



ERRANT INDIVIDUALISM IN LATE MEDIEVAL  
ENGLISH LITERATURE: THE POETICS OF FAILURE

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by

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## INTRODUCTION

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Success always puffs up fools with pride, and worldly security weakens the spirit's resolution and easily destroys it through carnal temptations. I began to think myself the only philosopher in the world, with nothing to fear from anyone, and so I yielded to the lusts of the flesh. Hitherto I had been entirely continent, but now the further I advanced in philosophy and holy theology, the further I fell behind the philosophers and holy Fathers in the impurity of my life. It is well known that the philosophers, and still more the Fathers, by which is meant those who have devoted themselves to the teachings of Holy Scripture, were especially glorified by their chastity. Since therefore I was wholly enslaved to pride and lechery, God's grace provided a remedy for both these evils, though not one of my choosing: first for my lechery by depriving me of those organs with which I practised it, and then for the pride which had grown in me through my learning [...] when I was humiliated by the burning of the book of which I was so proud.<sup>1</sup>

The series of letters collectively known as the *Historia calamitatum*, in which the twelfth-century logician and Benedictine monk Peter Abelard (1079-1142) reveals the details of his turbulent life, has proved highly evocative to scholars interested in the representation of the self in writing. At a very basic level, the apparent revelation of this man's innermost thoughts and being across the space of more than eight centuries, a profession of personal anguish and a reflection on a life lived at a fever pitch of emotional and intellectual intensity, strikes a cord with our overtly confessional modern Western society, saturated as it is with talk-shows, tell-all magazine interviews, celebrity autobiographies, misery memoirs, and reality television. Perhaps more intriguingly, the teasingly familiar identity that emerges out of the *Historia* offers the possibility of sketching out the contours of a universal being common to all persons across the vagaries of history, or of tracing a developmental narrative of the emergence of a modern self from earlier, somehow less authentic, forms of self-understanding. In particular, it

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<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, ed. by Betty Radice, rev. by M. T. Clancy (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 9.



is Abelard's alleged individuality, his apparent sense of possessing an identity that was qualitatively distinct from both his predecessors and contemporaries that critics have been keen to highlight. Mary M. McLaughlin argued that during his lifetime

It was Abelard, always fighting to defend and to extend the frontiers between the self and the world, who most fully experienced and most clearly articulated a new sense of personality. At the centre of his *Story of Calamities*, at once its author and its subject, stands the autonomous individual who carries his world within, who faces constantly the private decisions and dilemmas, as well as the struggles with his environment, that force him repeatedly to define himself anew, the individual who by choice and action shapes itself.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Robert Hanning asserted that 'whatever intention or intentions lie behind the *Historia calamitatum*, its undeniable effect is that of a work organised around the experiences of a single person in such a way that we can abstract from the account an analysis of the protagonist's personality, as opposed to an example or paradigm of God's power, as would be the case in an early medieval saint's life'.<sup>3</sup> Both critics use the word 'personality' in discussing Abelard's presentation of himself in his *Historia*. The OED defines 'personality' as 'that quality or assemblage of qualities which makes a person what he is, as *distinct* from other persons; distinctive personal or *individual* character' (my emphasis). Individuality and uniqueness are qualities that persons living in modern Western societies tend to value as integral to their sense of being a person. Abelard appears to reflect those values back at us, showing a 'nonexemplary, fully articulated representation of a society' that prompts us to 'relate to its denizens, good and bad, as people, like ourselves' (Hanning, p. 26). In doing so, he assuages the fears of modern

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<sup>2</sup> Mary M. McLaughlin, 'Abelard as Autobiographer: The Motives and Meaning of his "Story of Calamities"', *Speculum*, 42 (1967), 463-88 (p. 488).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (London: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 23.

scholars keen to research the nature of selfhood throughout different historical epochs, who might, for whatever reason, find the idea of discovering a person who conceived of their identity according to very different social norms an unsettling prospect.

Other critics have been less convinced by Abelard's supposed individuality. Karl Joachim Weintraub noted that

The frame which Abelard chose to present his life bears great similarity to the traditional hagiographic genre. The basic structure of the life is the typical one expected of a good Christian. It fits the standard conversion account. The man whom God gives a great talent misuses it in search of his own self-glorification. Pride, the greatest of Christian sins, is his sin. [...] Worldly fame and worldly gain [...] lead him into the snares of carnal allurements and lechery just at the point when he esteems himself as the sole reigning philosopher.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Caroline Walker Bynum argued that

Abelard's autobiography, which [...] is usually taken as the quintessence of twelfth-century individualism, is really the story of the rise and fall of a type: the philosopher. Abelard shows himself attempting to become the perfect philosopher and tempted as only a philosopher would be tempted: by lust, because a philosopher is supposed to be chaste, and by pride, because a philosopher is supposed to be dedicated not to self but to truth. Even at the end of the autobiography Abelard is still trying to show himself conforming to a model: the adviser to holy women, St. Jerome.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, Timothy Reiss has asserted that although many critics have argued

that Abelard possessed something like a modern sense of self, neither he nor anyone else could have viewed his experience of personhood in so radical a light. Whatever a person's 'center of knowing' might be [...] that center still conceived of its fulfilment as lying only in some sort of union with the divine even if [...] to achieve it implied a break in the circles of the person. [...] It is clear at the end of Abelard's first letter that his life's process as he has just recorded it was to be seen as figured in Christ's, exemplifying human

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Joachim Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (London: University of California Press, 1984), p. 96.

suffering on earth within a divine plan, making himself into an Augustinian *persona*.<sup>6</sup>

Calvin Normore has observed that ‘the *Historia calamitatum* is not an artless retelling of what is on [Abelard’s] mind but a document composed for the purpose of recounting his own path through adversity from the position of the ancient philosophers to that of a different kind of sage.’<sup>7</sup> The same argument is made on behalf of Abelard’s former object of desire and respondent in his later letters, Heloise, insofar as she also interprets their relationship within the frame of various normative models rather than a locus of individuality. In her discussion of how medieval persons utilised mnemonic techniques to organise various bodies of knowledge, including knowledge of the self, Mary Carruthers argues that ‘it is [Heloise’s] memory that is the “first mover,” as it were, of the whole incident. Clearly, she is not “expressing herself.” Self-expression is a meaningless term in a medieval context [...] for there was no concept of an autonomous, though largely inarticulate “individual self,” to be defined against social norms’.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, these critics consider it the case that when Abelard and Heloise came to portray themselves in their writings, they saw it as imperative to remain, or could do nothing else other than remain, within the forms of self-understanding that were instantiated in medieval culture.

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy J. Reiss, *Mirages of the Self: Patterns of Personhood in Ancient and Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 293.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin G. Normore, ‘Who is Peter Abelard?’, in *Autobiography as Philosophy: The Philosophical Uses of Self-Presentation*, ed. by Thomas Mathien and D. G. Wright (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 64-75 (p. 68).

<sup>8</sup> Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 10 (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), p. 182. See also Weintraub, pp. 87-88, and Reiss, ‘Despite Heloise’s agonizing, her and Abelard’s tale was one, overall, of defeating any gap between worldly and divine circles, defeating human frailty [...] and adjusting passions to reason.’ Identifying within Abelard and Heloise’s correspondence common discourses and tropes such as: the human in relation to the divine; the nature of being animate; humans in their differences; women differing from men; and social choices such as becoming a teacher or taking the cowl, Reiss argues that ‘it was by gathering into the person these several personae that wholeness could be renewed’ (p. 293).

The specific arguments surrounding Abelard are indicative of a wider debate that has been conducted in relation to issues surrounding how medieval persons conceptualised a sense of individual identity, or, given the prevailing discursive forms inherent in medieval society that conditioned *what* people were able to know and *how* they were able to know it, whether they were in fact able to do so in any sense that we as moderns might understand the term. The general debate on the status of being an individual has taken as evidence discussions or representations of individuals in literature, philosophy, theology, documentary evidence traditionally (but, of course, no longer) assumed to be the domain of historians; in short, anything that can bring the critic closer to that elusive, perhaps ultimately unrecoverable realm of actual lived experience. Bynum's consideration of Abelard's position is predicated on a wider examination of twelfth-century epistemologies of being which were, as was the case with medieval society on the whole, heavily conditioned by the prescriptive norms of religious discourse:

When we speak of 'the individual,' we mean not only an inner core, a self; we also mean a particular self, a self unique and unlike other selves. When we speak of the 'development of the individual,' we mean something open ended. In contrast [...] the twelfth century regarded the discovery of *homo interior*, or *seipsum* as the discovery within oneself of human nature made in the image of God – an *imago Dei* that is the same for all human beings. Moreover, the twelfth-century thinker explored himself *in a direction* and *for a purpose*. The development of the self was towards God. (p. 87)

The proper goal of being was, according to Bynum, the obliteration of individuality, the fashioning of a self that existed entirely within normative forms of conceptual and real behaviour. The two issues which scholars have felt it particularly necessary to address have been whether a medieval person was able to conceptualise a sense of an individual self as distinct from social norms, the

accepted models or *personae* of being that existed within society – of which religious norms were certainly very important, but by no means the only ones – and, if so, what value did that sense of self possess when framed within the demands of the culture within which it existed. In this introductory section I wish to trace briefly an overview of the developments in this discussion, paying particular attention to what exactly proponents of each view were asserting in their arguments. In analysing how and why these arguments developed we can understand that each group was in fact articulating entirely compatible positions over the nature and value of individuality in medieval culture. However, critics that followed in their wake have not been sensitive to this issue, and have instead developed a unhelpfully combative, antagonistic, and reductive way of talking about identity during the Middle Ages, one which is itself symptomatic of larger trends in literary criticism.

This study will address these problems and consequently formulate an approach that can better understand the value of individualism in the late Middle Ages. The theoretical basis for my argument is established in the introduction. Here, I argue that a fundamental aspect of medieval selfhood was the tension created between, on the one hand, the aspiration to attain transcendent and transparent non-identity, and on the other, the awareness of an errant individualism that incessantly reminded a person of their failure to achieve what they *should* be. Having established this position, chapters one to three examine the work of three authors in which this tension is enacted. Chapter one discusses how Richard Rolle's *Incendium Amoris* tries to erase the errors of the historical author by constructing a textual avatar that is fully transparent against the background of authoritative Biblical, patristic, and mystical tradition, ultimately claiming to

become a cipher communicating God's divine logos. Chapter two discusses John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. This chapter contests claims made by recent critics that Gower's poem shows that the human faculty of reason is enough to correct personal sin and error. Instead, it is shown that the *Confessio* advocates a much more traditional, even theologically extreme, position concerning the route via which the fallen human condition might achieve its goal of spiritual salvation. Finally, chapter three looks at Thomas Hoccleve's *Complaint* and *Dialogue*. Here, the ostensible initial focus on heavenly concerns gives way to a debate on how one can best integrate the erroneous self into a late medieval social milieu that demanded strict conformity to accepted models of thought and behaviour.

#### 'THE DISCOVERY OF THE INDIVIDUAL' (?)

McLaughlin and Hanning's work formed part of a body of scholarship that sought to establish how 'The Discovery of the Individual' occurred during the twelfth century.<sup>9</sup> For these critics, prior to the twelfth century a medieval person could only conceive of him or herself in terms of the strictly delimited conceptual boundaries around and within which early medieval society was structured. For Colin Morris 'the individual was caught up in a network of loyalties, with little choice about his way of life or opportunity to select his own values' (p. 36), whilst Walter Ullmann similarly argued that in pre-twelfth-century society 'the fundamental presupposition [...] was that the individual accepted his standing in society, that he divested himself of his individuality and will by following the

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<sup>9</sup> The epithet was taken from Colin Morris's book of the same name. See, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1972).

direction “from above,” that, in other words, he obeyed’.<sup>10</sup> However, these scholars went on to assert that a fundamental shift occurred in the structure of society during the period they are examining. Abelard looms large in Morris’s study; the monk’s logical and dialectical techniques in reconciling conflicting Biblical and Patristic authorities required ‘a good deal of independent judgement’ and were therefore ‘an important manifestation of the individualism of the age’, as were his innovations in the theory of contrition and his role in facilitating the ‘birth of autobiography’ (pp. 60-61, 71-74, 84-85).<sup>11</sup> Hanning and Peter Dronke locate the emergence of a new awareness of individuality in the authors and heroes of twelfth-century romance, with Hanning describing how in these texts we are presented with ‘the necessity of seeking [individuality] by sacrificing the stability of an externally imposed order for the adventure of self-definition’ (p. 5).<sup>12</sup> Finally, Ullmann finds a shift from subject to citizen in the feudal arrangement during the period, one in which ‘it was necessary to employ one’s own critical faculties’, and therefore ‘presupposed the responsibility of the individual’ (p. 65).

The implicit target of the work of these scholars was the assumption that the medieval period as a whole was monolithic in thought and belief, a static and homogenous culture spanning from the end of the Dark Ages until the start of the Renaissance, in which there was no real or ideological instability, conflict, or struggle which would form the occasion for the development of a sense of self-aware individualism. The two arch-exponents of this view who have been, and are

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1967), p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of whether the varying aspects of Abelard’s thought contributed to the concept of individuality see below, pp. 70-73.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Dronke, *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry, 1000-1150* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

still, constantly cited by more recent generations of medieval scholars are the medievalist D. W. Robertson and the Renaissance scholar Jacob Burckhardt. It is worth quoting them verbatim once again simply due to the overwhelming influence their comments have had in setting the terms of the debate.

The medieval world was innocent of our profound concern for tension. [...] We project dynamic polarities on history as class struggles, balances of power, or as conflicts between economic realities and traditional ideals. [...] But the medieval world, with its quiet hierarchies, knew nothing of these things.<sup>13</sup>

[In the Middle Ages] man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category.<sup>14</sup>

These views, and the methodologies they helped to instantiate in Medieval and Renaissance (or Early Modern, as its practitioners would later define it) studies, were explicitly attacked in the work of Lee Patterson and David Aers.<sup>15</sup> Their work showed how the underlying ideological assumptions functioning beneath Robertson and Burckhardt's assertions had led them, along with those who followed in their wake, to fashion a critical orthodoxy which could quite startlingly ignore huge swathes of evidence regarding the reality of medieval life. Patterson saw Robertson's work as a 'root-and-branch, no-holds-barred, take-no-prisoners attack upon the liberal humanist ideology that has dominated Anglo-American literary studies since their inception in the nineteenth century' (*Negotiating the Past*, p. 26), in particular the prerogatives of the New Criticism

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<sup>13</sup> D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of Renaissance Italy* (London: Phaidon Books, 1965), p. 81.

<sup>15</sup> See Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 3-39, and 'On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies', *Speculum*, 65 (1990), 87-108, and David Aers, 'A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the "History of the Subject"', in *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. by David Aers (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 177-202.



dominant at the time. For Patterson, Robertson displayed a profound antihumanism in arguing that

in the Middle Ages character was conceived not in terms of subjectivity, as a consciousness set over against that which it experiences, but rather in terms of ideology, as a structure of value itself. [...] Culture not merely conditions individual consciousness but absorbs it entirely [...] This is an effacement of the self that invests medieval discursive practices with absolute authority. (*Negotiating the Past*, p. 23)<sup>16</sup>

Alongside Aers, Patterson also attacked a similar propensity for wilful ignorance in the work of Renaissance scholars who wanted to write ‘a history which claims to identify in the sixteenth century a new “construction” of the subject’ (Aers, p. 180). These critics needed ‘to establish [...] the modernity of their enterprise, the claim that in their chosen texts they descry the present condition in its initial, essential form. And to that end the Middle Ages serves as premodernity, the other that must be rejected for the modern self to be and know itself’ (‘On the Margin’, p. 99). The Middle Ages were consequently ‘turned into a homogenous and mythical field which is defined in terms of the scholars’ needs for a figure against which “Renaissance” concerns with inwardness and the fashioning of identities can be defined as new’ (Aers, p. 192). The crucial point was that, thanks to the convergence of these two positions, a view of the Middle Ages had been created in which ‘anything remotely resembling the versions of the individual and individual subjectivity taken for granted in later Western societies’ was entirely absent (Aers, p. 181).

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<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of Robertson and his critical legacy, see Derek Pearsall, ‘Chaucer’s Poetry and its Modern Commentators: The Necessity of History’, in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. by David Aers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), pp. 123-47 (pp. 138-40); Alan T. Gaylord, ‘Reflections on D. W. Robertson, Jr., and “Exegetical Criticism”’, *The Chaucer Review*, 40 (2006), 311-32; Ralph Hanna, ‘Donaldson and Robertson: An Obligatory Conjunction’, *The Chaucer Review*, 41 (2007), 240-49.

Determined to refute this reductive viewpoint, Patterson and Aers drew on the work of Morris, Ullmann, Hanning, et al, as their starting point, as well as citing various examples of medieval texts which show ‘the dialectic between an inward subjectivity and the external world that alienates it from both itself and its divine sources’ (‘On the Margin’, pp. 99-100). These include Augustine’s *Confessions*, Dante’s *Vita nuova*, Petrarch’s *Secretum*, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (inevitably), hagiographies such as Thomas of Celano’s *Life of St. Francis* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Canterbury Tales*, Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, and Lollard confessions. We shall have cause to return to many of these texts over the course of this thesis in order to (re)examine how they inform and are informed by late medieval conceptions of individuality. For now, we simply need note that the combined force of Aers and Patterson’s arguments created a powerful new consensus within which medieval scholars felt able to import new paradigms and methodologies for understanding the self because it had, it was felt, been established beyond question that there *was* an individual self, and that a medieval person could conceptualise and express that sense of self as distinct from the normative paradigms of thought and behaviour bound up within their culture, set their consciousness over and above the values which were disseminated through the ideology of the particular period. The complex interiority necessary for a sense of individualism had seemingly been established.

As in the specific case of Abelard, other critics were not so sure. Bynum sought to qualify the general thesis advanced by the likes of Ullmann and Morris, specifically, as we saw above, with regards to the ‘discovery of the individual’ in religious life and writing. She argued that the emphasis that these scholars placed

upon the discovery of the individual had ‘also sometimes implied that typological thinking and a sense of modelling oneself on earlier examples is in twelfth-century literature a vestige of an earlier mentality that simply gets in the way of a sense of individual quest, experience, and self-expression’ (p. 84). This, she asserted, was not in the case:

Twelfth-century religion did not emphasise the individual personality at the expense of corporate awareness. Nor did it develop a new sense of spiritual and psychological change, of intention, and of personal responsibility by escaping from an earlier concern with types, patterns, and examples. Rather, twelfth-century religious writing and behaviour show a great concern with [...] how behaviour is conformed to models. (p. 85)

For Bynum, the twelfth-century person did not ‘find himself’ by casting off inhibiting patterns but by adopting appropriate ones (p. 90). Following Bynum’s work, Peter Haidu has also argued that

The discovery of the individual in the twelfth century [...] emphasised the location of the individual in a corporate group, the integrity of their interdependence. The new self-awareness defined that self in terms of likeness, of models, of imitation of types. Social diversity was expressed in the ideological constructs of corporate metaphors that provide models for individual self-recognition, not as unique singularities, but as a social type embodying specific models.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, Weintraub concludes that although ‘to men whose self-orientation depended so much on the uncontested validity of their norms and models, a world growing more complex was bound to present difficulties’ so that ‘processes of self-orientation became more complex’ (pp. 58-59), and that ‘it is precisely this many-layered quality of medieval civilization which contributed to basic processes of social differentiation and thus ultimately to the emergence of individuality as a consciously cultivated value’ (p. 50), the basic structure of

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Haidu, *The Subject Medieval/Modern: Text and Governance in the Middle Ages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 273.

medieval life 'maintained the barriers that stood in the way of self-conscious individuality' (p. 52). After examining various texts in which first-person voices relate ostensible personal histories, many of which are the same ones cited by Aers and Patterson as examples of complex interiority, Weintraub decides that

None of these self-revelations permits a conclusion that involvement in the intense intellectual currents of the times occasioned the kind of inner crisis of self-definition which leads to new personality conceptions. Quite the contrary, the accounts again and again point to the vital strength of the models of personality even when individuals had more complex experiences. (p. 63)

Statements such as these seem to stray very close to the Burkhardtian and Robertsonian assumptions that the first group of scholars we examined worked so hard to debunk. However, that they have continued to exert such force over critical conceptions of the Middle Ages indicates that we would do well to avoid discounting them as simply misguided remnants of an earlier, unsophisticated critical mentality. But this leaves us with a central dilemma. Given that statements on the possible ability of a person to conceptualise a sense of a self as an individual in medieval culture seem to stand diametrically opposed to those asserting the ability to conceptualise a sense of self according to available socio-cultural norms, ones which apparently demanded impersonality and the obliteration of any notion of unique being, is it possible to engage with and advance the debate without falling into either one of these two camps?

## THE VALUE OF INDIVIDUALISM

Given the complex nature of the arguments which surround any debate on the construction of a sense of identity, none more so than in discussions of a

period as historically distant and culturally alien from current Western norms as the Middle Ages, it is necessary to understand fully what claims are actually being made by proponents of one view or another. The model of subjectivity imported from modern theory in order to attack the reductive assumptions of Robertson and Burckhardt has been outlined by a number of medieval scholars in works dealing with the issue. Marshall Leicester's and Haidu's are typical:

In modern theory the subject is not conceived of as a substantial thing, like a rock, but as a position in a larger structure, a site through which various forces pass. [...] The subject [...] is the continually shifting vector product of all the forces in play at the subject site, including unconscious desire, concealed or mystified material and social power, the structures of language, whose relation to consciousness is perhaps less clear, and of course, consciousness itself.<sup>18</sup>

The individual is a site of multiple traversals, constituted in the disruption, breaking, and reknitting of multiple semiotic strands, his or her subject position(s) targeted by multiple interpellations [...] subjectivity is always under construction. (Haidu, p. 4)

As a consequence of this basic structure of the subject, it is seen as inevitable that a person is faced with a multiplicity of competing demands, real and ideological, on their sense of identity. It is entirely reasonable to accept Bynum's proposition that typological thinking and the desire to base oneself on models *did* proliferate throughout the twelfth century, and further to that, the Middle Ages in general. However, it is also the case that the more patterns of thought, behaviour, and being were abstracted, encoded, and disseminated throughout society, the less chance a person had of being able to realise them effectively in day-to-day life. This could be because those paradigms lacked internal consistency in and of themselves, or with other normative conceptual or behavioural models inhering within culture that also demanded to be fulfilled, or simply because, as ideals,

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<sup>18</sup> Marshall Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), p. 14.

they could not account for the varying and unavoidable demands of existence within a arbitrary and contingent historical society. Consciously or unconsciously, choices have to be made between competing or inconsistent pressures on what a person should be doing or thinking, of what they should be *being*, choices which can only lead to an increased sense of agency, on the 'I' making, or failing to make, those decisions (Haidu, pp. 341-42). 'What Althusser called "state ideology" forms not only obedient subjects but subjects of questioning, critique, and revolution as well. Critical subjectivity grounds itself in the deconstruction of existing ideology, or of the discrepancies between praxis and ideology' (Haidu, p. 343). For instance, Miri Rubin has shown how in discussions on the Eucharist the 'arbitrary language' used to minister to the general populace

becomes the site of infinite utterances, it mediates and expresses difference in the face of the ongoing demands for conformity [...] and in response to powers which aim at shaping hegemonic meanings. Yet determination cannot hold; powerful institutions can influence the frequency and shape of symbols, suggesting thereby normative readings of social relations, but users may go on to explore the gaps and create private, if not subversive, meanings.<sup>19</sup>

The medieval person was caught between the desire for conformity with the ideal and the impossibility of ever achieving it. 'Subjectivity is dialectic, conflicted in the spaces [...] between the individual as is and what he imagines he *ought* to be'.<sup>20</sup> In the Middle Ages, a sense of self as an individual distinct from the normative practices inhering in culture *has* to emerge as a consequence of the structure of the subject. Action, self-fashioning, both real and conceptual, is required on the part of each person, even if, in the final analysis, the attempt to

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<sup>19</sup> Miri Rubin, 'The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities', in *Culture and History*, pp. 43-63 (p. 58).

<sup>20</sup> Isabel Davis, *Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 7-8.

fashion a self in line with accepted models of being fails, finally resulting in a confused anxiety, identity experienced as swirling inertia.

Indeed, Leicester has argued that by the late-Middle Ages a situation had been reached in which the 'discrepancies between praxis and ideology' had become so sharpened that the medieval population attained a level of 'critical subjectivity' in which they were able to view their culture as if from outside or above it, therefore being able to perceive its constructed and artificial nature. Leicester uses the term 'disenchantment' to describe the process via which this situation arises. The term is taken from the work of Max Weber,

who gives it a purely technical meaning that has the advantage of focusing directly on the relation of subjects to institutions. In this sense, disenchantment is a function of the process of intellectualisation and rationalisation of society and the world, the awareness that in dealing with them 'there are no mysterious processes that come into play, but that rather [...] one can, in principle, master all things by calculation'. (p. 26)<sup>21</sup>

Weber is primarily interested in describing the rise of a scientific world-view against that of magic and religion, but his terminology is adapted by Leicester to focus on the question of how a critical human agency that exists over and against the norms of the culture in which that person resides might come about in any given period.

Disenchantment means the perception that what had been thought to be other-originated, the product of transcendent forces not directly susceptible of human tampering and subversion, is in fact humanly originated, the product of human creation. At the social level disenchantment is thus the perception that what had been taken to be natural, the way things are, is actually institutional, a construction. (pp. 26-27)

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<sup>21</sup> Leicester is citing Weber's essay 'Science as a Vocation', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 129-156 (p. 139).

If this general model of individual coming-to-consciousness is the case, Leicester considers the specific situation in late fourteenth century as particularly suited to its development, presumably from an earlier medieval mentality which was still unable to 'un-think' itself from its cultural location. The fourteenth century was

A disenchanted epoch in which [...] matters previously held to be established and maintained by God had actually been humanly produced and then ascribed to divine agency. One might mention in passing the Great Schism, Lollardy, the Peasants' Revolt, and the depositions of Edward II at the beginning of the century and Richard II in Chaucer's lifetime at its end as examples of the collapse of traditional structures of authority beneath the weight put on them by active and often articulately critical human agents. (p. 27)

The artificial nature of the institutions which instantiated patterns of thought and belief in medieval society had, according to Leicester, become readily apparent, thereby encouraging not just the necessary but doomed attempts to satisfy the conflicting demands made by those institutions, but also, because those demands could be readily *perceived* as conflicting as a consequence of them being created by human actors and agents, the active manipulation of discursive fields comprising medieval culture by self-aware individuals. However, Leicester's theorising leads him into certain difficulties. As he himself admits, a fully disenchanted perspective would 'in its extreme form', carry 'the suspicion, or even the conviction, that the category of transcendence itself is a human construction and that there are only institutions. A fully disenchanted perspective constitutes the world as a tissue of institutions rather than natures' and therefore 'sees experience and social existence as an encounter between conflicting interpretations rather than the passive reception of preexisting meanings' (p. 27). This is manifestly not the case in the Middle Ages, even given the upheavals of the late fourteenth century. The transcendent was not a humanly constructed



category, even if people were aware that the institutions acting on behalf of the divine were.

We might consider the situation in the late-Middle Ages as one of partial or pseudo-disenchantment. It was certainly the case that people were recognising that the network of institutions and traditions inhering within society were not as sacrosanct as they were previously held to be. However, I would argue that, rather than hastening the onset of a notion of individuality as something to be valued in and of itself, as a bulwark against the homogenising tendencies of dominant medieval ideologies, the breakdown of 'traditional structures of authority' would in fact strengthen a person's desire to embed their sense of identity within established models of being. The values of community, solidarity, and of living a life compatible with the goal of salvation that were previously embodied in institutions still mattered, regardless of how discredited those institutions might be. There was nothing outside of the already existing culture that people could turn to in order to conceptualise a sense of identity proper to the accepted norms of that culture, even if, in the final analysis, they would fail to fashion an identity completely congruent with those norms. Established forms of being still mattered, and were considered the best, indeed, the only means, of living one's life, of *being* a person. What had changed was that those forms were now decoupled from the prescriptive ministrations of Church and State.

This created a paradoxical problem: a greater sense of individual agency was now present within the matrix of a person's being via which they could actively fashion an orthodox identity. But the very existence of that increased responsibility of what and how one might *be* a person also increased the risk of *being* wrong. The sense of individuality that emerged out of such a situation was

therefore fraught with tension and self-doubt. Seeing a person's sense of individuality, along with an ideology of 'individualism' that might arise from a group or groups of people possessing that sense, as concepts to be valued, is highly questionable if the society in which a person exists places a heavy emphasis on conformity. Modern history tells us that patterns of thought and belief advocating or demanding subservience, impersonality, and subjection inhere in a culture long after their constitutive alterities have been consciously formulated and encoded as desirable and beneficial. For a medieval culture in which no such programmatic opposition had yet been articulated, divergence from normative values held only a very uncertain appeal. As Reiss has noted, 'the idea that we exist only to the extent that we are outside and against others [is] itself a cultural creation. It grew from – and against – different assumptions: ones involving community as integral to personhood, interdependence as integral to human being'. And medieval society was unquestionably one that held such assumptions. 'This is not to adopt Burckhardt's familiar dictum [...] but it is to agree that such "membership" was one element in selfhood [...] "Subject" [...] was public citizen and divine soul, not private self' (Reiss, p. 26). Understanding oneself according to known models of being mattered; fitting securely inside accepted paradigms of self-realisation had very real positive value; occupying a given role in society gave a person an undeniable sense of worth. In Aristotelian tradition, 'man' was a functional concept describing a life in which 'to be a man is to fulfil a set of roles, each of which has its own point and purpose'. Modern notions of the human, at least in the West, have lost this functional concept; to be human is to be an entity 'prior to and apart from all roles'.<sup>22</sup> Modern Western

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<sup>22</sup> Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Notre Dame, Indiana:

conceptions of self valorise being an individual as distinct from everyone and everything else, of living a life set over and against societal norms. A life that is wholly unique and that satisfies the somehow essential nature of one's being is usually defined as the ultimate goal.<sup>23</sup> For a medieval person, to be unable to locate oneself in known forms of being did not induce this same sense of triumphant liberation of one's individualism; it constituted a loss of a sense of identity.

The editors of a recent collection of essays dealing with what they define as 'Early Modern Autobiography' have proved more sensitive to this issue than many current medievalists.<sup>24</sup> I shall address what I consider to be the reason for this in a moment. For now I simply wish to observe that, in their introduction to the volume, the editors assert that in the texts they deal with (beginning, we should note, with the work of Thomas Hoccleve)

Individual experiences are defined by a strong sense of social expectation and obligation. Such definition is rarely (as it is today) in the service of revealing one's own, or another's, psychology or of setting out to explore one's unique individuality. (p. 5)

Self-description [...] referred to understandings of oneself *within* a wider frame, and more often than not, individuality was marked less by how one stood *out* than by how effectively one fitted *in*. (p. 14)

In an essay in the same collection, Conel Condren has convincingly argued that 'human social and moral identity [...] was presented and presumably conceived not in terms of selves or individuals but personae [...] appropriate to given

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University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 58-59.

<sup>23</sup> In *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (London: Routledge, 1991), Patterson describes the modern sense of self as a 'being understood as possessing a whole and undivided selfhood, an inner entity known through a sense of immediacy and plenitude and constituted above all by self-aware consciousness and executive will' (p. 3). Modern individuals, 'instead of understanding themselves as products of determinative historical processes [...] tend to see themselves as autonomous and self-made' (p. 4).

<sup>24</sup> *Early Modern Autobiography: Theories, Genres, Practices*, ed. by Ronald Bedford, Lloyd Davis, and Philippa Kelly (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

offices'.<sup>25</sup> He argues that in an Early Modern culture heavily conditioned by classical and Christian assumptions regarding being,

Overwhelmingly, the identities assumed are official ones, both in a negative and a positive sense. That is, self occurs either in referring back to a persona, or, more intriguingly, to suggest an absence of any sense of official identity, responsibility, and bounded duty [...]. The more autonomous the agent seems, the more in fact it is being delegitimised. (p. 46)

Condren's desire to stress the continuity between the overarching structures of thought and belief between the medieval and Early Modern periods is a welcome and important antidote to the reductive and exclusionary pronouncements we saw were characteristic of earlier generations of critics. Indeed, his notion of the 'delegitimised' self, the man without a proper persona with which he can orientate and locate himself within society, is crucial to this thesis.

These discussions of individual identity conceived of as distinct from socio-cultural and ideological norms are more nuanced than simply asserting if such an identity did or did not exist. In line with the work of theorists such as Haidu and Leicester, critics such as Condren acknowledge that an awareness of individuality is present as a necessary consequence of the structure of the subject's identity, one aspect of a person's being. But they then ask the question: what *value* does such a sense of individuality, and a notion of 'individualism', possess within the context of the culture it was articulated? In asking this question, they allow us to see how the assertions of both groups of critics we examined at the start of this introduction can be of equal value. Weintraub argued that Abelard did not consciously cultivate 'individuality as a value to be sought' (p. 74) even if he was eminently recognisable as one to both his contemporaries

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<sup>25</sup> Conel Condren, 'Specifying the Subject in Early Modern Autobiography', in *Early Modern Autobiography*, pp. 35-48 (p. 36).

and (often, it has to be said, to an unhelpful extent) to scholars examining his work. Similarly, Reiss asserts that Abelard's ‘“individualism” entered the stage of history “with a negative marker”’, and that the *Historia* is a ‘tale of *personae*’ (p. 243). Hanning is sensitive to the issue of Abelard's text being a ‘tale of *personae*’, discussing how ‘the *Historia calamitatum* makes abundant use of traditions and conventions that do not aim at establishing the protagonist's individuality, and in fact militate against any such hypothetical program’. But when Hanning finally concludes that ‘the author surmounted them in making Abelard live for us as a particular person instead of a moral type’ (p. 23), he does not ask the crucial question of whether Abelard was consciously seeking to portray himself in his text as ‘a particular [individual] person instead of a moral type’ because he *valued* being the former rather than the latter, or if it was a quality that was a component of his identity in spite of attempts to subsume and eradicate it by making use of ‘abundant [...] traditions and conventions’. In both cases, the *fact* of an awareness of individuality as a component of Abelard's identity is not in question; it is the *status* of that fact to the man himself that is actually of crucial importance in any critical examination.

In an important early intervention into this debate, John Burrow was able to grasp the necessary coexistence of the two positions, charting a course between Aers and Patterson's discovery of ‘individual subjectivity’ and Weintraub's assertion that first-person accounts ‘again and again point to the vital strength of the models of personality even when individuals had more complex experiences’. Burrow recognised that ‘conventional’ utterances or the striking of ‘poses’ in first-person narratives do not mitigate against a person expressing something essential or truthful about themselves. ‘The substantial question of truth is nearly

always more difficult than the formal question of reference, because there are so many things beside the truth that one can speak about oneself (not all of which one would want to call lies).<sup>26</sup> A person can assume conventional attitudes as a matter of habit, thereby rendering the distinction between convention and supposedly more authentic behaviour as nonsensical (p. 394). Indeed, non-literary experience is often shaped by conventions. Burrow cites the medieval example of the seven deadly sins, a ‘conventional scheme’ that ‘did indeed figure in literary fictions [...] but it also provided the moral grid-system most commonly used by men of the period whenever they attempted to map their inner lives’ (p. 396). Conventionality did not equate to fictionality; in being conventional they understood themselves more fully.<sup>27</sup> ‘There was, in fact, no authentic residual voice for which we can search and which would have been the subject of autobiographical writing’ (Condren, p. 37), nothing more real to discover beneath a surface supposedly falsified and distorted by pre-existing forms of being which inhered in a culture heavily conditioned by the workings of ideology.

None of this is to deny agency, ‘to say that persons are wholly determined by context, [...] fashioned as mere senses of an overarching discourse, meanings made by a symbolics of power’ (Reiss, p. 21). Neither is it to say that for some persons, if not all, a sense of active choice, a chance to determine one’s being, would not be in some part and at some level welcome. But all this can be true while it still being the case that in a culture that placed such a high value on conformity, in which a person tried to realise the self ‘*in a direction and for a purpose*’ (Bynum, p. 87), an awareness of such individual agency could induce

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<sup>26</sup> John A. Burrow, ‘Autobiographical Poetry in the Middle Ages: The Case of Thomas Hoccleve’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 68 (1982), 389-412 (p. 391).

<sup>27</sup> The editors of *Early Modern Autobiography* have similarly noted that ‘formality of style does not necessarily mean impersonality, and moreover, that impersonality does not mean lack of personhood’ (p. 4).

anxiety, disorientation, and an acute sense of personal error and failure if the intended purpose was not achieved. To stray outside recognised paradigms of behaviour and thought was to consider oneself in error, a fact that people recognised and tried to amend by re-engaging with known forms of being. Whilst the means of fashioning an identity, the directional paths via which one might travel towards a certain form of being, were in a state of partial flux, the end, the purpose for which one was travelling, remained very much a source of value that permeated all levels of medieval society.

Given that a typological and communal understanding of selfhood still delimited the discursive possibilities available to a medieval person, but that such an understanding simultaneously induced a kind of cognitive dissonance due to the inevitable failure to fashion that self, it meant that a sense of personhood was not simply 'a choice [...] between alienated individualism and enchanted embedding' (Reiss, p. 28). Caught between the desire to look upwards towards transcendent states of being and feet of clay lodged firmly in the historical world, to be a person was something infinitely more complex than a simple either/or decision. But, ever since Patterson and Aers's assault on the old orthodoxies surrounding questions of individuality, medieval critics have tended to make a choice on behalf of the subjects they analyse, and plumped for alienated individualism every time. A dangerous binarism has sprung up in which medieval individuals, because they are conscious of being active agents caught up in an unstable flux of competing and contradictory ideologies, unable to properly fulfil any of them but nevertheless perpetually compelled to do so, will therefore necessarily stand in antagonistic relation to society and the network of traditions and institutions, real and conceptual, that comprise it. Established models of

being, the official personae which ‘exhausted proper conduct’ (Condren, p. 37), and the prevailing culture in which they inhere, are vilified and allegedly exposed as manifestations of a Foucauldian disciplinarian society, forces which have suppressed a medieval person’s right to assert their ‘true’ individual identity. The agency critics have rightly found within medieval culture is reduced to being able to work only to undermine and overthrow the prevailing ideologies of the period. The ‘discovery of the individual’ has all too often actually been the discovery of the dissenting, subversive individual. This discovery necessarily valorises a notion of being that is set in competition with the norms of the culture in which it exists. Under such a model, ‘orthodoxy’, as the people actually living within the culture under analysis would have understood it, is denied any positive value.

Timothy Clark’s work critiquing what he calls the ‘dominant culturalism’ of contemporary scholarship in the humanities is useful in helping to define the issue I take to be at stake in much recent medieval criticism.<sup>28</sup> Clark perceptively realises that the model of theoretical subjectivity utilised in much recent criticism takes as its normative assumption a post-Enlightenment, rights-bearing subject who should be free to assert their identity against larger deterministic forces. In such readings, freedom is seen in terms of ‘the realisation of a suppressed or distorted essence, affirmed against kinds of inhibition to it, whether these be the power of tradition, social oppression, the ideological connotations of the medium or systematic prejudice’ (Clark, p. 16). This is clearly the model of subjectivity deployed by those discovering individualism against the background of medieval ‘tradition’ that disseminated a typological methodology of self-understanding, one that, to modern sensibilities, would suppress a ‘right’ to be an individual. But, as

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<sup>28</sup> Timothy Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-Culturalist Turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the later Gadamer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 12.



we have seen, it is not the case that ‘typological thinking and [...] a sense of modelling oneself on earlier examples’ was ‘a ‘vestige of an earlier mentality that simply [got] in the way of a sense of individual quest, experience, and self-expression’ (Bynum, pp. 84-85). Models and personae did not suppress or distort an ‘essence’, or create an inhibition to the realisation of a somehow more ‘real’ identity. For a medieval person fashioning and experiencing their identity, value resided in the presence within that identity of models instantiated in tradition (whatever debilitating effects this presence might induce in practice). ‘To be a person can only ever be how people *think* their contexts and *experience* their *being* a person’ (Reiss, p. 23).

As Davis notes, it is easy to look for signs of individuality in moments of subversion and iconoclasm (p. 8). The attempt by critics to seek out apparently distorted or suppressed essences from the margins of medieval society is valuable in some sense, given the many falsifying prescriptions perpetrated by medieval ideologues, and the latter generations of scholars who took such prescriptions at face value in order to serve their own ends. But the danger in adopting this ‘freedom as autonomy model’ is that it operates via an ‘inherent violence in positing a central identity conceived of as striving against an antagonist in the form of tradition, prejudice, etc.’, a striving for affirmation against a repressive Other. ‘In so far as the critic also tends to identify with the agent of the struggle, it produces an us/them polarisation that is conflictual, confrontational and often unhelpfully self-righteous’ (Clark, p. 21). What Clark means by this is that critics can end up fighting battles over ‘rights’ for individuals to be free to be a certain way when no such conception of what that ‘way’ was existed at the time. As a very basic example, we can point out that the Lollards were not asserting a post-

Enlightenment ‘right’ to worship as they pleased because this was somehow truer to an individual identity conceived of as being denied legitimacy by the norms of tradition. Rather, they were arguing that their form of worship was more orthodox than the version of faith upheld by the orthodox Church because it was based more firmly in traditional practices. This is very different from ‘affirming a suppressed or distorted essence over and against tradition’; it is to contest the very nature of tradition itself because that was where value resided, where the self was legitimised.

Critics have, however, accepted as normal and natural a model of being that is based around the right to individual assertion. As Clark notes, it is ‘a long way from being neutral’, and bolsters

arguments that all things be seen in terms of a cultural politics that affirms modern notions of freedom as self-realisation on behalf of under-represented groups, without a sense of the specifically liberal model of subjectivity such notions depend on and reinforce. Hence the unthematized rhetoric that pervades so much criticism: ‘prison’ (‘prison house of language’), ‘imprisoned’, ‘escape’, ‘free ourselves from’, ‘chained to’, ‘hemmed in by’, ‘held captive by’, ‘hostage to’, ‘subverts power’, ‘challenges the authority of’, ‘defies’, ‘resists’ (p. 19).

It is not hard to locate this tendency in recent medieval criticism, in which ‘texts and people are continually subjected to kinds of trial procedure designed to either condemn or acquit them of degrees of complicity in metaphysical/colonial/patriarchal thinking’ (Clark, p. 20). For instance, in their introduction to *Queering the Middle Ages*, Glen Burger and Steven F. Kruger argue that ‘Queer study of the Middle Ages promises the recovery of cultural meanings that are lost, obscured, or distorted in work that either ignores questions of sexuality or attends

only to hegemonic or heteronormative understandings of it',<sup>29</sup> whilst in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* Jeffery Cohen urges the need to 'destabilise hegemonic identities (racial, sexual, ethnic, religious, class, age) by destabilising their historical contingency'.<sup>30</sup> To give an example of a critic using the model of 'culturalist' criticism in relation to a particular medieval author, Sarah Beckwith sees the identity constructed in the *Book of Margery Kempe* in terms of a female mysticism 'doubly colonised as a focus for the projection of Otherness because both God and woman are seen as the place of a mystified and unrepresentable (but nevertheless constantly represented) otherness'.<sup>31</sup> Margery's identity is simply reduced to a the test case in

The question posed by the league between God, Christ and woman in female mysticism [...] whether female mysticism is a possible space for the disruption of the patriarchal order, or whether, on the contrary, it exists to act out rigorously its most sexist fantasies, to reinforce the relegation of 'woman' to a transcendent, mystified and mystificatory sphere. (p. 36)

These books betray the antagonistic language of 'culturalism', promising to 'recover' proper identities 'lost' and 'distorted' beneath the warping surface of normative medieval culture. Orthodoxy is denied any kind of positive value, needing to be 'destabilised' as it is supposedly always seeking to suppress the human right to self-assertion, as if that self could be anything other than it currently is. As a consequence of this type of approach, those institutions within which the dominant ideologies of the period are thought to inhere are portrayed as having an entirely negative value, leading to the wilful disregard for relevant and necessary areas of study, a disregard that has proved just as distorting as anything

<sup>29</sup> *Queering the Middle Ages*, ed. by Glen Burger and Steven F. Kruger, Medieval Cultures, 27 (London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2001), p. xvi.

<sup>30</sup> *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. by Jeffery Jerome Cohen (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Beckwith, 'A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe', in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. by David Aers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), pp. 34-57 (p. 35).

perpetrated by Robertson or Burckhardt. For large swathes of medieval scholarship to have moved entirely ‘On the Margin’ is really no better than for it to be trapped within outdated conservative paradigms of interpretation.

Indeed, it could be argued, in line with Clark, that ‘culturalist’ criticism has created a new status quo in which ‘“Transgressive” or “subversive” become ultimate terms of praise; to call a text “marginalised” becomes to flag up its massive centrality, the non-canonical functions as a kind of canon, and so on’ (p. 19), and, conversely, what used to be thought of as central to proper understanding of the period, established canons, and so on, has been marginalised. For instance, Aers himself has more recently bemoaned the success of his own enterprise, insofar as it has led to the wilful neglect of Christianity as a field of study, stating

It seems that since the demise of Robertsonianism in the late 1970s and early 1980s the most influential and intellectually searching works on Chaucer have not been interested in what is specifically Christian about the poetry, its culture, and its questions. Prevalent critical paradigms, including those that are historicising, have tended to sideline (not simply ignore) distinctively Christian practices, ideas, and difficulties. In works of great critical force, from a variety of ideological dispositions, Christianity has been either *marginalised* or briskly subjected to the master discourse of psychoanalysis. (my emphasis)<sup>32</sup>

Trigg has identified the same problem in her book tracing reading practices in relation to Chaucer, noting that ‘the works of historically distant authors who belong to culturally dominant groups (the “dead white males” of popular currency) [are] one of the first points of attack of feminist, postcolonial, and multicultural studies and of other movements concerned to expose the hegemonic

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<sup>32</sup> David Aers, *Faith, Ethics and Church: Writing in England, 1360-1409* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), p. 2.

cultural politics of a traditional criticism'.<sup>33</sup> Such a tendency has led, for example, to the need to defend 'the study of the canon against a gynocritical insistence that women's writing should replace the old canons.' To combat such attempts, Trigg maintains that 'Basic structures, the economies of literary production, should be the object of examination. Since we cannot escape from reading [...] the patriarchal archetext, we must continue to use canonical texts to interrogate and undo the cultural economy inscribed within them' (p. 20).

There is certainly no doubt that much debate in the Middle Ages in relation to the way people were permitted to behave and to believe descended into persecution and the exercising of force by one group against another. But these clashes did not occur over a 'right' to behave however one chose, but over competing definitions of orthodoxy, of how one could live most fully within pre-existing ideal forms given the limitations placed on the human condition due to the vagaries of history. It was the accidents of historical circumstance and the inevitable presence in one's personal life of human fallibility that caused them to begin from a point of personal error in relation to such ideals: a sense of being an individual inevitably arose from this process. But it was these errors that a medieval person sought to expurgate as best they could in order to journey towards the ideal, conspiring with and investing in dominant ideologies because they saw 'obedience and faith' to be 'active strengths' (Davis, p. 8). Individuality and an awareness of one's individualism was a necessary starting point for a journey towards a better, integrated and enlightened condition.<sup>34</sup> But that

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<sup>33</sup> Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern*, Medieval Cultures, 30 (London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> That we can apparently see, from a historical vantage point, that any such hope would seem to be nothing more than an ideologically determined fallacy does not mean we can deny that it had very real value to those people living within the accepted norms of their culture. In fact, our supposedly 'historical vantage point' which shows faith in and hopes for the ability to achieve

condition was one that could never be achieved in the here-and-now. The process of being a person was therefore a constant negotiation between ideal forms and the realities of historical circumstance. There was certainly no ‘outside’ to medieval culture, no place for someone to be something entirely unformed by the prescriptive norms of the period. But there was the always-present opportunity to create new discursive spaces from the amalgamation of prior models, to bend existing patterns of thought and belief into new concepts of being. Due to the unique life they had lived, the errant individualism of each person necessarily facilitated a process of infinite slippage and renegotiation between that life and the ideal form(s) they assumed it *ought* to have been. To paraphrase Trigg, being a person involves a constant process of making and unmaking, re-engaging with centrist orthodoxies whilst also undoing the cultural economy inscribed within normative medieval society.

What remains to be discussed is the way in which I understand how this process of negotiation took place in the specific texts I deal with in this thesis. I have established the need to readdress how recognised forms of self-understanding instantiated in medieval tradition and society had a very real worth to the people living in that culture, and why much current criticism has been unable to properly recognise this issue. This thesis will therefore examine how Rolle’s *Incendium Amoris*, Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, and Hoccleve’s *Series*, portray individuals who at first stand in delegitimised relation to normative

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transcendent states of being to be a cultural fantasy is itself nothing more than a set of assumptions inherent to a liberalized, rationalist, and largely atheist or agnostic Western viewpoint, a viewpoint which conditions what does and does not seem conceptually viable. For many people living in both the West and around the globe, ‘obedience and faith’ are still ‘active strengths’, regardless of whatever sinister disciplinarian forces we consider them to be manifestations of.

models of being, before going on to (re)inscribe those individuals within medieval society. Each is concerned to seek a way, or ways, to re-engage and re-integrate with orthodox personae, to negotiate a path back from the wilderness into ordered society. What we find at issue in these texts is not questions of how to fashion a self that exists above and beyond, or outside of, medieval culture, but rather new ways of existing, of being, *within* that culture.

We have until this point tracked discussions of individualism through a general critical context which took in all forms of self-understanding inhering in medieval culture, constituting, to name just the most obvious ones, political, religious, philosophical, and historical. This study will necessarily remain sensitive to this need for an interdisciplinary approach. However, its focus is principally literary. I assume all three authors were wielding control over the interactions between various models and personae we see deployed in their texts, moulding and shaping the presentation of each individual to maximise the effect on the reader and therefore serve their own ends in composing the text (what those ends were and whether they succeeded or not is a matter to be discussed in each individual chapter). It is a central tenet of this thesis that in the work of all three authors they were aware of the contradictory and conflicted position(s) that they found themselves in regarding the prevailing real and ideological demands of their current milieu. In this sense, they were 'partially-disenchanted' in the manner I discussed above, able to perceive, to one extent or another, and depending on the unique situation each found themselves thinking about the errant individualism they portrayed in their text, the humanly constructed contours of society which conditioned ways of knowing and being a person, but nevertheless maintaining that the overarching values of that culture still very much mattered.

Finally, as anyone familiar with the works under discussion here will know already, the error stricken individual found in each is a textual avatar for each author. The degree to which this is the case, the conceptual gap that, as readers, we are encouraged to believe exists (or not) between each writer and that avatar varies in relation to each author. Rolle and Hoccleve's works rely on the reader accepting the correspondence between the speaking 'I' of the text and that of the real author. The strategies of self-legitimation deployed in relation to the textual avatar are meant to equally legitimise the status of the real author. In contrast, Gower stands only in a very loose relation to his avatar, Amans. They are linked insofar as Amans's progression to a position of self-understanding authorises Gower's pedagogic programme, since Amans assumes the persona of authoritative poet, 'John Gower', by the close of the *Confessio*. However, Gower is not concerned for his own well-being in the same way Rolle and Hoccleve are, because he not dealing with any 'real' errors of thought or conduct that have been levelled at him in the historical world. Gower's concern is to show a literary creation erring in order to show how it can be saved. Amans is an 'individual' in the sense that he is divided from society and from God, and so, ultimately, from himself, but his errors are mankind's. The erroneous textual avatar is the everyman, and Gower attempts to show where, how, and why Amans can reintegrate himself in the economy of social and spiritual salvation that the author of the poem sees as necessary for the recovery of society at large. In this sense, he represents a control case for the other two texts I deal with, testing out the value of a generic, *theoretical* notion of individualism in the context of the late-Middle Ages, whereas Rolle and Hoccleve test out what it meant to be an individual in *practice*.



As a consequence of the often oblique relationship each author shares with their textual avatars, this thesis unfolds alongside and with an awareness of autobiographical theory, and at many points I draw heavily on the arguments critics of autobiography have advanced in their work in order to understand how the self shown in each text relates to its larger context, even if that self stands only in indirect relation to a historical person. As Davis has commented, medieval authors are not ‘principally engaged in representing a historical life. [Their] writings are less acts of memorialisation or recollection than expressions of confession and conscience’, meaning we should be more concerned with the *autos* than the *bios* (Davis, p. 5). In focusing on the *autos* of these texts, I can examine how each self squares the knowledge of their errant individualism with (and within) a conscience conditioned by the discursive norms of medieval society to frown upon and question such individualism. The errors initially assigned by each author to their textual avatar may well be the errors of the historical author, or they may be fabricated or falsified according to the demands of medieval convention in order to better fulfil each author’s overall project. Indeed, one often gets the impression that these authors find it expedient to show a fault where none existed in order to better highlight the process of overcoming; a deliberate fall in order for a glorious rise to take place. As Burrow argued, however, showing how a course is plotted from a state of ‘conventional’ error towards reintegration with societal norms does not necessarily constitute a lie about what a person’s sense of identity and being is, even if it is not referentially ‘true’ in the strictly historical sense.

These texts can tell us something truthful about the *value* of individualism in medieval culture, of how and why it mattered to be excluded from or belong to

that culture. Consequently, it is the success and/or failure of the internal logic of each work that I am interested in in this thesis, of how the self established in each text, a self which possesses only a pseudo-existence or identity on the edge of society, tries to chart a path back into the social body and function as a legitimised persona or combination of personae. Crucially, however, all three texts are in the end plagued by the fact, acknowledged or not, that they can never quite live up to the ideals that they strive for in the here-and-now. These texts more often limn the process of striving for but not finding paradigms of being that can fully assuage conflicted human consciousness. To say as much is really to repeat nothing more than one of the central tenets of medieval culture, that achieving perfection is impossible in the temporal world. This is why I see a 'poetics of failure' functioning implicitly in each author's work. It is failure that ultimately produces new forms and models of self-understanding. The 'errant individualism' of each authorial proxy lies in their flawed humanity; it is cast into relief as each negotiates and engages with a multiplicity of ideals in order to try and better understand their place in society, the world, and, ultimately, God's eternal pattern.

## CHAPTER ONE

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 NEGOTIATING PARADIGMS OF ERROR IN  
 RICHARD ROLLE'S *INCENDIUM AMORIS*

I cannot tell you how surprised I was the first time I felt my heart begin to warm. It was real warmth too, not imaginary, and it felt as if it were actually on fire. I was astonished at the way the heat surged up, and how this new sensation brought great and unexpected comfort. I had to keep feeling my breast to make sure there was no physical reason for it! But once I realised that it came entirely from within, that this fire of love had no cause, material or sinful, but was the gift of my Maker, I was absolutely delighted, and wanted my love to be even greater. And this longing was all the more urgent because of the delightful effect and the interior sweetness which this spiritual flame fed into my soul. Before the infusion of this comfort I have never thought that we exiles could possibly have known such warmth, so sweet was the devotion it kindled. It set my soul aglow as if a real fire was burning there. (*Incendium Amoris*, 45)<sup>1</sup>

The opening of the *Incendium Amoris* offers an unexpectedly direct challenge to its reader, opening out two horizons of expectation which Rolle must go on to address. The first is, quite simply, that he might be mistaken in asserting the phenomenon described as divinely inspired, have misjudged mere emotion or the agitated contortions of consciousness for contemplation of the highest reality. Rolle can refute this charge of mistaken interpretation and assert the spiritual validity of his experience by satisfying the second horizon of expectation his opening gambit would invite medieval reader to consider: how far does Rolle's experience satisfy the accepted and esteemed precedents regarding direct communion with the divine that were instantiated in medieval culture? The most powerful of these precedents were found in the writings of St. Augustine, and as we shall see, Rolle seeks to validate his own experience through engaging with

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, trans. by C. Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972; repr. London 1988). Citations from the Latin text are given parenthetically after the English translation only when the discussion of specific Latin terms or phrases are needed for my argument. The Latin is taken from *The Incendium Amoris of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, ed. by Margaret Deansly (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1915).

both the explicit words and the implicit argument of Augustine's *Confessions*. However, Rolle also has to assert the distinct, individualised elements of his own experience, as doing so validates and authenticates that experience according to the imperatives of the cultural milieu of fourteenth-century England.

Rolle's language in this initial passage is designed to stress the palpable physicality of his experience, attempting to pre-emptively banish to the realm of impossibility any refutation that he has erroneously substituted delusion for truth. When he feels his heart warm ('incalescere': Deansly, 145) it is 'real [...] not imaginary' ('uere non imaginarie', 145). In the final sentence of the passage cited above Wolters also uses the phrase 'real fire' in his translation, but doing so loses full range of meaning that Rolle invokes. 'Nam ita inflammat animam meam ac si ignis elementaris ibi aderet' (145) is better translated as 'It set my soul aflame as if an elemental fire was burning there.' Again, the language used here, in particular 'elementaris', strongly focuses the reader on the unmistakably corporeal nature of Rolle's experience, the singular and knowable presence of spiritual fire in his person. Rolle is also greatly concerned to delimit a boundary as to what his experience is *not* a result of. Once again, in translating the line 'non esset a carne illud incendium amoris, et concupiscencia, in qua continui' (145) as 'this fire of love had no cause, material or sinful' Wolters loses a great deal of the meaning Rolle's Latin evokes. Translating 'carne' as 'flesh' rather than 'material' captures better the distinction Rolle is attempting to make, in that the sensation being described 'boils up' from within the body ('ex interiori efferbuisset' – another word which Wolters unhelpfully elides) but is not generated *by* the body. The need to assign proper meaning to individual experience, and the language via which that can be achieved, is quickly

established as a central concern of Rolle's text. It is across the conceptual boundaries of truth and error that develop out of these initial statements, and the problems that they create, that the argument of the *Incendium Amoris* unfolds. This chapter is an attempt to understand the deep-lying structures of thought that function beneath the surface of Rolle's ostensible argument, providing a further self-justificatory mechanism within his complete mystical metaphysics. Underneath the clearly present desire to convince his readers of the veracity of his experience (the *realness* of the warmth infused in him by God) is a further mechanism of self-justification which uses the paradigms of confessional writing established and validated by Augustine. In this chapter I look at how Rolle deploys both assertive and defensive poses in his writing in order to control the two horizons of expectation activated at the start of the *Incendium*, paying particular attention to how definitions of error function in relation to the authoritative spiritual persona fashioned over the course of the text.

The response that Rolle ostensibly professes to have desired from his readers is given later in the Prologue. 'I offer [...] this book for the attention, not of the philosophers and sages of this world, not of great theologians bogged down in the interminable questionings, but to the simple and unlearned, who are seeking rather to love God than to amass knowledge' (*IA*, 46). How could this be accomplished?

To achieve this [...] they must, first, fly from every worldly honour; they must hate all vainglory and the parade of knowledge. And then, conditioned by great poverty, through prayer and meditation they can devote themselves to the love of God. It will not be surprising if then an inner spark of uncreated charity should appear in them and prepare their hearts for the fire which consumes everything that is dark, and raises them to that pitch of ardour which is lovely and pleasant. Then will they pass beyond the things of time, and sit enthroned in infinite peace. (*IA*, 47)

Rolle's stated aim in writing the *Incendium* would then seem to be principally didactic – an exercise in affective evangelism, with descriptions of Rolle's own condition and narratives of his conversion from sin to sanctity acting as a template for others to imitate. A necessary component in such a project would be the effective demonstration that Rolle has undergone conversion from a state of sin and error to a now enlightened perspective – no one, after all, would want to listen to or follow a deluded sinner on the path to damnation. A confession of Rolle's previous sins, recognition of his *past* errors, would therefore seem to be a prerequisite to his pedagogic aims.

Assigning improper conduct to an anterior or exterior state allows for the speaking subject to claim a unified totality, a rigorously policed and enforced boundary of perfection predicated on possessing complete understanding of all the available factors of a given field of knowledge. In his recent analysis of the philosophical uses of autobiography, Thomas Mathien states that confessions can only take place from this position of enlightenment. 'One must *know* that one has failed in the past, and how one has done so, in order to confess the fact.'<sup>2</sup> The confession must also therefore 'include an acknowledgment of a new form of knowledge or insight, whether acquired by supernatural or natural means, together with some sort of historical account of its acquisition' (p. 24). This narrative concerning the acquisition of a new understanding is of crucial importance. The confessional writer has, as Mathien notes, 'a difficult position to maintain. Having admitted to previous errors in action, in belief or in attitude' he or she 'must now maintain that their replacements – which establish the viewpoint that makes the description of the errors possible – are not themselves errors'. He then goes on to

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Mathien, 'Philosophers Autobiographies', in *Autobiography as Philosophy*, ed. by Thomas Mathien and D. G. Wright (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 15-30 (p. 23).

argue that, 'Confessional autobiographers can adopt a variety of strategies to resolve this difficulty. For example, one can show how the new awareness *cannot* be erroneous, or demonstrate that it provides a cognitive or moral advantage, that it resolves difficulties in understanding or in conduct of a generally recognised character' (p. 24).

For Mathien, Augustine's *Confessions* is the paradigmatic example of this type of work. Mathien's analysis is useful for framing the terms of my own argument as the *Confessions* provided the exemplary conversion model for medieval Christendom. The first nine books of Augustine's text consist of a narrative account of how he progressed from a state of sin in thought and behaviour to a place within the divine economy of salvation. In his pursuit of victory at public debates and his constant desire for women he errs in his actions, guilty of pride and lust; in following the Manichean heresies he shows himself to err in belief. On accepting the doctrines of the Christian faith those erroneous and sinful aspects of his past life are superseded by a new form of insight into his own condition and that of the world around him. Having thus acknowledged the 'new form of knowledge' Mathien requires, Augustine must then assert the truth of his new, Christian position. In one sense this involves the tautology at the heart of Christianity: truth cannot be an error because it is truth. But, ever aware of the need to address an audience of non-believers as well as the faithful, Augustine goes to great lengths to show how his new state of awareness provides him with an improved understanding both of the facts of his own life (in books I-IX), and of troubling interpretative issues to do with time, memory, the medium of created existence, and matters of theology and scriptural explication (books X-XIII).

The implied argument of the text that ‘proves’ Augustine’s current condition is truly enlightened has, as Walter Spengeman has observed, ‘been employed by so many autobiographers of so many different ideological persuasions over the centuries that we are apt to forget that its origins lie in a very special set of beliefs and assumptions’.<sup>3</sup> The mode is grounded in the certainty that the retrospective narrator can view his own life from a point outside it; therefore this view is not subjected to the destabilising circumstances of the life he is describing. The past self, the protagonist, can only view his life from an ever-shifting perspective in which the past is continually reshaped in the fleeting present moment by the accumulation of new experience.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the narrator stands outside the span of temporal action he is reporting; his perspective is not altered by new experience and he contemplates the past from a fixed point of immutable truth (Spengeman, pp. 7-9). Within the tenets of Christian theology, an immutable truth can of course only be the eternal pattern given to the objects and events of the material world by the unmoved mover. The narrative of Augustine’s life found in the *Confessions* is therefore a revelation of the ‘always-already-has-been’ that underwrites all of existence. In a complex but always informative essay, Eugene Vance describes this process as the interruption of the narrating ‘I’ by God’s own grammar. Vance argues that the authenticity of the conversion to the currently enlightened position is marked not by the completion of the autobiographical circle – when the protagonist gives way to the narrator, his story

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<sup>3</sup> William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine has much to say about this very issue in X, 11 of the *Confessions*. ‘For *cogo* (I bring together) and *cogito* (I cogitate) have the same mutual relation as *ago* (I do) and *agito* (I do constantly) and *facio* (I make) and *factito* (I make often). But the mind has appropriated this word by itself, so that what is collected together (*colligitur*), that is, brought together (*cogitur*), in the mind but in no other place, is now properly said to be cogitated.’ Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. by John K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960).



finished, and ‘at the same instant, the narrator is born to tell the story already told’ (Spengeman, p. 15) – but by its displacement. ‘The deictic “I” becomes a purely “grammatical” sign pointing to an order of written signs identical with history, to a logos born not of the speaking self but of the divine Other by whom we are originally spoken’.<sup>5</sup> Examining the totality of his experiential self in Book X of the *Confessions*, those things the ‘senses reported’, others ‘intermingled with myself’, ‘and then in the wide treasuries of memory scanning certain things, laying away certain others, and drawing forth others still’, Augustine acknowledges that God is ‘the abiding light which I consulted concerning all these things, as to whether they were, as to what they were, and as to what value they possessed’ (X, 40). So although he never commits the impiety of confusing himself with God – ‘I myself was not you’ (X, 40) – the formal position of Augustine’s divinely instructed consciousness within the text of the *Confessions* is analogous to God’s immutable truth. It is an omniscient, eternal perspective that allows interpretative stability both in relation to Augustine’s own life and the subjects dealt with in books X-XIII.

Turning to the *Incendium*, we find that Rolle presents the narrative of his own life according to this Augustinian paradigm. In order to assert his own life as an *exemplum*, as a pattern worthy of others to follow, Rolle must demonstrate that he has overcome sin to achieve a position of enlightenment that cannot be erroneous. To this end, in, for example, cap. 12 of the *Incendium*, Rolle writes a stylised autobiographical passage that is notable for reading like a brief synopsis of the first nine books of the *Confessions*:

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<sup>5</sup> Eugene Vance, ‘Augustine’s *Confessions* and the Grammar of Selfhood’, *Genre*, 6 (1973), 1-28 (p. 13).

Lord God, pity me: my infancy was stupid, [I, 6-8]  
 my boyhood vain [I, 9-20] my adolescence unclean. [II, 1-VIII, 11]  
 But now, Lord Jesus, my heart has been set on fire with holy love,  
 and my disposition has been changed [VIII, 12; IX, 10]  
 so that my soul has no wish to touch those bitter things  
 which once were meat and drink to me. [IX, 1-13]  
 (IA, 81)<sup>6</sup>

We can here see that the two sins Rolle is concerned to demonstrate that he has ‘overcome’ are those which give Augustine so much trouble over the course of his narrative; pride and carnal lust. They are invoked again at the start of the pivotal cap. 15, in which Rolle recounts the first time he received his gift of heavenly fire. When Rolle was an adolescent, we are told, God curbed his ‘youthful lust and transformed it into a longing for spiritual grace’ so that he ‘ardently longed for the pleasures of heaven more than [he] ever delighted in physical embrace or worldly corruption’ (IA, 91). We can certainly compare this portrayal of ‘unclean’ adolescence with similar descriptions in the *Confessions*:

I wish to bring back to mind my past foulness and the carnal corruptions of my soul [...] For in my youth, I burned to get my fill of hellish things. I dared to run wild in different darksome ways of love. [...] I could not distinguish the calm light of chaste love from the fog of lust. Both kinds of affection burned confusedly within me and plunged me into a whirlpool of shameful deeds. (II, 1-2)

But whereas Augustine spends the best part of eight books deconstructing the fault of his carnal lusts from the perspective of his new knowledge, in the *Incendium* we simply get a statement of error that has been overcome. Similarly, when Rolle tells us he ‘used to listen to that kind of flattery which all too often can drag the most doughty warriors from their heights down to hell itself’ (IA, 82) we can find echoes of the vain young Augustine, who tells us he ‘loved to win

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<sup>6</sup> What I consider to be corresponding chapters from the *Confessions* are given in square brackets at the end of each line.

proud victories in our contests, and to have my ears tickled by false stories, so that they would itch all the more intensely for them' (I, 10). But again, the intense intellectual enquiry that this state of sin prompts in the *Confessions* is completely absent from Rolle's account of his own conversion.

The reason for this is that Rolle intended his work not to be primarily a pedagogic demonstration of how to leave error behind and ascend to a position of infallible grace as he claims at the outset, but rather to defend himself from accusations of errant behaviour and belief that were *still* present even in his post-conversion self; to be, in effect, an apology for its author in his current situation.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, this is in marked difference to Augustine's project. At the opening of Book IV of the *Confessions*, Augustine implores God to 'enable me to follow around in present recollection the windings of my past errors, and to offer them up to you as a sacrifice of jubilation' (IV, 1). Later in Book IX his description of the process of conversion is specifically one of sacrificing the old, erroneous self in order that the divinely guided self can begin to live:

For there, within my chamber, where I was angry with myself, where I suffered compunction, where I made sacrifice, slaying my old self, and, with initial meditations on my own renewal of life, hoping in you, there you began to grow sweet to me, and you gave 'joy to my heart (Psalms 4. 7).' (IX, 4)

In the *Confessions*, error is consigned to the past self. This is not to say Augustine is free of sin in the present, as he readily admits in Book X: 'Who is it, Lord, who is not carried a little beyond the limits of his needs? [...] Not such a one am I, "for I am a sinful man (Luke 5. 8)" ' (X, 31). But these current errors are not present as

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<sup>7</sup> This point has been well made by Nicholas Watson in his book *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 13 (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 113-41. I will also comment on how apology functions in the *Incendium* in my own argument, but it will be with regards to specific issues arising out of Rolle's use of the confession/conversion model rather than the strategies Watson discusses.

a qualifying factor within the interpretative matrix of the *Confessions* and so do not affect Augustine's ability to be a correct reader of the divine logos – from an orthodox theological position everything we see him interpret he gets right. We might say that whilst sin and error are doctrinally inescapable due to Augustine's nature as a human being, and therefore theoretically present in the narrating 'I' of the *Confessions*, in the practical matters of interpretation that that 'I' must engage in (his own past life and the discussion of matters in books X-XIII), it never displays any incongruence with the immutable truth.

In contrast, despite initial claims to secure error-free interpretative capacity for his narrating 'I', which relegates any possibility of error to the past (as seen in the assertion of the actual physical reality of a spiritually inspired 'real warmth'), it becomes clear over the course of the *Incendium* that what constitutes a correct reading of the divine grammar for Rolle is in fact still very much a concern. Anxiety over aspects of Rolle's *present* behaviour and thought which are contentious loom large throughout the text, undermining the integrity of the narrating 'I' in its claims to have achieved complete self-effacement and erasure within the divine logos. This has very clear implications for both Rolle's own status as an enlightened interpreter of the divine will, and, consequently, his stated pastoral mission. If he is acting or preaching in a manner that is contrary to prevailing orthodoxy, then who is going to believe he has attained an infallible interpretative position as a consequence of his conversion, let alone follow him? Rolle has to demonstrate that he is a correct reader of Gods' eternal word, even when this places him in conflict with normative standards of behaviour. It is for this reason that the Augustinian paradigm of confession and conversion is so important to the overall strategy of the *Incendium*. Rolle defends himself by

recourse to the Augustinian precedent in which, following a conversion, one's own thoughts and actions are subsumed within and guided by the divine logos underpinning creation. Vance describes Augustine, in his enlightened position, as being the already written reader of God's divine ur-text. Rolle's conversion to a position of enlightenment is different in that he describes himself as being in receipt of the gift of *canor*, or song (*IA*, 88-95). He is, in a sense, the already sung singer, his gift allowing him to partake in an eternal and indescribable divine melody. Epistemologically, the two positions amount to the same thing: both Augustine and Rolle's can interpret their past lives according to the one true pattern, as for both, the narrating 'I' of their texts has been interrupted and displaced by Gods' will. But to be in Rolle's position also brings with it a potential corollary, one which Augustine does not explore, but which Rolle exploits to the full. If the narrating 'I' of the present is following (because it has been displaced by) the immutable truth, then it cannot go wrong in its actions in the here-and-now. Although in the *Incendium* we find autobiographical descriptions of Rolle's errant behaviour prior to his conversion, we also get many instances when he is describing post-conversion incidents when he has been accused of improper conduct and error by his peers, or how aspects of his thought and behaviour have been seen to be doctrinally contentious. As we shall see, he is able to defend himself from these accusations by arguing that just as his post-conversion consciousness can correctly read the past, it must therefore be able to correctly read the present, and that his actions can therefore only be judged to be correct. Rolle can in effect 'solve' the problem of being accused of error, and indeed go on the attack against his critics, by imitating and expanding upon the formal implications of the omniscient narratorial position theorised in the

*Confessions*. Augustine still considered himself a flawed sinner following his conversion, despite the improved understanding it granted him. For Rolle, the transformation of the narrating 'I' into 'the likeness of him in whom all is melody and song' (*IA*, 77) logically eradicates the potential for sinful behaviour in the post-conversion self.

In the *Incendium*, Rolle exploits the possibilities for self-legitimation contained within the formal logic of the confessional narrative, extrapolating the methodology of infallible reading of the past and applying it to the present. One final point that we need to expand on here is that he does so without recourse to any of the intellectual rigour that his illustrious predecessor's model suggested was necessary to justify one's claims, or that critics such as Mathien have seen as essential to the task if it is to be believable and effective. What is lacking in Rolle's text in any great detail is the element Mathien argues is crucial for claiming a new form of knowledge or insight: a historical account of its acquisition. To understand why Rolle's argument was still effective even when it displayed what, as moderns, we could consider a gravely lax attitude to historical veracity, we need to expand on the issue we touched on briefly in our introductory section, that is, the difference between what Burrow called 'the formal question of reference and the substantial question of truth' (see above, pp. 25-26). Like Burrow, James Olney has argued that we can 'understand the life around which autobiography forms itself in a number of other ways besides the perfectly legitimate one of "individual history and narrative"'. One of these ways would be to 'understand it as participation in an absolute existence far transcending the shifting, changing unrealities of mundane life'. In this sense, life would 'not stretch back across time but extends down to the roots of individual being; it is

atemporal, committed to a vertical thrust from consciousness down into the unconscious rather than to a horizontal thrust from the present into the past'.<sup>8</sup> Olney here seems to conceptualise the act of autobiographical writing as occurring along axes labelled 'consciousness' and 'history', or, in a manner similar to Davis, *autos* and *bios* (see above, p. 37). Within such a configuration, 'truth' becomes a variable that can correspond to a greater or lesser degree to either of these axes depending upon the individual prerogative of an author within their historical moment. For Augustine, the consistency of the 'horizontal thrust' of his narrating 'I' is as crucial as the vertical, as he must both establish and use the perspective outlined by Spengeman and Mathien in order to maintain its enlightened and trustworthy position. Rolle's 'I' demonstrates it has passed through Augustine's positions via brief stylised descriptions, thus qualifying as trustworthy/true speaker, but because Augustine has established the ground and paradigm, and because Rolle needs to be *not-Augustine* but to prove the validity of his own experience and words, he can and must move quickly through the stages to arrive at his unique position. Hence sins past and overcome receive only a cursory description, and the *Incendium* as a whole lacks any kind of definite temporal framework within which the historical events described are fixed.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> James Olney, 'Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of *Bios*: The Ontology of Autobiography', in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 236-67 (p. 239).

<sup>9</sup> During the pivotal cap. 15 Rolle states that 'From the time my conversion of life and mind began until the day the door of Heaven swung back [...] three years passed, all but three months. But the door remained open for nearly a year longer before I could really feel in my heart the warmth of eternal love' (*IA*, 92). However, what actually constituted the beginning of his conversion is difficult to pinpoint. Rolle goes on to tell us of the moment when he was sitting in meditation and first felt 'an unusually pleasant heat', but that 'it was just over nine months before a conscious and incredibly sweet warmth kindled me' (*IA*, 93), and then, a few lines later, that 'From the time my conversion began until, by the help of God, I was able to reach the heights of loving Christ, there passed four years and three months' (*IA*, 94). These three distinct descriptions can be amalgamated into a roughly coherent chronology by asserting that Rolle's conversion took four years and three months overall (*IA*, 94), consisting of the period of two years and nine months 'until the day the door of Heaven swung back', plus another year before he felt the real 'warmth of eternal love' (*IA*, 92), with that year corresponding to the 'just over nine months' before he felt the 'incredibly sweet

Consequently, any philosophical speculation on the delinquent nature of the historical self is also absent. In the *Incendium* Rolle presents to his readers a series of autobiographical vignettes, moments from his life in which he has been, or is being, accused of error, accusations which he simply refutes and then moves on. The focus of autobiographical moments in the *Incendium* is always upwards, an atemporal vertical thrust towards the divine that seeks the unchanging reality underlying the unstable flux of human existence. Adopting this focus gives Rolle license to play fast and loose with history in its strictly temporal manifestation. Intellectual rigour and argument exploited by Augustine and regarded by Mathien as essential are superseded by the power of unique moments where affective force contrives to be felt in the present. The affective as opposed to intellectual conversion is thus a repeatable moment or series of moments and the historic self becomes redundant. However, the historic self is not entirely jettisoned from the text, as readers can, in effect, follow the vertical axis of consciousness/*autos* down into the horizontal axis of history/*bios* via the precedent of Augustine, who has plotted the temporal coordinates of the conversion narrative that Rolle is implicitly following.

To a modern perspective, this kind of zero-sum assertion may be deeply unpalatable, especially if we are used, as many critics of autobiography are, to moving from Augustine straight to Descartes. However, we can and should see what we (moderns) might call a lack of proper self-analysis as central to our understanding of Rolle's metaphysics and epistemology. Augustine's *Confessions*

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warmth' (IA, 93). However, it is clear that, even in the space of two pages discussed above, there are glaring inconsistencies in the temporal scheme being articulated. Those inconsistencies are greatly exacerbated by the rest of his text, in which Rolle shifts between talking about himself in the past tense as a misguided sinner, to being on the way to conversion, to being currently converted, according to the needs of whatever point he is currently trying to make about the underlying truth of his experience.



did not only provide a model of confessionary self-legitimation, it also bequeathed to the Middle Ages two parallel but contrasting paradigms to describe direct human experience of the divine. The first was one of speculative mysticism, requiring rigorous philosophical and theological inquiry and minute description in which the person having the experience would attempt to recreate as closely as possible the 'reality' of the divine through language. However, given that the divine is by its very nature beyond human comprehension or description, failure to capture one's experience was in fact a sign of its authenticity. This inevitable failure of language, of the human faculties of description and understanding, was therefore the second paradigm of relating to the divine that emerged out of Augustine's thinking. The *Confessions* itself largely displays the characteristic of the first of these types, especially in the final three books. However, as we shall see, it also very clearly describes mystical experience of the divine in terms of the latter type as well. It is very clear that in Rolle's case he was working within the latter of the two traditions. The lack of 'detail' in the autobiographical sections of the *Incendium* are not an attempt by Rolle to avoid justifying his errors, but actually constitute the justification themselves. To ask any more of Rolle, to expect him to try to represent his sense of being in a more transparent manner, is to make claims on him that simply have no validity within the cultural and intellectual context within which he perceived his experience and chose to articulate it in writing. So although it is easier for us to comprehend conceptually how and why Rolle considered himself to be in a position of interpretative stability in terms of the textual metaphor of reading and writing formulated by Vance, we must, as we shall see below, also always remain conscious that it was the *failure* of language in the face of the ineffability of the divine that formed the

first line of defence against his critics. It is for this reason that, although my argument draws on Vance's idea of the enlightened self as having been interrupted by a divine 'grammar' which causes that self to become an infallible writer of his own, and a reader of other's, actions, it is necessary to stress that Rolle did not consider his experience of the divine to have taken place in any abstract intellectual or philosophical sense, or the subsequent enlightened position he occupied to need explaining in those terms. It was the superabundance of sensual and emotional experience that lay outside language that indicated authenticity. This is why Rolle strives so hard to create a song-like quality in his Latin: alongside the confessional logic of self-justification I shall be dealing with below, this song is the principal method he adopts in the *Incendium* for persuading his readers of the reality of his experience.<sup>10</sup>

## MYSTICISM AND THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

Certain problematic issues arise when a person such as Rolle transposes the paradigm of conversion from a situation where the erroneous sinner is a heretic and the enlightened convert author is a Christian, to a situation where both the erroneous sinner and the enlightened convert author is a Christian. Augustine

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<sup>10</sup> As Sarah de Ford explains of Rolle's Latin *oeuvre* in general, 'these works are not "about" song, they are intended to be song, extended compositions in highly alliterated and rhythmical prose which undertake to involve the reader in the ecstasies of the mystical experience of Rolle. If they do not succeed [...] the difficulty lies in the inexpressible nature of the experience and also in the inability of the non-mystical reader to bring any comparable experience from his own life.' Sarah De Ford, 'Mystical Union in the *Melos Amoris* of Richard Rolle', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at the Exeter Symposium, July 1980*, ed. by Marion Glascoe (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1980), pp. 173-202 (p. 174). See also *The Contra Amatores Mundi of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, trans. & ed. by P. F. Theiner, University of California Publications, English Studies, 33 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 7-8, and Frank Shon, 'The Teleological Element in Richard Rolle's *Contra Amatores Mundi*', *Modern Language Review*, 101 (2006), 1-15 (pp. 2-3) on the song-like qualities of Rolle's Latin in both the *Contra* and in general. I discuss this issue in more detail below (pp. 79-81).

provided the exemplary model of a past sinner becoming a true adherent to God's truths. However, Augustine was not writing in a context where the earthly Christian Church disseminated normative models of self-understanding through its symbiotic relationship with the powerful machinery of medieval states. In the late fourth and early fifth centuries, because of the precarious socio-political conditions of the period, no one group of adherents to a specific doctrine could enforce a normative definition of orthodoxy on any other group with anything like the far-reaching efficacy of their medieval descendents. 'Orthodox theology' was therefore in a much more fluid and mutable state, and individuals could have their sense of spiritual identity conditioned by a wide-ranging set of practices. Looking at this state of affairs from within an explicit spiritual perspective that demanded a person subscribe to specific tenets as orthodox (which Christianity does), such a heterogeneous mass of other beliefs would be regarded as heresy. This was the position Augustine found himself in after his conversion from the Manichean heresies of his youth to the tenets of the Catholic faith. So whilst the narrative of conversion in a religious context always demands a move upwards towards better understanding of the central mysteries of the faith, in the specific socio-historical context within which Augustine experienced his conversion, he was also making a lateral movement from outside the faith to within it. The point of contrast, both in terms of his personal narrative and his theology, would always be between his old, essentially heretical self, and his new fully orthodox persona. Any potential clash with existing structures of authority within the newly adopted orthodoxy that his enlightened understanding might create were always likely to be sublimated and diffused by the beneficial effects that the convert, especially one as intellectually

combative over his newfound faith as Augustine, gained in terms of asserting the authority of the true faith over those that stood in opposition to it.

For anyone writing in the late Middle Ages, there was no such pressing need to establish the primacy of Christian faith. Indeed, the starting point for all Christians in terms of their understanding of orthodoxy was formally analogous to the position Augustine reached at the end of his conversion narrative. As we saw in the introduction to this thesis, a plethora of scholarship over the last half a century has taught us that sweeping generalisations are best avoided when it comes to analysing personal spiritual convictions in any given group or society. However, it is safe to say that, in medieval Europe at least, no one ‘became’ a Christian in the same sense that we see Augustine becoming a Christian in his *Confessions*. Rather, people were born into a dominant world-view which Augustine himself had helped to establish, and the field of knowledge with regards to what it was possible to know, and even to *be*, as a human being had largely been delimited through interpretations of his writings. Competing notions of proper orthodoxy were still of course a huge concern, but the debate took place over a conceptual terrain in which everyone agreed that, in theory at least, certain fundamental starting principles existed (however vexed this notion might become in practice) rather than it being those first principles themselves which were being contested (Morris, p. 24). What is interesting is that when, in this context, a conversion narrative is imposed on the narrative of a person’s life, it still demands an upward movement of the self towards better understanding of the faith. But when a normative standard of orthodoxy is firmly established as a shared starting point, this upwards movement can only lead the convert to a formal epistemological position where he or she has to claim better understanding than

the already orthodox. This is, of course, completely different from the position Augustine claimed in his text, which was simply better understanding than the heretic. So we reach a position in which we can see that, whereas the exemplary conversion narrative seen in the *Confessions* provides a bulwark for existing authority against potential challenges, when transposed into a context where that same authority is already normative, the conversion narrative actually challenges existing authority.

Before we look at the *Incendium* itself, it is first necessary to examine how the general formal problems we have outlined above manifest themselves in the mystic's relationship with the Medieval Church. Doing so will allow us to see the specific discursive field within which Rolle, and indeed, any other mystic, could be accused of error. Augustine set a broad precedent within which medieval persons might conceptualise personal experience of God. Throughout the Middle Ages attempts to discuss and describe direct encounters with the divine nature took place across a spectrum between, on the one hand, philosophical and theological discussion, and, on the other, the expression of the failure of the human faculties when confronted with God's perfection via recourse to a language of ineffability. Although it is of course possible to find examples of both throughout the Middle Ages, it is also certainly the case that during different periods the Church promoted either the intellectual or affective model as being more 'correct' than the other.<sup>11</sup> However, this was by no means a guarantee that a man or woman undergoing an intense personal experience that they understood as a direct communion with God would necessarily interpret that experience within the 'officially sanctioned' paradigm. This was especially the case when there was

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<sup>11</sup> See below (pp. 68-73) for a more detailed analysis of the social promotion of different models for the self, specifically in relation to the figures of Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux.

a rich plethora of competing traditions and models which were also available to the would-be-mystic, and which they might consider as more relevant to the specifics of their experience.<sup>12</sup> However, as we have noted, Rolle's ostensible intention in writing his book is pastoral, attempting to offer an account of his experiences as a model for his audience to follow and therefore attain the same level of contemplative perfection: 'And so, because I would stir up by these means every man to love God, and because I am trying to make plain the ardent nature of love [...] the title selected for this book will be *The Fire of Love*' (IA, 47). In addition, Rolle is writing to try and benefit those most in need of spiritual assistance, the 'simple and unlearned' (IA, 46) who are most likely to fall into eternal peril if they are not given a guiding hand. Given that the aim of his text is the salvation of his fellow man, and therefore entirely congruous with the aims of the Medieval Church, why might Rolle, or indeed any other mystic, present a threat to the authority of the Church, even if they considered their mystical

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<sup>12</sup> The 'reality' of mystical experience has always been a hotly contested area of debate. The presence of mystics and mystical writings across many cultures and historical periods has divided scholars and theologians into a multitude of different camps. We might broadly define them according to three positions. Sceptics tend to see mystical experiences as simply intense, non-supernatural personal experiences (such as extremes of emotion, psychosis, or delusion) that are interpreted within the dominant paradigms of particular historical and cultural moment within which the supposed mystic lived. Like sceptics, spiritualists think that a mystic can only conceptualise personal experience within the terms of a culture that is available to them. But, unlike sceptics, spiritualists see the 'core' mystical experience as a super- and supra-natural reality rather than simply an event fully explicable as misinterpreted biological and psychological phenomena. Finally, those with a specific religious faith will argue for the reality of mystical experience within the theological orthodoxies of that faith, often contesting both the sceptics' dismissal of supernatural experience, and the spiritualists' insistence on a trans-historical 'core' experience which is then simply described in terms of a specific religion. See Peter Moore, 'Christian Mysticism and Interpretation: Some Philosophical Issues Illustrated in the Study of the Medieval English Mystics', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1987*, ed. by Marion Glascoe (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), pp. 154-76, for an excellent, measured view on the pitfalls many scholars fall into when dealing with the subject. Unfortunately, I am unable to deal with these larger philosophical issues in this study. For the purposes of this chapter, I take the position that Rolle (and other medieval mystics) had some kind of intense personal experience that they interpreted within the paradigms available to them in the late Middle Ages. It is my concern to discuss how, having understood that experience in terms of certain traditions, they justified it to those who saw them as in the wrong. In effect, I am concerned with how Rolle defended himself from those medieval critics who asserted that his experience and actions were erroneous rather than investigating the veracity of that experience myself.

experience as having occurred or required explanation within a discourse other than the one propagated by institutional orthodoxy? If the goal of the process is a universally desired moment of salvation, why did the method via which one arrived at that moment become a point of debate, tension, and conflict?

The answer lay in the problematic position the discourse of mysticism and claims to mystical experience occupied in relation to the prevailing socio-political, and especially ecclesiastical, systems of authority defined and enforced during the late Middle Ages. Commentators upon the nature of mysticism have recognised that to claim to have had direct access to God places the mystic in a uniquely problematic position with regards to the strictures of institutional authority. Whilst the mystic offers a direct channel to the divine will and can thus help the earthly Church to understand the central mysteries of the faith more clearly, this very fact invests them with the personal authority to cut across any and all institutional power structures. The mystic is therefore not starting from a position of subservience and then satisfying various criteria to reach a point of forgiveness or enlightenment, such as in an auricular confession, where the penitent is at all times in the control of the priest, and subject to them for absolution. Rather, the mystic can announce that they are in a position of authority without any recourse to the strictures of the Church. Able to pronounce on issues regarding proper conduct of the self in relation to the divine, mystics therefore represented a potentially subversive threat to the entire ecclesiastical establishment, one that could bypass the usual methods of accessing positions of authority, such as education or ecclesiastical preferment, which were actively determined by the forces of orthodoxy. The issue of who counted as a mystic, and

what legitimately counted as mystical experience was therefore of central importance to the Medieval Church.

The Church had made a great investment in promoting various technologies of the self as ‘correct’ and proper ways to realise the individual in relation to the larger social hierarchy of the Middle Ages.<sup>13</sup> Looking at the issue of mysticism specifically, Grace M. Jantzen notes that ‘it was crucial to the ecclesiastical establishment that those who claimed knowledge of the mysteries of God should be contained within the structures of the church, since the power of the church would be severely threatened if it should be acknowledged that access to divine authority was possible outside its confines’.<sup>14</sup> She goes on to examine how the ecclesiastical establishment sought to control what could be legitimately defined as mystical experience by rejecting the validity of visionary experience and making instead an ideological investment in the promotion of mystical exposition of scripture or speculative, philosophical mysticism as ‘correct’ forms of direct experience of the divine (pp. 184-92). Working within a clearly defined textual

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<sup>13</sup> The fourth Lateran Council of 1215 has in particular garnered much attention as the moment when the Church tried to formalise a conceptual space into which the medieval subject could emerge. Jerry Root argues that ‘The obligatory confessional practice that develops after 1215 requires a discursive technique because the lay population must present “something” in their annual visit to the priest. To facilitate this process, the Church generates a plethora of prescriptive, didactic writings to teach medieval penitents how to present themselves in confession. This literature “constructs” the medieval subject by drawing in very explicit terms an outline of the self that one must present to the priest.’ Jerry Root, *Space to Speke: The Confessional Subject in Medieval Literature* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1997), p. 3. Root sees this technique of self-production in terms of a Foucauldian method of institutional control; by limiting the discursive space into which the penitent can project him or herself, the clergy could aim to eliminate the possibility of producing non-conformist ideologies amongst the lay population. When performed in direct contact with the priest, either individually or as part of a congregation, the penitent’s self-presentation could be effectively managed. The dialectic between priest and penitent which allows the former to be absolved of his sins will be discussed in detail in the next chapter dealing with Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*. See also Mary Flowers Braswell, *The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages* (Toronto: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983), pp. 22-41, Michael Harden, ‘Confession, Social Ethics and Social Discipline in the *Memoriale presbiterorum*’, in *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Peter Biller and A. J. Minnis (Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 1998), pp. 109-22, and Reiss, pp. 295-97, on how structures of confession mitigated (or tried to mitigate) against the expression or growth of individualism.

<sup>14</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion, 8 (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 2.



tradition is likely to encourage existing discursive patterns of knowledge to be replicated in the mind of an interpreter, thereby maintaining the hierarchical status quo. Making mystical experience 'text-based' promoted conformism and replication of what was 'known' to be true within the limits of doctrinal orthodoxy. However, when it came to the issue of mystical experience, those who favoured the visionary model could claim an equally well-established historical tradition within which their experience could be validated, even if the Church did not currently consider that tradition correct. The authoritative precedent for both speculative and visionary mysticism is found in Augustine's *Confessions*, where they are conceived as mutually corresponding methods for understanding the self in relation to God. By the late Middle Ages, however, the latent harmony between the two types of mysticism had been blurred and their inherent tensions exacerbated to the point where they were seen to function as binary opposites, with each viewed from the perspective of the other as being inherently susceptible to erroneous interpretation of properly divine phenomena, rather than as necessarily complementary techniques of understanding the divine along the same interpretative spectrum, with each correcting the potential errors and weaknesses of the other methodology.

The speculative mystical tradition that had become codified and enforced by the time Rolle was writing has its foundation in Augustine's engagement with Neoplatonic thought as it was transmitted through Plotinus. Augustine took the Platonic distinction between the bodily and non-bodily and understood it as the Christian opposition between spirit and flesh. Having done that, he could also import the related oppositions: the higher realm of the spirit was that of the eternal and immutable, in contrast with the temporal and ever-changing world of the

flesh. Augustine also utilised Plato's conception of the realm of Ideas to facilitate his own notion of the divine. As Charles Taylor has explained

Created things receive their form through God, through their participation in his Ideas. Everything has being only insofar as it participates in God. [...] The conception of an order of creation made according to God's thoughts merges with the great Johannine image of creation through the Word, and hence links Platonism with the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>15</sup>

The universe is thus an external realisation of God's rational order, and it is therefore necessary that humans try to perceive this order since it is the ultimate Good. However, the major difficulty in both Platonic doctrine and Augustine's Neoplatonic Christianity is that it is impossible to contemplate the highest reality directly. One must therefore move one's attention through a series of articulated stages. Understanding is gained through observable things only insofar as they are the first objects of attention; after this they fall silent and the mind can focus upon their divine origin. Augustine therefore begins by considering the corporeal world, but this consideration must ultimately be turned to focus upon the self.

This is because God is not just the transcendent object or just the principle of order of the nearer objects, which we strain to see. God is also and for us primarily the basic support and underlying principle of our knowing activity. God is not just what we long to see, but what powers the eye which sees. (Taylor, p. 129)

When we observe ourselves observing we are therefore confronted not just with ourselves but also forced to acknowledge the divine power motivating that act of contemplation. The focus of attention shifts from what is exterior to what is interior, and here is where God is to be found. It is worth examining briefly two chapters from Book VII of the *Confessions* in order to see the distinctly

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), p. 127. Cf. *Confessions*, VII, 9.

philosophical and analytical language Augustine uses to describe this inward, followed by upward, turn.

Augustine begins chapter ten by stating his initial movement towards interiority: 'Being thus admonished to return to myself, under your leadership I entered into my inmost being' (VII, 10). Augustine initially describes the act of experiencing his own experience as such: 'by my soul's eye, such as it was, I saw above that same eye of my soul, above my mind, an unchangeable light. [...] It was above my mind, because it made me, and I was beneath it, because I was made by it' (VII, 10). The light described here is the light in the soul given by God, illuminating man's understanding of the world and of himself; it is the light 'which lighteth every man that cometh into the world' (John 1. 9). Later, in chapter seventeen, Augustine reinterprets how he came to this moment of clarity:

Thus I gradually passed from bodies to the soul, which perceives by means of the body, and thence to its interior power, to which bodily senses present exterior things [...] and thence again to the reasoning power, to which what is apprehended by the bodily senses is referred for judgement. When this power found itself to be in me a variable thing, it raised itself up to its own understanding. It removed its thought from the tyranny of habit, and withdrew itself from the throngs of contradictory phantasms. In this way it might find that light by which it was sprinkled, when it cried out, that beyond all doubt the immutable must be preferred to the mutable. Hence it might come to know this immutable being, for unless it could know it in some way, it could in no wise have set it with certainty above the mutable. [...] Then indeed I clearly saw your 'invisible things, understood by the things which are made. (Rom. 1. 20)' (VII, 17)

I have quoted this section at length mainly to give a full sense of the analytical rigour with which Augustine treats what would presumably have been a jumble of sensual impressions. Rationality and logic are tools deployed in the service of one's faith. In these sections of the *Confessions*, Augustine saw it as of primary importance to use his powers of analysis to understand himself and his faith in relation to the truth already present and embodied in existence, the divine

grammar described by Vance. The explicative force Augustine conjures here is what made philosophical mystical experience such an attractive paradigm in terms of being able to regulate other would-be-mystics' encounters with God. Defining a stringent programmatic methodology through which a person might be able to achieve direct experience of the divine theoretically narrowed the conceptual options available to the general population, thus reducing instances of potentially threatening non-conformist mystical experience. Via such a programme, an attempt could be made by the ecclesiastical authorities to render inner experience objectively verifiable.

Of course, delimiting the discursive field in such a manner was, in practice, another matter entirely. This was in large part due to the alternative precedent provided in the *Confessions* for a highly expressive, emotional experience of the divine. As well as synthesising the Platonic idea of directing one's vision towards the Good with existing Christian theology, Augustine also reinterpreted the idea in order to try and better approximate man's relationship with God. As well as offering speculative analysis of the process via which he achieved a state of divinely guided (self-)understanding, Augustine also described it as a journey of the affections.<sup>16</sup> Crucially, this is not a different experience to the one Augustine describes in Book VII. Book X begins by discussing the same turn to the self through means of outside objects, which in turn facilitates the discovery of the true nature of the divine reality:

By means of sense I gazed upon the outside world, as far as I could, and I looked upon this bodily life of mine. From there I entered into the recesses of my memory [...] I considered them, and I stood aghast; I could discern

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<sup>16</sup> Eugene TeSelle, 'Augustine', in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed. by Paul Szmarch (New York: State University of New York, 1984), pp. 19-36 (pp. 28-30). See also Taylor, p. 128.

nothing of these things without you, and I found nothing of these things to be you.

And I myself, who found all this, who went over all these things, and strove to mark off and value in accordance with its excellence, taking some things as senses reported them, questioning about others that I felt were intermingled with myself, numbering off and distinguishing the very messengers of sense, and then in the wide treasuries of memory scanning certain things, laying away certain others, and drawing forth others still – I myself was not you. [...] For you are that abiding light which I consulted concerning all these things, as to whether they were, as to what they were, and as to what value they possessed. (X, 40)

However, what is different in this passage is that the turn towards God, rather than simply being described at the analytical and comparative level, is then further reinterpreted in terms of love for the divine: ‘Sometimes you admit me in my innermost being into a most extraordinary affection, mounting within me to an indescribable sweetness’ (X, 41). This short passage offers a framework for imagining the experiential subject’s relationship to God that is entirely different to any kind of rational or philosophic model. As TeSelle notes, Augustine was to go even further in Book VIII of *The Trinity*, where there is

a kind of initiation of the reader into several different ways of approaching God, beginning with the futile attempt to look on God directly, and gradually diminishing his expectations. Eventually he suggests that the best experience of God is to be found not in knowledge, which remains uncertain, but in love. (p. 29)

Love, when seen as an ‘indescribable sweetness’ that occurs within a person’s ‘innermost being’, is clearly beyond the realm of objective verifiability through comparative analytical discussion. Whereas the veracity of an experience of the divine described in philosophic terms was dependent on precise terminology and sharp analysis, the veracity of an experience of the divine in affective terms could be based upon its very indescribability. In the *Confessions* the philosophical and affective modes are part and parcel of the same model of self-exploration and self-

revelation, being different ways of expressing the same orientation of the self towards God. However, each paradigm contained within its structural and conceptual make-up the potential to be interpreted in opposition to the other: an interiority that was also objectively verifiable could be set in opposition to an interiority that, in its plenitude of love, could not be measured by any rational standard.

In the writings of Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) we find a direct development of these two positions. They appear in forms that are more recognisably medieval due to Anselm's increased interest in formalising and distinguishing between their essential characteristics, although they have yet to accrue any positive or negative associations in the eyes of the ecclesiary due to the relative lack of awareness or discussion of formalised patterns of belief amongst the general populace. Anselm himself was deeply familiar with Augustine's thought. Like Augustine, he absorbed Platonic ideas and doctrines through the writings of intermediaries and applied them to his own understanding of the nature of God. In fact, he was far more stringent than Augustine in his application of philosophic modes of enquiry, and his works represent a significant reworking of Augustinian precedents in purely philosophic terms.<sup>17</sup> His quartet of dialogues – *De Grammatico*, *De Veritate*, *De Libertate Arbitrii*, and *De Casu Diaboli* – are a series of exercises to train students in the techniques of intellectual inquiry. But they do not consist merely of an exposition of Anselm's own views, but rather place the reader into an active role, such as presenting arguments for apparently contradictory conclusions or offering proofs that none of the obvious

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<sup>17</sup> See Gareth Matthews, 'Anselm, Augustine, and Platonism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, ed. by Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), pp. 61-83.

answers to a question are correct.<sup>18</sup> His *Monologion* puts into practice this type of approach to understanding in eighty chapters designed to convince unbelievers of the existence of God. However, Anselm was also insistent that even if the mind had been correctly ordered through intellectual inquiry to ascend towards the reality of the divine, the final step could only be taken by joining the will to the intellect in an act of faith and love towards God. In his *Proslogion* he alternates sections of prayer exercises designed to stir the emotions and the will with sections of intellectual inquiry into the nature of the divine, aiming to focus the whole self as it attempts to move upwards in understanding ('Faith and Reason', p. 36). His most noted achievement in the affective field was the collection of nineteen prayers and three meditations he wrote whilst he was at Bec. They follow a recognisably Carolingian pattern, consisting of a collection of confessional and intercessory prayers organised hierarchically, directed first towards God the Father, and subsequently the Son, the Virgin, and onto the saints. The originality of these works was found in the devotional fervour and emotional intimacy they sought with God, a style which, as Bestul notes, whilst seeming somewhat overheated and effusive to modern tastes, 'represented an unsurpassed achievement in the rhetoric of emotion that proved to be an effective model for writers of subsequent generations'.<sup>19</sup> But these too represent a synthesis of the intellectual and the affective modes. As Wogan-Browne, et al, have discussed, the prologue to the *Prayers and Meditations* stresses 'the need to subordinate reading (*lectio*) to the needs of meditation and prayer (*meditatio* and *oratio*); the reader is told, on the one hand, to absorb the text as deeply as possible, on the other, to read

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<sup>18</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, 'Anselm on Faith and Reason', in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, pp. 32-60 (p. 39).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas H. Bestul, 'Antecedents: The Anselmian and Cistercian Contributions', in *Mysticism and Spirituality in Medieval England*, ed. by William F. Pollard and Robert Boenig (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 1-20 (p. 5).

affectively and selectively, rather than with a rationalising eye on the whole'.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, in its attempt to ultimately turn the reader away from the text, this method of achieving a proper understanding of one's relation to God had the potential to blossom into the type of affective mysticism espoused by Rolle. But in Anselm, the emotional intensity of the passages are nevertheless contained and structured through a recognisable dialectical pattern stretching back through Benedict and Cassian to Origen: 'first the reader is stirred out of inertia into self-knowledge, which produces sorrow for sin, dread of its consequences, and anxiety over distance from God; these in turn produce humility and issue prayers for help, which resolve into a compunction of desire which energises the soul's search for God' ('Faith and Reason', p. 35). We can see that, like Augustine, Anselm's understanding of the divine, his experience of it in relation to his own self-understanding, could be expressed in both philosophic and affective terms. The two were a necessary part of the same experience, two sides of the same coin if you will. It represents a more balanced approach to understanding the capacity of the human faculties to approach God, as yet untouched by of socio-political imperatives that were to emerge as structuring concerns in the near future.

An illustrative example of how the differences between the philosophical and affective paradigms could be exacerbated due to such socio-political concerns for those involved in debating the contested conceptual terrain, even to the point that those tensions crystallised into accusations of heresy, and the concurrent highly real threat of spiritual and bodily peril, is in the clash that took place in the twelfth century between Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Abelard. The tenth to twelfth centuries saw a great rise in zeal for all aspects of the spiritual life. It

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<sup>20</sup> *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), p. 213.



resulted in the reform of the Benedictine monasticism of the West and the emergence of different orders – Cluniac, Cistercian, and Carthusian – committed to living a segregated communal life that was designed to allow its members to concentrate on inner spiritual growth. The Carthusian Guigo II and the Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux taught that the fruit of learning should be inward experience of the truth of Christ.<sup>21</sup> Bernard (1090-1153) in particular became known as the leading medieval authority on the contemplative life. One sign of his singular distinction in the field is his appearance as the guide who introduces Dante to the highest mysteries of the deity in the *Divine Comedy* (Bestul, p. 10). His series of eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs (*Sermones in Cantica Canticorum*) proved to be his greatest contribution to contemplative teaching. Like Augustine, Bernard emphasises that self-examination needs to precede contemplation before human beings can begin to restore the image of God within:

For ‘God is a spirit,’ and those who wish to persevere in or attain to his likeness must enter into their hearts, and apply themselves spiritually to that work, until ‘with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord,’ they ‘become transfigured into the same likeness, borrowing glory from that glory, as the Spirit of the Lord enables them.’<sup>22</sup>

Again, similarly to Augustine, it is love for God that provides the dynamic force behind man’s aspiration for divine union. But in Bernard’s writings this idea is given a new focus centred on love for Christ’s humanity. *Sermo* 20.6 provides a highly influential theory of contemplation, whereby the aspirant begins by focusing with intense concentration on the events of the earthly life of Christ as a means of enkindling love and compassion. After this initial stage they can then be led to higher acts of reflection, with the eventual goal being to move beyond the

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<sup>21</sup> Marion Glascoe, *English Medieval Mystics: Games of Faith* (London: Longman, 1993), pp. 32-33.

<sup>22</sup> *Sermo* 24.5; cited in Bestul, p. 11.

need for corporeal images of any kind, using the intellect alone to contemplate the divine nature.<sup>23</sup>

As I shall show shortly, these aspects of Bernard's work proved a direct influence on Rolle's own brand of mysticism. However, at this point it is pertinent to note that whereas in the fourteenth century this type of mysticism was seen as potentially subversive and even dangerous to the forces of orthodoxy, in the twelfth it stood as the bulwark against perceived threats to the doctrinal and social establishment. Conversely, the text-based, philosophically rigorous methodology for understanding the self in relation to the divine that in the fourteenth century was promoted as institutionally 'sanctioned', was in the twelfth century seen as a subversive threat to the dominance of the Church in administering the spiritual life of the individual. The reason for such a shift can be accounted for as much by political necessity and the desire to respond to threats to social order (real or perceived) as to any sense of transcendental objective 'truth'. In his theological and philosophical writings, Abelard placed great emphasis upon the necessity of clear thinking about all theological matters, believing that knowledge and understanding served faith, not impeded it. 'He maintains that he is defending the Christian faith by making it as intelligible as possible' (Radice, p. xxxix). But in doing so, his work went far beyond the preconceived norms of his day. In *Sic et Non* his theory of scriptural interpretation broke controversial new ground in suggesting the fallibility of the human authors of scripture, suggesting that 'obscurity and contradictions in the writings of the Fathers can be explained on many grounds, and can be examined without impinging on the authors' good faith

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<sup>23</sup> It is important to note here that 'intellect' does not equate to 'rational understanding' but rather means something like entirely non-corporeal, a wholly spiritual and transcendent love for the divine.

and insight'.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in his *Ethics* he expounded a theory of divine punishment and reward that took into account only a person's intentions rather than deeds.<sup>25</sup> However, in spite of his comparatively radical approaches to matters of doctrine, Radice notes that it would be:

wrong to suppose Abelard a rationalist in any but the twelfth-century sense of wishing to use his mastery of logic for the better understanding of his faith. He writes sadly in his 'Confession of Faith' that logic has made him hated by the world through misrepresentation, though 'I do not wish to be a philosopher if it means conflicting with Paul, nor to be Aristotle if it cuts me off from Christ.' And he makes it plain in his philosophical works that he has no use for popular dialecticians who display their expertise on empty topics; properly used, dialectic has a moral basis and examines real problems, and it demands courage and honesty on the part of the user in neither giving way to authority nor to shallow cleverness. (p. xxxix)

It is then clear that Abelard is working within the very recognisable tradition of philosophic and analytic thinking about the self in relation to God that we have identified in both Augustine and Anselm. But, as with those two thinkers, Abelard was at the same time composing work that can be placed firmly within the affective branch of Christianity. His series of laments on Old Testament themes, such as a lament of Dina, a lament of David over Abner, and a lament of David over Saul and Jonathan are 'animated by the same cultural impulses that invigorate the devotional works' of writers such as Bernard, William of St Thierry, and Aelred of Rivaulx (Bestul, p. 20).

However, this unquestionable commitment to the Christian faith did not prevent him from being vilified and condemned by the institutional authorities. The traditional explanation for his persecution, in particular the direct confrontation it led to with Bernard, has always been to place the conflict squarely

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<sup>24</sup> A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic literary attitudes in the later Middle Ages*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1988), p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Abelard, *Ethics*, trans. by D. E. Luscombe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 45.

in ‘the world of learning, fired by the tension between the intellectual arguments of scholasticism and the more experiential piety of the monastic orders’ (Glascoe, *Games of Faith*, p. 37). Bernard sees the mystery of faith as being beyond human knowledge, which can only be approached through mystic contemplation.

He sees himself as a preacher with a sacred duty to proclaim revealed truth and to defend it and, for all his reforming zeal, he stands against Abelard as a champion of tradition. He sees Abelard as a danger to the faith of young people and simple men, and Abelard’s attempt to *understand* the Trinity as an evil example of intellectual arrogance and an insult to Christian belief. (Radice, pp. xxxviii-xxxix)

However, as Constance Mews has pointed out, constructing Bernard and Abelard as artificial metaphors for ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ respectively risks an oversimplification by focusing ‘exclusively on the rival traditions they are thought to embody, without appreciation of the way political pressures shaped the rhetoric of the participants involved.’<sup>26</sup> Mews and John Marenbon have demonstrated that Abelard’s writings were in public circulation in a climate of civil unrest and antagonism in France, and during a period when Episcopal authority in general was being challenged.<sup>27</sup> Within this context, Bernard, and others close to the Pope, such as William of St Thierry, and Henry Salinger, Archbishop of Sens, all feared discussion of core Christian values outside an organised framework, and Abelard’s writings, with their apparent criticism of authority and emphasis on the individual as an actively determining agent in the divine order, were feared to provide a pretext for schism and revolt. When Abelard was summoned by the Council of Sens (1141) to defend himself against Bernard, the issue of what constituted the correct interpretation of orthodoxy was never put up for debate;

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<sup>26</sup> Constance Mews, ‘The Council of Sens (1141): Abelard, Bernard, and the Fear of Social Upheaval’, *Speculum*, 77 (2002), 342-83 (p. 353).

<sup>27</sup> John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), pp. 16-32.

Abelard's writings were condemned as heretical before he had a chance to speak thanks to behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings by those for whom maintaining the integrity and unity of the earthly Church took precedence over indulging the potentially disruptive nuances of theological debate.

Just as Abelard's philosophical theology sprang from a deep engagement with Christian tradition and a desire to aid man in understanding the faith, but nevertheless came to be perceived as a threat to the social order as promoting dangerous self-realizations, we can observe a similar dynamic at work with regards to Rolle's affective mysticism. It has been suggested that the type of intense personal connection with God promoted by mystics such as Rolle led to movements that were considered to be dissenting and heretical by the Church. Operating outside and beyond recognised systems of ecclesiastical authority, mystics were a potentially subversive threat, promoting new models of selfhood amongst the populace, models that relied on the strength of personal conviction rather than institutional authentication for their validity. Rosamund Allen notes how Rolle's interpretation and presentation of his experience within an affective tradition may 'have nurtured a spirit of independence in his readers, and perhaps prepared the ground for the Hussite and Lollard movements, both of which used his Latin and English works',<sup>28</sup> whilst Glascoe, discussing the issues relating to mysticism in the context of a wider explosion in lay piety and education in the late Middle Ages similarly observes how 'the potential for subversiveness in the realisation of the equality of all men in the sight of God, and the possibility of each man reading the word of God for himself, sadly, proved too explosive a threat to be ignored and the Lollards were subject to persecution' (*Games of*

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<sup>28</sup> *Richard Rolle: The English Writings*, ed. by Rosamund S. Allen, The Classics of Western Spirituality (London: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 53.

*Faith*, p. 44).<sup>29</sup> Whatever the reality of these groups use of mystical thought in general or of Rolle's writing in particular, what was important was that he could be perceived to be promoting or supporting such movements. A typical passage from the *Incendium Amoris* illustrates Rolle's vitriolic opinion of excess desire for 'futile discussion', combining the rejection of an intellectual approach to God with the popular late medieval discourse of anti-scholasticism and anti-clericalism:

Nowadays too many are consumed with a desire for knowledge rather than for love, so that they scarcely know what love is or what is its delight. Yet all their study should have been directed to this end, so that they might be consumed with the love of God as well. Shame on them! An old woman can be more expert in the love of God – and less worldly too – than your theologian with his useless studying. He does it for vanity, to get a reputation, to obtain stipends and official positions. Such a fellow ought to be entitled not 'Doctor' but 'Fool'! (*IA*, 61)

Whatever the professed authorial intention Rolle made regarding his text, it is easy to see in passages such as this how sections of the *Incendium* could be read by both disgruntled laypersons and fearful ecclesiastics as authorising the complete reconstitution of the earthly Church's established hierarchical relationship with God's divine order. The stated aims of any medieval text were often only incidental to what it was perceived to be promoting or could be made to stand for, either by those using such teachings to interpret, define, and enact their own vision of individual or group identity against that promoted by the establishment, or by that establishment in its effort to judge whether such definitions were orthodox (or not) in light of such interpretations.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Glascoe gives a useful discussion of the rise of popular piety and its relation to mystical experience on pp. 37-47 of *Games of Faith*.

<sup>30</sup> 'It is therefore true that the later Middle Ages saw a burgeoning of heretical movements, if by that is meant organized movements calling for the reform and spiritual renewal of the church, and in the meantime setting themselves up as a locus of faith and practice for their adherents. Nor is it surprising that when, instead of reform, the church mounted an inquisition to root them out they

However, even if such panics did develop, it is not indicative of an ecclesiastical position that by the fourteenth century was completely opposed to affective visionary mystical experience. Even if the Church considered the philosophical model of mystical experience to be more expedient as a means of social control in the late Middle Ages, and affective mysticism as a potential threat, it had to tread carefully in denouncing or disciplining those who claimed to have had visionary experience given its long authoritative history in the writings of spiritual giants such as Augustine, Anselm, and Bernard. Perhaps even more crucial was the fact that, although the veracity of an individual mystic's experience could be legitimately questioned, interrogated, and possibly denounced as false, the power of God to grant that experience could not be contested. So whilst the prevailing socio-cultural concerns might lead to a greater scepticism or more stringent interrogation over mystical claims of one type or another, it could not override the incontestable religious truth that an all-powerful God could grant an individual enlightened understanding. *If* the mystic had a genuine channel to the divine, and could reveal central mysteries surrounding the faith, it was foolhardy for the Church to ignore. The Church's position in dealing with mystics *could* slip into persecution, but this was often only after protracted negotiation over the central tenets of an individual's position. The Church, as much as the mystic, trod a difficult and delicate line between asserting the dominance of its own authority and acknowledging that it could in theory be undermined according to God's divine prerogative. It was therefore in the interests of the Church to

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became more radical, sometimes seeing themselves as opposed to the church altogether and claiming direct access to God through their own study of the scriptures and their own spiritual experiences without having to go through prescribed channels of ecclesiastical authority. [...] Accusations of orgies, incest, infanticide and cannibalism first made against early Christians in the Middle Ages were made against a whole variety of groups who were seen as a threat to the church. [...] The reality behind these fantasies must be sought at least as much in the psyches of their promulgators as in the beliefs and practices of the groups concerned' (Jantzen, pp. 246-52).

incorporate mystics into the body of the faithful not simply for sinister disciplinary reasons but because, if genuine, they offered a direct channel to the highest authority.

Similarly, despite the mystic's potential power to cut across the Church's authority, this was not the goal of their experience, but rather a consequence of it. Their own actions were as much an attempt at negotiation concerning their own status as were the attempted ministrations of the Church. The Church, and the traditions it embodied, offered a very real sense of psychic security for the medieval person. It was the only world-view available to a person, and whilst the internal contradictions of that view, of which the divergence between intellectual and affective traditions of mysticism is only one example, could be a source of simmering discontent and dissatisfaction, which often exploded into conflict between different groups, or create a powerful sense of psychic dislocation and disorientation in the individual as to what the proper method of social or spiritual behaviour might be, to be cut off completely from psycho-social norms would represent a loss of sense of self so profound that it would never be contemplated as a desirable end by anyone with a commitment to the basic tenets of the faith. Legitimizing one's words and actions, reconciling one's sense of the self with ecclesiastical authority, however changed one might consider oneself to be due to an alleged encounter with the divine, was imperative for anyone seeking a sense of proper spiritual equilibrium. Watson provides an excellent analysis of this problem at the beginning of his study, which I here quote at length:

Unmediated contact with the divine must affect all areas of a mystic's life, for such contact both annihilates the pretensions of everything less than the divine and confers a special status on whoever experienced it. The mystic's inherited view of her or his relationship with the ecclesiastical establishment is hence threatened. That establishment must retain its role if the mystic is to remain committed to an orthodox stance; to abandon such a



stance is to risk a loss of spiritual balance and a fall into spiritual anarchy, as well as the tangible perils that can result from falling foul of the ecclesiastical authorities. Thus the import of the experience may have to be defined forcibly in terms of Christian orthodoxy. Yet conversely, and in spite of the risks, the authority of tradition and establishment will also have to be redefined in relation to the authority that the experience and its recipient now have. (p. 3)<sup>31</sup>

It is important to note here the very real need to be a member of the Church that existed at all levels of medieval society, as in the next part of our analysis of the *Incendium* we find Rolle being extremely abrasive and confrontational regarding his specific situation, claiming authority over the earthly Church in an aggressively dismissive manner. Rolle makes hugely disruptive assertions regarding the position of the contemplative. His anti-scholasticism and anti-clericalism cited above is one such instance. Another is when, early on, he argues that ‘Men of action and rank, even if they are outstanding for their virtue or knowledge, should always put contemplatives before themselves, reckoning them to be their superiors before God’ (*IA*, 55). Similarly, he never admits to any error except in his pre-conversion self. However, Rolle makes it abundantly clear that he considers himself a member of the orthodox Church in opposition to heretics, as well as stressing the need for the essential unity of the earthly Church through the rooting out of erroneous opinion. Rolle’s anti-scholastic diatribe is in fact a springboard for him to attack those who rely too much on learning as a threat to the essential truth of the Christian faith:

Truth in plenty, whole and holy, reveals itself to those who look for it: ‘closed books’ are open to the sons of God. Then where does the treachery of the heretic spring from if not from his undisciplined and chaotic mind, blinded by its desire for its own reputation? For heretics never cease opposing God in their hearts by their insensate greed. Moreover when the Christian religion would cut away what is opposed to it, and make all agree in the unity of the faith and love, they will openly resist truth by manifold

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<sup>31</sup> See also Jantzen, p. 16.

argument. It is ever the way of the heretical and proud to ventilate new ideas and to question whatever the Church has asserted. Things that the faithful Christian holds dear they take pleasure in decrying. (*IA*, 61)

Clearly, Rolle does not view himself as an anti-establishment scourge with a duty to turn others to his unorthodox view of the faith. Rather, he sees himself at the centre of the establishment with a profound and necessary duty to bring back those who stray from the intrinsic tenets of the faith. The *Incendium* should not be seen as inciting conflict between a self-defined marginal figure and the normative ministrations of those in positions of ecclesiastical power, but a negotiation over the proper definition of orthodoxy itself.

Similarly, the attempt at negotiation is always present implicitly through Rolle's use of the affective tradition. Watson notes that

in general terms [Rolle's] discussions of love themselves belong to well-defined literary and mystical traditions, which developed alongside the devotion to the humanity of Christ. [...] Rolle held that the soul's ascent to God takes place through the ordering of the faculty of love, the *affectus*, so that it turns back on its former, secular, objects, and pours itself out in measureless desire for God, a desire which is equivalent to mystical union. (p. 19)

More specifically, we can find in Rolle's writings the influence of those writers who expressed an affective relation to the divine discussed above. Hope Emily Allen describes how Rolle's

focus on the individual soul, and a growing tendency to use unexpected imagery and daring theology finds its first expression in the prayers and meditations that Anselm composed whilst at Bec, which instigated a tradition that challenges a personal response of a deeply emotional kind. [...] The techniques of Anselm's prayers, requiring withdrawal, self-examination and compunction, are similar to Rolle's prescriptions for preparing for mystic joy, but Rolle, two hundred years later, represents the new, non-monastic age of the fourteenth-century saints, many of whom were not in orders but were laypeople. (pp. 53-54)

Similarly, Watson sees in Rolle's discussion of love 'an elaborately rhetorical approach' to the subject 'coupled with a daring sense of theological possibilities' that finds its source in the writings of the twelfth century. Watson specifically discusses the work of Bernard, and of Richard and Hugh of St Victor, from whom Rolle adapts various descriptions and models of the stages of 'ordered love', and who also influence Rolle's highly affective mode of address (p. 19).<sup>32</sup> Allen also notes the influence of Bernard, examining how Rolle derives several passages from Bernard's *Sermons on the Canticles* and *De Diligendo Deo*, and also how he makes great use of Bernard's analogy between carnal and divine love in his study of the Song of Songs (p. 55).<sup>33</sup> The influence of Bernard can also be detected in Rolle's intense devotion to the humanity of Christ, and in particular his focus in the name of Jesus through the short prayer form as a means to achieve a state of mystical contemplation.<sup>34</sup>

Rolle's use of the language of ineffability is also designed to produce an understanding in his readers of the essentially orthodox nature of his experience. It is here necessary to make some remarks about the ineffability of God in relation to the descriptive faculties of human language, and to a possible misinterpretation of this relationship if it is defined within post-Enlightenment categories of a philosophy of language and epistemology. Both speculative philosophical mysticism and affective mysticism do not claim to know the nature of the divine in its entirety. God is beyond comprehension both in conceptual and linguistic terms.

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<sup>32</sup> Rosamund S. Allen also discusses the influence of Richard and Hugh (*The English Writings*, pp. 57-58).

<sup>33</sup> See also Denis Renevey, *Language, Self and Love: Hermeneutics in the Writings of Richard Rolle and the Commentaries on the Song of Songs* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> Denis Renevey, 'Name Above Names: The Devotion to the Name of Jesus from Richard Rolle to Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1999*, ed. by Marion Glascoe (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), pp. 103-23 (p. 106).

However, it is important not to confuse this with more modern concerns regarding the 'alleged ineffability of *subjective experiences*' (Jantzen, p. 283). For medieval authors the language of ineffability 'is a way of indicating the transcendence of God; but that transcendence must also be understood [...] as inexhaustible fecundity, the very opposite of frustrated speechlessness' when trying to relate the subjective nature of experience from one individual to another (Jantzen, p, 284). So when Rolle describes his experiences in terms of 'the infusion and understanding of heavenly, spiritual sounds, sounds which pertain to the song of eternal praise, and to the sweetness of unheard melody; sounds which cannot be known or heard save by him who has received it', how he 'became aware in a way which I cannot explain', or how 'then and there my thinking itself turned into melodious song, and my meditation became a poem, and my very prayers and psalms took up the same sound' (*IA*, 93), he is not trying to place himself outside of the verifiability of institutional authority by proclaiming his experience to be untranslatable to other people. In fact, his concern is to make the experience as verifiable as possible by showing that it belongs to a very definite medieval tradition. 'He knows God perfectly who recognises that he is beyond our comprehension and capacity' (*IA*, 62). Of course, whether we are dealing with subjective experience of human perception or the experience of the divine, in real terms both lay outside the capacity of another person to say whether they 'happened' or not. But the key issue is that Rolle is once again framing his experience within an authoritative set of concepts, trying as far as possible to make his claims seem natural and normal within the framework of orthodox Christian thought. If any potential critics want to deny the veracity of Rolle's claims, they

must also by implication deny an entire tradition of mystical experience and the terms within which it is expressed.

Rolle had a very real inner conviction of the truth of his experiences. That he interpreted and subsequently presented those experiences within the more general context of the growth of fervently emotional lay piety examined by Glascoe and the specific tradition of affective experience of God is indicative of the fact that he considered those experiences to be entirely valid within the framework of orthodox Christian theology. But as we have seen, such statement *could* be perceived as running counter to the specific formulation of orthodoxy as it was defined by the ecclesiastical establishment in the late Middle Ages. Ostensibly part of the same singular tradition, with the common goal of salvation for the individual, these two discourses existed in tension with each other: the affective, emotional, private, experience opposed to the intellectual, textual, public experience.<sup>35</sup> Rolle could not reject either of these demands in defining his experience at both a personal and a textual level. He could not simply assert the primacy of his own understanding outside any and all institutional channels, whatever he might ostensibly proclaim regarding his inviolable personal authority. To do so, as Watson shows, is to place oneself in mortal and spiritual peril. But he could also not entirely cede the personal authority granted to him by his mystical experience due to the demands of the establishment for a 'correct' self-fashioning. To do that would be to ignore the truth of those experiences, as he himself had understood them. This placed him in an intensely difficult position. Errors by his pre-conversion self could be normalised according to a confessional

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<sup>35</sup> Jantzen defines these in terms of 'feminine' and 'patriarchal' models of experience, noting how male mystics who claimed to have had visionary experiences of the divine such as Rolle and Francis of Assisi were often 'accused of being "feminine" in their dress, behaviour and activity' (p. 190).

paradigm of progression from delusion and sin to sanctity and enlightenment. But Rolle also had to defend himself from accusations of error in conduct and belief in his post-conversion self. One method by which he attempts to achieve this was through presenting his experience within the affective mystical tradition, as we have seen above. We might perhaps call this the imitative strand in the *Incendium*, and it is one which has been both well documented and analysed.<sup>36</sup> However, Rolle was also concerned to exploit the formal logic of the confessional model, and his ability to conceptualise and deploy its methodology of self-justification has been something that has been as yet unrecognised in the *Incendium*. We might think of the presence of this structuring principle as being itself representative of a negotiation between the affective impulse which demands authority on the basis of unexplainable experience, and a more analytical concern in which Rolle considers how he might need to logically justify his claims, even if only by implication.

#### ACCUSATION AND THE AMBIGUITY OF ERROR

In the *Incendium* Rolle constantly foregrounds accusations of error that have been levelled against him. Certain accusations are designed to indicate he has been properly purged of sin prior to his conversion. For example, in cap. 12, following the stylised conversion lyric discussed above (p. 46), Rolle presents particular examples of the sin of concupiscence that the Augustinian paradigm demands the converttee to have overcome. He tells us ‘Yet there was a time when I was rebuked, quite properly, by three different women,’ the first one because in

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<sup>36</sup> See John A. Alford, ‘Biblical *imitatio* in the Writings of Richard Rolle’, *Journal of English Literary History*, 40 (1973), 1-23, for further discussion.

his ‘eagerness to restrain the feminine craze for dressy and suggestive clothes’ he ‘inspected too closely their extravagant ornamentation’, the second because he ‘spoke of her great bosom’ as if it pleased him, whilst in the third incident Rolle tells us he ‘appeared to be going to touch’ the woman ‘somewhat rudely’ before she upbraided him (*IA*, 81). His post-conversion self can correctly read these moments in their proper context, necessary errors in the narrative of his own coming to his true self: ‘When I came to myself, I thanked God for teaching me what was right through their words, and for showing me a more pleasant way than my previous one, so that I might cooperate more fully with Christ’s grace’ (*IA*, 81). Wolters suggests that ‘When I came to myself’ refers to the narrative of the prodigal son in Luke 15. 12-32,<sup>37</sup> specifically the first line of Luke 15. 17, when, after realising the extent of his spiritual famine, we are told

In se autem reversus dixit quanti mercennarii patris mei abundant panibus ego autem hic fame pereo. Surgam et ibo ad patrem meum et dicam illi pater peccavi in caelum et coram te.

(And returning to himself, he said: How many hired servants in my father's house abound with bread, and I here perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and say unto him: Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee. Luke 15. 17-18)<sup>38</sup>

Although Rolle’s Latin does not echo anything in the Vulgate specifically (‘Nam rediens ad meipsum gravis egi Deo meo quia per illarum uerba me bonum docuit, et uiam suauiore[m] quam antea cognoui mihi ostendit, ut amplius operarem gratiam Christi’; Deansly, p. 179) I would suggest that Wolters is correct in identifying Rolle’s ultimate source as Luke, since Augustine makes great use of

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<sup>37</sup> *Incendium Amoris*, p. 81.

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=1&b=3&c=15> [accessed on 15 June 2008]

the same biblical passages in the early parts of his *Confessions*.<sup>39</sup> The trope of wandering and return exemplified in the Biblical narrative limns the conceptual process of a divinely guided consciousness returning to the events of one's past life, examining the shifting and mutable pattern of life as lived from a stable interpretative position. From this vantage point, Rolle interprets his encounters with women as having been indicative of his coming attainment of enlightenment.

In cap. 8 we are told

Further, we know this – and there is no doubt about it – that no young man who is surrounded by feminine beauty and flattery and sweet nothings and enervating luxury can possibly be holy, unless it is through grace, great and exceptional. So many and such like things are asking for trouble, and all too often bring a holy man down. I reckon it a major miracle when a man through God's grace and a love for Christ spurns these allurements completely, and out of the midst of them all (which war against his soul, however pleasant they be to his flesh), rises like a man to the utmost heights of heavenly contemplation. There is no doubt that he is more holy as a result of this. (*IA*, 67-68)

The later events recounted in cap. 12 were then examples of 'allurements' which were, at the time, 'pleasant' to Rolle's 'flesh'. Events that, when lived through, represented moments of great anxiety and personal crisis, take on the status of stable signifiers of a movement towards a greater understanding of the divine.<sup>40</sup> Having properly ascertained the nature and role of women (at least according to prevailing medieval paradigms) Rolle is able to properly fix their position in the economy of mystical salvation he is outlining: 'I think it better therefore to dispense with whatever [women's] particular contribution to life is, rather than

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<sup>39</sup> For example, *Confessions* I, 18/Luke 15. 12-32; II, 10/Luke 15 .14; III, 4/Luke 15. 18-20; III, 6/Luke 15. 16; IV, 16/Luke 15. 13; VIII, 3/Luke 15, 4-32.

<sup>40</sup> Jantzen discusses how Origen of Alexandria (185-245) conceived of the natural impulses of the body, whilst not sinful in themselves because part of human nature as provided by God, were nevertheless a potential source of sin if not properly controlled. In Origen the urges of the body are not bad in themselves, 'However, it is startling to find that the body's goodness consists not in its intrinsic beauty or value, but rather because it is the perfect adversary for the soul to overcome in its quest for purity!' (p. 90)



fall into their hands, hands which know no moderation whether loving or despising!’ (IA, 82).<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Rolle offers a retroactive reading of his own behaviour as well. Of his encounters with the three women, he states ‘Yet these things happened because I was seeking their salvation, not because I was after anything improper’ (IA, 82). Not only were the actions of the three women a necessary step in bringing Rolle to a position of mystical contemplation, but, within the context of the divine ur-text he is now reading, Rolle can also see something else that he was unable to at the time: that he played a similar role in ensuring they put behind themselves sinful actions – presumably the interaction with men at all.<sup>42</sup>

It is interesting that Rolle’s sins turn out not to be the ‘hellish things’ or the ‘darksome ways of love’ that Augustine had to overcome. In fact, they seem to be almost trivial in their nature. Are inspecting a woman’s clothes too closely, or an almost slap-stick incident regarding comments made about the size of a woman’s bust really the stuff of spiritual peril? Similarly, the third woman, although she does rebuke Rolle when he tries to touch her, does so only ‘jokingly [...] saying “Calm down brother!” It was as if she had said, “It doesn’t go with your office of hermit to be fooling with women” ’ (IA, 81). Watson suggests the problem here is that, in his rush to proclaim himself spiritually secure in the

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<sup>41</sup> See also pp. 117-18 and p. 136 of the *Incendium* for further examples of how Rolle’s anti-feminism forms an intrinsic part of his mystical system. Renevey has argued that ‘The spectre of the sexually attractive woman is overwhelmingly present in the writings of Rolle. She bears great responsibility in bringing chaos and failure in the spiritual enterprises of many. [...] For Rolle, the spiritual battle and its victorious outcome depend on the ability of the contemplative to operate a psychological self-castration and thus erase from the memory this type of woman’ (*Language, Self and Love*, p. 71). In the same book Renevey offers an interesting discussion (pp. 68-73) of how Rolle’s ‘fundamental’ psychological misogyny informed his reading of the Song of Songs. This pressurized conjunction consequently produced his distinctly intense affective mysticism in which ‘the tension promoted by the encounter or visualization of enticing women forces Rolle to effect a drastic transfer of the sexual desire, which is then directed to God’ (p. 72).

<sup>42</sup> Spengeman discusses the difficult position that the spiritual convert finds himself in due to having to ‘deny on principle the spiritual efficacy of faithless action’ whilst simultaneously appearing to demonstrate in the narration of the actions of his past self that ‘errors have eventual good results’ (p. 22).

present, Rolle needlessly tries to minimise his past errors as well. As Watson notes, ‘conversion narratives [...] demand a few sins of their heroes’ (p. 130), but Rolle is so worried about convincing his readers of his sanctity and infallibility post-conversion that he forgets he does not actually need to have demonstrated exemplary behaviour prior to his conversion. The point at which Rolle has found himself in the present therefore determines, and confuses, his presentation of past events. We can elaborate on Watson’s discussion here by seeing this confusion in Rolle’s logic as an example of how having to begin the conversion narrative from a conceptual position that accepts all the orthodox tenets of Christian thought, rather than converting to that orthodoxy from a heretical position, can hinder the impact of the narrative. That fact that Rolle’s conversion is taking him far beyond the sanctity and authority of the ordinary Church, rather than into its body from the ranks of the heretical, means that he does not want to risk beginning his account from too lowly a position within the ranks of the faithful. Sins are necessary for Rolle to fit within a pseudo-Augustinian persona, but due to the pressure on the medieval Christian to be whiter-than-white if they are to fulfil the upward trajectory required by the conversion narrative, those same sins cannot be mortal, so they end up being simply trivial.

To approach the same issue from another angle, a sneaking suspicion exists when reading this section of the *Incendium* that women were not really a big temptation for Rolle to overcome at all. As readers, we are left with the sense that these ‘sins’ may be conventional inventions of the type discussed by Burrow and Olney, re-imaginings of trivial incidents as moments of great spiritual peril that were stridently conquered. Turning Watson’s argument on its head, it is possible to suggest that Rolle’s past errors were actually entirely negligible, and

that the problem is not that Rolle is trying to minimise his previous mistakes in an effort to appear spiritually secure, but rather that he is struggling to find anything in his biography sufficiently worthy to indicate his spiritual fortitude. Under such conditions, the actual 'facts' of the incidents involving women need to be rendered opaque so that the more profound truth at issue in the *Incendium*, Rolle's ultimate spiritual sanctity, becomes properly visible.

Despite these various confusions in his argument, for Rolle, carnal error is firmly in the past. It is not troubling to his conception of himself within the boundaries of institutional orthodoxy, nor does it seem to have been an issue that he was taken to task over by his critics. The more pressing concern in the *Incendium* are the accusations of error that have been made against in his post-conversion self. In the very act of receiving the gift which theoretically places Rolle in a position of superior knowledge to the rest of humanity he finds himself criticised according to normative standards of behaviour. During the account of his conversion and attainment of mystical union in cap. 15, Rolle tells us that one evening when reciting the night-psalms, he receives, along with the sensation of warmth he describes in the Prologue, the accompanying sound of heavenly melody (*IA*, 93). One consequence of this gift, which Rolle terms *canor* (song), is that it forces him to stop singing outwardly, as doing so prevents him from properly contemplating his internal song. This apparently proved to be controversial, as in cap. 33-34, Rolle later tells us he was criticised for remaining silent at mass: 'They thought my attitude was *wrong*, for they said that all men ought to sing aloud to their Creator, and give voice audibly' ('Arbitrantur enim in hoc me *errasse*, asserentes omnes debere modulari cororaliter coram Conditorem, et musicam exterioris uocis personare') (*IA*, 141; Deansly, 232; my emphasis).

Determined not to in any way tarnish the gift he has been given, Rolle eventually stops attending Mass altogether. ‘Do not be surprised then’, he says, ‘if I have fled from what would have been my undoing. I would have been at fault not to have left what I knew to be preventing me from this loveliest of songs. It would have been *wrong* to have acted otherwise’ (‘Non est ergo mirum si fugissem quod me confunderet, et in quo culpandus fueram, si destiti ab hoc quod me a dilectissimo cantico meo depellere sciebam. *Errassem* utique si aliter egissem’) (*IA*, 148; Deansly, p. 239; my emphasis). Rolle’s choice of ‘error’ here, highlighted by my emphasis, is significant and, as we shall see, he has already used the word with particular intent in describing his behaviour earlier in the *Incendium*. Clearly, we are no longer here on stable ground when it comes to recognising what is and is not truly erroneous. Actions and behaviour which indicate pride and lust in a person, such as remarking on a woman’s clothing, are unvarying markers of a sinful nature; their meaning is constant and can be correctly ‘read’ by all followers of the Christian faith. In contrast, Rolle’s actions in being first silent during and then absent from Mass have no such stable meaning.

A similar situation can be found in the pivotal account of Rolle’s conversion in cap. 15. Having given his account of his sins of ‘youthful lust’ and susceptibility to flattery, which have been routinely overcome, Rolle outlines a much more problematic situation. It seems that he has changed his cell on more than one occasion, something that was expressly forbidden in the *Regula Heremitarum* (Watson, pp. 47-50). Rolle leaves himself open to critique here on multiple fronts: in its Latin form *errare* etymologically encompasses not just the sense of erring doctrinally but also the act of wandering about like a drifter or vagrant. Cut off from the spiritual analogy of the prodigal son, the trope of

physical wandering here accrues problematic associations rather than directing the reader towards a positive interpretation of Rolle's actions. He counters by asserting another orthodox precedent for his behaviour. The Desert Fathers were accustomed to change their place of habitation also; evil men criticised them, but then they would have done the same had the Fathers remained in the same place (*IA*, 92). Rolle characterises the vapid, proud, and spiteful nature of such men earlier in the *Incendium*. 'Many of those who used to speak with me were like scorpions', he says, 'with their head they oozed flattery, and with their tail they struck slanders' (*IA*, 72). 'They defend whatever position they take up, however false or *wrong* it may be. They cannot be persuaded by reason or authority because they are not going to be seen to be beaten or ridiculous' ('Magis ergo sunt fugiendi quam uincendi, quia peruicaces sunt et quod assumpserunt siue sit falsum siue *erroneum* omnino defendant, et nec auctoritate nec ratione possunt uinci, ne uideantur uicti et incongruum protulisse') (*IA*, 70; Deansly, 168; my emphasis). Once again, we are no longer in the safe Augustinian realm where error is conclusively consigned to the past and can be correctly read by all followers of the orthodox faith. In the *Incendium* error is a troubling reality in the here-and-now, and competing paradigms of orthodox personal behaviour problematise the claims made by the mystic to have access to God's divine narrative.

Since it is his outward physical actions that prove to be the contested topic for Rolle, he shifts the locus of the debate towards the interior, exploiting the logical implications of the Augustinian paradigm of conversion in order to insulate himself from his critics. The structure of Augustine and Rolle's thought shares common ground on two interrelated topics: firstly, the earthly condition of the mortal whose mind is granted the privilege of union with the divine essence,

and secondly, the interpretative capacity of that mind. Immediately following the passage in Book X of the *Confessions* I discussed at the opening of this chapter (see above, p. 45), Augustine thinks of his divinely instructed consciousness in the following terms: ‘Sometimes you admit me in my innermost being into a most extraordinary affection, mounting within me to an indescribable sweetness. If this is perfected in me, it will be something, I know not what, that will not belong to this life’ (X, 40). Rolle is clearly working in the affective language we have identified as Augustinian in its origin. We have already seen how at the opening of the *Incendium* Rolle describes ‘the interior sweetness (*suavitatis*) which this spiritual flame fed into my soul’ (IA, 45). However, Rolle is happy to go far beyond the precedents of the Augustinian paradigm in almost all respects. It is crucial to note that when Augustine discusses the concept of complete mystical union he states it has only ever been, for him, momentary and fleeting; the fallen human condition cannot ultimately be transcended. For example, following the passage cited above, he goes on to say ‘But under my burdens of misery I sunk down to those other things, and I am drawn back again by former ways and held fast by them. Such is the strength of onerous habit! Here I abide, although I would not; there I wish to be, but cannot; in both ways I am wretched’ (X, 40). Similarly, if we look at the famous vision Augustine and his mother have at Ostia, Augustine states that

We ascended higher yet by means of inward thought and discourse and admiration of your works, and we came up to our own minds. We transcended them, so that we attained to the region of abundance that never fails [...] where life is that Wisdom by which all these things are made, both which have been and which are to be. (IX, 10)

Clearly, an understanding of a 'Wisdom by which all these things are made, both which have been and which are to be' would be truly God-like. But then, even as they 'sighed for it', they 'left [it] behind' (IX, 10). Whatever fleeting insight Augustine gains, he stresses it is quickly gone again. In contrast, Rolle states that after his conversion he has achieved a state of continual union with the divine:

From the time my conversion began until, by the help of God, I was able to reach the heights of loving Christ, there passed four years and three months. When I had attained this high degree I could praise God with joyful song indeed! And here that blessed state has remained since that initial impetus: and so it will continue to the end. (*IA*, 94)

Clearly, no wretchedness here then.

For both writers, the consequences of such a complete union with the divine would be death. But whilst for Augustine this is only a hypothetical situation (*if* his momentary admittance into God's innermost being was perfected it could not belong to this life), for Rolle it is a conceptual reality, and would be a physical one if he had his way. For instance, in cap. 10 Rolle states that 'when the love of God takes complete charge of a man, not only does it kill the root of his love for the world', but he is also 'now dead to the world and one with heaven' (*IA*, 74).

Similarly, in cap. 11 we find the following passage:

But in him who attains the heights of contemplation with joy and ardent love, the desires of the flesh now lie virtually dead. It means death to evil longings for the man who surrenders himself to contemplation, whose inner self is being changed to a glory and pattern that is different. Now it is 'no longer he who lives, but Christ who lives in him' (Galatians 2. 20), and as a result he is overwhelmed with love and longing for him. He almost dies because it is so beautiful; he can hardly live because of such love. (*IA*, 78)<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Similarly, following the account of how he received the gift of heavenly fire in cap.15, cap. 16 begins with an earnest entreaty to death to take Rolle, since he who has been blessed with this gift 'is taken after death to the place where angels sing, because he has been cleansed, and blessed, and now lives in the Spirit's music' (*IA*, 96).

As Watson notes, contemplatives such as Rolle ‘experience frustration at the barriers their flesh imposes between them and God, and long to die, for their conversion from this world to the next is already so complete that they have nothing to fear, and much to relish’ when they arrive in heaven. ‘The gift of *canor* brings the earthly careers of the elect to a joyful standstill, for they can subsequently have nothing further to look forward to and little to fear in this life’ (p. 72).

Now, because Rolle claims he has realised in practice what Augustine only articulates in theory (a complete union with the divine will, consequent ‘living death’ where the inner self is changed to a ‘glory and pattern that is different’, a pattern that can only be that of God’s immutable truth), he also utilises the full implications of what such a union would allow the mortal mind to do to shield himself from his critics. Augustine is greatly concerned to maintain the formal theoretical distinction between a divinely guided consciousness and a consciousness that would be truly divine in its interpretative capacity. To this end he only focuses on his own personal narrative and the topics that grow out of that personal experience.<sup>44</sup> In Rolle’s work this distinction is hopelessly blurred because his interpretative capacity appears to know no boundaries. When Rolle states that the contemplative who is ‘ablaze with heavenly fire [...] is transformed into the likeness of him in whom is all melody and song’ (*IA*, 77), it is hard not to take him literally given the truly God-like omniscience he displays towards the rest of humanity. Like the Augustinian consciousness, this omniscience is directed towards the revelation of a hidden order. But for Rolle, this revelatory moment is explicitly teleological, realised as it is within the context of the final Judgement. It

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<sup>44</sup> There is a definite progression that links the last four books with the first nine. Book X, which offers a meditation of the function of memory, is both personal and universal in its concerns, providing the springboard for the rest of Augustine’s more abstract enquiries.



is here that we can locate Rolle's principle justification for actions that his critics claim run counter to acceptable norms of personal and spiritual conduct.

#### CRISIS IN THE SELF OR CRISIS IN SOCIETY?

Paul F. Theiner describes the central structuring principle of Rolle's thinking as follows: 'In answer to the basic ontological question, "What *is* there?" Rolle consistently says, "What does *not appear to be*." The [spiritual] realities of the world are systematically and diametrically opposed to its appearances' (p. 13).<sup>45</sup> In one of his earliest works, *Judica Me*, Rolle continually sets up this antithesis between loving what is valued in the here-and-now and what is valued in eternity: 'Do not seek your delights here where they suddenly perish, but in heaven where they cannot perish. Do not seek riches here because they will pass away, but seek them with Christ where they shall remain permanently'.<sup>46</sup> In order to ensure one's salvation one needs simply to avoid everything of temporal value and focus instead on love of God. One who does so is an *electus* (elect), who has 'loved God above all things and did not trust in the treasures of earthly money, but has chosen Christ as his helper and shall have Him as a Helper against evil charges' (*Judica Me*, 82). However, the correlate of this situation, in which everything is the inverse of its true, spiritual reality, is that those who love temporal things most are those who enjoy most favour within the world: 'And indeed, in these times in which the end of the world is coming, the proud especially are in power, the hypocrites preside, murderers are in power,

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<sup>45</sup> See for example, the *Incendium Amoris*: 'All those visible things people long for are vain. On the other hand the things which cannot be seen are true, and heavenly, and eternal' (p. 105).

<sup>46</sup> *An Edition of the "Judica Me Deus" of Richard Rolle*, trans. & ed. by J. P. Daly, Salzburg Studies in English and Renaissance Literature, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies, 92:14 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1984), p. 83.

fornicators are honoured, the avaricious acquire riches and dignities, the angry and envious put themselves forward' (*Judica Me*, 84). These are the *reprobi* (reprobate), the ignorant, greedy and selfish, who trade away the eternal reward for the passing riches of the temporal. What is most important in light of later developments in Rolle's thought is his argument that the elect have 'To suffer the opprobrium of men, the scandals of the reprobate, the curses of the adversaries for Christ can show us the light of heaven so that we may say with the Psalmist, "Night shall be my light in my pleasures" (Psalm 138. 11)' (*Judica Me*, 87). However, this will not always be the case. At the moment of the Judgement, the true spiritual order will be made manifest, what does not appear to be will be, and the elect will 'ascend with Christ at the head, leading them to their supernal seats, and then, exulting through Christ and with Christ and in Christ see the Divine Majesty forever!' (*Judica Me*, 82-83). The Judgement constitutes a reversal for the reprobate too, who 'shall have the world which they loved too dearly, the demons they served, and the flesh they refused to mortify, as their accusers'. Crucially, 'They will also have God's elect as accusers. When they saw them (living uprightly, they neither imitated their works nor listened to their words, but laughed at them) and despised them' (*Judica Me*, 85).

As Frank Shon has recently noted 'Rolle's sense of a persecuted and misunderstood elect is therefore bound up with the eschatological movement which will ultimately reveal and vindicate their status' (p. 6). As in the latter *Incendium*, Rolle is aware of the potential difficulties of announcing himself to be spiritually secure so never numbers himself among the elect until right at the end of *Judica*. His strategy is to include himself by implication, but the inference of his later statements are clear:

The first order of the elect will consist of the Apostles and their followers, namely, the perfect who gave up all things perfectly for Christ and followed him in the way of poverty. And these shall judge others, whence Job says, 'He saveth not the wicked, and he giveth judgment to the poor' (Job 36. 6). Also, since here we are judged and despised heedlessly by tyrants and wicked men, there the tyrants and other wicked men shall be carefully judged by us. (*Judica Me*, 113)

When the moment of Judgement comes, whatever idiosyncrasies of behaviour he might have indulged in, Rolle will be proved right, and will denounce those who criticise him as they have shown themselves to make the same error of perception in valuing outward appearances as the reprobate. The same system is deployed in the *Incendium*. The Judgement is a moment of moral revelation, 'when the true nature of the good and the wicked will be made known, and a transcendent order will triumph over the corrupt earthly one' (Watson, p. 56). The wicked (who by obvious implication include those who have criticised Rolle elsewhere in the *Incendium*) who are caught up in the transitory enjoyments of the worldly, following their own petty and self-serving interests rather than God's true pattern, will be forced to admit that they were wrong and that Rolle was right. Key to Rolle's argument, however, is that this moment does not simply occupy a crucial place as a future event. Thanks to his enlightened, post-conversion consciousness, Rolle can already perceive the transcendent order underlying the current corrupt earthly one, and he is more than happy to reveal it in the here-and-now. When discussing the actions and behaviour of the wicked, Rolle can confidently state

But however much they may conceal for a while, there can be no doubt that long before the end, or at all events *at* the end, they will be recognised for what they are. [...] In their heart, where God sees them, true humility is lacking, and they are after their own glory, not God's. (*IA*, 75)

Of course, in practice Rolle doesn't have to wait until the Judgment for this to happen; due to his post-conversion enlightened consciousness he can see the true pattern of error underneath these men's outward shows of orthodoxy 'long before the end'. Of the many Biblical quotations Rolle weaves into his text, few can be more apt to his overall project than the one he chooses from I Corinthians 2. 5: 'The spiritual man judges all things, and himself is judged by no man' (*IA*, 79).

And what of Rolle's own supposed errors? 'He cannot go *wrong*: he can do what he likes and he will be safe. No mortal man can give him such sound advice as that which he has within himself from God Eternal' ('Non potest *errare*; aget quicquid libet, secures est. Nullus mortalis potest ei dare tam salubre consilium, quemadmodum est illud quod in se habet ab immortali Deo') (*IA*, 79; Deansly, 176; my emphasis). As we noted earlier, Rolle's manipulation of the Latin term *errare* is crucial (see above, pp. 87-89). Pre-conversion, error is exactly that: error. But now, in his enlightened post-conversion position, outward error on Rolle's part is actually an example of living in accordance with the eternal pattern that is hidden from all but God's elect. Rolle often stresses the notion of faulty or unformed patterns when he describes the wicked and/or his critics. For instance, at the beginning of the *Incendium*, we are told that 'The eager love of the wicked [...] is shameful. They have ceased from all spiritual exercise [...] Their love has no pattern ('Quorum amor omnis inordinatus est'), being given to things more temporal than eternal, more to bodies than soul' (*IA*, 51; Deansly, 150). A love that is *inordinatus* represents the antithesis of a proper ordering of the self that would be required to achieve a perfect correspondence with the divine order. Later, when describing how he 'longed to sit and concentrate on Christ, and him alone', and therefore avoid attending regular

Church services, Rolle also tells us that ‘those who argued with me did not share this opinion, and tried to make me conform to their pattern’ (‘Hoc arguentes me non opinabantur, ideoque ad suam formam reducere conati sunt’) (*IA*, 142; Deansly, 233). *Forma* does not carry any negative connotations in and of itself, implying only the idea of a model, example, or moral pattern in the abstract, but when we remember that the *forma* of his critics is *inordinatus*, the danger of Rolle conforming to it is clear. In fact, *reducere* should probably be translated more accurately as to draw or bring backwards, which indicates even more explicitly that, were he to follow the advice of his critics, Rolle would be reversing his direction of travel along the path towards salvation. All of this points to the fact that, by this point, Rolle is not really offering an ‘opinion’ on the best conditions to achieve mystical union at all. Rather, it is a divinely guided fact based upon and within the divine logos. After the moment of conversion ‘error’ is redefined – it no longer refers to Rolle’s wrong-doing, but to the mistaken perceptions of his unenlightened critics. Criticisms levelled against him are simply indications that those who make them are unable to perceive the truth to which he is privy. In fact, within such a context, persecution in the world is actually a sign that one is correct in relation to eternal things and is striding more securely into heaven: ‘I know this: the more men have been furious with me with their denigrations, the more I have advanced in spiritual growth’ (*IA*, 92).

Early in the *Confessions*, musing upon God’s omnipotent creative capacity, Augustine states

No matter how many have already been our days and the days of our fathers, they have already passed through this single present day of yours, and from it they have taken their measures and their manner of being. And others still shall also pass away and receive their measures and their manner of being. [...] All things of tomorrow and all beyond, and all things of yesterday and

all things before, you shall make today, and you have already made them into today. (I, 6)

Although he offers customary, and indeed necessary qualifications of humility,<sup>47</sup> for all intents and purposes Rolle presents himself as occupying this position in the *Incendium Amoris*. Brought to a 'joyful standstill' in a single present day, possessed of an enlightened consciousness from which he bestows the measure and manner of being, sinner or saved, to everybody about him, Rolle sees the world through the foreseeing eyes of God himself. To return to Vance's metaphor, if in his *Confessions* Augustine parses the divine logos that underwrites his past self, and the present knowledge of time and memory, form and matter, and scripture that emerges from that self-knowledge, then Rolle realises this project on a truly God-like scale, correctly interpreting the material world and its objects in terms of the underlying grammar and syntax of the eternal sentence: the past, present, and future of all humanity are all available to be read in terms of the 'already-always-has-been'. But it is also the 'always-already-is'. Augustine thinks of God's omniscient knowledge of events as an eternal present encompassing past and future. Rolle does likewise, making that position the foundation of his interpretative and judgemental ability. In another essay, Vance discusses how Augustine uses a 'daring analogy between the temporal process of the recited poem and the temporality of history' in his *De vera religione*.<sup>48</sup> As human beings, we can grasp and interpret the totality of a poem because we are not a part of that poem.

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<sup>47</sup> Watson discusses the necessity for Rolle to adopt a humble, sporadically fallible pose in his post-conversion self, even as he was simultaneously claiming conceptual and behavioural infallibility, and how these competing impulses confuse and diminish the overall impact of the *Incendium's* argument (pp. 129-35).

<sup>48</sup> Vance, 'Saint Augustine: Language as Temporality', in *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes*, ed. by John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols (Hanover: University of New England Press, 1982), pp. 20-35 (p. 31).

However, because of original sin, we labour as a *part* of history, hence we are not able to stand apart from it and grasp its totality. [...] Man labours then, in a poem of history that he cannot read as a whole. [...] Angels, by contrast, inhabit a spiritual realm [...] where they understand God's *logos* as a discourse proffered without syllables, without syntax, and without enigma. ('Language as Temporality', pp. 31-32)

The best approximation of a discourse without syllables or syntax in temporal terms would be that of a melody. Rolle often compares the contemplative to angels (cap. 3), and the song of the lover to the song of angels (caps. 31-34 are the most extended example of this assertion). In doing so he is laying claim to a type of understanding which is not plagued by the divisive and partial limitations of regular perception. Whether we see Rolle's condition in terms of the textual or musical metaphor, the formal consequence of his position is the same. Rolle can look forward to the rest of his life in the dual sense of seeing what is ahead and of anticipating with pleasure. We might term the narratorial position relative to his own life 'pseudo-proleptic autobiography' – although Rolle claims no power of foresight or visionary capacity, he can correctly assign meaning to all future events as they arrive in the present as he is privy to the eternal underlying pattern that cannot be erroneous.

## RE-IMAGINING THE ROLLEAN PARADIGM

Apology is the fundamental aim of the *Incendium*, the final principle to which all the other structures conform. A brief return to Mathien's essay helps to show how this aim can be reconciled with Rolle's first assertion, that the *Incendium* was written for the 'simple and unlearned, who are seeking rather to love God than to amass knowledge.' Mathien observes that when autobiographical accounts are written as an apology, 'Conclusions about how to

live well or how to come to know are available to anyone who can draw suitably close analogies between their lives and that of the autobiographer' (p. 23). Given all Rolle's tautological twists and turns, the endlessly self-referential posturing that never actually arrives at self-analysis, and the total lack of systematic programme of spiritual ascent for the would-be contemplative to imitate, could the medieval reader take anything away from this maddening work? Crucial to Mathien's definition of apology is that the life shown therein 'is argued to have conformed to certain, arguably reasonable, standards of moral or cognitive probity' (p. 23). This would seem to be an insurmountable stumbling block for would be followers of Rolle – regardless of his insistence that his behaviour is acceptable because divinely sanctioned (an argument which, I believe, he is successful in making), whether it could ever be considered reasonable to attempt to imitate him raises some interesting questions.

For all his idiosyncrasies, Rolle remained one of the most popular and widely read late medieval mystics. There are over forty surviving manuscripts of the *Incendium* in particular, non later than the early fifteenth century (Wolters, p. 10). Rolle wrote at least two works in English, *The Form of Living* and his *English Psalter*, at the request of the anchoress Margaret Kirkeby, and numerous other manuscript rubrics link him to specific individuals (Watson, p. 32, 246-47). In fact, Rolle left a pattern of mystical behaviour and belief that was quite literally lived by one of his readers. In her own *Book* (1438), Margery Kempe explicitly states that she has had read to her the '*Incendio Amoris*' of 'Richard Hampol, hermyte' (ll. 5171).<sup>49</sup> Her own mystical experience is described in an unmistakably Rollean register, referred to as both 'a sownd of melodye so swet

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<sup>49</sup> Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by Barry Windeatt (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000). See also ll. 1258 and ll. 4820



and delectable' (ll. 325), and as a 'fyer of love brennyng in her brest' (ll. 2899), whilst she also echoes Rolle in, for example, describing the body of Christ as like a 'duffehows of holys' (ll. 2270)<sup>50</sup> and in using the term 'synguler lofe' (ll. 1628).<sup>51</sup> However, it is not these verbal echoes that interest us most, but rather the fact that, granted the gift of communing with the divine will, Kempe gains the ability to foresee the events of both her own life and those of others. She can, quite literally, reveal the future shape of God's already written sentence. For instance, in one episode early in the *Book*, Kempe arrives at an abbey where she is welcomed by all the monks except one 'whech bar gret office in that place' and 'despysed hir and set hir at nowt' (ll. 802-03). However, after she converses with the monks during meals, Kempe's critic eventually 'gan gretly enclyne to-hir-ward and gan to have gret savowr in hir wordys' (ll. 808-09). The monk consequently decides to ask 'I prey me whethyr I schal be savyd or nowt, and in what synnes I have most dysplesyd God' (ll. 812-13).

The question gives Kempe the opportunity to demonstrate the improved interpretative capacity she has gained thanks to her conversion. As we have noted, for Augustine, the divinely inspired consciousness gains improved interpretative capacity only with regards to the pattern hidden in one's *past* life. Rolle expands on this position by claiming that the divinely guided consciousness can assign proper meaning to events that occur in the present of his own life, even – or perhaps we should say especially – if they run counter to accepted opinion, and that events in the future that cannot be known by man will not affect his position as one of the already saved elect. In a sense, Rolle is secured against the

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. the *Meditations on the Passion*, in S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson, ed., *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse*, EETS o.s. 293 (London: OUP, 1988), p. 74.

<sup>51</sup> The term is ultimately derived from Richard of St Victor's *De Quattuor Gradibus Violentiae Caritatis* (Windeatt, p. 135), but is discussed repeatedly by Rolle. Cf. *The Form of Living*, in *Prose and Verse*, pp. 16-17.

contingency of future events without having explicit knowledge of what those events are. The monk's question allows Kempe to go even further than this, as she is required, if she is to answer his question correctly, to be able to read God's hidden order to interpret the proper meaning and outcome not of her own life but of another person. In fact, talk of *reading* God's order is slightly misplaced. Continuing to use Vance's textual and grammatical metaphor, in the *Book of Margery Kempe*, God's word quite literally interrupts the narration of Kempe's own life to allow her to access the proper meaning of things. Kempe is in constant conversation with Christ throughout the text, and he always obliges with the necessary information to allow her to answer whatever challenge or question is laid down by her many earthly interlocutors. In the case of the monk, Christ says to Kempe ' "My derworthy dowtyr, sey in the name of Jhesu that he hath synned in lethery, in dyspeyr, and in worldly goodys kepyng" ' (ll. 822-23), and that the monk will be saved ' "yf he wyl forsakyn hys synne and don aftyr thi counsel. Charge hym that he forsake hys synne and be schreve therof, and also hys office that he hath wythowtynforth" ' (ll. 830-32). Christ's words of course prove to be accurate, and the monk stands 'abaschyd' (ll. 840) after his sin is revealed, before giving a meal in Kempe's honour and handing her gold to pray for him (ll. 849-50). The narration then moves forwards in time by an unspecified period and we are told

Another tyme whan the creatur cam ageyn to the same place, the fornseyd monke had forsakyn hys office at hir counsel, and was turnyd fro hys synne, and was mad suppriowr of the place, a wel governyd man and wel desposyd, thankyd be God, and made this creatur gret cher and hyly blyssed God that evyr he saw hir. (ll. 851-56)

Over the course of this episode Kempe's divinely instructed consciousness has demonstrated the capacity to move along the temporal axis of history/*bios* from past to present to future whilst also parsing the consciousness/*autos* of other persons in that history. She has demonstrated the ability to read the monk's past sins from beneath the veneer of his current silence, whilst also providing an accurate reading of the narrative of the monk's life as it is yet to unfold. The large temporal leap forward in the narrative that 'proves' Kempe was right at the time she made her recommendation to the monk about how he could save himself mirrors the capability a truly divine consciousness would have to move along the temporal axis of history within which humanity is normally confined. From the perspective of such a consciousness, there exists no formal distinction between telling/writing and doing, as the possibility for someone to *errare* from the already spoken/written word is nil. Kempe can demonstrate the capacities normally limited to an omniscient author (whether we consider that persona in either its divine or simply secular incarnation) whilst existing in the flux of the present, able to step outside of the confused and contingent perspective that limits normal human perception and offer a coherent reading of the order underlying the chaos.

In the *Incendium Amoris* Rolle claims much on behalf of what his divinely guided consciousness can accomplish in purely abstract terms, but he has left us with an unfortunately small amount of information as to how, and even if, that consciousness functioned in the daily hustle and bustle of medieval life. Whether this is due to the general reluctance of medieval authors to write about the details of their own lives, or, perhaps more suggestively, due to the extreme difficulty of realising the theoretical implications of Rolle's metaphysics and epistemology in

practice, which led him to withdraw as much as possible, we will never know. The *Book of Margery Kempe* goes some way towards filling in the framework that Rolle left. Kempe seems to have literally lived what in Rolle's work is largely only a theory, and it undoubtedly illustrates the many fraught issues faced by the medieval mystic who claimed to be able to directly commune with the divine. One final thing that needs to be repeated here is that for Kempe, just as for Rolle, the actual lived experience of mystical communion took place on an intensely emotional, personal level, and was completely and continually immersive, rather than being conceptualised in terms of theory or abstract forms. But this does not mean that these deep-lying structures, a substrata of inherited traditions and tropes filtered through the prism of prevailing socio-cultural expectations, are not present in their thought. Discussing these underlying structures, moulded by Augustine, allows us to move past *what* Rolle and Kempe claimed to have experienced in order comprehend, in however partial and limited a manner, *why* and *how* they understand the forms of being we find represented in their texts.

## CHAPTER TWO

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‘AND LETE ALLE OTHER TRUFFLES BE’: RECOGNISING  
THE TRUTH IN GOWER’S *CONFESSIO AMANTIS*

Over the course of the last chapter we examined the *Incendium Amoris* of Richard Rolle, in which a desire for, and aspiration towards, impersonality interacted with an unavoidable sense of individuality occasioned by a person’s necessary existence within the corporeal world. Rolle’s text presents to us a specific example of how one person interpreted their own sense of being within the matrix of existing paradigms of personhood, a palimpsest of identity in which the author attempted to make the multiplicitous facts of his biographical history subservient to forms and models of being instantiated in an existing culture. A person for whom typological thinking had a profound and meaningful value, Rolle in turn left a model of spiritual being that others could attempt to live their own life within, of whom Margery Kempe was just one highly visible example. Rolle and Kempe’s work offers a general model of the process of deconstruction, negotiation, and reinterpretation of forms of self-understanding, the ebb and flow of consciousness(es) within culture that took place in order for people to realise a sense of being. However, we can also see their writing, and the self that they realised in that writing, in more specific terms as an example of how frameworks for imagining and defining identity, frameworks that were once the exclusive province of those moving in ecclesiastical circles, underwent a process of dissemination throughout late medieval society to be incorporated into a sense of self-understanding by those with no formal training.

One of the most important, if not the most important, of these paradigms was that of the formal confession. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council made confession obligatory, instantiating a formalised model of self-definition that was, in theory, common to all levels of medieval society. It is always dangerous to make sweeping generalisations regarding what an entire culture understood as relevant to their sense of being, but in the case of the medieval confessional we can safely assert that it was an unavoidable component of personhood in the entirety of Western Christendom. Critics have tended to see the practice of confession as inimical to the development of a sense of individuality in medieval culture, typically viewing it as an effort by the Church to limit the development of non-conformist or antagonistic ideologies amongst the lay population. For instance, Braswell argues that the aim of the confessional was

to restore the penitent to harmony with his environment, with God, and with the Church. But we must note that, in being so restored, the penitent loses his individuality as a sinner. [...] In correcting his 'special personal defects', the sinner is directed, in effect, to divest himself of his ingenuity, to become humble and passive, to forsake his own private, egotistical battle. His individual personality is 'reintegrated' into a *type*. (p. 22)<sup>1</sup>

We can think of works of the type written by Augustine, Anselm, Rolle, and Kempe as confessions, insofar as they aim towards this idealised theoretical eradication of 'individual personality' within existing paradigms of being (whatever their success in practice). However, they are not structured around the process of confession as it was understood in strictly formal terms during the Middle Ages, that is, in the interaction between penitent and priest, with the latter attempting to correct the errant individualism of the former in line with acceptable patterns of thought and behaviour. Given that this interaction is as close as we

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p 60, n. 13, for further discussion of this issue.

might reasonably expect to find to a universalised technology of the self in late medieval culture, we can legitimately expect to discover something regarding the *value* of individualism by examining how an author conceptualises a sense of identity through the methodology of a formal confession.

#### CONCEPTUAL COHERANCE IN THE *CONFESSIO AMANTIS*

At the beginning of Book I of the *Confessio Amantis*, before he takes on the guise of the lover whose confession will form the locus of the poem's argument, the poet John Gower states that 'I may nocht strecche up to the hevене / Min hand, ne setten al in evene / This world, which evere is in balance' (I, 1-3).<sup>2</sup> Rather, his subject will be love, a topic which 'is nocht so strange, / Whiche every kinde hath upon honde' (I, 10-11). This is a classic piece of medieval dissimulation, the modesty *topoi* of which medieval authors were so fond.<sup>3</sup> We arrive at Book I via an extended discussion in the Prologue of the current state of medieval society. Gower looks at the three estates of the State, the Clergy, and the Commons, and sees that all is 'falle into discord' (Prologue, 121). The State is riven with self-interest, conflict and disunity, 'So that justice out of the weie / With rythwisnesse is gon aweie' (P, 131-32). The clergy are more interested in selling pardons and following 'lawe postif' (P, 247) rather than the law as given by God. As a consequence of the two ruling estates being in discord and division, the Commons is left unchecked and tends towards its naturally unruly condition: 'Where lawe lacketh, errour growth' (P, 511). After discussing Nebuchadnezzar's

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<sup>2</sup> John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. by Russel A. Peck, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series, 3 vols (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 2000-05).

<sup>3</sup> See E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon, 1953), pp. 83-85.

dream, in which the decreasing quality of precious metal from which a statue is made represents the decay of the temporal world, Gower finally hopes that there might come another Arion, the legendary harper whose skill was such that he could bring both the natural world of beasts and the citizenry and their lords into harmony with each other. It would be somewhat surprising if, having both established the absolute necessity for such a figure to emerge and set the stage for his entrance, a poet whose previous work was titled *Vox Clamantis* did not feel himself up to such a task, whatever protestations of inferiority he might make.

Of course, having identified both a problem and the desirable solution, one final issue that remains is to identify the method by which such a state of unity can be brought about. Gower's poem is intimately concerned with how existing forms of knowledge, existing forms of being, that are bound up within culture and history can be used to shape lived experience. How, he asks, can law be restored and error expunged, and a symbiotic harmony be achieved in both the individual and society, and between the individual and society, when confronted with the fractious and divided terrain, both conceptual and real, of late fourteenth-century England? The ostensible solution to the issue is presented to us right at the outset of the poem. By (re)telling what Chaucer calls 'olde appreved stories',<sup>4</sup> works by classical and biblical authorities, or *auctores*, within which are contained infallible moral and ethical advice, current authors can effect the regeneration of society in the manner of a contemporary Arion. As Gower states, 'be daies olde, /Whan the bokes weren levere, / Wrytinge was beloved evere / Of hem that weren vertuous' (P, 36-39); it is therefore necessary that 'In oure tyme among ous hier' we 'Do

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women*, G prologue, 21, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Oxford: OUP, 1988). All subsequent quotations from Chaucer's works follow the divisions according to line number, and, where appropriate, book and/or fragment, from this edition.



wryte of newe som matiere / Essampled of these olde wyse' (P, 1-7). And this is precisely what we get in the *Confessio*. To give only briefly some of the major sources which Gower assimilates and re-deploys in his poem, we find many narratives from Ovid, particularly the *Metamorphoses*, the *Heroides*, and the *Fasti*, the medieval *Ovid moralise*, various accounts of the fall of Troy and other Greek histories such as Statius's *Thebaid*, Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, and Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Le Roman de Troie*, collections of fables by Avianus and Hyginus, and numerous Biblical narratives. In Book VII we find a *regimine principium* based around the work of Giles of Rome and Brunetto Latini. In the confessional frame, the debate between the lover and his confessor draws upon a similarly wide range of philosophical and pedagogic influences. Ovid is at the fore once again with his *Remedia amoris*, *Amores*, and *Ars amatoria*; Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* undoubtedly influences the debate heavily; the figure of Genius, the poem's confessor, has antecedents in a long tradition, not least the writings of Jean de Meun and Alan of Lille, who in their *Roman de la Rose* and *De Planctu Naturae* respectively provide the most immediate precursors. And this is to not even consider the general intellectual context within which Gower was writing, the vast corpus of theological, scholastic, and classical writing by other *auctores* which defined *how* and *why* the titular lover Amans should learn as he does in the poem, never mind *what* he learns, or the general cultural context, in which the sacraments of confession were defined, disseminated, and disputed by the clerisy and lay-population.

Gower's almost casual early remark that he will write a book 'Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore' (P, 19) does not even begin to do justice to the sprawling

nature of the poem, the sheer range of materials he will draw upon, and the scope and ambition of his design. Such encyclopaedic depth is of course a good thing for a poet attempting to regenerate an entire society. However, when we consider that Gower chooses to withdraw to the much more limited topic of human love rather than ‘setten al in evene / This world’, we can discern the outlines of what has, over the last twenty-five years, become *the* crucial issue that scholars and critics of almost all persuasions feel they have to address: the conceptual coherence of the work as a whole.<sup>5</sup> In the figure of the lover Amans, afflicted with a passion that stands outside of the rule of reason and law, divided against himself in a state of sin and error, we have an analogue for the state of society as a whole. If we see Amans progressing through the text to a state of error-free enlightenment, learning from the tales he is told by Genius, and from the surrounding discussion of the confession, then the implication is that society as a whole can benefit from those same tales, from that same process of reading and being ‘Essampled of these olde wyse.’ The fact that Amans learns is doubly important, as in the final moments of the *Confessio* we see Amans become the poet John Gower who, because he is free from error thanks to the process of education he has undergone in the poem, is now in a position to write the text we have just read, a text that bears witness to its own effectiveness as a personal confessional manual that can unify the divided individual and therefore society as a whole. However, the central issue of Amans’s progression from error to enlightenment presents certain difficulties for the reader in terms of the overall

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, David W. Hiscoe, ‘The Ovidian Comic Strategy of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*’, *Philological Quarterly*, 64 (1985), 367-85; Katherine R. Chandler, ‘Memory and Unity in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*’, *Philological Quarterly*, 71 (1992), 15-30; A. J. Minnis, ‘John Gower, *Sapiens* in Ethics and Politics’, in *Gower’s Confessio Amantis: A Critical Anthology*, Publications of the John Gower Society, 3, ed. by Peter Nicholson (London: D. S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 158-80; Russel A. Peck, ‘The Phenomenology of Make Believe in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*’, *Studies in Philology*, 90 (1994), 250-70.

consistency of the process. Genius constantly tells tales which have no relation to Amans's condition, to which Amans promptly responds with comments such as: 'as of the dede / I am withouten eny drede / Al gultless' (II, 2387-90). Further to this, Genius is traditionally a priest of Venus – 'Bot of conclusion final / Conclude I wol in special / For love, whos servant I am' (I, 249-51) – a role which, in the *Confessio*, often places him in collusion with Amans's self-indulgent and misguided desire rather than opposing it. As often as not Genius actually encourages Amans in his pursuit of his lady either implicitly, by way of the action in the tales he tells, or explicitly in the commentary and debate, frequently stating, for instance, that love cannot be mastered by law or reason: 'For love is lawe in every place, / Ther mai no lawe him justefie / Be reddour ne be compaignie, / That he ne wole after his wille' (V, 4556-59). Amans himself memorably states that Genius's attempts to guide him to a state free of sin have been entirely in vain at the end of Book VII:

Do wey, mi fader, I you preie!  
 Of that ye have unto me told  
 I thonke you a thousandfold.  
 The tales sounen in myn ere,  
 Bot yit myn herte is elleswhere,  
 I mai miselve noght restreigne,  
 That I nam evere in loves peine.  
 (VII, 5408-14)

Indeed, if we compare two passages, one from Book I, one from Book VIII, in which love is described in almost identical terms (love is blind, she subjects men to her whims as if in a game of chance, she acts much as fortune does), we can surely ask the question: what has changed?

Bot what schal fallen ate laste,  
 The soothe can no wisdom caste,

Bot as it falleth upon chance;  
 For if ther evere was balance  
 Which of fortune stant governed,  
 I may wel lieve as I am lerned  
 That love hath that balance on hond,  
 Which wol no reson understonde.  
 For love is blind and may nocht se,  
 Forthi may no certineté  
 Be set upon his jugement,  
 Bot as the whiel aboute went  
 He yifth his graces undeserved,  
 And fro that man which hath him served  
 Fulofte he takth aweye his fees,  
 As he that pleieth ate Dees,  
 And thereupon what schal befall  
 He not, til that the chance falle,  
 Wher he schal lese or he schal winne.  
 (I, 38-57)

Venus, which stant withoute lawe  
 In noncertein, bot as men drawe  
 Of Rageman upon the chance,  
 Sche leith no peis in the balance,  
 Bot as hir lyketh forto weie;  
 The trewe man fulofte aweie  
 Sche put, which hath hir grace bede,  
 And set an untrewen in his stede.  
 Lo, thus blindly the world sche diemeth  
 In loves cause, as to me siemeth  
 (VIII, 2377-86)

In Book I we are dealing with a love that is romantic, human, and particular, a love related to the individual experience of Amans in his futile attempts to woo his lady. By Book VIII the horizon of the poem has expanded and we are dealing with love as a generalised phenomenon common to all men, but it still manifests itself in the understanding of Amans as something that is completely beyond control. Similarly, in both cases a person caught in the condition of love judges blindly and, consequently, without certainty as to the outcome of decisions taken on those judgments (I, 47-49; VIII, 2385-86). It appears that Genius's range of reference is so vast and conflicted that it passes by the needs of Amans

completely, and he is therefore left trapped, blind, and bewildered in 'loves cause' (VIII, 2386).

If Amans has failed to learn from the material contained within the poem and be absolved of sin and error, then how can it be justifiably argued that he can assume the role of the enlightened poet John Gower? And on what basis can Gower claim that his text is morally and socially regenerative when we have just witnessed it fail on its first subject? That the logic implicit in asking such questions is tautological does not make them any less valid. Indeed, this type of tautology (what Watson defines as writing a 'work in order to prove that the work being written has authority'<sup>6</sup>) is a key feature of the three works under discussion in this thesis. Equally, however, authority cannot simply be created *ex nihilo*; as we saw with Rolle, to do so would irrevocably sever the persona one was cultivating from the social whole, leaving a person without a sense of identity that had been legitimated according to socio-cultural norms. In the *Confessio* Amans has to validate Gower's authority within a context that is fully consistent with the expected norms of the body politic. If he fails, which, on a first reading of the poem is what many will conclude is the case, the whole teetering edifice of contemporary *auctoritas* comes crashing to the ground. To put it very simply then, when critics make reference to the conceptual coherence (or seeming lack of it) of the *Confessio*, what they are responding to is the feeling one gets when first encountering the poem, that Gower just didn't manage to synthesise his materials into a satisfactory whole. Indeed, the ghost of Macaulay inevitably looms large over Gower studies more than a century after his edition. His statement that the *Confessio* has 'no doubt most serious faults. The scheme itself, with its conception

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<sup>6</sup> *Invention of Authority*, p. 124.

of a Confessor who as a priest of Venus has to expound a system of morality, while as a devotee of Venus he is concerned only with affairs of love [...] can hardly be called a consistent or happy one' has set the terms for the discussion ever since.<sup>7</sup> It would also be fair to say that it is an opinion which few have been willing to agree with, and indeed that most critics have anxiously denounced.<sup>8</sup> How much this scholarly scramble to proclaim the unified coherence and complete intentionality of Gower's work – even if this unity comes in the form of an intentional incoherence, which, as we shall see, has become the *de rigueur* argument – has to do with notions of what a canonical author is *supposed* to be and do is an interesting question which I will be examining throughout this chapter as it becomes relevant to my main discussion.

It will become apparent when we examine the prevailing arguments concerning the conceptual coherence of the *Confessio* that a definite trend has arisen that sees Gower in full command of his materials, synthesising a spectacularly diverse and often contradictory set of sources and traditions into a unified argument which at the same time allows for the articulation of multiple authoritative positions, making Gower as much the ideal Bakhtinian dialogic author as Chaucer.<sup>9</sup> To my mind this tells us more about what we as moderns think Chaucer's project as a writer was (which is by no means what it was thought

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<sup>7</sup> G. C. Macaulay, *The Complete Works of John Gower*, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899-1902), I (1899), p. xix.

<sup>8</sup> Alistair Minnis provided much of the initial impetus for the rehabilitation of Gower in recent scholarship. The following example is typical of the general position adopted by many recent critics: 'In writing the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower seems to have adopted a distinctive authorial role, that of the *sapiens* in ethics and politics, and an understanding of this role enables us to appreciate the essential unity of the diverse materials in his work.' See Minnis's '*Sapiens* in Ethics and Politics' (p. 158).

<sup>9</sup> See M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 342-46. For an example of a critic using Bakhtinian theory in relation to Chaucer, see Jon Cook, 'Carnival and the *Canterbury Tales*. "Only equals may laugh"', in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. by David Aers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), pp. 169-91.

to be at other points in history), and therefore what we would like Gower to be as his rival and equal, than anything inherent or necessary to the *Confessio* itself. This is especially the case given the prevailing conservatism that I see as characteristic of Gower's poem. But before I examine how this is manifest in the poem itself, it is necessary to discuss the current critical consensus surrounding the *Confessio* in order to gain a fuller understanding of the position I wish to take in my own argument.

It is possible to discern two distinct strands of Gower criticism in which the essential unity of the *Confessio* is argued. The first strand has been identified by James Simpson in the writing of scholars such as C. S. Lewis, J. A. W. Bennett, and Alastair Minnis, as 'a powerful consensus' that has 'argued for the entire, readily perceptible moral coherence of the work', implying 'a complete squaring of the literary form of the *Confessio Amantis* with its pedagogic "information": the poem is being presented as a coherent, efficient, moralising structure.'<sup>10</sup> In particular, this strand of criticism focuses on a reading of the poem in which the final unity is to be found in the goal of divine salvation. These critics argue that to order one's moral faculties to be those of the good lover was to inevitably organise oneself along proper social, ethical, and ultimately spiritual guidelines. In thus serving oneself in an ethically profitable manner the good lover would also serve the greater causes of his earthly and divine Lords. Peter Nicholson has more recently refined this position. Taking as his starting point the *dits* of Machaut, he argues that

there is never any conflict [...] between the demands of Love and the demands of God. The casualness of the many juxtapositions of the two

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<sup>10</sup> James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's Anticlaudianus and John Gower's Confessio Amantis*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 25 (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), pp. 136-138.

suggests that the language of adoration simply did not raise a moral issue for the poet; and whenever he invokes God and Love in the same context, he affirms a harmony between their expectations rather than a contradiction.<sup>11</sup>

The ‘lessons that the poem contains are fully consistent with the need to seek salvation, but that is not the most immediate goal’ (p. 7), so Gower devises ‘an ethics of love using the framework of traditional morality but grounded in the experiences of the world and in the nature of love itself, and [makes] these compatible’ (p. 8) However, when analysing the conclusion of the *Confessio*, Nicholson’s argument for coherence flounders in the face of the actual action of the poem. When, in Book VIII, Genius suddenly abandons his service to Venus and declares Amans’s love as sinful, Nicholson observes that

his sudden characterization of all human love as blindness ignores all of the characters in the tales, including the one just before, whose love for one another is neither sinful in itself nor a cause of sinful behaviour; and his implication that love is an obstacle to salvation contradicts all of his own statements on the possibility of adhering to both laws. [...] In denying the possibility of reconciling love and virtue, Genius rejects the effort to distinguish between sinful love and virtuous love that has been his major preoccupation during the confession. (pp. 381-82)

Nicholson goes on to try and resolve the contradictions this part of the poem produces in his argument, but it is by far the most unconvincing portion of his otherwise excellent book. Nicholson’s problem here is only a specific instance of the more general problems faced by critics of this first persuasion in light of the many disjunctions of meaning that are to be found at various points in the poem. At the moment when the critic feels he has, in Simpson’s phrase, ‘squared’ the literary form with the necessary pedagogic concerns of the poem, one element slips out of position within the carefully aligned conceptual structure the critic has

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Nicholson, *Love and Ethics in Gower’s Confessio Amantis* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 25-26.



imposed on the poem, rendering his or her argument untenable. In practice, it is usually much more than one element of the poem that works against the kind of streamlined interpretative procedures these arguments presuppose: any detailed reading of the poem throws up multiple points of resistance to a finalised, monolithic interpretation.

The second strand of criticism which tries to argue for the essential unity of the *Confessio* tries to make a virtue out of this vice. More recent in its origin, it acknowledges that the *Confessio* is impossible to resolve into a coherent unity in light of one interpretative key. Arguably it finds its first expression in the works of Kurt Olsson and James Simpson – indeed, it is possible to say that these two have created a new ‘powerful consensus’ which has become the prevailing orthodoxy in Gower studies.<sup>12</sup> Another of Simpson’s remarks provides the key to understanding this second strand of criticism. Whereas Simpson characterises the position of earlier scholars as arguing for a ‘readily perceptible moral coherence of the work’, his own stance, and that of the critics who follow after him, might be summed up by saying that whilst coherence is present, it is certainly not readily perceptible, and in fact must be probed for beneath an ostensibly incoherent poetic form. This is obviously an attractive position, as we noted above, to anyone of a canonising impulse, allowing as it does for critics to reconcile problematic and contradictory moments in the poem with a larger intentional design, saving Gower from charges of incompetence whilst at the

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<sup>12</sup> See Kurt Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the ‘Confessio Amantis’*, Publications of the John Gower Society, 4 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), and Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, op. cit.

same time asserting that he is an even more sophisticated author than had first been realised.<sup>13</sup>

To justify their position Olsson and Simpson sensibly turn to the authoritative tradition Gower himself recommends at the outset of his poem. Drawing upon the rhetorical theory outlined by John of Salisbury in his *Metalogicon*, Olssen argues that

Genius [...] ‘causes’ debate by the very conflict in the doctrines he presents. [...] The *Confessio* is a poem which [...] conforms to a tradition of ‘disputeisoun’ extending back to antiquity, and specifically to the *disputatio in utramque partem* or ‘the method of arguing alternatively on both sides of a question’. As a form of dialectic, such disputation is a method of arriving at a judgment of the relative worth of competing opinions. (p. 70)<sup>14</sup>

When Genius seems to contradict himself by, for instance, first admonishing Amans for his desire, and then colluding with him, this is an example of him generating, but not tidily resolving ‘conflicting opinions on key issues’ (p. 52). According to Olssen, Genius ‘compiles these values and brings them into relationship, often into conflict, but does not consistently judge among them or reconcile their differences’ (pp. 56-57). In a similar vein, Simpson sees the *Confessio* as a psychological personification allegory in the tradition of Allan of Lille’s *Anticlaudianus* and Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, in which Amans and Genius represent two parts of the same soul. Rather than being an infallible guide, Genius, as the soul’s imagination, is actually to a certain extent influenced by the demands of Amans, who represents desire. Genius tries to perfect the will, but he is also undermined by it, resulting in him feeding Amans with images and

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<sup>13</sup> See Diane Watt’s *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics*, Medieval Cultures, 38 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 157, for an extended discussion of this point.

<sup>14</sup> He is citing John’s *Metalogicon*, 3.10, trans. by Daniel D. McGarry (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Berkely University Press, 1962), pp. 189-202.

narratives that comfort him in his deluded state. As Simpson notes, ‘Genius is an inherently unstable psychological category, with competing and opposing allegiances within the soul. Any “information” he gives to Amans should [...] be regarded with care’ (p. 171). The final conclusion both critics make is that the intended presence of these contradictions shifts the pedagogic burden away from any one figure within the poem itself and onto the reader. There is no authority figure within the text, as readers we cannot know ‘without exercising our own *ingenium* and judgement’ (Olssen, p. 139). As Simpson persuasively argues,

the reader becomes the central locus of the poem, in which its strains are registered. Rather than being primarily referential, such poems are *enactive* – they draw readers into their action in such a way as to reproduce problems and/or experiences within the reader. [...] And it is precisely through their effects on readers that such works escape the charge of didacticism. Instead of being the passive transmitters of received ideas, such works become the locus in which received ideas are experienced anew through the reader’s resolution of, or struggle with, those ideas. (p. 120)

On first reading, a statement of this kind might perhaps evoke fears that Gower is being portrayed as promoting a free-wheeling interpretative nightmare more closely associated with the concerns of modern theory rather than late medieval poetry. However, there is, according to Simpson, a progressive moral dimension firmly imbedded within the poem’s structure, it is just more difficult to perceive than at first thought. As the poem advances a political framework emerges in which a debate between Amans and Genius takes place regarding whether love and will can be controlled by reason and law. Genius begins to construct a counter argument, based in the works of Ovid and Aristotle, in which ‘the formation of a personal ethics demands a placing of the self within the human constraints which govern relationships in society’ (Simpson, pp. 191-92), culminating in the *regimine principium* of Book VII. As we have seen, Genius is

not wholly consistent in stating his case and often ends up asserting that desire is irresistible. However, the benefit of seeing the poem in the terms defined by Olssen and Simpson is that the framework of debate does not have to be either completely consistent or visibly affecting only Amans, but can rather refer at any moment to any of the constitutive or constituted elements. As David Aers notes when discussing this same strand of Gower criticism, ‘Anything that might seem contradictory [...] is to be read as a deliberately partial moment superseded in the final unities of Gower’s theory and art.’<sup>15</sup> By the end of Book VII the specific nature of Gower’s theory has apparently been made explicit. According to Simpson, a significant and absolute change has occurred; not to Amans, but to Genius, who now definitively states:

For God the lawes hath assised  
 Als wel to reson as to kinde,  
 Bot he the bestes wolde binde  
 Only to lawes of nature,  
 Bot to the mannes creature  
 God gaf him reson forth withal,  
 Whereof that he nature schal  
 Upon the causes modefie,  
 That he schal do no lecherie,  
 And yit he schal his lustes have.

(VII, 5372-81)

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<sup>15</sup> David Aers, ‘Reflections on Gower as “*Sapiens* in Ethics and Politics”’, in *Re-Visioning Gower*, ed. by R. F. Yeager (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1998), pp. 185-202 (p. 187). Responding to the body of criticism that has grown out of Minnis’s article, Aers offers a highly effective counter argument to current interpretations of Gower as being a ‘brilliant dialogic and utterly coherent moral and political poet’ (p. 186). Rather than seeing ‘“contradictory positions” in the politics and ethics of Gower’s writing [...] as carefully designed steps on a securely constructed pedagogic ladder [...] leading us to “perfection”’ (p. 188), Aers argues that Gower ‘simply and unironically reproduced’ the contradictions inherent in the Church’s teachings because, as an orthodox Catholic, he had ‘normalized and internalized’ those contradictions in the same manner the Church had. This explains how Gower can ‘assert with equal vehemence morally and theologically incompatible positions in areas of real difficulty, asserting whichever position most accorded with contingent demands’ (p. 193). Aers’s argument has much to recommend it, but it also makes Gower something of a ‘cultural dope’, completely unable to perceive any of the problematic issues rife within late-medieval culture. My own argument will draw heavily on the idea of Gower as a highly conservative and orthodox author, but I conclude that he takes this position having consciously considered all the ‘contradictory positions’ rather than being unaware of them.

This is supposedly the final position the poem takes with regards to the interaction of love and law, will and wit, desire and reason. Animals are bound only by natural laws; in contrast, God has given man reason with which to temper his urge to untrammelled self-fulfilment.

Once we realise that Genius is Amans's imagination, then we also recognise that the soul of which Amans is a part *has* undergone a very significant shift towards integration in Book VII. [...] Genius, then, is the pupil as much as the teacher in Book VII, and his position with regard to controlling the will is itself a demonstration that the mind can resist the tyranny of the will. (Simpson, pp. 216-17)

By assimilating the urgings of natural law into a politicised ethics exemplified in the *regimine principium* of Book VII, Gower is confident that the divided human condition can be healed. By shifting the locus of meaning away from any one figure in the text itself, the burden of interpretative responsibility rests not on what happens to Amans, but rather on how the reader uses the poem as a whole to initiate a reassessment of their own moral condition. Even if Amans fails to learn from the material in the poem, he fails to learn in a manner that is instructive to others: we as readers then are granted the possibility of succeeding through right use of our own mental faculties. The poem is in its final sense what we might call 'outward-facing': Gower's programme of social and ethical reform finds its realisation where it really matters, in the external world, rather than in the internal dynamics of the poem. According to Simpson and Olssen, such a process aims to make readers of the poem effective judges or confessors of their own conduct and behaviour in the realms of morality and ethics. It is here that we should become alert to potential problems in arguments of this type, as we have already seen the difficulties Rolle encountered when he was perceived to be endorsing an individual's power to judge him or herself outside of established structures of

institutional authority (see above, pp. 73-76). Given the investment Gower makes in the opening of the *Confessio* in just these traditional structures of authority as essential for the rehabilitation of self and society, is it really likely that he was endorsing such a step towards self-justification?

It is interesting to observe what happens in the work of one critic when he pushes the idea of the *Confessio* as an 'outward-facing' poem to its logical end, as the conclusions he reaches in his analysis are indicative of the flaws I see as central to the whole strand of criticism. Allen J. Mitchell recognises, like Olssen and Simpson, the problematic and contradictory nature of much of the poem. He comments that 'Gower's habit of blending sharply juxtaposing subject matter, creating what amounts to sexual and spiritual montage, and his proclivity for protracted excursus as well as blatant incongruity, to the detriment of a consistent moral message' is 'especially perplexing'.<sup>16</sup> However, if we conceive of the various exemplary narratives, and the discussion generated within the poem by these episodes, as prompts to moral activity under specific conditions rather than as part of a homogeneous and inflexible moral message, the perplexing problem of incongruity disappears. According to Mitchell, the end of exemplary rhetoric is to be found not in what texts *mean*, but rather in what they *do*, in the multiple ways that they can be practiced in the real world. And again, this only happens thanks to the 'integral personal or subjective process' involved in the reception of a text or texts. The reader supposedly takes the arguments on a case-by-case basis without trying to find a 'determinate moralisation or thematic closure' (p. 13). Any 'virtue or integration [...] will occur outside the poem in the conscience of

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<sup>16</sup> Allen J. Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*, *Chaucer Studies*, 33 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), p. 36.

the reader' (p. 65).<sup>17</sup> Leaving aside the obvious question of how one can do anything based on a text without first deciding what it means, it is this final part of Mitchell's argument, and what he goes on to say in consequence of it, that interests me most. Apparently, Gower is more concerned with *Practique* than *Theorique* in his poem, to use Mitchell's terms, and 'conceptual problems are secondary' to this end (p. 38). By 'conceptual problems' I can here only assume Mitchell means the issue I have already identified as being at the heart of the poem: Gower has to show how, as Amans, he progresses from a state of division and error to enlightened knowledge, otherwise the poem is worthless. The authority to write a text concerned with *Practique* can only be gained through the demonstration and application of a rigorous and consistent *Theorique*.<sup>18</sup> The conditions under which Amans becomes Gower at the end of the poem are therefore integral to any understanding of the poet's view of man's general capability in the fallen world. But the ending of the poem is precisely what Mitchell's argument seeks to avoid. Bizarrely, he goes on to state that 'to press a certain exemplary logic [...] to its conclusion, the ending did not have to happen the way it did anyway.' Apparently, 'Amans's rather mysterious end is one among a set of possibilities [...] furnishing probable rather than necessary truth' (p. 50).

Like Mitchell, Simpson seeks to elide the ending of the poem. Book VII is, for Simpson, effectively where the argument of the poem comes to rest. It allows him to make two concurrent statements regarding Gower's final design.

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<sup>17</sup> Note the parallels with Simpson: 'There is no locus of authority from within the action [...] that makes coherent sense of its narrative structure. Only in the reader can the structural incoherencies of the work be resolved' (p. 253).

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to consider how far the criticism aimed at Rolle, and at mystics living, working, and writing in the affective tradition in general, was a consequence of them claiming the authority to write texts intimately concerned with the spiritual *Practique* of salvation whilst at the same time displaying an inconsistent, or even incoherent, *Theorique* in their personal behaviour and thought.

According to Simpson, Gower ‘never asks us to move beyond the reason’, that is ‘the practical sciences of ethics, economics and politics’, in order to effect the personal and social regeneration that is the aim of the *Confessio* (p. 253). Consequently, Simpson can also assert that ‘Gower’s ethics in the *Confessio* are not specifically Christian’ (p. 196, n. 40). Indeed, Simpson rejects the proposal that ‘Gower is promoting a religious and personal transcendence from worldly life’ (p. 202), stating again that the political ‘is the final emphasis which brings the poem together, rather than any wish for personal salvation or for transcendent vision’ (p. 225).

This anxiety to shut down the poem before Book VIII is telling. There is much in the final parts of Book VIII that indicates Gower *is* asking us to move beyond reason and towards a specifically Christian perspective. In their desire to see Gower as a proto-humanist with full faith in the faculties of man to effect his own re-integration with proper models of being, critics such as Simpson and Mitchell avoid the issue of the ending by stating that we do not need to move beyond reason, that the ending did not have to happen, and that internal conceptual problems in the poem are a secondary consideration in light of its practical application.<sup>19</sup> Yet there is an ending, and one that is crucial in light of the conceptual issues underlying the authority of the whole poem; in it Gower shows that reason by itself cannot and does not bring about the expurgation of error that allows Amans to become the enlightened author John Gower. Gower’s solution resides in the late fourteenth-century debate surrounding the Christian doctrine of grace; it is clearly articulated in the ending, and is also present in the main body of the poem, where it offers a counterpoint to the ‘humanist’

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<sup>19</sup> Simpson only devotes four pages (pp. 267-270) to the lines of the *Confessio* covering Amans’s conversion, barely registering any of the tensions that, as we shall see, are clearly explicit in any detailed reading.



perspective identified by Simpson, before finally superseding that perspective. The presence of reason in the text as a force for self-understanding is not completely invalidated, and neither are the incongruities that are incontestably present in the poem ignored or artificially resolved. Rather, Gower shows that whilst reason can grapple with the contradictions placed on man in his earthly condition, it cannot resolve them, and must ultimately cede to the highest power (grace) in order to effect the restoration of the sinner. My argument here is in effect a return to the position taken by Bennett, Minnis, and Nicholson, in that I see divine salvation and transcendence from earthly life as the final goal of the poem, one that is visualised *within* the work in the figure of Amans/Gower. However, as I will show, there is a context that can accommodate all the contradictions, paradoxes, and lacunae, that critics of the second persuasion rightly argue are present in the poem – but, crucially, that they have wrongly seen as limiting the reformatory potential of Gower’s argument to an entirely terrestrial sphere *outside* the poem. We can find in the *Confessio* a direct engagement with the split that occurred between an Aristotelian tradition that held that cold, clear reason could allow the human mind to find a path to enlightenment and merit salvation, and a revived Augustinianism that draws both on a Platonic tradition concerning revealed truth and a Pauline tradition concerning the inability of man to effect his own salvation. It is this second Augustinian position which I believe is much more indicative of Gower’s final argument regarding *how* and *why* Amans finally becomes the enlightened poet John Gower, the *auctor* who is then able to write the restorative work we have just read.

## THE FAILURE OF GENIUS

As the above indicates, Book VII occupies a central position in Gower's overall design. At the end of Book VI Amans asks Genius 'Hou Alisandre was betawht / To Aristotle, and so well tawht / Of al that to a king belongeth' (VI, 2011-13). The lover recognises that in order to move past his current state of infatuation and beguilement he needs to train his mind to function rationally rather than simply allow it to indulge in fantasy. As Genius tells Amans: 'For wisdom is at every throve / Above alle other thing to know / In loves cause and elleswhere' (VII, 15-17). At this point of the poem, a consensus emerges between Genius and Amans that an education in practical reason and ethics is the best way to proceed in order to advance Amans's recovery. To this end Genius embarks on a programme of instruction based firmly in an Aristotelian framework. There are three general categories treated in Book VII: Theory, Rhetoric, and Practice. Theory includes discussions of theology, physics, mathematics, astronomy, music, and the history of the earth. The section on Rhetoric asserts the necessity of speaking truthfully for the good of oneself, and therefore society in general. The most important part of Genius's instruction is devoted to Practice. In this it is divided into three parts: Ethics (VII, 1649-68), Economics (VII, 1668-78), and Policy (VII, 1679-98). The final part of Policy is given by far the most attention, and Genius resumes his technique of tale telling in order to illustrate the five points of Policy: Truth, Liberality, Justice, Pity, and Chastity.

Having completed his lengthy instruction, at the close of Book VII Genius makes the statement (already quoted above, but repeated here for convenience) that seemingly puts the definitive seal on the pedagogic methodology of the poem:

For God the lawes hath assised  
 Als wel to reson as to kinde,  
 Bot he the bestes wolde binde  
 Only to lawes of nature,  
 Bot to the mannes creature  
 God gaf him reson forth withal,  
 Whereof that he nature schal  
 Upon the causes modefie,  
 That he schal do no lecherie,  
 And yit he schal his lustes have.

(VII, 5372-81)

However, as we noted previously, this is immediately followed by Amans's scathing verdict on Genius's attempted programme of reform:

Do wey, mi fader, I you preie!  
 Of that ye have unto me told  
 I thonke you a thousandfold.  
 The tales sounen in myn ere,  
 Bot yit myn herete is elleswhere,  
 I mai miselve nocht resteigne,  
 That I nam evere in loves peine.

(VII, 5408-14)

When we return to their discussion in Book VIII, it seems that little has changed. Genius picks up in the same manner that he ended with in the previous Book, advising Amans to place his baser natural instincts towards self-fulfilment, those of 'kinde', under the control of his reason.

Forthi, my sone, I wolde rede  
 To lete al other love aweie,  
 Bot if it be thurgh such a weie  
 As love and reson wolde acorde.

(VIII, 2020-23)

By doing so Amans's love may 'ben honeste' (VIII, 2026) rather than self-destructive. However, Amans is still no nearer to accomplishing this. He responds immediately with another lament that every argument he tries to use to overcome

his lady's aloofness is 'concluded with a nay' (VIII, 2048), before imploring his confessor once more for his help: 'Youre hole conseil I beseche, / That ye me be some weie teche / What is my beste, as for an ende' (VIII, 2057-59). One wonders, after eight-and-a-half books, how Amans thinks that Genius has not managed to give him 'hole conseil', or what other 'weie' there might be for Genius to 'teche'. Whatever the case, it demonstrates that as far as Amans being able to realise an integrated, informed, and enlightened persona, he is no closer than when we first come across him at the start of Book I.

Genius's response is crucial to understanding how and why Amans finally undergoes his conversion. When he announces to Amans 'Mi sone, unto the trouthe wende / Now wol I for the love of thee, / And lete alle other truffles be' (VIII, 2060-62), the terms of the debate shift decisively. Here Genius begins to articulate the larger concerns with which the poem will now begin to deal; concerns which lie beyond the priest's own capacity to understand them. The MED, defines 'truffles' in relation to this line of Gower's poem as 'a ridiculous or extravagant notion' or 'an obvious error'. Now, the MED only cites lines VIII, 2060 and VIII, 2062 in support of this reading: the entry reads 'Mi sone, unto the trouthe wende [...] And lete alle other truffles be.' This makes perfect sense in terms of the MED's need for a definition which defines 'truffle' in opposition to 'trouthe': Genius is telling Amans to turn towards the truth (i.e., the teaching embodied in the poem) and leave his condition of lovesick delusion behind. However, this is not actually what Gower has his priest say at this point. Genius actually states 'unto the trouthe wende / *Now wol I* for the love of thee, / And lete alle other truffles be.' This is clearly a very important difference. It is actually Genius himself, saying in response to Amans (presumably in response to Amans's

continued failure), that *he* will turn towards the truth. What is more, ‘truffles’ can only be Genius referring to his own previous words. This can only raise the question: what are these ‘truffles’ that Genius has been telling Amans in the previous eight-and-a-half books of the poem if not the ‘trouthe’ that the lover so desperately needs to hear? And what is the ‘trouthe’ that has not yet been mentioned?

Two further definitions of ‘truffles’ are given in the MED. The first is that of ‘an unedifying story, idle or extravagant tale, a fable’. It is useful to remember at this point what Gower says of his own poetic enterprise at the start and end of the *Confessio*: he aimed to write a work that was ‘Somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore’ (P, 19), ‘Which stant between earnest and game’ (VIII, 3109). The rationale for combining the two genres in this manner is clearly stated.

That who that al of wisdom writ  
 It dulleth ofte a mannes wit  
 To him that schal it aldai rede,  
 (P, 13-15)

Gower will therefore follow the ‘middel weie’ (P, 17) and write a book ‘between the tweie, / Somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore’ (P, 18-19) so that ‘Some man mai lyke of that I wryte’ (P, 21). This method of blending high and low material is not in and of itself radical. Robert Mannyng of Brunne states that he will use exactly the same technique for his confessional manual *Handlyng Synne*.<sup>20</sup>

For lewed men y vndyr toke  
 On englyssh tonge to make þys boke,  
 For many beyn of swyche manere  
 þat talys & rymys wyle bleþly here  
 Yn gamys, yn festys, & at þe ale,

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Mannyng of Brunne, *Handlyng Synne*, ed. by Idelle Sullens (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1983).

Loue men to lestene trotouale,  
 Þat may falle ofte to velanye  
 To dedly synne or outhere folye.  
 For swyche men haue y made þys ryme  
 Þat þey may weyl dyspende here tyme  
 And þer yn sumwhat for to here  
 To leue al swyche foul manere  
 And for to kun knowe þer ynne  
 Þat þey wene no synne be ynne.

(*Handlyng Synne*, 41-56)

By writing in this style the process of moral instruction supposedly becomes more palatable to those in the grip of their baser instincts. But of course, in the context of Book VII this methodology has proven to be totally ineffective – despite all Genius’s attempts Amans is still caught in the grip of a love fantasy. All the tales of the previous books have quite literally been ‘unedifying’ stories, failing to improve the lover’s morals or intellect. This brings into play the final sense of ‘truffles’; that of ‘a playful activity, diversion, pleasant occupation; an idle pursuit, a worthless or vulgar pastime, an unworthy or unbecoming activity.’ This is much more damning for the priest. The sense of ‘truffles’ as leisurely pursuit firmly reminds the reader of Genius’s links to the court of Venus, whilst the second sense of a ‘worthless’ pastime and an ‘unworthy’ activity indicates just how unsuccessful he has been in discharging his duties towards Amans, and therefore ultimately his true divine Lord. We should recall at this point Chaucer’s Pardoner, another, this time undeniably unsavoury, advocate of Mannyng and Gower’s technique: ‘For lewed peple loven tales olde; / Swiche thynges kan they wel reporte and holde’ (*Canterbury Tales*, VI, 437-38). Little needs to be said about the Pardoner’s critical reputation as a spiritual con-artist of the first degree, but the fact that after telling his ‘tales olde’ he leaves his victims no closer to salvation than when he began has uncomfortable echoes of Genius’s own failure

to bring about a change in his charge. Unpacking all the various implications of ‘truffles’ in light of Amans’s condition at the time Genius uses the phrase, it seems to offer a damning retroactive indictment of the entire tale-telling project that has been the basis of the pedagogic methodology of the *Confessio*. It looks like an admission by the priest that he has erred too much on the side of pleasure and not concentrated enough on the task of saving souls.<sup>21</sup>

Genius now seems to acknowledge that he has been culpable in failing to bring Amans to a proper conclusion of his ‘schrifte’ due to his focus on ‘lust’ and ‘game’:

For I behihte thee that gifte  
 Ferst when thou come under my schrifte,  
 That thogh I toward Venus were,  
 Yit spak I suche wordes there,  
 That for the presthod which I have,  
 Min ordre and min astat to save,  
 I seide I wolde of myn office  
 To vertu more than to vice  
 Encline, and teche thee mi lore.  
 (VIII, 2075-83)

Genius here seems to be reflecting that his previous stated aims have gone unfulfilled. He promised that even though he was under the control of Venus he would speak in his capacity as a priest, concentrating more on virtue than vice.

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that Mannyng uses ‘truffle’ at one point in his manual to distinguish between these types of ‘talys & rymys’ which men ‘wyle bleþly here / Yn gamys, yn festys, & at þe ale’ and a Biblical narrative which they should pay more serious attention to: ‘þys yche tale no tryfyl, For hyt ys wryte in þe bybyl’ (1425). As his editor notes in her introduction, Mannyng’s ‘emphasis is somewhat more narrative than homiletic’, and he often ‘included contemporary stories that would be of more interest to his readers than the traditional ones in the penitential literature of the ages’ (p. xiii). However, Mannyng’s decision to differentiate his Biblical tale from mere ‘truffles’ indicates that even though using a ‘middel weie’ was acceptable poetic practice up to a certain point, sometimes more serious issues had to be dealt with, and they should be explicitly treated as such. For a positive interpretation of the uses of ‘ernest and game’ in the poem, see Olsson. He argues that ‘The lover’s confession affords rest from the more “ernest” business of the Prologue, and even more, it subtly serves the end of the Prologue by using “game” to sharpen “mannes wit”’ (p. 32). Olsson somewhat contradicts the overall tenor of his own argument, that the *Confessio* is effective in using ‘ernest and game’ to create a moral reformation – hence reinforcing my own interpretation – by later calling the poem a ‘leisurely recreation’ (p. 224).

Note the language he uses: 'I behihte [promised] / I seide I wolde' – not 'I have.' But if he has been dealing in 'truffles' all along then he has failed to keep this promise. With this surely weighing heavily on his mind Genius dogmatically returns to expounding the allegedly definitive doctrine of rational control enshrined in Book VII. We should remember that Genius stated at the start of that Book 'For it is nocht to the matiere / Of love, why we sitten hie / To schryve, so as Venus bad' (VII, 7-9). Since this 'matiere' of Book VII lies outside the domain of Venus, it would make sense that this is the 'trouthe' that Genius states he will be turning to in order to leave behind the 'truffles' that have failed so spectacularly to help Amans. Indeed, in what is the priest's most sobering and austere speech in the whole poem, Genius abandons even the synthesis he stated was possible in VII, 5372-81, in which the natural impulses of love could be properly directed by the correctly educated faculties of the mind, and instead advises Amans to withdraw from the pursuit of love completely: 'And set thin herte under the lawe / The which of reson is governed / And nocht of will' (VIII, 2134-36).<sup>22</sup> Reason, for Genius, is the final 'trouthe' of the poem.

Once again, however, such assertions prove to be futile in the face of Amans's condition of division and error. The lover becomes for the first time visibly annoyed at his priest's dogmatic insistence on the primacy of reason over the will despite the concrete evidence in front of him that it is not working. Echoing the language the priest used in his previous admission of dealing in the leisurely pursuit of 'truffles', Amans skewers Genius with the implications of his own words: to Genius, Amans's 'wo' is 'bot a game' (VIII, 2153). Amans then accuses Genius of a fatal lack of empathy and understanding: Genius does not

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<sup>22</sup> This is the section that we noted caused Nicholson problems in his argument concerning the poem's ending (see above, pp. 115-17). I am indebted to his discussion for highlighting Gower's shift of emphasis in the use of reason at this point in the poem.



feel what Amans feels (VIII, 2154); it is easy to give orders (VIII, 2159); a man often marvels at the condition he observes others in, but if he knew that condition himself and felt it 'as it is in soth' he would be compelled to act in the same manner (VIII, 2162-66). Crucially, Genius is never given the chance to respond to this accusation. Gower never makes it explicit that Genius's silence from this point until after Amans's conversion is meant to indicate that there was nothing that he could say to counter the lover's accusations – that the priest has in effect fully conceded the redundancy of his project and efforts – but the implication is surely there. Genius, having denounced his tale-telling exercise as mere 'truffles', turns one last time to the 'trouthe' of the doctrine of cold clear reason. But it proves to be his last roll of the dice. When that fails in the face of Amans's continued insistence that he will inevitably sin, Genius is rendered mute, his entire pedagogic project in tatters. So whilst it is certainly the case that Genius has adopted a consistent position as the champion of practical reason and is no longer colluding with Amans's desire (Simpson, p. 216), the fact that he has no further role to play in the poem until after Amans's (and so ultimately the poet's) own conversion indicates that this doctrine cannot be Gower's final say on the matter of personal and social reformation to a condition free from errant individualism.

That this is the case is signalled when the narrative perspective of the poem shifts from that of a dramatic dialogue to Amans as a first person narrator analysing his own predicament. With Genius now having nothing more to contribute in terms of instruction, this is the final staging ground in which his pedagogic methodology will be proved effective or not. Peck sees this shift as indicative of the lover taking a new stance in which he can finally exercise an

objective control over the emotions and desires he has previously been so helplessly subject to.<sup>23</sup> However, this is not supported by the words of the poem:

Tho was between mi prest and me  
 Debat and gret perplexeté:  
 Mi resoun understood him wel,  
 And knew it was soth everydel  
 That he hath seid, bot noght forthi  
 Mi will hath nothing set therby.  
 For techinge of so wis a port  
 Is unto love of no desport;  
 Yit myhte nevere man beholde  
 Reson, wher love was withholde;  
 Thei be noght o governance.

(VIII, 2189-99)

Two distinct points are made here. The first, running from lines VIII 2189 to VIII 2194, indicates that Amans's reason understands all of Genius's arguments, but nevertheless, his will simply does not acquiesce. The narrative perspective may be different, but as far as Amans is concerned, nothing has changed from a psychological point of view: reason and love cannot be harmoniously synthesised. However, between VIII, 2195 and VIII, 2198 there is an unremarked shift in the meaning of 'love', which, whilst not indicating that Amans can exercise control over his lovesick malady, does indicate that he is coming to a more nuanced understanding of his condition. In VIII, 2196 'love' refers to romantic or erotic love, as it takes no delight in dry wisdom. And yet, in lines VIII, 2197-98, 'love', this time indicating compassion or sympathy, is necessary to communicate 'Reson' (VIII, 2187-88). So 'love' of the second kind is needed to allow Amans to properly align his reason, but not the first. Amans does seem to be aware of this second, complementary system of love and reason, but he is unable to fathom

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<sup>23</sup> John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. by Russel A. Peck, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series, 3 vols (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 2000-05), I (2000), p. 343, n. 2189.

how it can be put into operation in his own being whilst the first system, in which love and reason stand in antagonistic relation, continues to plague him: 'Thei be noght o governance'. The key phrase is that Amans (or it may well be Gower indicating the direction his poem is heading in spite of his avatar's confusion) feels that the love necessary to 'beholde / Reson' is somehow 'withholde' from him, that is, under the control of an outside agency who has the power to bestow it upon the divided individual in order to make him whole once again.

It is unsurprising that Amans does not develop this line of thought: in light of his complete helplessness to actively obtain the type of love that *can* help him, he simply returns to pursuing the carnal, earthly love that seems to be more easily within reach. It is certainly the case that his confessor has been of no help to him. Amans's comment that he and Genius 'fellen in distance' (VIII, 2200) is indicative of the disjunction between the two interlocutors. Amans then tells us that it actually fell to *him* to initiate a reconciliation with the presumably surly priest:

[...] bot I spak faire,  
 And thurgh mi wordes debonaire  
 Thanne ate laste we acorden,  
 So that he seith he wol recorden  
 To speke and stonde upon mi side  
 To Venus bothe and to Cupide  
 (VIII, 2201-06)

In one sense this is what we would expect of a medieval confession: the hearer/pupil/penitent has to be in a receptive state and willing to take proactive steps and act upon the guidance of the teacher/confessor. The problem here is that rather than the reconciliation occurring because Amans (the pupil/penitent) has moved towards a common-ground established by Genius's position, Genius (the

pseudo-confessor) accepts Amans's position in which the romantic and erotic model of love holds ultimate sway. Having advised Amans to set aside his love completely at VIII, 2134-36, Genius then amazingly agrees to carry a letter from Amans to the god and goddess of love. Loving sympathy between penitent and confessor leads both back towards the deluded confusions of erotic love rather than towards grace and enlightenment. The letter from Amans proves to be full of the same lovesick ramblings, confused resignation, and obstinate denial of any need to change that have been the hallmark of his discourse throughout the poem. Amans argues that 'The resoun of my wit it overpasseth' (VIII, 2231), that 'For thogh reson agein my will debate, / I mai nought fle, that I ne love algate [so that I do not love anyway]' (VIII, 2236-37); 'Pleinly thurghsoght my wittes all I have, / Bot non of hem can helpe after mi wille' (VIII, 2247-48). It might here be remarked that whilst Genius has adopted a consistent position over Amans's need to master, and even renounce, love with reason in *word* (theory and rhetoric), he has not quite done the same in *deed* (practice), as his willingness to 'recorden' (remember) to act as emissary to the two deities proves. But perhaps this is simple resignation on his part. Amans states in his letter 'Thus wot I nought wherof myself to helpe' (VIII, 2251): it is clearly the case that by this point Genius does not know how to help him either.

#### AMANS'S FRACTURED FOREBEARERS

Before we move on to the second portion of my argument, that is, exactly what it is that Gower shows is necessary in the matter of Amans's conversion and salvation, what helps him where he 'nought wherof' himself 'to helpe' (VIII, 2251)

by granting him the love that ‘was withholde’ (VIII, 2198), I want to return to the main body of the poem in order to see where Gower presents other evidence that reason alone cannot be enough to save a sinner from himself. Even before we see Amans’s spectacular failure in Book VIII, at various points in the poem Gower presents three figures whom we see fall foul of their own baser impulses, despite having the idealised schooling and ostensible control of reason that supposedly results in the highest ordering of the human faculties: Ulysses, Alexander, and Aristotle. Through these examples, it seems obvious that Gower is formulating a strong counter-argument to the notion that practical reason can allow the errant individual to re-conceptualise his or her identity according to the prerogatives of ideal models of being, an argument that we should keep in mind when we read Book VII. At the start of the ‘Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus’ in Book VI, Ulysses is described as having mastered not just Rhetoric but all of the various aspects of the pedagogic programme that will soon be outlined in the next Book:

He was a worthi knyht and king  
 And clerk knowende of every thing.  
 He was a gret rethorien,  
 He was a gret magician;  
 Of Tullius the rethorique,  
 Of King Zorastes the magique,  
 Of Tholomé th’astronomie,  
 Of Plato the philosophie,  
 Of Daniel the slepi dremes,  
 If Neptune ek the water stremes,  
 Of Salamon and the proverbs,  
 Of Macer al the strengthe of herbes,  
 And the phisique of Ypocras,  
 And lich unto Pictagoras  
 Of surgerie he knew the cures.  
 (VI, 1397-411)

It is by virtue of this ‘wisdom that he schapeth’ that he ‘Ful many a gret peril ascapeth’ (VI, 1419-20). One of these perils is the sorceress Circe. Through his

learning and craft, specifically his sorcery, Ulysses is able to resist her magic that would 'make him love in such a rage' that she could take 'Al that he hath or worldes good' (VI, 1436, 1438). But having allowed him to stand firm in the face of the sorceress's beguilements, Ulysses' learning is not enough to prevent him from destroying all that he has of his own accord. He takes his pleasures with Circe and unbeknowingly leaves her pregnant. It is an indulgent and adulterous act of will committed despite all of his education, fitting well with the Book's theme of Gluttony.<sup>24</sup> Returning home Ulysses is the embodiment of the ruler guided by practical reason, but his sin follows him to the very heart of both his real and metaphorical domain. Circe has informed her son Telegonus of his parentage and sent him to Ulysses for the same instruction that his father received (VI, 1614-29). But when Telegonus arrives at the palace and announces his heritage the guards do not believe him. A fight ensues and five are killed, prompting Ulysses himself to find out what the commotion is. Again, at the crucial moment in the narrative, his reason fails him; seeing the carnage Ulysses is 'nyh wod for wroth' (VI, 1696). Rather than try to find out what is going on he takes up his spear and casts it at Telegonus. The boy dodges the attack and retaliates in kind, mortally wounding his father. Only now does the truth come to light. As the townspeople cry out in anguish that their king is dead, Telegonus realises what he has done and informs his dying father who he is. Ulysses bears no grudge and grants Telegonus his heritage, but the implication of the Tale is clear. Despite being ruled by right reason and law, Ulysses was unable to control his carnal desire. His sin was thus able to return unrecognised in his own

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<sup>24</sup> Katherine S. Gittes argues that Ulysses has a 'love' for sorcery that is itself indicative of his passion. See 'Ulysses in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*: The Christian Soul as Silent Rhetorician', in *English Language Notes*, 24 (1986), 7-14 (pp. 11-12).

kingdom, metaphorically the kingdom of the soul, and destroy it in spite of its ostensibly ordered estate.

It is of course possible to raise the objection that Ulysses has always been an ambiguous figure for moral interpretation in the Middle Ages. This is certainly the case in the *Confessio*. In the Prologue Gower discusses how ‘Under the reule of governance / [...] The word was lich to the conceite / Without semblant of deceite’ (P, 108, 111-14). Accordingly, the use of rhetoric for dishonest ends is a contributory factor to the current malaise: ‘For whan the word to the conceipte / Descordeth in so double a wise, / Such Rethorique is to despise / In every place, and for to drede’ (VII, 1554-57). As an example of this misuse, Genius briefly summarises the story of how Ulysses used his famed eloquence to make Antenor sell him a town the latter had won through treason (VII, 1558-63). Is it right and proper for Ulysses to deceive Antenor, given that Antenor had himself gained possession of the town through improper conduct? This brief vignette gives the impression of the beguiler beguiled, and the question of whether this is really an entirely positive example of the good use of rhetoric is never raised by Gower, such is the brevity of the episode. But given the implications of the ‘Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus’, we are surely given license to speculate that two wrongs do not make a right, in this case or any other. The figure of Ulysses represents a man who, despite being in the possession of all the qualities of ‘a worthi knyght and king / And clerk knowende of every thing’ (VI, 1397-98), still lacked something essential that would allow him to realise a fully integrated, error free state of being. Once again, Gower is suggesting that the human faculties alone are unable to achieve this idealised state; something necessary is ‘withholde’ which is not within our mortal capacity to attain.

This point is reinforced by Gower's presentation of the two remaining figures I deal with in this section, Alexander and Aristotle. The master and pupil are the template for the pedagogic scheme of Book VII, a scheme which is extrapolated explicitly onto the relationship between Genius and Amans, and which implicitly references the relationship between poet and reader. Alexander and Aristotle are supposed to have reached the highest ordering of the human faculties, 'the practical sciences of ethics, economics, and politics' (*Sciences and the Self*, p. 253) that apparently represent Gower's final pronouncement on how to rectify the problem of discord and division inherent in society and the individuals of which it comprises, and yet, at other points in the poem, both are shown to err in matters of proper personal conduct. Aristotle fails as an example in and of himself of the power of reason to master desire, and as a teacher of Alexander, whilst Alexander offers little evidence of the beneficial effects of the extensive political and ethical instruction we see him receive in Book VII. The failure of the two illustrious historical figures to properly order their personal estate is mirrored in the respective failures of Genius and Amans, and suggests a potential threat to Gower in his desire to act as *auctor*, and to the hopes of the reader approaching the *Confessio* for personal guidance. As we shall see, Gower is pointing towards the necessary presence of a factor that comes from outside the purely corporeal realm in order for the proper systems of inter- and intra-personal relations to be established.

In the 'Tale of Alexander and the Pirate' we are confronted with how ineffectual reason is in face of the will. It is stated that in the case of Alexander 'That reson mihte him non governe, / Bot of his will he was so sterne, / That al the world he overran / And what him list he tok and wan' (III, 2443-46). This is



hardly a celebration of the effectiveness of the education we will see Alexander receive later in the poem. Indeed, if anything, the portrayal of Alexander in this Tale is even less encouraging with regards to how successful practical reason can be in forming an ethical character than is the case of Ulysses. If the latter is gluttonously indulgent, he is nevertheless also portrayed with some sympathetic characteristics. In contrast, Alexander is quite literally presented as piratical in his rapacious and destructive nature, with a complete lack of redeeming features. At the start of the Tale a pirate is brought before the king charged with inflicting pillage and death on ‘many a man’ (III, 2369-74). Rather than attempting to excuse his behaviour, the man brazenly says to Alexander:

Sire, if I were of miht,  
I have an herte lich to thin;  
For if the pouer were myn,  
Mi will is most in special  
To rifle and geten overall  
The large worldes good aboute.  
(III, 2380-84)

But whereas the pirate only leads a poor gang and is consequently given the name of ‘pilour’ and ‘thief’, Alexander, ‘which routes grete / Miht lede and take thi begete, / And dost riht as I wolde do’ (III, 2389-91), is called ‘Emperour’. Perhaps the most scathing assessment the pirate delivers on Alexander’s conduct is in the following lines: ‘Oure dedes ben of o colour / And in effect of o decerte’ (III, 2394-95).

Of course, Alexander has no obligation to confirm the man’s accusations. Confronted by his doppelganger, the king may be forced to acknowledge that their actions spring from a common impulse of the will, but he therefore also has the opportunity to differentiate between the pirate’s actions as being unrestrained

by any system of values, and his own as being contained within the parameters of practical reason and 'humanist' ethics. What in fact happens is that Alexander manages to do almost the exact opposite of what the pedagogic schematics laid out elsewhere in the poem say he should be doing. Book III of the *Confessio* is concerned with the sin of Wrath. Immediately prior to the 'Tale of Alexander and the Pirate' Amans asks Genius if there 'be liefull eny weie / Withoute senne a man to sle' (III, 2208-09). Genius responds that if a man is convicted 'Of moerdre of elles robberie' (III, 2212) then the judge 'schal slen of pure dette' (III, 2214). Here then, Alexander is fully permitted to exercise his wrathful nature in punishing the criminal, as this action is sanctioned, in fact it is required, within the proper system of laws by which a nation must be correctly governed: 'For who that lawe heth upon honde, / And spareth for to do justice / For merci, doth nocht his office' (III, 2216-18). And yet sparing the pirate is exactly what Alexander does. Having heard the pirate, we are told that Alexander considered the formers 'wordes wise' (III, 2405). He then replies 'Thin ansuere I have understonde, / Whereof my will is, that thou stonde / In mi service and still abide' (III, 2407-09). It is interesting to note that at this point we are surely meant to understand that Alexander thought the pirate's words were 'wise', that, to use modern narratological parlance, the narrative is being focalised through his consciousness at this point. This indicates the crucial point that Alexander does not act in ignorance of his own nature. He shows he is educated and self-aware by recognising the common impulses that can exist in both king and criminal. In isolation, this would be proof of a lucid and worthy self-understanding. But having acknowledged that the pirate has made a salient point ('Thin ansuere I

have understonde’) Alexander makes no effort to prove that he can defeat or rise above that baser part of himself, and simply recruits the pirate into his service.

As in the case of Ulysses, the allegorical implications of this passage are not hard to decipher; Alexander has acquiesced to the base impulses of the will that the pirate represents. That this is a failure of reason is made explicit both within the Tale and in the preceding discussion. Genius tells Amans that for a criminal to be granted mercy when he has sinned against the law ‘resoun mot be weyved’ (III, 2224). In the context of the discussion of Justice in Book VII this is a calamitous inversion of the proper system of governance. According to Gower, it is within the king’s natural power to ‘stant above the lawe, / To give bothe and to withdrawe / The forfeit of a mannes lif’ (VII, 2719-21). However, echoing the teachings of Book III, ‘thinges whiche are excessif / Agein the lawe, he schal nocht do’ (VII, 2722-23). In sparing the pirate’s life and making him a knight, Alexander has abused the power that, as king, is naturally his. Alexander has delegitimised his identity, stepping outside the law on an occasion when he should have been constrained by the dictates of his office as inscribed in that law. The disordered state of Alexander’s inner kingdom of the soul and the lack of restraint he shows in his outward realms are mirror images of each other. Like an untamed falcon he suffers nothing that gets in the way of his rapacious desires (III, 2428-33), ‘For al the world ne mai suffise / To will which is nocht reasonable’ (III, 2436-37). Alexander’s life is portrayed as a brutal, desolate, and neverending quest towards temporal self-fulfilment. Having set out ‘In destorbance of worldes pes, / His werre he fond then endeless’ (III, 2465-66), and he dies from being poisoned far from home. The ending of the Tale illustrates the self-destructive nature of untamed desire. Alexander is ‘forevere desconfit

[vanquished]' (III, 2467) once he starts down the slippery slope of self-indulgence. What we should also remember is that this occurs despite all the education we see him receive later in the poem.

The final figure we come across in whom right reason fails in the face of desire is the master of Book VII, Aristotle himself. It is therefore perhaps the most surprising of all.

Aristotle also,  
Whom that the queene of Grece so  
Hath bridled, that in thilke time  
Sche made him such a silogime,  
That he forgat at his logique;  
*Ther was non art of his practique,*  
*Thruh which it mihte ben excluded*  
That he ne was fully concluded  
To love, and dede his obeissance.

(VIII, 2705-13, my emphasis)<sup>25</sup>

Gower does not spend much time elaborating the famed philosopher's situation, but it is hugely suggestive nonetheless. In fact, the brevity of the episode is most likely intentional on Gower's part. Ulysses and Alexander were figures about whom much had been written by others. The stories of their lives were therefore open to being re-interpreted in order to achieve the desired effect in the poem. It was necessary to portray Ulysses and Alexander in the act of receiving their education so that it could be shown elsewhere in the *Confessio* to fail them in the face of their will. In the case of Aristotle, authoritative texts were not written *about* him, he was *the writer of* authoritative texts. Gower has no need to inscribe further evidence of Aristotle's reason in operation in the poem; that reason permeated late medieval culture at all levels. It simply fell to the poet to show this

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<sup>25</sup> See also Watt, pp. 55-56 for commentary on this passage. She also provides a highly perceptive analysis of the ethical contradictions in Gower's presentation of Aristotle and Alexander on pp. 114-18.

greatest of minds laid low by love. Clearly then, as far as Gower is concerned, the practical arts that have been outlined in Book VII are not enough to bring an unruly will under control.<sup>26</sup> If there should be any doubt that this is the case it is worth pointing out that the point at which we find this depiction of Aristotle is during the swoon into which Amans falls at the end of the poem (VIII, 2450-744). This is after the point at which Genius has been silenced in the face of Amans's continuing inability to apply his teaching in the correct manner. The greatest philosopher and the lowliest lover are therefore united in their inability to effectively apply the 'lore' of the *Confessio*. Gower seems to be saying that this is not simply a case of Amans being incompetent where others have succeeded; rather, there is a much more fundamental problem with regards to the unruly operation of the will. Does the poem therefore represent the failure of both the 'truffles' of 'lust' and 'game' and the 'trouthe' ('ernest' and 'lore') of reason, to bring about the restoration of the lover, and therefore the society as a whole (for whom he stands as everyman), to a condition free of sin and error?

Yes and no. Yes, in that, as I have demonstrated, neither 'lust/game' nor 'lore/ernest' are *in and of themselves* able to effect Amans's recovery. No, in that, as all readers of the poem will be aware, Amans does become the enlightened poet John Gower, the truth-telling author who composes his work for the benefit of society as a whole. We therefore need to find a (conceptual) solution underpinning Amans's recovery that does not invalidate the 'middle weie' of the poem (as otherwise writing it would, after all, be a redundant project) but also that shows that the 'middle weie' is inadequate to the task of personal and social restoration *by itself*. What Gower gives us by way of a solution is an entirely

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<sup>26</sup> That Aristotle's '*practicque*' (VIII, 2711) is not enough to control his love would seem to directly refute Mitchell's claim that *practicque* is the main concern of the poem (see above, pp. 122-23).

necessary factor that originates outside, and cannot be generated by, the pedagogic interplay that the poem conducts inter- and intra-textually between its own materials, and extra-textually with the reader. It is therefore beyond the scope of a 'humanist' interpretation of the *Confessio*, something that is 'withholde' from the sphere of everyday worldly activity. This factor is the light of self-understanding and salvation offered by divine grace. That Gower takes up such an orthodox position should be unsurprising given the markedly conservative nature of his writing, but there seems to have been a recent reluctance among scholars to get to grips with the issue in detail. Critics often deal with the notion of grace in passing in their discussions of the *Confessio*, but it seems to have been largely ignored, and even rejected outright, in more recent analyses in order to champion the more supposedly progressive elements of the poem. I have already touched upon one factor that I believe has contributed to this situation, that is, the desire to see Gower as a thoroughly 'modern' medieval author. This is a purely ideological concern, and I will in the remainder of this chapter discuss it more thoroughly, particularly in relation to 'The Tale of Constance', relating it also to my opening remarks in this thesis regarding the current propensity to read 'for the margins' rather than the centre in medieval studies as a discipline. Whilst the ideologically conditioned paradigms within which current debates on Gower are being conducted constitute a reason for a *lack* of discussion of grace, another issue can be pinpointed that I believe has contributed to misinterpretation in discussion of the end of the poem amongst those scholars who *have* raised the issue of grace; that is, that the specifics of late fourteenth-century soteriological debate are fractured and complex. Often scholars will simply mention in passing the predominance of the issue during the

Middle Ages as a whole, or cite only a single patristic, scholastic or, pastoral source in support of their argument without considering whether these views were current at the time Gower was writing.<sup>27</sup> I hope the following discussion can in some way remedy this state of affairs.

## FINDING SALVATION IN THE LATE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

There is a general critical consensus that the interpretations of the fourteenth-century *moderni*, in which man could merit grace and salvation through his own works, were dominant during the period. This consensus has influenced the current debate surrounding the *Confessio*. Drawing upon the sympathetic treatment *moderni* soteriology is given in poems such as *Piers Plowman* and *Pearl*, critics have assumed that the *Confessio* can be interpreted in a similar manner, creating a sense that the poem can be seen as a ‘humanist’ work in which possession of practical reason by a man is enough to allow him to expurgate individual sin and error and assume a position of enlightened salvation. What I want to propose is that Gower was advocating a much older, theologically conservative position, one that had undergone a revival at the start of the fourteenth century, in which man could do little under his own powers independent of God’s assistance. Examining the details of Amans’s conversion, the action in certain parts of the main body of the poem, and the literary and doctrinal sources informing both, will allow us to see that it is this understanding of the operation of grace that gives conceptual coherence to the poem as a whole. It allows for the incongruities and inconsistencies that are the hallmark of man’s

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Olsson, p. 26 and pp. 176-77; Nicholson, pp. 60-61; and Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower’s Confessio Amantis* (Illinois: Carbondale, 1978), pp. xv-xvi.

divided and sinning condition to be present, and the debate that these problems prompt in the human mind, a debate conducted in terms of both the 'lust' of 'truffles' and the 'trouthe' of 'lore'. But these factors, whilst both inevitable and necessary to the human condition, are shown to be, in the final analysis, secondary and contingent in matters of spiritual salvation. The final conversion envisaged by the poem, one which specifically authorises Gower to write his 'bok for Engelondes sake' (P, 24), but which also imagines the criteria in which the everyman also represented by Amans can attain the same state as the poet, is based not upon anything the individual actively achieves himself; rather, it is a consequence of the benevolent gift of divine grace. We see that the field of learning presented in the poem is relevant to the human condition but cannot finally determine whether a man will be saved; he can only do his best based on the information available to him and then hope. This is the final message that Gower passes on to us at the close of the poem.

William Courtenay has stated that

the theological themes we do find in Middle English literature are precisely those that were of concern to scholars and poets alike in the second half of the fourteenth century, derived in part from the impressive discussions of psychology and the human will that were so important for English theologians during the 1320s and 1330s. These common interests were biblical themes and imagery, and the penitential themes of vices and virtues, grace and justification, moral choice, sin and repentance, predestination and human liberty, and the conflicts and ambiguities that life presents to the average Christian.<sup>28</sup>

The crucial issue that dominated debate in this period was the relation of free will to the divine will, and therefore whether in light of God's foreknowledge of events it was possible to merit grace, and consequently salvation, through works,

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<sup>28</sup> William Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth Century England* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 380.



or whether one could only be justified by God alone.<sup>29</sup> To give the structure of the debate in its most basic form, on the one hand, human beings have free will and therefore bear responsibility for their good or bad deeds, and hence their salvation or damnation. On the other hand, man's nature has been so radically debilitated by the Fall that it is only through the free gift of grace that God has rendered humanity capable of performing good deeds and gaining salvation. To stress the importance of works and unaided human virtue in the recovery of one's true nature undermined the divine prerogative to completely undetermined action as it implied God was *obliged* to reward virtue, and also impaired his omniscience by making his knowledge contingent on human decision. Conversely, to stress the effects of original sin, the complete depravity of human nature, and the need for grace prior to any virtuous action jettisoned the notion of human free will from the sphere of human actions in all but name.<sup>30</sup> The first position was termed Pelagianism, after the late fourth-century British monk who was considered to maintain this position. The chief advocate of the second position was of course Augustine, and it was the impact of his late 'Anti-Pelagian' writings that would set the terms for the debate not only for the Middle Ages, but through to the Reformation and beyond. It is only necessary to take a small sample of Augustine's work from this late period here, as the position he took will become more familiar as it recurs in my own argument. Russell places the crucial late text *De gratia et libero arbitrio* (*Grace and Free Will*) as being composed c. 426-27,

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<sup>29</sup> Gordon Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians: A Study of his 'De Causa Dei' and its Opponents*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life & Thought, 5 (Cambridge: CUP, 1957), p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Adams, 'Piers's Pardon and Langland's Semi-Pelagianism', *Traditio*, 39 (1983), 367-418 (pp. 369-70). See also James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B-Text* (London and New York: Longman, 1990), pp. 79-80.

based on it being listed second to last in the *Retractions*, completed 427.<sup>31</sup> In it Augustine maintains that ‘In doing anything, it is certainly we who act, but it is God’s act that enables us to act by his bestowal of efficacious power upon our will.’<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the earlier *De civita dei* (c. 413-27) puts the case in the following terms: ‘Thus our wills have only as much power as God has willed and foreknown; God, whose foreknowledge is infallible, has foreknown the strength of our wills and their achievements, and it is for that reason that their future strength is completely determined and their future achievements utterly assured.’<sup>33</sup>

What is most significant about Augustine’s work is that it was almost immediately subject to revision in light of a more sympathetic and positive view of man’s capacities. Just a hundred years after Augustine’s death, the Second Council of Orange (529) failed to take a clear line on the matter, and the series of edicts that were issued looked, in retrospect, like an attempted synthesis between divine election and free will (‘Piers’s Pardon’, p. 373).<sup>34</sup> By the twelfth century the issue had been elevated to the status of a famous question, and theologians were again attempting to chart a moderate course. Anselm frames the question in the terms that have become most recognisable:

Therefore since we come upon some passages in Sacred Scripture which seem to recommend grace alone and some which are considered to uphold free choice without grace, there have been certain proud individuals who have decided that the entire efficacy of our virtues rests upon our free choice alone, and in our own day there are many who retain no hope whatsoever of

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<sup>31</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Grace and Free Will (De gratia et libero arbitrio)*, in *The Teacher, Free Choice of the Will, Grace and Free Will*, trans. by Robert P. Russell, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, LIX (The Catholic University of America Press: Washington, D. C., 1968), p. 248.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, 5.10, trans. by Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> See also Heiko A. Oberman, *Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine, a Fourteenth century Augustinian: A Study of his Theology in its Historical Context* (Utrecht: Kemink & Zoon, N. V., 1957), p. 96; and Paul Rorem, ‘Augustine, the Medieval Theologians, and the Reformation’, in *The Medieval Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Medieval Period*, ed. by G. R. Evans (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), pp. 365-72 (p. 370).

the very existence of free choice. Therefore in this investigation of ours, our aim shall be the following: to show that free choice in many instances coexists with grace and co-operates with it.<sup>35</sup>

This attempted synthesis is characteristic of what has come to be termed ‘Semi-Pelagianism’. However, Augustine’s late position continued to exert a powerful influence. We can see Anselm struggling with the Augustinian inheritance which demands total depravity of the human will when he states ‘on the one hand human hearts without learning or intellectual activity spontaneously sprout, as it were, thoughts and volitions which are of no avail to salvation or are even harmful.’ However, ‘On the other hand [...], it is only by their own sort of seed and assiduous cultivation that they at all conceive and germinate those without which we cannot advance towards the soul’s salvation’ (*De Concordia*, pp. 458-59). Anselm here envisages freely directed learning being able to correct the errant movement of the will. However, this situation could be quite easily reversed depending on where the author wished to place the emphasis. Writing shortly after Anselm, Allan of Lille prescribed a similar pedagogic plan that placed the onus on meritorious human endeavour:

For rewards obtained from victories shine more fair than all other gifts. Rewards purchased by toil bring more honour and delight than all gifts given gratis. The one who receives a reward for labour merits higher praise and commendation than he who obtains it while enjoying his leisure. [...] See how in this universe, as in a noble state, a certain excellence of administration is established by an approved plan of management.<sup>36</sup>

But he goes onto make the qualification that ‘Our chain of reason extends too far when it dares to lift our discourse to the ineffable secrets of the Godhead’ (p.

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<sup>35</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, *De Concordia*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. by Brian Davies & G. R. Evans (Oxford: OUP, 1998), pp. 435-74 (p. 453).

<sup>36</sup> Alan of Lille, *Plaint of Nature*, trans. by James Sheridan, *Mediaeval Sources in Translation*, 26 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980), pp. 120-21.

121). Here we can see the difficulties of ‘elaborating this compromise within the framework of increasingly complex theological and philosophical theories’, or to put it another way ‘it very much mattered which end of the stick, as it were, one chose to begin with’ (‘Piers’s Pardon’, p. 370).

By the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century the debate had solidified into a consensus in which good deeds and virtuous living were considered to be fully meritorious of grace. The key thinkers in this respect were Duns Scotus and, following him, William of Ockham. Ockham’s innovation was to draw a distinction between the unlimited freedom of God (*potentia absoluta*) and God’s self-imposed limitations to act within the spiritual and physical orders he had established (*potentia ordinata*). God’s *potentia absoluta* denoted God’s pure omnipotence, that most basic attribute which allowed him to act in any manner he wished, completely undetermined by any outside necessity, and limited only by the principle of non-contradiction (that he cannot make contradictories true at the same time). However, from this position of complete and unlimited freedom to act, God has chosen to implement in the created order through his ordination (*potentia ordinata*) a system which he continues to uphold despite his freedom to do otherwise.

This distinction between what God could do and what he has in fact done, is doing, and will do, became [...] a means of seemingly guaranteeing the omnipotence of God in the strongest Augustinian language while, at the same time, guaranteeing that human effort would be rewarded and that the universe would continue to function as God had created it. [...] The laws regulating the process of salvation, the terms according to which God’s grace and ultimately the reward of eternal life are given, were established by God’s free will and obtain because of his benevolent, consistent will, not because they are absolutely necessary or inherent in the nature of things. (Courtenay, pp. 212-13)<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See also Leff, pp. 127-39, and Oberman, pp. 35-43.

Having established these principles, Ockham went on to refine a number of Scotist positions. The most important of these for the purposes of our discussion is that, having established the order of grace through Christ's redemptive sacrifice and promulgated this order through Scripture, God had of his own free will committed to reward with the gift of grace those who did their best to fulfil his commands to live virtuously and observe the moral law.<sup>38</sup> As is hopefully apparent, it is important to understand that in the strictest terms no medieval theologian taught what was considered to be the absolute Pelagian position, that free will alone could initiate fully meritorious action. To say that a thinker was 'semi-Pelagian' in outlook was to say that he 'strongly repudiates key elements of the authentic Augustinian position and tends to emphasise the role of free will so far as to overshadow any theoretical statements he may make about the need for divine concursus in human decisions' ('Piers's Pardon', pp. 371-72).

In line with Courtenay's thesis, we can see that the 'semi-Pelagian' position that was taken by Scotus, Ockham, and other thinkers such as Alexander of Hales and the early Aquinas, exerted a strong influence on the literature of the second half of the fourteenth century. Jim Rhodes has argued that in *Pearl*, the Dreamer's 'emphasis on work in the world assumes the essential goodness of human nature and accepts the obligation to work [...] as the human side of the *pactum*.'<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Simpson shows how, in *Piers Plowman*, Langland discusses rewards from God in economic terms of wages and gifts, differentiating between 'mede', as God's gift freely given, and 'mercede' as a wage, or merit earned

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<sup>38</sup> See Courtenay, pp. 213-14; Adams, 'Piers's Pardon', pp. 374-77; and Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (New York: OUP, 1999), pp. 101-111.

<sup>39</sup> Jim Rhodes, 'The Dreamer Redeemed: Exile and the Kingdom in the Middle English *Pearl*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 16 (1994), 119-42 (p. 134).

through labour.<sup>40</sup> The discussion with which I am most concerned is Adams's. His consideration of the exemplum of Trajan is the best example of Langland's 'semi-Pelagian' position. It is useful for my own discussion as it shows a fourteenth-century author dealing with a Pagan who through 'lele leve and lyvngy in truthe' (B.XI.162) succeeded in achieving salvation.<sup>41</sup> In Passus B.X, Scripture points out in response to Will's sacramentalist assertion 'That is baptized beth sauf, be he riche or pore' (B.X.351) the obligation for the *viator* to work:

Ac Crysten men withoute more may nought come to Hevene,  
 For that Cryst for Cristen men deyde and confermed the lawe  
 That whoso wolde and wylneth with Cryste aryse  
*Si cum Cristo surrexistis, etc.*  
 He schulde love and lene and the lawe fulfille.  
 (B.X.77-81)

Will's response is to defend himself by reference to the imperative of predestination:

Many tales ye tellen that Theologye lerneth,  
 And that I man made was and my name y-entred  
 In the legende of lyf longe er I were,  
 Or else unwriten for somme wikkednesse as Holy Writ wytnesseth.  
 (B.X.379-82)

He then goes on to cite Solomon and, interestingly for our own argument, Aristotle, as examples of righteous pagans and biblical figures who lived before God established the *pactum* by way of Christ redemption of mankind, and as a consequence were not saved. Will's Augustinian fatalism anticipates Gower's

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<sup>40</sup> *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, pp.78-80.

<sup>41</sup> This, and all further citations refer to *Piers Plowman: The Donaldson Translation, Middle English Text, Sources, and Background Criticism*, ed. by Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H. A. Shepherd (London and New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

own position regarding whether the learning of the master philosopher can be effective as a means to attain salvation:

And if I shulde worke bi here werkes to wynne me Hevene,  
That for her werkes and witte now wonyeth in pyne,  
Thanne wroughte I unwisely, whatsoevere ye precehe.  
(B.X.392-94)

Langland's counter to this position is made in Passus B.XI, with the arrival of Trajan. The Roman Emperor informs Will:

How [I] was ded and dampned to dwellen in pyne  
For an uncristene creature: clerkis wyten the soothe  
That al the clergye under Cryste [ne] mighte me cracche fro helle,  
But onliche love and leauté and my lawful domes.  
(B.XI.142-45)

The implication of this passage is clear: Trajan has been able to act under his own power in a naturally virtuous manner that is meritorious of God's grace. As Adams notes 'No episode in the poem marks Langland more clearly as semi-Pelagian than this one. All of Langland's educated contemporaries understood that to allow for the salvation of the righteous heathens was to admit precisely the point that every authentic Augustinian always denied – that heathens could be righteous' ('Piers's Pardon', p. 390).<sup>42</sup>

The Trajan episode in *Piers Plowman* shows that had Gower wished to include an exemplum indicating that virtuous living meritorious of salvation could occur before the infusion of grace, then material was available.<sup>43</sup> However, he

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<sup>42</sup> Courtenay shows that the likes of Uthred of Bolton and Robert Holcot maintained this position (p. 343).

<sup>43</sup> It is of course, always problematic to make an argument based on what is *not* or *might have* been in a text rather than what actually *is*. However, the question of the 'righteous heathen' was a recurrent concern in the Middle Ages, and the Trajan story was especially well-known due to its connection with the saintly Pope Gregory. The version of the story on which Langland's poem is based is the one that appears in the *Legenda Aurea*, or *Golden Legend*, a thirteenth-century

does not do this. In fact, his position is much closer to Will's in Passus B.X; in both cases they see a programme of righteous living as being unable to guarantee salvation. This is because both Will and Gower are tapping into the classic late-Augustinian position, in which works could not merit grace. This tradition had undergone a revival, specifically at Oxford, in the early fourteenth century. It reached its peak in the 1320s and 1330s, exactly the period Courtenay has argued had such a great influence on later Middle English Literature. We can perhaps see two main influences precipitating this revival. The Paris condemnations of 1277, when Bishop Tempier denounced 219 theses as heretical, were primarily anti-Averroistic in that they sought to defend the primacy of faith against those who accepted natural standards for their speculation. But their chief importance was in finally bringing to the surface long-held anti-Aristotelian sentiment. Against the idea that God and his ways could be associated with the physical world, and understood through the hierarchy of cause to effect from God to the created order, now emerged a revived Augustinianism in which illumination came from God alone and was independent of the material and sensory world. Reason had a role, but that role was to understand revealed truth; if reason judged something to be so, 'the foundation for that judgement must rest in Scripture primarily, and only secondarily in the operation of created reason.'<sup>44</sup> In remaining true to their Platonic origins by starting with the cause and refusing any independent value to the effect, this type of Augustinianism was, as Leff has noted, 'ever liable to rule

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collection recording over one hundred and eighty Saints lives. The work was so massively popular that it survived in over one thousand manuscript editions and, with the advent of printing in the 1450s, editions were published in both Latin and every Western European language. For the 'Legend of St Gregory' see Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), I, pp. 171-84. In light of these facts I am happy to assert that a man as widely read as Gower would have had the material to mind, if not directly to hand, should it have been pertinent to his overall design.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Lahey, 'Wyclif and Lollardy', in *Introduction to Theology*, pp. 334-54 (p. 345).



out practical experience all together' (p. 6). Already we see man being shunted to the periphery of the picture in matters concerning the divine *ordinatio*. Working in congruence with this movement was the direction some scholastics took in light of the rediscovery of Augustine's post 410 works in the latter half of the thirteenth century. This discovery led to a much more precise, source-critical approach to discussion, and with it came a much strengthened anti-Pelagian approach, emphasising the necessity for grace at the expense of human effort and human merit that we examined above (Courtenay, pp. 307-11).<sup>45</sup> Two features were then characteristic of this revival. The first was an increasing refusal to allow reason to follow its own course and the consequent reliance on the reaffirmation of theological dogma. We can find this tendency in a thinker such as Richard Fitzralph.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, we find in the work of thinkers such as Gregory of Rimini and Thomas Bradwardine a greatly reduced role for man in the scheme of salvation, and a consequent reassertion of God's primacy:

This reaffirmation of God's role in salvation, with its emphasis on grace (*solo gratia*), predestination before foreseen merits (*praedestinatio ante praevis merita*) based on God's decree rather than God's foreknowledge, double predestination (that the final condition of the damned represents a conscious decision on God's part just as much as the beatitude of the elect), and the perseverance of the saints, went hand in hand with a stronger view of the divine omnipotence that sometimes bordered on divine omnivolence. (Courtenay, p. 309)<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Courtenay's chapter (pp. 307-24) on the subject offers perhaps the best general discussion of the topic I am dealing with here.

<sup>46</sup> See Leff, *Richard Fitzralph, Commentator of the Sentences: A Study in Theological Orthodoxy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1963), pp. 138-68. Leff argues that Fitzralph tends to omit the distinctions made by his contemporaries regarding certain key terms in the debate regarding free will and merit (p. 161). He seems to be suggesting that Fitzralph has accepted these positions as orthodox despite the internal contradictions they suggest when subjected to further analytical scrutiny. It is interesting to note the parallel here with Aers' assertion that Gower 'normalized and internalized' contradictions inherent in the Church's teachings (see above, p. 120, n. 15).

<sup>47</sup> On Bradwardine's theological determinism see Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, pp. 98-109, and Oberman, pp. 65-122. On Rimini's theory of double-particular election see James Halverson, 'Franciscan Theology and Predestinarian Pluralism in Late-Medieval Thought', *Speculum*, 70 (1995), 1-26.

Adams asserts that radical Augustinians were in a minority in the late fourteenth century ('Pier's Pardon', p. 382, n. 43); whilst Courtenay has similarly noted that after 1370 there was a shift away from the high-point of what he calls *Theologica Anglicana*, with less focus on scholastic debate, fewer citations of past authorities ('even with Augustine'), 'a movement away from Bradwardinian formulations', a greater reliance on Scripture, and a greater concern with the practical and devotional, all of which were the hallmarks of Wyclif's intervention into the debate (p. 355). However, the issues raised earlier in the century still clearly resonated loudly. Indeed, Courtenay also notes that 'The theological "market" in the second half of the fourteenth century lay in the areas of sermon literature, biblical studies, and religious, doctrinal, or political controversies that had extra- or supra-university significance and appeal' (p. 369). I would suggest that one such religious/doctrinal concern that would have retained both its prominence and the basic conceptual terminology surrounding the debate as it filtered into the wider public consciousness would have been the terms under which personal salvation could be achieved. We have, of course, already seen one highly eccentric and personalised discussion of this issue in Rolle's writings.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps a more familiar and oft cited example is the passage in Chaucer's 'Nun's Priest's Tale':

But I ne kan nat bulte it to the bren  
 As kan the hooly Doctour Augustin,  
 Or Boece, or Bisshop Bradwardin,  
 Wheither that Goddes worthy forwiting  
 Streyneth me nedely for to doon a thing,—

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<sup>48</sup> Writing in the 1330s and 1340s Rolle was explicit in his anti-scholasticism (see above, p. 74), but his emphasis on the completely arbitrary nature of both God's gift of *canor* and the salvation that it entailed (at least when it came to anyone other than himself) shows him to be clearly working in the same theological tradition as these later writers, even if they understood and discussed the issue within their own specific discursive field. I take the dates within which Rolle was writing from the chronology established by Watson (pp. 273-78).

'Nedely' clepe I simple necessitee;  
 Or elles, if free chois be graunted me  
 To do that same thing, or do it noght,  
 Though God forwoot it er that was wroght;  
 Or if his witing streyneth never a deel  
 But by necessitee condicioneel.

(CT, VII, 3240-50)

As ever, it is difficult to know what to make of Chaucer's light-hearted but well-informed look at the theological issues he raises, as he makes no attempt to adjudicate between the three positions, and the fact that the controversy is placed in the context of an animal fable raises questions over how seriously readers are supposed to take the episode.<sup>49</sup> But the fact that it *is* well-informed indicates that the issue clearly had a 'supra-university significance and appeal' in both its terms and its content amongst men of Chaucer's station in life at least, one of whom, of course, was Gower. It is the contention of the rest of this chapter that Gower intended the *Confessio* to be read within the terms of this debate, and in particular aligned his poem with the concerns of the Augustinian school of thought. Adams has remarked that 'All thinkers in the neo-Augustinian tradition concur that, apart from grace, the will now is free only to sin. [...] free will alone is unable to call forth even naturally good acts' ('Pier's Pardon', p. 383). This seems to me to be remarkably similar to Amans's position at the end of the *Confessio*: his free will is completely unable to compass any benefits of renouncing his love despite the best efforts of his reason, and wants only to wallow in the despair and self-pity caused by his excessive desire. As we shall see, it is only through the gift of grace freely given that Amans's reason begins to operate in a manner that finally effects his salvation.

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<sup>49</sup> See Winthrop Wetherbee, 'Classical and Boethian Tradition in the *Confessio Amantis*', in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. by Siân Echard (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 181-96, for a discussion of this Tale in relation to the prologue of the *Confessio*.

## UNDERSTANDING AMANS'S RECOVERY

We must begin by returning to where we left Amans, where he 'noight wherof' himself 'to helpe', and examine what happens during his conversion. I want to do so by way of a brief statistical analysis that shows that claims such as 'Gower's ethics in the *Confessio* are not specifically Christian' (*Sciences and the Self*, p. 196, n. 40) and that the political 'is the final emphasis which brings the poem together, rather than any wish for personal salvation or for transcendent vision' (*Sciences and the Self*, p. 225) are incorrect. Counting words is clearly a crude indicator of meaning in a text, but I think in this case the figures really are instructive, and allow us to move with an added confidence into the main argument. If, discounting the Prologue, we examine the distribution of the word 'grace' throughout the main body of the poem, we find that it occurs in Books II to VII in an average of 0.49% of the lines, or roughly once every 200 lines. By contrast, in Book I it occurs in 0.81% of the lines, or once every 130 lines. In Book VIII the term becomes even more frequent, occurring in 0.98% of the lines, or roughly once every 100 lines. Even further to this, we can divide Book VIII into two distinct parts, as it consists only of one Tale, the 'Tale of Apollonius', followed by the final section of the poem in which the climactic moments that we have been analysing play out.<sup>50</sup> When we do so we find a very noticeable preponderance of the term in the second section: it occurs on average every 58 lines compared to an average of every 182 lines in the 'Tale of Apollonius'.<sup>51</sup> This is not to say that the preceding Tale is redundant to the discussion of the

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<sup>50</sup> Volume I of Peck's edition marks the shift, which occurs over lines 2008-2009, with a full line-break.

<sup>51</sup> All statistics have been worked out on the basis of the information given in *A Concordance to John Gower's Confessio Amantis*, ed. by J. D. Pickles & J. L. Dawson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), pp. 240-241.

operation of grace, as I will go on to examine later. But it does indicate that Gower was increasingly concerned to frame the resolution of his poem in terms of the issue. Given that in the action of the ending we find Amans both submitting a request to the divine to be cured of his state of sin and division, and that it seems to succeed as he becomes John Gower, we have more than enough license to follow up this line of enquiry in our own analysis.

One final caveat must be added before we turn to the detail of the ending itself, and that is the rather obvious point that we are here dealing with a 'secular allegory' regarding the operation of divine grace. When Amans prays, he prays to Venus and Cupid, and, in the decisive moment in which he is cured of his malady, it is the God of Love rather than the God of Christianity who reaches inside the lover to withdraw the 'lancegay' that has been the cause of all his sinful lusts. But it would have been obvious to a medieval reader, as it has been to Gower's modern interpreters, that these actions had much more significant implications. Interpretations in which the actions of Classical and Pagan divinities bring about the superior plan of the divine will had well established precedents by the late Middle Ages. Minnis and Scott have done most to bring to light this type of critical approach in their indispensable *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition*.<sup>52</sup> For example, they show how in William of Conches' twelfth-century commentary on Boethius's *Consolation*, the world-soul (*anima mundi*) described in Plato's *Timaeus* is identified with the Holy Spirit (p. 121). Similarly, a commentator on the *Aeneid* who has sometimes been identified as 'Bernard Silvester' writes in the following manner:

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<sup>52</sup> A. J. Minnis, and A. B. Scott, eds., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 1988).

At this point we should note that, just as in other mystical writings, so too in this book there are 'alternative meanings' (*equivocationes*), and 'plurality of names' (*multivocationes*), and that the integuments relate to different things. For instance, in the book by Martianus [Capella], by Jupiter you understand at one point the superior [i.e., celestial] fire, at another point a star, at another the Creator. [...] Different names designate the same thing, and this is 'plurality of names' (*multivocatio*). For instance, both Jupiter and Anchises designate the Creator. (pp. 153-54)

By the fourteenth century writers such as Giovanni del Virgilio and Pierre Bersuire had developed this system of secular allegory so that it was flexible enough to accommodate a multiplicity of meanings. Minnis and Scott cite the example of Book XV of Bersuire's *Moral Reduction; Ovid Moralized*, where the author works in systematic fashion to explicate the various levels of meaning in the text: 'So let us say that by that Goddess [Diana] we can understand [...] Or else suppose that [...] Or suppose that [...] and if you wish, suppose that [...] Or if you wish, suppose that [...]' (pp. 371-72). Modern critics have been happy to follow the same interpretative method. Kinneavy notes that the presence of Venus and Cupid in the poem suggests 'the omnipresence of God during the entire shrift', and that Venus's appearance at the end represents 'a kind of *deus* (or *dea*) *ex machina*', the intervention of the divine will where the human will 'nought wherof' itself 'to helpe'.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Nicholson discusses how in the 'Tale of Jupiter's Two Tuns' (VI, 325-90)

Jupiter in particular may [...] be seen as a stand-in for God [...] with the difference that he is not God; and since he is known to be a fiction, he represents not a specific agent but instead an underlying moral order that is present in the universe itself, acting apart from God (just as Venus does), though in most literal terms, of course, necessarily subordinate to him. (p. 88)

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<sup>53</sup> Gerald Kinneavy, Gerald, 'Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the Penitentials', *The Chaucer Review*, 19 (1984), 144-61, (p. 145, 152).

To summarise, the interpreter could allegorise the actions and characteristics of one Classical divinity as representing different concepts enshrined in Christian doctrine, or could alternatively see different Classical divinities as aspects of a singular operation of the divine will. It is this second method of interpretation which I believe Gower is asking his readers to employ in the final stages of his poem – the actions of Amans, Venus and Cupid, are supposed to indicate the human sinner's relationship to the operation of divine grace. Venus and Cupid simply become, to paraphrase Nicholson, agents of the underlying spiritual order in the universe.

We have already identified the beginning of the soteriological 'turn' of the *Confessio* in our previous analysis. Disillusioned with the ineffective pedagogic scheme he has been subject to, and having accused Genius of a lack of empathy with his condition (VIII, 2150-70), Amans turns to his priest and asks him to take a final request for help to the God and Goddess of Love:

Unto Cupide and to Venus  
 Be frendlich toward mi querele,  
 So that myn herte were in hele  
 Of love which is in my brest  
 [...]  
 Bot for final conclusion  
 I thenke a supplicacion  
 With pleine wordes and expresse  
 Wryte unto Venus the goddesse,  
 The which I preie you to bere  
 And bringe agein a good ansuere.  
 (VIII, 2172-5, 2183-88)

It is at this point that the narrative perspective of the poem shifts into the first person (see above, pp. 133-35), and Amans informs the reader that Genius has delivered his letter. Shortly afterwards, Venus appears before Amans, and he tells us 'To grounde I fell upon mi kne, / And preide hire for to do me grace' (VIII,

2316-17). It is important to bear in mind the completely passive nature of Amans's situation here; he can only hope for divine intervention, not do anything to effect it himself. This is still the case when Amans has fallen into the swoon where he sees the procession of lovers (VIII, 2450-744), where he again tells us 'And thus I lay in hope of grace' (VIII, 2725).

As we have previously noted, in his early work Thomas Aquinas started out with the inherited synthesis of free will and grace. However following his rediscovery of Augustine's later work and the Semi-Pelagian controversies, his *Summa theologiae* is recognisably Augustinian in its careful emphasis on the divine initiative in every part of the process of justification ('Piers's Pardon', p. 375, n. 28).<sup>54</sup> In it, Aquinas asks the question: can man know any truth without grace? To this he responds:

Now it is clear that just as all physical movements are derived from the movements of the heavenly body as a primary physical mover, so all movements, both physical and spiritual, are derived from what is the primary mover simply speaking, which is God. And so, however perfect a physical or spiritual nature is taken to be, it cannot proceed to actualise itself unless it is moved by God. This actual motion is in accordance with the order of his providence, not according to *natural necessity*. (my emphasis)<sup>55</sup>

This is obviously pertinent to the condition Amans is in at the end of the poem. He has been unable to bring about the integration of his reason and will through 'natural necessity', the process of education in ethics and politics that has been elaborated by Genius in the poem. That this is the case is made clear by Aquinas's next statement:

Thus the human intellect has a form [...] which is sufficient of itself for the knowledge of certain intelligible realities, those, namely, acquaintance with

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<sup>54</sup> See also Rorem, p. 370.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. by Thomas Gilby and others (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1964-), XXX, ed. by Cornelius Ernst (1972), 1a2ae, 109.1.



which it can reach by way of sensible realities. But the human intellect cannot know more profound intelligible realities unless it is perfected by a stronger light, say the light of faith or prophecy; and this is called *the light of grace*, inasmuch as it supplements nature.<sup>56</sup>

In the *Confessio*, Amans has attempted to progress by way of ‘acquaintance with sensible realities,’ that is, in applying the pedagogic information contained in the Tales, and what he has learnt in the debate between himself and Genius, to his own condition. But the only thing that he *has* learnt is that the reason and the will cannot be reconciled and harmonised using the human faculties alone; this is the ‘intelligible reality’ of the human condition when it reflects on itself. Indeed, if we move ahead to the final words of the poem, this is exactly what the now enlightened and authoritative Gower states. Rather than having found a way to reconcile reason and will, Gower instead simply tells us he takes his ‘final leve’ (VIII, 3152) of carnal desire:

Of love and of his dedly hele,  
Which no phisicien can hele.  
For his nature is so divers,  
That it hath som travers  
Or of to moche or o to lite,  
That plainly no man delite,  
Bot if him faile of that or this.  
(VIII, 3155-61)<sup>57</sup>

The ‘more profound intelligible reality’ Gower has come to understand is by contrast:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. See also *On the Trinity*, 1-2, in *Selected Writings*, trans. & ed. by Ralph McInerny (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 109-141.

<sup>57</sup> In response to Simpson, Hugh White argues that at the end of the *Confessio* ‘The poem, to be sure, does encourage a countenancing of the possibility that reason and the impulse to love might be harmonic, but the fact that it ends with its narrator figure, Amans/John Gower, not effecting that harmony but leaving love behind both as a personal experience and as a subject for writing would seem to indicate that it is less committed than Simpson suggests to the promotion of this harmony as the goal of human endeavour.’ Hugh White, *Nature, Sex, and Goodness in Medieval Literary Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 176.

thilke love which that is  
 Withinne a mannes herte affirmed,  
 And stant of charité confermed,  
 Such love is goodly for to have,  
 Such love mai the bodi save,  
 Such love mai the sule amende,  
 The hyhe God such love ous sende  
 Forthwith the remenant of grace;  
 So that above in thilke place  
 Wher resteth love and alle pes,  
 Oure joie mai ben endeles.

(VIII, 3162-72)

The shift from discussing love as earthly desire (VIII, 3155-61) to love as Christian charity (VIII, 3162-72) finally fulfils the expectation for a more profound moment of (self-)understanding regarding the human condition that was created by Amans's earlier moment of lucidity about the need for a type of love that was 'withholde' from the sphere of ordinary human action so that he could 'beholde / Reson' (VIII, 2195-98). What Amans lacks at the point where he is lying in 'hope of grace' is (obviously) the 'light of grace' so that he can make sense of the first context of 'love' by being granted the second. He needs the 'light of grace' to view the chaos of the human condition of division and sin, the solipsistic perspective he has been trapped within throughout the poem, from a fully enlightened state. The final gloss on the poem at VIII, 3108 similarly indicates the entirely necessary dismissal of trivial corporeal concerns:

Hic in fine recapitulate super hoc quod in principio libri primi promisit se in amoris causa specialus tractaturum. Concludit enim quod omnis amoris delectacio extra caritatem nichil est. Qui autem manet in caritate, in deo manet ('Here at the end he recapitulates concerning what in the beginning of the first book he promised he would particularly treat in cause of love. For he concludes that all pleasure of love beyond charity is nothing. "Who remains in love, he remains in God. (I John 4. 16)"')<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Translated by Andrew Galloway in Peck's edition (vol. I).

The act of personal comprehension allows the poet to pass on his understanding of the human condition as a general truth for society at the close of the poem.

It is clear from the action of the poem that this understanding is caused by Venus and Cupid as representatives of the proper divine order of things rather than Amans doing anything under his own power.<sup>59</sup> After Amans has described the contents of the vision he has during his swoon, we shift back to his narration of the 'real' world of the poem. Here he tells us how 'Cupide to the laste, / Forth with his moder full avised, / Hath determined and devised / Unto what point he wol descende' (VIII, 2784-87). The God of Love then strides forward and we are told

Bot he, *whiche wolde thanne give*  
*His grace*, so as it mai be,  
 This blinde god which mai nocht se,  
 Hath groped til that he me fond;  
 And as he pitte forth his hond  
 Upon my body, wher I lay,  
 Me thought a fyri lancegay,  
 Which whilom through myn herte he caste,  
 He pulleth out

(VIII, 2792-800, my emphasis)

As a consequence of this, Amans says he 'hadde a revelacion, / So as I tolde now tofore' (VIII, 2806-07). The implications for the chronological consistency of the poem created by line 2807 are highly suggestive. Exactly what does this 'revelacion' encompass in terms of the previous action of the poem? The most obvious answer is the swoon he has just been put into by the appearance of Venus, as, according to the *MED*, we can understand 'revelacion' as meaning 'instruction by a pagan divinity.' But we can also understand it as meaning 'The communication or disclosure of spiritual doctrine, mystical truth, divine precepts,

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<sup>59</sup> Watt, p. 103.

historical events, etc. by God through Christ, the Holy Spirit, a saint, etc.’ What I want to suggest is that the ‘revelacion’ is exactly such a disclosure in that it grants a new perspective from which Amans can consider the information contained within in the entirety of the *Confessio*. In this sense the ‘revelacion’ extends across the whole action of the poem, functioning as an instantaneous and comprehensive retroactive re-reading and revision of everything that has gone before. It is this that allows Amans to progress from seeing his (and the entire human) condition from within what has so far been his characteristic register, as destined for division, sin, and failure, to discussing it (as Gower) in terms of the larger enlightened context, where the failure of man in his natural capacity is inevitable, but salvation can come through the simple hope *in* (definitely not the determination *of*) the activity of divine grace.

What is interesting is that the ‘revelacion’ not only reorders *what* Amans understands, but also *how* he understands it. It represents also the complete reordering of Amans’s comprehensive faculties as the precursor to his assuming the position of the enlightened and authoritative Gower. Norman Kretzman has commented on Aquinas’s *Summa* that

Elaborating an Aristotelian theme (*Politics* I 2), Aquinas observes that the soul’s rule over the (normal) body is ‘despotic’: in a normal body, any bodily part that can be moved by an act of will is moved immediately when and as will commands. By contrast, the rational faculties rule sensuality ‘politically.’ The powers and passions that are the intended subjects of this rational governance are also moved by imagination and sense, and so are no slaves to reason. ‘That is why we experience the irascible or the concupiscible fighting against reason when we sense or imagine something pleasant that reason forbids, or something unpleasant that reason commands.’<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Norman Kretzman, ‘Philosophy of Mind’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. by Norman Kretzman and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), pp. 128-59 (p. 146). Kretzman is citing 1a, 81.3 of the *Summa*.

Now, we have seen that Amans cannot control his passions through such 'political' governance, so that his will fights against his reason, earlier in Book VIII. To repeat this key passage:

Mi resoun understood him wel,  
 And knew it was soth everydel  
 That he hath seid, bot nocht forthi  
 Mi will hath nothing set therby.  
 For techinge of so wis a port  
 Is unto love of no desport;  
 Yit myhte nevere man beholde  
 Reson, wher love was withholde;  
 Thei be nocht o governance.

(VIII, 2191-99)

What Gower seems to indicate before this, however, is that even normal 'despotic' type of rule over the body is not functioning correctly in the lover. Genius's first lesson to Amans in the *Confessio* is to control his 'wittes fyve' (I, 296), as the senses 'be properly the gates, / Thurgh whiche as to the herte algates / Comth alle thing unto the feire, / Which may the mannes soule empeire' (I, 299-302). Genius tells Amans tales to do with the misuse of vision and hearing specifically, as these are the principle sources by which sin enters the soul. After being told the 'Tale of the Sirens' (I, 481-529), Amans admits that when 'I may my lady hierre, / My wit with that hath lost his stiere: / I do nocht as Uluxes dede' (I, 559-61). Unlike the classical exemplar, Amans lacks the ability to control his senses; consequently he states 'I am topulled in my thought, / So that reson leveth nocht, / Wherof that I me mai defende' (I, 565-67). However, the question of *what* exactly Ulysses did during this Tale is somewhat ambiguous. In keeping with the classical legend, we are told that Ulysses devises a plan to resist the Sirens's song: 'no man of his compaignie' (I, 518) will succumb to its lure, as they will all have their ears plugged. They duly sail through the danger, and there

is 'such governance on honde, / That thei the monstres have withstonde / And slain of hem a gret partie' (I, 525-27). But during all of this, there is no mention of Ulysses himself. It must be remembered that in classical versions of the legend Ulysses has himself strapped to the mast so that he can experience the Sirens's song without suffering the consequences. It is impossible to tell for sure if this is the case in Genius's version of the Tale, but the vague and imprecise language used by the priest certainly gives the reader license to speculate. For instance, when describing how Ulysses plugged his crew's ears, Genius's exact words are: 'For he hem stoppede alle faste, / That non of hem mai here hem singe' (I, 522-23). The words 'he hem' in I, 522 may imply that Ulysses ('he') plugged the entire crew's ears ('hem'), *including* his own. However, the same words could also imply a distinction between the person doing the plugging of ears (Ulysses/'he') and those having them plugged (the crew/'hem'). If this is the case, then none of the crew (the first 'hem' of I, 523) could hear the Sirens (the second 'hem' of I, 523) sing, but Ulysses could.

The suggestive ambiguity over Ulysses actions in the Tale brings to mind his later behaviour in the poem. Returning momentarily to the 'Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus', Peck has offered an allegorical interpretation in which Will 'assaults Reason in the king's stronghold (i.e., the tower being the soul's domain), first by overthrowing the otherwise reliable five senses [the five guards that are killed], and then by striking down the king himself' (*Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 132). If Peck's reading is correct, we can see from the 'Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus' that Ulysses does not have his senses fully under control. The crucial detail missing from the 'Tale of the Sirens' about what exactly 'Uluxe dede', as opposed to what he made his men do, becomes increasingly suspicious

through its absence. Given what we see later in the *Confessio*, a legitimate concern can be raised that Ulysses was indeed strapped to the mast of his ship during the episode, inwardly revelling in the sensory delights of the Sirens's song whilst projecting the outward appearance of 'governance' through the ordered actions of his crew. Now, a later refinement Aquinas makes with regards to commanding the body with the reason is that 'just as then there cannot fail to be disordered movements of desire in the senses so long as this sense-desire is not wholly subject to reason, so too many disorders arise in the acts of reason itself if man's reason is not stably submitted to God' (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, 109.8). Following this position, Amans can see through retroactive interpretation that Ulysses' failures (implied in the 'Tale of the Sirens', explicit in the 'Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus') is because the hierarchy of 'sense-reason' is not completed by the necessary final term '-God'. As a consequence, Ulysses is destroyed by his own errant desires. Peck goes onto show that during Amans's swoon the lover's sensual faculties begin to operate correctly. 'Gower reiterates again and again such phrases as "I sih," "Min yhe [...] I caste aboutes," "I sih," "myn Ere it areche," and so on. Amans is seeing and hearing anew, and this time his wits behave reasonably' (*Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 178). When we remember that this is all occurring, thanks to the retroactive moment of 'revelacion', as a necessary logical consequence of the removal of the 'lancegay' (although in the narrative and temporal scheme of the poem it also occurs as a precursor to the removal), we can see that the reordering of Aman's comprehensive faculties is thanks to the operation of divine grace.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> The temporal paradox of the poem that I see as being a consequence of the moment of 'revelacion', in which certain actions have to occur both as a precursor *to* and consequence *of* grace, was one that scholastic commentators frequently confronted in their discussions of the divine *ordinatio*. As we noted in the discussion of grace above (pp. 147-53), where the emphasis

What Gower still seems concerned to stress here is that reason can start to operate correctly only once the aid of divine grace has removed the divisions caused by desire, not that carnal love and reason can be reconciled so that reason brings about enlightenment in the human condition in and of itself. Once Cupid has removed the ‘lancegay’, we are told that ‘whan Resoun it herde sein / That loves rage was aweie, / he cam to me the rihte weie’ (VIII, 2862-4) ‘So that of thilke fyri peine / I was mad sobre and hol ynowh’ (VIII, 2868-69). As White notes,

the attempt to grant reason any sort of power over love at this point in the poem goes against the implications of the way Gower presents matters. His swoon means that the end of love comes while Amans’s rational faculties are in suspense, and within the swoon the crucial things happen to Amans rather than being achieved by him [...] rational reflection can happen only after the passion of love has ended, and does not bring about that end. (pp. 206-07)

White’s understanding of Gower’s position in the poem bears strong resemblance to the general position Augustine adopts in his later writings over man’s capacity to act in general. For example, we noted that in *Grace and Free Will* Augustine states ‘In doing anything, it is certainly we who act, but it is God’s act that enables us to act by his bestowal of efficacious power upon our will’.<sup>62</sup> We can quite easily understand the action of the *Confessio* in these terms, where the ‘efficacious power’ is the removal of the lancegay, which then enables Amans to perform the act of rational reflection. Perhaps a more immediate and obvious

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was placed as to what came first was a matter of great contention. The matter principally rested on the causal paradoxes created by explaining a divine Will that is eternal and unchanging in terms of human concepts of causality that can only deal with temporal and logical *a priori*. Anselm is indicative of the logical contortions commentators often tied themselves in when trying to work through the implications of their positions. In his *De Concordia*, for example, he writes: ‘Assuredly, no one preserves this received uprightness without willing it. But no one can will it without having it. And one cannot have it at all except by grace. Therefore, just as no one acquires it without a prevenient grace, so no one preserves it except by subsequent grace. Clearly, though it is preserved by free choice, nevertheless its retention should be attributed more to grace than to free choice, since free choice only has and preserves it owing to the prevenient and subsequent grace’ (p. 456).

<sup>62</sup> *The Teacher, Free Choice of the Will, Grace and Free Will*, p. 287.



source that would be at hand to Gower would be the Augustinian precedent established by Alan in *de Planctu*, where he has Reason state:

According to [Theology's] reliable testimony man is born by my work, he is reborn by the power of God; through me he is called from non-being into being, through Him he is led from being to higher being; by me man is born for death, by Him he is reborn for life. But my professional services are set aside in the mystery of this second birth. [...] Since in these matters (of the second birth) the entire reasoning process dealing with Nature is brought to a standstill, let us, by the power of faith alone, pay homage to something so great and mysterious. Nor is it surprising that in these matters Theology shows no kinship with me, since in many instances our paths to knowledge, though not opposite, are different. I establish the truths of faith by reason, she establishes reason by the truths of faith. I know in order to believe, she believes in order to know.<sup>63</sup>

Again, reason has a sphere of understanding to which it is appropriate (recall Aquinas's description of 'certain intelligible realities'), but it is inadequate by itself to approach a higher region of understanding. Only with the aid of divine illumination can reason begin to contemplate higher truths. As White states, 'Reason does something towards completing the healing of Amans here [...] but, critically, Reason's operation cannot begin, he cannot come to Amans, until "loves rage" is "aweie" ' (White, p. 207).<sup>64</sup> The divided state of the lover is rectified *for* him, not *by* him. This would be extremely damaging to Gower's claim to be an authority, based as it is upon the reader witnessing Amans being purged of error and evolving from ignorance to knowledge, if it were not superseded by the authority granted by divine precedent.

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<sup>63</sup> Alan of Lille, p. 125. The final sentence of the quotation is of course a variation on the maxim in Isaiah 'Unless you believe, you shall not understand' (Isiah 7. 9). We can trace the development of this position through Augustine's *Free Choice of the Will* in Russell, pp. 63-241 (p. 71), and Anselm's *Proslogion*, in *The Major Works*, pp. 82-104 (p. 87). See also Allan's *Anticlaudianus*; 'For Reason does not come before Faith; rather Faith anticipates it and Reason finally obeys the dogmas of Faith and follows her as she teaches the Articles of Faith' (VI, 274-77). Cited in Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, p. 63.

<sup>64</sup> I came to the same conclusion regarding this section of the *Confessio* in my MA dissertation before coming across White's argument. See Ben Smyth, 'Listening for the Limitations of Poetic Authority in the *Confessio Amantis* and the *Legend of Good Women*' (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Liverpool, 2005), p. 91.

With Amans's reason now in full operation, two things can occur. The first is that his confession can be formally completed. But by this point it is little more than an afterthought. Having already been healed of his affliction, Amans asks

And natheles as for the laste,  
 Touchende mi confession  
 I axe an absolucion  
 Of Genius, er that I go.  
 (VIII, 2889-93)

Priestly absolution, normally the prerequisite authority for the confessing subject's conversion, is postponed until well after the fact. We find here another aspect of Gower's essentially neo-Augustinian perspective. Bradwardine, for instance, argues that 'Sin is a defect in a subject's nature. It can only be exorcised by a *habitus* strong enough to do so, which means God's grace'. This in effect invalidates the structures of confession, absolution, communion, and the other sacraments. 'In each case these cannot do what God alone can do. Nothing, therefore, can precede, aid, or be substituted for, God's grace in justifying sinners'. So, despite attempts to qualify his assertions lest he be interpreted as discarding all ecclesiastical discipline, Bradwardine's final position is so extreme that 'it is but a short step to the position that Luther was later to take up over the sacraments and Church activity in general' (*Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, pp. 83-85). Courtenay has noted how Wyclif drew on Bradwardine and Fitzralph; we find in his thought 'a strong doctrine of grace and justification, [...] of the invisible, inward, or essential church, and the idea of the lordship of grace' (p. 324).<sup>65</sup> That Gower should adopt this position is ironic in light of his criticism of

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<sup>65</sup> See also Lahey, pp. 337-341, on the relation of Wyclif's thought to Bradwardine's and Fitzralph's work. We can once again note the affinity this neo-Augustinian position shared with the implications of affective mystical experience. Both could be interpreted as attempting to bypass the normative institutional structures of authority regulating a person's relationship to the

'This newe secte of Lollardie' (P, 349) as one of the forces that was a cause of discord and division in the earthly Church. However, it should be remembered that the Lollards considered themselves to be a conservative, retrenching movement. We should therefore not be surprised that, although Gower was wary of the social and political implications of a group that explicitly opposed the institutional and sacramental authority of the Church, he can yet find much common ground with them in questions of theological and doctrinal orthodoxy that were far from settled, and which, in their details, demanded difficult questions of all men.<sup>66</sup>

The second, more important, issue that the restoration of Amans's rational faculties leads to is that he is finally ready to understand (his) love within the context of the 'higher intelligible realities' of divine truth. This is the moment at which he receives the name of the enlightened poet, John Gower. After Genius has granted his forgiveness, the penitent falls to his knees. Venus tells him 'John Gower, / Now thou art at laste cast' (VIII, 2907-09), and that he should 'go ther vertu moral duelleth, / Wher ben thi bokes, as men telleth, / Whiche of long time thou hast write' (VIII, 2925-97). In telling the poet to go back to the moral style of his previous works, Venus is presumably referring to the much more straightforwardly didactic *Mirroure de l'Omme* and *Vox Clamantis*. This would seem to indicate that Genius's self-critique of the pedagogic method he utilised in trying to teach Amans is shared by Gower in relation to the poem as a tool for

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divine, and establishing a rapport in which the matter of salvation lay between God and the individual.

<sup>66</sup> See Katherine C. Little, *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). 'The impact of Wycliffism on late medieval writers may have less to do with the author's embrace or rejection of Wycliffite positions than with an embrace or rejection of interpretative concerns that Wycliffites brought into focus for their contemporaries' (p. 80). Little discusses Wycliffite thought specifically in relation to the *Confessio* in pp. 101-112.

moral instruction in general: the *Confessio*, with its attempt to promote morality and harmony through a combination of ‘lust’ and ‘lore’ has, in the final analysis, amounted to nothing more than a ‘truffling’ failure (White, p. 215). Venus, who is now speaking mainly as an aspect of the underlying moral order of which she is but a subordinate part, instructs Gower to completely leave behind the system of values of natural, unruly ‘kinde’ she previously embodied in order to focus on the higher degree of love that has been benevolently bestowed upon him, the love that ‘stant of charité confermed’ (VIII, 3164).

Gower now shifts back to the indirect address of the Prologue, his poem coming to its final declaration of the need to trust in God’s intervention to prevent the final disaster that is the all too likely consequence of man’s actions. In the Prologue and Book I the voice of the poet is completely despairing, and there is little hope for unity in a world where all was subject to fortune and the greedy desires of men:

Ther is no regne of all outtake,  
 For every climat hath his diel  
 After the tornynge of the whiel,  
 Which blinde Fortune overthroweth.  
 Whereof the certain no man knoweth.  
 (P, 136-40)

Similarly, at the close of the poem Gower is still very much aware that he is living in a time of sin and strife, where, for example

Uppon the lucre of marchandie,  
 Compasement and tricherie  
 Of singular profit to wynne,  
 Men seyn, is cause of mochil synne,  
 And namely of divisioun,  
 (VIII, 3037-41)

However, there is a sense of hope, albeit a muted one:

As He which is of alle thinges  
 The creatour, and of the kynges  
 Hath the fortunes upon honde,  
 His grace and mercy for to fonde  
 Upon my bare knes y preie,  
 That He this lond in siker weie  
 Wol sette upon good governance.  
 (VIII, 2981-87)

Hope lies not in the capacity of man to save himself, but simply in the willingness to have faith that there is a guiding benevolence that encompasses the confusion and division, and that it can and will bring men, and perhaps society at large, to their salvation.

## MODELS FOR SUCCESS

Just as we find in the poem's treatment of figures such as Ulysses, Alexander, and Aristotle, evidence that Gower was finally to reject reason as the means to full unification of the self, so we can also find indications in other Tales the final position Gower adopts over man's capacity to integrate the errant individual into a unified pattern of being. There are a trio of Tales which provide practical and theoretical demonstrations of Gower's understanding of the divine *ordinatio*: The story of Darius and the three counsellors, which includes the telling of the Tale of Alcestis (VII, 1783-984); The Tale of Apollonius (VIII, 271-2008); and the Tale of Constance (II, 587-1612). The story of Darius and the three counsellors in Book VII is based on I Esdras 3-4. Critics often pinpoint the episode as being a microcosm of Gower's entire theoretical perspective

throughout the poem.<sup>67</sup> Gower's use of the story is exemplary of the debate we have already identified between an Aristotelian model of understanding, where truth could be approached by reasoning from effect to cause, and the revived Neo-Platonic/Augustinian tradition in which reason could only extend so far before divine revelation was necessary. The 'Tale of Apollonius' occupies a pivotal position in the poem. Being the only Tale told in Book VIII, it provides the bridge between the debate of Book VII and the climax of the poem, and in it Gower shows how a pagan king who has absorbed the learning of Book VII can be safely brought to a position of personal, social, and spiritual salvation within the norms of orthodox Christian beliefs. Finally, the 'Tale of Constance' demonstrates in perhaps its purest form Gower's position with regards to man's capacity for action in relation to God's will. I discuss this Tale last as, by placing it in the context of some recent discussions of Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale' and his 'Retraction', it can help to clarify the argument that has been an evident subtext in this chapter: that there is an ideologically motivated resistance to reading Gower conservatively, and reading his poem as itself conservative, in current scholarship.

The narrative from Esdras concerning Darius and the three counsellors (VII, 1783-984) is told as part of the explication of Truth, the first part of Policy. As we have already seen in the poem, from within the limited confines of human perspective the best way to define and approach truth is unclear. Consequently, we immediately find a point of resistance to the previous methodology of tale-telling the poem has relied upon. The Latin heading to the section reads 'Moribus ornatus regit hic qui regna moderna, / Cercius expectat ceptra future poli. / Et quia

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<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Peck *Kingship and Common Profit*, pp. 143-44; Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, p. 283; and Wetherbee, 'John Gower', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. by David Wallace (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), pp. 589-609 (p. 604).

virtus supereminet mones, / Regis ab ore boni fibula nulla sonat.' ('He who rules modern kingdoms adorned with virtues more securely looks toward the future rule above. And because truth-telling stands above all virtues, so no lying fable is heard from the mouth of a good king.')68 Rather than any countenancing of a 'middle weie', between 'truth-telling' and 'fable', there is an antithesis here which anticipates Genius's turning away from 'truffles' towards 'trouthe'. But as we noted, the 'trouthe' reached by means of practical reason that the priest advocates also proves to be a failure, both for Amans and for Alexander. We are put in mind of Alexander's failings in the episode with the pirate when we are told

Tawhte Aristotle, as he wel couthe,  
 To Alisandre, hou in his outhe  
 He scholde of Trouthe thilke grace  
 So that his word be trewe and plein,  
 Toward the world and so certein  
 That in him be no double speche.

[...]

Avise him every man tofore,  
 And be wel war, er he be swore,  
 For afterward it is to late,  
 If that he wole his word debate.

(VII, 1727-33, 1741-44)

As we noted, in forgiving the pirate and elevating him to the rank of knight, Alexander is guilty of a kind of 'double speche' as he breaks his solemn compact to uphold the laws of the land. We are told in the Prologue that in legendary times past 'The word was lich to the conceite / Withoute semblant of deceite' (P, 113-14); now words only obscure true intentions and lead men through twisting pathways of deceit.

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<sup>68</sup> Translated by Andrew Galloway in Peck's edition (vol. III).

The narrative contained in Esdras imagines an alternative model of arriving at, or perhaps more accurately, being brought to understand, 'trouthe'. It is of course significant that Gower uses a Biblical narrative to make his point. Not only does the narrative deal with 'trouthe' as its theme, as Holy Scripture it is *itself* truth. To repeat the quote from Mannyng of Brunne: 'þys yche tale no tryfyl, For hyt ys wryte in þe bybyl' (*Handlyng Synne*, 1425). The episode tells how Darius, king of Persia, sets his three wisest counsellors the question of 'which strengest is, / The wyn, the womman, or the king?' (VII, 1812-13). Each of them responds in the affirmative with respect to one of the options. However, this is not the conclusion of the matter. The third counsellor has answered that woman is strongest, but he then qualifies this answer:

Bot for the final conclusion  
 What strengest is of erthli thinges,  
 The wyn, the wommen, or the kinges,  
 He seith that trouthe above hem alle  
 Is myhtiest, hou evere it falle.  
 The trouthe, hou so it evere come,  
 Mai for nothing ben overcome;  
 It mai wel soffre for a throwe,  
 Bot at laste it schal be knowe.  
 [...]  
 For hou so that the cause wende,  
 The trouthe is schameles at ende,  
 (VII, 1952-60, 1963-64)

What Gower is here asserting is that the human capacity for rational debate is suitable to deal with certain topics, but it is essentially unreliable when dealing with 'more profound intelligible realties' (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, 109.1). Truth is likely to be obscured by the fallible workings of human reason, 'It mai wel soffre for a throwe'. Again this is a characteristically neo-Augustinian position; Bradwardine, for instance,



emphasises very strongly the essentially unreliable nature of human knowledge in being able to recognise and understand the truth: this can be seen in the way in which our opinions constantly vary, so that we are influenced to change them by sheer weight of numbers instead of having the certitude which comes from faith alone. (*Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, p. 120)

Now, the contingent nature of human understanding and knowledge is precisely what has been made clear in the *Confessio*, where Amans and Genius take at one time one position over a certain subject, and at a later time an opposite position, depending on how the examples in the Tales are affecting them. Consequently, as we also saw, this process does not allow them to recognise 'trouthe'; this recognition only occurs when it is imparted from an external source. 'Truths come from God alone; we can only find them if God reveals them to us. [...] There is no room for philosophy' (*Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, p. 120). This is exactly how Peck describes Gower's argument at this point of the poem: 'Truth comes as an unexpected candidate, outside the original bargain' (*Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 143), the 'original bargain' being that philosophical consideration can lead to a complete consideration of all the issues in their proper context. We can see that in this episode Gower is anticipating the conditions under which Amans reaches enlightenment at the end of the poem. Arriving at a truthful understanding of one's condition is a matter of divine revelation, something that lies beyond the capacity of man to determine: 'For hou so that the cause wende, / The trouthe is schameles at ende.' Indeed, if we look at the Biblical text itself we can see that it drives Gower's position home forcefully, first dismissing the subjects that have been the topic of debate as worthless, and then indicating that truth lies beyond man's capacity for comprehension under his own power:

Vinum iniquum, iniquus rex, iniquae mulieres, iniqui omnes filii hominum, et iniqua omnia opera illorum, et non est in ipsis v sua iniquitate peribunt. Et veritas manet et invalescit in aeternum, et vivit et obtinet in saecula saeculorum. *Nec est apud eam accipere personas neque differentias*, sed quae iusta sunt facit omnibus iniustis ac malignis. Et omnes benignantur in operibus eius.<sup>69</sup>

(Wine is wicked, the king is wicked, women are wicked, all the children of men are wicked, and such are all their wicked works; and there is no truth in them; in their unrighteousness also they shall perish. As for the truth, it endureth, and is always strong; it liveth and conquereth for evermore. *With her there is no accepting of persons or rewards*; but she doeth the things that are just, and refraineth from all unjust and wicked things; and all men do well like of her works. I Esdras 4. 38-40; my emphasis)<sup>70</sup>

If the material from Esdras provides the theory that underpins Amans's understanding of truth at the end of the *Confessio*, then the 'Tale of Apollonius' can probably be thought of as offering a practical demonstration of those terms as manifested in human activity. It is interesting to note at the outset the parallels between Apollonius's position and that of Ulysses. Like the Ithican king, Apollonius has been well-versed in the Aristotelian manner: 'Of every naturel science, / Which eny clerk him couthe teche, / He couthe ynowh, and in his speche / Of wordes he was eloquent' (VIII, 390-93).<sup>71</sup> Both are exiled from their homeland and subject to the bitter whims of Fortune. However, a crucial difference exists. Ulysses survives his exile by mastering others with his reason,

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<sup>69</sup> Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/bible/vul.iEsd.4.html> [accessed 25 June 2009].

<sup>70</sup> I have cited the Latin for this passage from a different source and used the translation given in *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), due to the fact that <http://www.latinvulgate.com/> does not contain the relevant chapters. This is due to the complex textual history of the various books of Esdras, which can cause considerable confusion. 'Esdras A of the Septuagint is III Esdras of St. Jerome, whereas the Greek Esdras B corresponds to I and II Esdras of the Vulgate, which were originally united into one book. Protestant writers, after the Geneva Bible, call I and II Esdras of the Vulgate respectively Ezra and Nehemiah, and III and IV Esdras of the Vulgate respectively I and II Esdras' (New Advent Catholic Encyclopaedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05535a.htm> [accessed 25 June 2009]). The section quoted here from I Esdras in protestant Bibles is generally given in an appendix to the editions of the Vulgate as III Esdras, corresponding to the designation given to it by Jerome, and is made up almost entirely from materials existing in canonical books. The one exception to that are chapters 3. 1 – 5. 6, concerning the story of Darius and Zorobabel, part of which is cited above.

<sup>71</sup> Compare to VI, 1397-411, cited above (p. 137).

but he cannot orientate his self-understanding within a more important context due to the solipsism reason alone entails. When his sin returns, he fails to recognise it, and is destroyed. Apollonius also survives thanks to his wit and resources, but these alone cannot and do not deliver his ultimate salvation. It is made very clear throughout the Tale that at crucial moments the king and his family are delivered through the operation of external agents that are directly referred to as and/or embody the operation of divine grace. On his first escape from Tyre Apollonius's ship is destroyed in a storm, 'Bot he that alle thing mai kepe / Unto this lord was merciabile, / And broghte him sauf upon a table, / Which to the lond him hath upbore' (VIII, 628-31). Similarly, when the king's wife seemingly dies whilst giving birth and is put out to sea in a coffin, God delivers her to the shore intact where she will be miraculously revived: 'Of gret merveile now beginner / Mai here who that sitteth stille: / That God wol save mai nocht spille' (VIII, 1158-60). Apollonius's daughter Thaise is also brought to safety through divine intervention. As she is about to be slain by the henchmen of her treacherous guardian Dionise, a group of pirates leap out from nowhere as if in answer to her prayers and drag her away (VIII, 1383-95). She is swiftly sold into captivity in a brothel, but she is miraculously spared the loss of her virginity for no other reason than 'Bot such a grace God hire sent' (VIII, 1428). It is only now, after she has been saved through external agency, that she can, like Amans who will follow her, begin to exercise her reason in a useful capacity. She persuades her captors to free her from the brothel and goes to reside amongst the holy women of the city, where she uses 'the wisdom of a clerk' (VIII, 1483) to pass on 'that science so wel tawhte' (VIII, 1492).

The central episode of the Tale revolves around the reunification of Apollonius and Thaise. Having set out to find his daughter, Apollonius is blown once more off course by a storm and comes to rest in the city of Mitelene. The ruler of the city, Athenagoras, goes to meet the vessel, only to find the crew lamenting the fact that their king has confined himself to the hold, overwhelmed in despair at the thought that he shall never find his daughter (VIII, 1589-648). Having unsuccessfully tried to console him, being thwarted by Apollonius's refusal to say or do anything, Athenagoras sends for the maiden Thaise to try and bring some comfort to the king by way of her skill in song and through her wise words (VIII, 1668-83). But once again, these human faculties are not sufficient to bring man out of his hopelessness. The restoration of unity rests on a moment of familial recognition that stands outside rational explanation: 'His herte upon this maide caste, / That he hire loveth kindely, / And yet he wiste nevere why' (VIII, 1706-08). 'Kindely' is here indicates natural impulses (in this case an instinctive unconscious recognition of one's family) that act in accord *with*, because they are proper manifestations *of*, the divine will. This is the best type of harmony, with all parts of God's created order functioning in concord. It is not the 'kynde' that has so debilitated Amans (and others) throughout the poem, the natural impulse to fulfil one's base desires which contravene the moral and ethical law which God's order instantiates in society.<sup>72</sup> Even though the recognition occurs through their inherent natural impulses, it is still ultimately caused *in* the pair from outside via divine revelation rather than *by* them: 'For God, which wot here hol entente, / Here hertes both anon descloseth' (VIII, 1710-11). Thaise is once again the recipient of grace, but this time she is also its agent. As for the king, 'Genius

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<sup>72</sup> The best discussion of these two contradictory definitions of 'kynde' in medieval literature is still White's *Nature, Sex, and Goodness*.

makes it very evident that Apollonius cannot save himself, that only an external agent can draw him out of his near-despair' (Olsson, p. 224):

This king hath founde newe grace,  
 So that out of this derke place  
 He goth him up into the liht,  
 And with him cam that swere with,  
 His doghter Thaise

(VIII, 1739-43)

Nicholson has said of the various episodes in the Tale that

God's presence and his omnipotence are felt at precisely the times when they are most sorely needed. These incidents serve to demonstrate that even if things don't always appear to be working out exactly right, there is nonetheless something more purposeful that is in control of Fortune and the winds; and they prepare the way for the reversal of the character's fate that comes with the conclusion. (p. 374)

Nicholson's words must be taken to apply as much to the poem as a whole as it does to the 'Tale of Apollonius'. The *Confessio* finally tells us to have faith and hope in the guiding hand of the divine even when our rational faculties (inevitably) fail to make sense of the chaos, confusion, and despair that is the lot of the human condition in its individual fallen state.

The final Tale to which we must turn to complete our understanding of Gower's poem is the 'Tale of Constance'. Appearing close to the beginning of Book II it is remarkable that, in a poem in which so many of the Tales become subject to revision in light of future narratives, the simplicity of its message remains unqualified, and in fact returns stronger than ever, in the ending of the poem. (As we shall see, many of the traits Constance exhibits at the start of the *Confessio* are echoed by Thaise.) Like many of the Tales we have looked at above that have been crucial to understanding Gower's position over the relation of reason, will, and man's capacity to effect his own salvation, it is a story of exile

and return. These Tales model in either a positive or negative manner the argument of the poem in general, as the state of unity envisioned in the Prologue breaks apart, a solution is vainly sought in the capacity of the human faculties, before finally the soul comes to rest in the certainties imparted by revealed truth. If the movement of the *Confessio* is viewed as an outward journey of the soul through various epistemological and ontological dilemmas, concluding in the flawed attempt at self understanding in Book VII, then the ‘Tale of Constance’ functions like a beacon, setting down a marker of simple truth at the start of the voyage in the hope that it can bring the wanderer to a safe return. The ‘Tale of Apollonius’ and the moments in which Amans assumes the role of Gower are the return journey from that place of error, indicating that, through his grace, God does effect a return to origins and wholeness.

There are many moments in this well-known narrative in which Constance, with her unquestioning faith in God’s guiding hand, is saved from harm through divine intervention. Placed in a rudderless ship and set adrift by her step-mother-to-be, ‘He which alle thing mai schilde, / Thre yer, til that sche cam to londe, / Hire schipe to stiere hath take in honde’ (II, 714-16). A knight slays the wife of the family who took Constance in, and then tries to implicate her as the perpetrator. But an angel of the Lord forces him to confess to his deeds before striking him dead (II, 779-889). After Constance marries Allee, the king of Elde, and bears him a child, the king’s envious mother conspires to have Constance and her baby banished. Having been presented with a false letter, allegedly from the king, demanding their exile, Constance resigns to herself and her child to their fate unquestioningly. Discussing this section of the Tale, Peck remarks: ‘Constance keeps her sense of hierarchy in order. She sees macrocosmic harmony

despite her trials, and she does not question the decisions of her microcosmic lord. She simply does not know why he acted as he did. He perhaps had his reasons even though she does not know them' (*Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 64). What Constance's (lack of) actions here advocate is the complete suspension/failure of reason through faith in the highest authority of revealed truth that is so typical of the classic Augustinian position. The language Gower uses to describe the incident even anticipates the abstract interpretation of Esdras. When Constance is cast adrift 'sche the cause wiste nocht' (II, 1052), but ultimately the truth comes to light and the king puts his mother to death (II, 1226-309): 'For hou so that the cause wende, / The trouthe is schameles at ende' (VII, 1963-64). Constance herself is also brought once more to safety. Drifting into the castle of the depraved Spanish admiral Theolus, he is about to seize and rape her when, in a moment that is prescient of Thaise's prayer (VIII, 1383-95):

Sche preide God, and He hire herde,  
 And sodeinliche he [Theolus] was out throwe  
 And dreynt, and tho began to blowe  
 A wynd menable fro the lond,  
 And thus the myhti Goddes hond  
 Hire hath conveied and defended.

(II, 1120-25)

Peck argues in regards to this episode that Constance, unlike Chaucer's Custance, uses her wits to help her out of her predicament by convincing Theolus to check if anyone is near before committing the rape (II, 1111-19), therefore giving her time to make her prayer (*Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 64).<sup>73</sup> I would argue that this runs counter to the prevailing theological position underpinning the poem, as whilst Constance can pray, she cannot be sure that her act of prayer guarantees

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<sup>73</sup> See also pp. 25-26 of Peck's introduction to vol. II of his edition of the *Confessio*.

any response from God. Because ‘sche the cause wiste nocht’, as much (if not more so) of her macrocosmic Lord as her microcosmic lord, she can have faith and hope, but not an *expectation*, of salvation.<sup>74</sup> Constance both summarises and accepts this position when she tells her Roman rescuers:

I am  
A womman woefully bested.  
I hadde a lord, and thus he bad,  
That I forth with my litel sone  
Upon the wawes scholden wone,  
Bot why the cause was, I not.  
Bot He which alle thinges wot  
Yit hath, I thonke Him, of His miht  
Mi child and me so kept upriht,  
That we be save both tuo.

(II, 1148-57)

The final recognition scene anticipates the climactic moments of the ‘Tale of Apollonius’. Allee arrives in Rome to take absolution, before attending a feast in his honour. Hearing of her husband’s plans, Constance sends their son to attend the feast as well.

The king his chiere upon him caste,  
And in his face him thoughte als faste  
He sih his oghne wif Constance.

[...]

*The king was moeved in his thoght  
Of that he seth, and knoweth it nocht;  
This child he loveth kindely,  
And yit he wot no cause why.*

(II, 1373-75, 1379-82, my emphasis)

As with the recognition scene in the Tale of Apollonius, the father identifies his child due to their natural (‘kinde’) relationship. But again, this possession of an

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<sup>74</sup> The Latin commentary is clear about where responsibility for her rescue lies: ‘Qualiter Nautis Constancie post biennium in partes Hispanie superioris inter Sarazenos iactabatur, a quorum minibus deus ipsam conseruans graciosissime liberavit.’ (‘How Constance’s ship was tossed after two years into the regions of upper Spain among the Saracens, from whose hands God, preserving her, liberated her by His grace.’) Translated by Galloway, in Peck’s edition (vol. II).



instinctive understanding of the presence of one's kin does not denote any active agency within Allee himself. He is entirely passive in the face of his 'kinde' impulses, which are themselves simply terrestrial manifestations of the proper order of things. The recognition that entails the happy reunification of the family and social unit comes as a consequence of an external agency 'moving' the passive king, although 'he wot no cause why.'

### GOWER'S POETICS OF FAILURE

My reading of the 'Tale of Constance' is highly conservative, even, according to the semi-Pelagian norms of the late fourteenth century, theologically extreme; all agency is attributed to God rather than residing in human capacity for action, and it is only in this manner that salvation is available to man. It is a position that critics have often seen as characteristic of Chaucer's Man of Law when he tells his own 'Tale of Custance'. B. W. Lindeboom argues that in the Man of Law's version of the story 'self-effacement, or rather, the non-exertion of free will is an absolute prerequisite for the proper working of constancy and the attainment of heaven'.<sup>75</sup> However, Chaucer, being the proto-modern, subversive author that contemporary scholars so often like him to be, is often considered to be constructing a subtext beneath the extreme determinism of the Tale and the clumsy interpretative sophistry of its teller. According to such a reading, Custance can be understood to be more powerful than the men (including the heavenly

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<sup>75</sup> B. W. Lindeboom, *Venus' Owne Clerk: Chaucer's Debt to the Confessio Amantis* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 151.

father) shown in the Tale.<sup>76</sup> Helen Cooper has observed the tendency towards this type of reading in much modern scholarship when she notes: ‘we tend to feel uncomfortable with anything in Chaucer that resembles real piety [...] the new millennium requires a dissenting Chaucer, one who holds out against the powerful hierarchies of church and state’.<sup>77</sup> I have noted the reasons for the tendency to read in these terms in my introductory chapter, in what I have termed the desire to ‘read for the margins’ (see above, pp. 32-33).<sup>78</sup> More recently, however, there has been a renewed willingness on the part of scholars to consider the hypothesis that Chaucer would have been working within the socio-religious orthodoxies of his day rather than ceaselessly seeking to dissolve them into the Bakhtinian dialogic or carnivalesque mode. One such critic is Lindeboom. The position taken by the Man of Law in the quotation cited above is, for Lindeboom, not something that Chaucer interrogates through ironic undercutting but a statement of fact; the real author agrees in this case with his teller. In fact, Lindeboom argues that Chaucer revised large parts of the *Canterbury Tales* as a response to the *Confessio*, what he calls ‘the remarkable Gowerization of the *Canterbury Tales*’ (p. 46). His thesis is highly innovative, if not without its problems, but I want to examine it in order to see what light it can cast on the general direction Gower criticism has taken in recent years.

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<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Eugene Clasby, ‘Chaucer’s Constance: Womanly Virtue and the Heroic life’, *The Chaucer Review*, 18 (1979), 221-33, and Joseph Grennan, ‘Chaucer’s Man of Law and the Constancy of Justice’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 84 (1985), 498-514.

<sup>77</sup> Helen Cooper, ‘Chaucerian Representation’, in *New Readings of Chaucer’s Poetry*, ed. by Robert G. Benson and Susan J. Ridyard, *Chaucer Studies*, 21 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), pp. 7-30 (p. 16).

<sup>78</sup> It is pertinent to remember that the object of Patterson’s attack in his 1987 book *Negotiating the Past* was an academic status quo that Chaucer was regarded as a conservative Catholic Christian of his time, ‘the epithet [conservative] [...] meaning to imply that Chaucer’s religious beliefs are [...] the central concern of his writing’ (p. 7). That in the space of twenty years of criticism the dominant paradigm within which we examine Chaucer’s work has spun around to see him as actively subversive shows just how successful critics such as Patterson were in dismantling the claims of previous scholarship. But it also highlights how, in the hands of less sensitive critics, the implications of their work could be used to justify the rejection of institutions such as the church and state as being of any type of positive value in the life of the medieval person.

Lindeboom argues that the *Canterbury Tales* was rearranged from the initial four tale per pilgrim scheme outlined in the General Prologue, in which two would be told on the way to Canterbury, and two on the way back to Southwark, to the one tale per pilgrim scheme ending at Canterbury because Chaucer wanted to imitate the penitential and contritional tone of the *Confessio*. The *Canterbury Tales* therefore needed to progress in a linear manner towards a moment of revelation and conciliation. ‘The Parson’s Tale’ and the ‘Retraction’, which in its expressions of regret for composing ‘translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees’ (*CT*, X, 1084) strongly echo Gower’s denunciation of his own ‘truffling’, offer an interpretative key that stabilises the contradictions and disjunctions that characterise the work as a whole. As with the *Confessio*, the concerns of the various debates are not dismissed, but rather placed in a new context where they can be understood as part of a larger design (Lindeboom, pp. 3-12, 45-108). Lindeboom admits that much of his argument is ‘at heart, a return to Tupper’s old theory of the *Canterbury Tales* as an exposition of the Seven Deadly Sins and Robertson’s *cupiditas/caritas* discussion’, although it has been reached by a different route. Like Cooper, he recognises that resistance to conservative readings has been formidable in recent criticism due to the ‘glut of patristic exegesis in the later half of the last century which seemed to inure the Chaucer field against its omnipresence and set in motion all sorts of counter mechanisms.’ However, ‘It nevertheless is rather difficult to believe that the looming presence of the “Parson’s Tale” at the end of the work, carrying untold exegetical implications with respect to everything that precedes, should have been so *marginalised*’ (p. 26, my emphasis). Lindeboom has in effect reversed the trend of much Chaucer and Gower scholarship of the last twenty years. Instead of

looking for signs of Chaucerian subversiveness in Gower, one the latter author could only incorporate in a hotch-potch and unsuccessful manner thanks to his illustrious contemporary's supremely modern world-view and his own innate stuffiness, Lindeboom sees signs of Gower's conservatism and orthodoxy reigning in the more radical Chaucerian style, even forcing it into retraction and sober reassessment. Whatever the merits and problems of the argument, it certainly offers a refreshing and necessary new perspective on the relation between the works of the two men.

Of course, the argument that Chaucer committed wholesale revisions of his masterwork according to a more theologically conservative model because of Gower's poem relies upon Gower's poem, and the ending in particular, itself being theologically conservative. The desire of Chaucer critics to avoid the 'looming implications' of the 'Parson's Tale' are like those of Gower critics who stop short their analysis before dealing with the full implications of the *Confessio's* final moments. Succumbing to such desires causes critics to be unable to interpret works conservatively; they can only see the ends of artistic endeavour to be the articulation of multiplicity, subversiveness, and contingency, never actually the attainment or realisation of some kind of unity. It is this type of reading I have been concerned to respond to in this chapter, showing that it is both conceptually and theologically necessary for Gower to attain unity as a precursor to attaining authority, that such a process has to occur under conditions which are bound by a specific soteriology, and that they are therefore finally indicative of the presence of that system in the lives of all men.

Does this final position reduce Gower to a conservative acting with the clunking fist of authority? In all honesty, I think it does. But I do not think it

makes him uncritically and incomprehendingly embedded within or enchanted by the cultural norms of his time in the manner asserted by Aers (see above, p. 120, n. 15). Critics have been afraid to return Gower to a position of dull orthodoxy, which, as Lindeboom and Cooper point out, has also been the case with Chaucer. But I have shown that Gower, in his dull orthodoxy, was certainly aware of and encompassed all the traditions scholars have assigned to him in the glut of recent work on the *Confessio*. In this sense, he is a 'brilliant dialogic' poet, capable of considering all the dilemmas and deliberations that face humanity in its natural state, of seeing a multiplicity of view-points and articulating the tensions between them. It is simply the case that, having done so, he rejects them as wholly insufficient to effect the salvation of the individual.

Shelia Delany argued some time ago that the Man of Law's Custance served 'on the metaphysical or tropological level, as an emblematic model for man and woman alike' and that the Tale's 'theological or ethical position becomes a social or political statement as well'.<sup>79</sup> It is my contention that Amans functions in the *Confessio* as exactly such a metaphysical and tropological symbol, one who is indicative of the theological position that needs to be adopted by the disparate mass of individuals comprising society at large. It is certainly a darkly orthodox, conservative vision of man's potential in a fallen world, based primarily on Augustine's interpretation of the bleaker implications of Pauline thought, but there is a glimmer of hope. Reigning in the optimism of his earlier criticism, Peck has recently observed that we find in Gower's work 'a gloom that in a few instances reaches into despondency', and that 'he sees little hope for broad social reform; vast numbers of people seldom have a moral awakening

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<sup>79</sup> Shelia Delany, 'Womanliness in the *Man of Law's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 9 (1974-75), 63-72 (p. 64).

sufficient to make much difference in social revolution'. But God will guide a select few to enlightenment and salvation; 'there is always the possibility for the one good person to find repose in the peaceful, well-ordered estate of divine grace'.<sup>80</sup> Even if this position is considered to be theologically extreme by the scholastic standards of the fourteenth century, I do not think it need necessarily be viewed as such when taken by an arch-conservative such as Gower, one already upset enough by the peasant revolt to write the *Vox Clamantis*, and prepared to revise the opening of his *Confessio* in light of the follies of Richard. In my reading of the poem, Gower is an elitist, conservative author envisaging his own salvation at the end of the poem, but holding out little hope that others could follow in his footsteps. His poem then represents a kind of retrenchment in the face of the uncertainties of a 'disenchanted' age. Rather than take a proto-humanist position which never asks us to move beyond reason, Gower seems far closer to a Bradwardine, who 'Denies that repentance for sin can be made naturally; that, through this, grace can be obtained, and, from this, justification', and who argues that 'Faith alone can make us justified: works have no part to play in achieving that which comes from Him alone' (*Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, p. 83).

Nicholas Watson has suggested a context in which we might make sense of Gower's attempt to close off theological debate amongst his contemporaries. Arundel's Constitutions, issued in 1409, were published in response to the crystallisation of Lollardy and Lollard doctrine into a definably unorthodox movement. Watson sees it as

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<sup>80</sup> Peck 'The Politics and Psychology of Governance in Gower: Ideas of Kingship and Real Kings', in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. by Siân Echard (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 215-38 (p. 217).

inevitable that, in trying to eradicate the heresy – by censoring out of existence the discussion, writing, and preaching by which it was sustained [...] the Constitutions should have had a considerable implications for texts and writers not aligned with Lollard views, and indeed for the whole intellectual life of fifteenth-century England.<sup>81</sup>

The latter half of the fourteenth century saw a flourishing vernacular theology that was as innovative and daring in the subject matter it tackled as any comparable period in the Middle Ages, ‘boasting original thinkers of the order of Rolle, Hilton, Langland, Julian [of Norwich], the authors of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and *Dives and Pauper*, the *Pearl* poet, besides lesser figures such as Clanvowe and large numbers of mostly anonymous Lollard authors’ (‘Censorship and Cultural Change’, p. 832). We have already seen how *Piers Plowman* and *Pearl* deal with controversial issues such as the ‘Semi-Pelagian’ controversy (see above, pp. 153-55); in this they are indicative of how works that discussed theological issues in the vernacular could potentially invite censure on the grounds that they undermined the authority of the Church. To this group of texts we can add the *Confessio*. From the title of the work onwards paradox upon paradox heaps up in the poem as theological doctrine comes into conflict with the pressures and demands placed on man in the temporal world, particularly the pressure to fulfil that most base of desires, his natural passion for procreation. As Genius observes, ‘On desireth toward helle, / That other upward to the hevene; / So schul thei nevere stoned in evene’ (VII, 504-06). Raising these issues posed potentially fatal concerns for the sharpest of scholastic minds, never mind vernacular poets. Would the *Confessio* have been a work that fell under the type of censure Watson envisages for more overtly theological works? Yes and no. ‘Yes’ in that it clearly

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<sup>81</sup> Nicholas Watson ‘Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409’, *Speculum*, 70 (1995), 822-64 (p. 826).

raises multi-faceted considerations concerning man's capacity to 'schrive' himself of his sins through the operations of reason and faith. In this it represents, like the *Canterbury Tales*, a pre-Arundelian world in which these matters could be discussed and debated in the vernacular by people other than Schoolmen, and the potential for the individual to bypass the authorised hierarchies of the Church within which the spiritual life was regulated still loomed large. But we can also answer 'No' because in the *Confessio* this alternative path is only ever formulated as a potential; it never becomes a reality that Amans or any of the characters in the poem can take. The poem is in this sense self-censoring; as we stated above, it raises issues for consideration before dismissing them as inadequate. Citing the following passage:

Lete holy chirche medle of the doctrine  
 Of Crystes lawes & o his byleeue,  
 And lete alle other folk ether-to enclyne,  
 And of our feith noon arguments meeue.  
 For if we mighte our feith by reson preeue,  
 We sholde no merit of our feith haue.

(*To Sir John Oldcastle*, 137-42)<sup>82</sup>

Watson makes the point that 'Hoccleve's engagement in the issues of his day led him close to adopting a clerical voice even while he asserted the need to keep secular and religious roles distinct' ('Censorship and Cultural Change', p. 849). We find a similar case in Gower. He saw the world as it was, and saw that it was not good. He also saw that the consideration of issues proper to theology within the terms of 'humanist' debate, via which man was supposed to be bringing about a world closer to a golden age, were nothing more than hopeful fallacies, and that faith alone, regulated by the hands of the righteous few, was the only hope of

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<sup>82</sup> *Hoccleve's Works: The Minor Poems*, ed. by Frederick J. Furnivall and I. Gollancz, rev. by Jerome Mitchell and A. I. Doyle, EETS ES 61 and 73 (London, 1892 and 1897, rev. 1970). Cited in Watson 'Censorship and Cultural Change', p. 848.



effecting the regeneration of society at large. He had to write his poem to prove that this was the case, but in doing so only looked forward to the moment when he could bring his enterprise to a close: ‘It were betre to dike and delve / And stoned upon the ryhte feith / Than knowe al that the Bible seith / And erre as somme clerkes do’ (P, 352-55). We could perhaps make the case for the *Confessio* to be one of the most highly contrived and articulate pieces of literature ever written that is happy to come to the point at which it ceases to speak.

We can conclude this chapter by reflecting on the point that, even though Gower and Rolle shared a very similar soteriology, with an inherently bleak, neo-Augustinian perspective on man’s capacity to effect his own salvation and consequently arrive at a point of enlightened understanding, they both considered themselves to have achieved such a position. As we noted in the previous chapter, the role of the contemporary *auctoritas* was fraught with potential danger. For Rolle, the authority he gained justified both his unorthodox personal behaviour and his controversial mystical metaphysics, but he still strove in his writings to maintain a connection with the established norms of the Church (see above, pp. 77-81). Similarly, even if Gower’s argument regarding man’s capacity to effect his own salvation can, in theory at least, stray remarkably close to invalidating the role of the established Church in ministering to the individual (see above, pp. 174-75), there is never any doubt that, in practice, he considered the maintenance of the social and spiritual status quo to be imperative in correcting the inevitable, and inevitably divisive, manifestations of errant individualism.

The feature common to both authors that perhaps played the largest role in insulating their writings from critique or persecution was that the magnanimous decision to share their knowledge with others was tempered by the fact that, even

as they encouraged their reader to imitate the pedagogical scheme outlined in their respective texts, they make no guarantees that this will lead to success. Like Rolle, the tautological conceptual mechanism that allows Gower to envision the terms of a conversion from error and disunity to enlightened salvation seems to close the path behind him for others. Elevation to the ranks of the saved is entirely in the hands of God. To claim that, in pulling the ladder to salvation up behind them, their texts display a kind of spiritual hypocrisy and elitism is to risk assessing a very different world-view according to the imperatives of modern values and prejudices, but it may well be the case that it is this hint of contented satisfaction, perhaps even smugness, that one finds in Gower's work that has caused critics of a certain persuasion to react and try and rehabilitate him as every inch the benevolent humanist. I do not think such a drastic revision is necessary or warranted. The Gower we perceive through the nexus of the *Confessio* is inherently conservative. Certainly, he articulates the hope that individual men might engage in better ethical and spiritual self-regulation, but he holds out little expectation that it will happen. Crucially, any such programme of self-education and self-regulation should not occur at the expense of the authority of established institutional norms. To say all this is simply to see Gower as a man of his time and of his class, one who certainly considered the pressing issues of his day with remarkable scope and vision, but who nevertheless bore the imprint of all the prejudices that we might expect of a man in his position.

## CHAPTER THREE

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 BEING AN INDIVIDUAL IN  
 THOMAS HOCCELEVE'S *SERIES*

At the close of the previous chapter we saw how Thomas Hoccleve found himself in the awkward role of secular authority on matters of orthodox religious doctrine, even as he was actively supporting the Arundelian Constitutions of 1409 in their attempt to limit the discussion of theological matters by those without the requisite training to do so. It would not prove to be the only occasion on which the final poet with which this study deals found himself in a situation requiring him to tread with care. In fact, any pretension on Hoccleve's part to being content with the role of the 'merely' secular poet who 'Lete holy chirche medle of the doctrine / Of Crystes lawes' and 'of our feith noon arguments meeue' (*To Sir John Oldcastle*, 137, 140) implodes under the weight of evidence of his own work. Indeed, it is not just the case that we find Hoccleve pronouncing and denouncing on the errors of others in relation to matters of religious orthodoxy. His poetic oeuvre offers an unparalleled insight into the pressure for conformity between multiple aspects of public and private life in the late medieval period, how the boundaries of that relationship were articulated and policed in both real and conceptual terms, and what happened when those boundaries were transgressed. The bare outlines of Hoccleve's career indicate why he has proved to be such a tantalising subject for critics investigating the supposed emergence of a sense of private and individuated self from the Burckhardian simplicities of past scholarship. In the fledgling years of the Lancastrian regime he found himself as something of an unofficial court poet, acting as poetic legitimator in chief of the

new status quo. However, when we come to his final major work, the collection of pieces known as the *Series*, we find Hoccleve on the wrong side of the divide between truth and error around which Lancastrian society was organised. Having had some sort of a nervous breakdown or psychotic episode, Hoccleve was ostracised by both his friends and society.<sup>1</sup> Writing from the position of the delegitimised outsider, we find him in debate with the normative standards of which he was seemingly once enforcer.

I say here only ‘seemingly’ because the issue is not, of course, so clear-cut. As we shall see, critics have been keen to point out that in the first phase of Hoccleve’s career we find in his writings ample evidence of points of resistance to any totalising vision of society and singular truth, moments where he reveals the contradictions, evasion, and silences inherent in the project of poetic state-making with which he is engaged. The notion of him as simply being a convinced cheerleader for the Lancastrian regime, unthinkingly mirroring the policies and ideologies of the king and court, does not stand up to close scrutiny. Hoccleve’s early work is remarkably subtle in that, whilst it strives to create authority for the new dynasty, it also interrogates the nature and routing of power in late medieval society; whilst it seeks out and denounces error, heresy, and deviation from political, religious, and social orthodoxies and norms, it understands they perform

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<sup>1</sup> It has proved difficult to pinpoint exactly when this episode of madness occurred. Burrow establishes the date of the *Dialogue* as between 1419 and 1421 (J. A. Burrow, ‘Autobiographical Poetry in the Middle Ages: The Case of Thomas Hoccleve’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 68 (1982), 389-412, p. 395), whilst Simpson agrees that the *Series* as a whole must have been composed between 1419 and 1422 (James Simpson, ‘Madness and Texts: Hoccleve’s Series’ in *Chaucer and Fifteenth Century Poetry*, ed. by J. Boffey and J. Cowan (London: King’s College London Medieval Studies V, 1991), pp. 15-29, p. 17. Given that Hoccleve tells us his madness ‘retourne into the place / Whens it cam, whiche at Alle Halwemesse / Was fiue ȝeere, neither more ne lesse’ (*My Complaint*, 54-56), we can tentatively propose that Hoccleve suffered his episode sometime during the years 1414-15. This, and all further references to the various texts of the *Series* refer to: *Thomas Hoccleve: ‘My Compleinte’ and Other Poems*, ed. by Roger Ellis (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2001).

a necessary function within the larger social dynamic. As a consequence of this understanding that error is a necessary and unavoidable component even within a regime that proclaims unswerving allegiance to truth, when Hoccleve finds himself on the 'wrong' side of the divide later in his life he is able to manipulate the paradoxes inherent within the arguments of those in authority and make them work to his own ends. Having been complicit in conjuring the conceptual legitimacy of the new regime, Hoccleve understood how fragile that legitimacy was. As a chief collaborator in the invention of authority he understood that to argue directly with that authority was to invite certain failure, but that it could be outwitted by shifting the epistemological basis on which arguments were conducted.

The possibility of error stalks the *Series*, embodied in the textual avatar of the poet himself rather than projected onto conspirators and heretics. Hoccleve considered it impossible to reintegrate this errant individual into the body politic according to any of the normative models offered to him by tradition; the personae available would not do. His project in the *Series* was therefore to craft a newly legitimised space within which he could be 'himself.' It is fascinating that, rather than try and eradicate the possibility for error from his textual persona, Hoccleve demonstrates, through a dizzying interrogation of the normative standards through which proper models of being are judged, that the possibility of error is unavoidably inherent to all of them. As in his earlier work, Hoccleve shows that to err is in the nature of *all* orthodoxy. Unable to enter society on its terms, he adapts society to his.

## THE SUBMISSIVE SUBJECT IN THE MIRROR FOR PRINCES

Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes* is the most fully realised poem from what we might describe as the semi-official phase of his career. As Blyth notes in the most recent edition of the poem, the references to the burning of the Lollard John Badby (*The Regiment of Princes*, 281-322) and the fact that the dedicatee of the work is Prince Henry (who on ascending to the throne ceased to be a Prince) places the date of composition between those two events; March 1410 and 21 March 1413 respectively.<sup>2</sup> This places the poem firmly within the timeframe where it was likely to be influenced by the concerns prompted by the Arundelian Constitutions of 1409. Indeed, we find in the passages referring to the Badby episode a recognisable continuation of the language used in the address *To Sir John Oldcastle*. The Old Man with whom Hoccleve is in conversation with throughout the poem advises him to

Be waar of thought, for it is perilous;  
 He the streight way to descomfort men ledith;  
 His violence is ful outrageous;  
 Unwys is he that bisy thought ne dredith.  
 [...]  
 Sum man for lak of occupacioun  
 Musith ferthere than his wit may strecche,  
 And at the feendes instigacioun  
 Dampnable errour holdith, and can nat fleeche  
 For no conseil ne reed,

(*RP*, 267-70, 281-85)

Speculation on religious issues by those lacking the requisite training and authorisation from the Church to deal with such matters can lead them into conflict with the bearers of religious orthodoxy and divinely ordained truth. Such

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. by Charles R. Blyth, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 1999), p. 4.

has happened with Badby, ‘a wrecche / Nat fern ago, which that of heresie / Convict and brent was unto asshen drie’ (*RP*, 285-87). Commenting on what may have happened to Badby’s immortal soul since it died in sin, or perhaps we should say striving *not* to comment on the issue, the Old Man will only say

Lat the dyvynes of him speke and muse  
 Where his soule is bycome or whidir goon;  
 Myn unkonnyng of that me shal excuse;  
 Of swich mateere knowleche have I noon.  
 (*RP*, 323-25)

There then follows a series of familiar refrains; ‘For mannes reson may nat preeve our fey’ (*RP*, 332); ‘He that almighty is dooth as him list; / He wole his konnung hid be and nat wist’ (*RP*, 350-51); ‘As Holy Chirche us bit, lat us byleeve’ (*RP*, 354). When it is Hoccleve’s turn to speak he submits unequivocally to the Old Man’s vision of proper spiritual conduct for the layman:

I thanke it God, noon inclinacioun  
 Have I to laboure in probacioun  
 Of His hy knowleche and His mighty werkis,  
 For swich mateere unto my wit to derk is.  
 [...]  
 In alle other articles of the feith  
 Byleeve as fer as that Holy Writ seith.  
 (*RP*, 375-78, 384-85)

The poem’s focus on proper compliance with religious orthodoxy and unreflective submission to authority is indicative of larger issues that the nascent Lancastrian regime felt it necessary to address. As we noted in the introduction to this thesis, the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century was a time of unprecedented upheaval in medieval society, leading to what Leicester called a ‘disenchanted epoch’ (see above, pp. 19-21). The deposition of Richard II and Henry IV’s ascension to (or seizure of, depending on which faction one might be

sympathetic to) the throne arguably represented a fitting culmination of this process. Any pretence to a divinely ordained and inviolable royal hierarchy unravelled under the pressure of domestic socio-political strife, a failing foreign policy, and a brutal usurpation. As Blyth notes in his edition, the *Regiment* 'was written at a time when England was still feeling the consequences of the deposition of Richard II, which haunted the usurper's reign by raising questions about the legitimacy of the Lancastrian line' (p. 5). Consequently, the new regime's authority had to be woven anew out of the tattered fabric of tradition. Pearsall notes that Prince Henry was 'very conscious of the precarious authority of the Lancastrian dynasty, and of the need to establish its legitimacy, not just through the slanting of the Latin articles and chronicles of the deposition, which had been his father's policy, but through the more public mode of the vernacular'.<sup>3</sup> To this end we find in the *Regiment* that Hoccleve is effusive in his praise of Henry's ancestors. The Prince's grandfather, John of Gaunt, is

A noble prince, I may allege and nevene –  
 Other may no man him testifie;  
 I nevere sy a lord that cowed him gye  
 Bet lyk his estat; al knightly prowesse  
 Was to him girt – o God, his soule blesse!

His garments weren nat ful wyde,  
 And yit they him becam wondirly wel.  
 (RP, 514-20)

The emphasis here is on establishing the correlation between John's position in society and the intrinsic values he possesses as a man. John conducts himself precisely in accordance with his estate. His inherent knightly virtues are externally manifested in the sword that is securely fastened to his side. Even the somewhat

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Pearsall 'Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes*: the Poetics of Royal Self-Presentation', *Speculum*, 69 (1994), 386-410 (p. 390).



bizarre (at least to modern tastes) comment on John's clothing resonates in similar fashion, forming as it does part of a larger discussion on the clothing in lord's retinues. To dress incorrectly or inappropriately rather than in accordance with one's station is to invite doubt and confusion about one's social position.<sup>4</sup> John's clothes, however, fit him perfectly – the implication being that the regal vestments the Prince assumes on his ascension will fit him equally well. A similar eulogy to John occurs in the Latin gloss at line 3347, and we find one to Henry, John's father-in-law and the first of the Plantagenet Dukes of Lancaster, at lines 2647-53. Scanlon has perhaps put it best when he describes these sections as creating a 'rhetorical representation of Henry as dynastically legitimate with a long and honourable patrimony'.<sup>5</sup> Just as these sections are an attempt to affirm the legitimacy of the Lancastrian bloodline to the throne, so the Badby episode supports the conventional orthodoxy of the Church against the Lollard heresy. As an advert for the necessity of unreflective submission on the part of the secular subject to the authority of the Church (represented in the person of the Prince), Hoccleve's evocation of the events at Smithfield implicitly, but forcefully, advises a similar relationship in all matters of personal conduct between the Prince as king and the reading subject.

Of course, both poet and monarch were more than aware that disseminating and enforcing proper paradigms of behaviour required complex techniques. Discursive mechanisms of containment and control had to be, and

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<sup>4</sup> In his *Invention of Authority*, Watson notes how, in the *Officium et Miracula* compiled in hope of Rolle's canonization, the author goes to great lengths in trying to align Rolle's evidently eccentric process of donning of the habit with more normative practices (pp. 41-42). A similar concern over the exactitude of a person's dress is shown in the early parts of Kempe's *Book*, where her continued decision to wear 'hir pompows array that sche had usyd befortym' (ll. 256) indicates outwardly that her inward conversion has not properly taken place.

<sup>5</sup> Larry Scanlon, 'The King's Two Voices: Narrative and Power in Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes*', in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. by Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of Berkeley Press, 1990), pp. 216-47 (p. 232).

were, much more subtle. The most eloquent and sophisticated discussion of the poetic methodology developed by Hoccleve in his role legitimating the new regime is still that of Paul Strohm. Although not without its own problems, which I will address shortly, Strohm's argument illustrates the strengths and the weaknesses inherent in Hoccleve's poetic technique. Examining the paradoxes Strohm points out in Hoccleve's conception of power and authority with regards to the *Regiment* will allow me to show how they are similarly exploited in the *Series* to a different, self-serving end, rather than in support of the Lancastrian regime. Hoccleve possessed an 'insider knowledge' that supposedly inviolable and singular notions of orthodoxy and truth were not fixed and stable terms against which one could and would be judged, but rather were contingent, slippery, and malleable, fashioned in order to serve and legitimate the interests of those in power. He therefore does not directly contest the normative personae propagated and enforced by these dominant orthodoxies, but rather locates in them gaps and spaces, or fashions new combinations, which allowed him to craft an identity that both necessarily engaged with those norms but also was faithful to his own sense of being.

After being told of Badby's reduction to 'asshen drie' we are given a brief but theologically accurate description of his 'Dampnable errour':

The precious body of our Lord Jhesu  
 In forme of brede he leevd nat at all;  
 He was in nothing abassht ne eschu  
 To seye it was but brede material.  
 He seide a preestes power was as small  
 As a rakers or swich another wight,  
 And to make it hadde no gretter might.

(*RP*, 288-94)

The two typical tenets of Lollard belief form the recognisable basis of Badby's heresy. He has claimed that in the Eucharist the body of Christ was not physically present, and that, since the Church did not have the ability to invest or deny the divine authority to make a man a priest, they therefore had no special power to perform the sacraments. The debate surrounding these issues was of course infinitely more complicated than this. And in fact, it was this gap between the ostensible simplicity of the heresy as it could be represented at the textual level – one that can be summed up, for example, in seven lines of Hoccleve's poem, and need only be retracted to ensure the reestablishment of the status quo and reincorporation of the heretic into the unified social body – and the irreconcilable minutiae of the controversy as it manifested in the opinions of individual men and women from all levels of medieval society, that was invaluable to the Lancastrian regime. For Strohm, 'eucharistic doctrine [...] enters the present interrogation scene as a matter of prosecutorial convenience. The diversity of opinion on the subject, and its potential to draw even the theologically sophisticated out of their depth, rendered it ideal for the purposes of interrogative entrapment'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, 'the question of the eucharist had been deliberately installed as the litmus test of orthodoxy, precisely because its internal paradoxes and contradictions were so pronounced, and its own understanding among different camps of the orthodox so fissured, as to constitute a ground so uneven that no one meant to stumble could fail to stumble' (p. 47).

Seeing the 'debate' over the eucharist as a deadly discursive game in which the categories of 'truth' and 'error' could be redefined as and when required by the forces of orthodoxy and authority markedly qualifies Watson's

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Strohm, *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 45.

thesis regarding the Arundelian Constitutions (see above, pp. 194-97). Whilst on the whole the new regime would prefer seculars to stay out of religious debate, and in a larger sense for the authority of the entire establishment to remain unchallenged, if pockets of dissent did emerge then they served a useful purpose in demonstrating the capacity of the forces of orthodoxy to maintain the status quo. In fact, the argument can be put forward that, in the knowledge that the complete homogenisation of opinions between human beings would never occur, dissent was actively encouraged to enter the public arena for debate, with those in power safe in the knowledge that it could not and would not be allowed to win the argument.

The real question is always [...] whether the subject will submit in the end, whether he or she will stand by the determination of the Church. [...] The question is in no way designed to elicit information, but rather to bring the accused to a point of realisation: that he or she is captive to the political authority of the orthodox system; that the only available choice with regard to dissenting beliefs is to renounce them or to die for them. (Strohm, pp. 51-52)

The *Regiment* tracks the dynamic in Lancastrian society between the absolute refusal to countenance the admission of error into the social body on the one hand, and its unavoidable and disturbing presence on the other. On the Badby episode, Strohm writes that ‘Hoccleve bends the energies of his texts to an assertion of the representational divide that the Lancastrians themselves were intent on driving between seeming and being, outer and inner, counterfeit and real, material and ineffable, heretical and orthodox, illegitimate and legitimate’ (p. 146). But to try and stabilise a poetic vision of the new reign around this divide required holding at bay its own complicity with and implication in the forces of error, namely ‘the embarrassing fact of the Lancastrians as an usurping dynasty, [...] the extent to which misrepresentation and false display reached a crisis point

during their regime' (p. 185), and their tolerance, or even active encouragement, of disorder and dissent to facilitate the iteration their own legitimacy on the body politic. How far Hoccleve intended to highlight and interrogate these issues has been subject to some debate amongst critics. For Strohm and Pearsall, as well as critics of the psychoanalytic persuasion such as Hasler, the presence of contradictory elements is a consequence of a poet who was a genuine supporter of the Prince attempting to provide an ideologically coherent justification of a new regime that was riven with dissent, disagreement and doubt at both a real and conceptual level.<sup>7</sup> As Strohm states, 'Hoccleve's [...] aspiration to full complicity was unwavering, but the impossibility of Lancastrian requirements drove even the most resolutely loyal text into a morass of embarrassing half-acknowledgements and debilitating self-contradictions' (p. 195). Hoccleve is seen as unconsciously manifesting the internal contradictions inherent in the Lancastrian regime's view of itself.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Perkins argues that in the *Regiment* 'Hoccleve's intentions go beyond the complicit, and that some of the Regiment's most powerful and disturbing messages are generated by design'.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Ferster states that Hoccleve 'is responding in very precise ways to the real issues of the reign' and that the poem intentionally engages with 'major political battles and some of the uncertainties about monarchical power that haunted the first reign after the deposition and murder of Richard II'.<sup>10</sup> It is the latter view that seems to me more

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<sup>7</sup> See A. Hasler, 'Hoccleve's Unregimented Body', *Paragraph*, 13 (1990), 164-83.

<sup>8</sup> See above, p. 120, n. 15, for a comparative discussion of Gower unconsciously 'normalizing' and 'internalizing' contradictions inherent to orthodoxy's view of itself.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Perkins, *Hoccleve's Regiment of Princes: Counsel and Constraint* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1996), p. 138. See also James Simpson, 'Nobody's Man: Thomas Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes*', in *London and Europe in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. by J. Boffey and P. King, Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies, 9 (London: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Queen Mary and Westfield College,

convincing, since, as I demonstrate below, Hoccleve's interrogation of the categories of truth and error are very much 'by design'.

## THE MIRROR OF MADNESS

Having attempted to stabilise the identity of the Lancastrian regime along the divide between orthodoxy and error in the *Regiment of Princes*, in the *Series* Hoccleve portrays himself as being on the wrong side of the freshly (re)inscribed psycho-social divide between orthodoxy and error. The language of the poem assigns to him all the terms and conceptual markers which indicate the insidious presence of error. The first few stanzas of his *Complaint* summarise the main issues at stake. Hoccleve has in the recent past been struck by a 'wilde infirmite' which 'many a man wel knewe, / And whiche me oute of mysilfe caste and threwe' (*Complaint*, 40-43). However,

But alþouȝ the substance of my memorie  
 Wente to pleie as for a certain space,  
 Ȝit the lorde of vertue, the kyng of glorie,  
 Of his hiȝe myȝt and his benigne grace,  
 Made it for to retourne into the place  
 Whens it cam, whiche at Alle Halwmesse  
 Was fiue ȝeere, neither more ne lesse.  
 (C, 50-56)

Five years have now passed since Hoccleve considers his wits to have returned to normal. However, having thanked God for his salvation, he admits that he is still living in 'gret turment and martire. / For þouȝ that my wit were hoom come aȝein, / Men wolde it no so vndirstonde or take' (C, 64-65). The sense of anger, hurt, and

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1995), pp. 149-80, for a similar discussion of Hoccleve as intentionally working within the conventions of the period to interrogate the routing of royal power.

alienation which Hoccleve feels at his continuing rejection from society, as well as his ultimate desire to successfully reintegrate with that whole, provides the motivation for the *Series*' exploration of the relationship between error and orthodoxy, and how they can be manipulated in order to legitimate a person's public persona.

The fact that 'many a man wel knewe' of Hoccleve's condition immediately places his poetic persona under the scrutiny and judgement of the normative standards he himself helped to enforce in the *Regiment*. And Hoccleve makes it very clear that during his madness he undoubtedly represented the side of error. He describes himself as being 'A riotous persone' who was 'forsake' by his old friends (*C*, 67). The phrase recalls a longer description by the Old Man in the *Regiment* of how he was 'ful recheless, / Prowd, nyce, and riotous for the maistrie, / And among other, consciencelees' (*RP*, 610-13), and in the 'Male Regele' of Hoccleve as a 'youthe' who was 'rebel / Vnto reson' ('La Male Regele De T. Hoccleue', 65-66).<sup>11</sup> In those poems the error to be overcome is youthful folly, whereas the implication in the *Complaint* is that it was Hoccleve's madness that caused him to engage in dissolute behaviour, but in both cases the error indicates that the person exists apart from the rigorously policed and cohesive social unit (Davis, pp. 141-42). Even more extreme than the 'infirmite' which caused him to relapse into the kind of behaviour expected of the dissolute youth, Hoccleve portrays his loss of reason as so serious that it made him beastlike: 'Men seiden I loked as a wilde steer' (*C*, 120). In discussing the figure of the medieval wild man, Goldie shows how in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century literature the wild man was often a knightly or aristocratic character who had temporarily

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<sup>11</sup> In Ellis, ed., *My Compleinte' and Other Poems*, pp. 64-78.

lost his mind.<sup>12</sup> Crucial to the trope, however, was that the descent into madness was accompanied by a movement out of the civilised urban space and into the untamed countryside. Concurrently, re-entry into the city or castle corresponded to a recovery of the central protagonists wits, along with a new insight into the necessity to master the darker impulses of the human will. Hoccleve clearly deploys the trope in the *Regiment* where, having passed a sleepless knight ‘Musynge upon the restlees bysunesse / Which that this trouby world hath ay on honde’ (*RP*, 1-2) he asserts that ‘What wight that inly pensif is, I trowe, / his moost desir is to be solitaire’ (*RP*, 85-86). The perfect Lancastrian subject, Hoccleve takes his restless thoughts away from the city where they could do harm to the social body and ‘Into the feeld’ (*RP*, 117) where he meets the Old Man. Only after resolving the issues that were vexing him and ‘Recordyng in my mynde the lessoun / That he [the Old Man] me yaf’ (*RP*, 2010-11) does this self-policing subject allow himself to return to the city, where he embarks on the writing of the *Regiment* proper, itself a document pertaining to the matter of self-vigilance in the behaviour of the Prince.

In contrast to this, in the *Complaint* we are told that Hoccleve’s madness manifested itself right at the centre of the urban space. He wanders raving into Westminster Hall (*C*, 72), and Hoccleve twice describes how he roved among the ‘prees’ (*C*, 73, 139) of London. As Goldie states,

Hoccleve’s transgression is exacerbated by displaying his wildness in an inappropriate setting. The street corners of London are not a separate, special place opposed to the city for the symbolic performance of animality. He has crossed the boundary between the symbolic space and real space [...] In so doing he has figured wildness and violence at the centre of the civilised world’s rules and ideals. (p. 33)

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew Boyd Goldie, ‘Psychosomatic Illness and Identity in London, 1416-1421: Hoccleve’s *Complaint* and *Dialogue with a Friend*’, *Exemplaria* II (1999), 23-52 (pp. 25-38).



Indeed, the symbolic transgression of conceptual boundaries is accompanied by inappropriate and excessive physical movement:

*Changed had I m[y] pas, somme seiden eke,  
 For here and there forþe stirte I as a roo,  
 Noon abood, noon areest, but al brainseke.  
 Another spake and of me seide also,  
 My feet weren ay wauynge to and fro,  
 Whanne þat I stonde shulde and wiþ men talke,  
 And þat myn yen souȝten euery halke.*  
 (C, 127-33, my emphasis)

As with Rolle's alleged *errare* of both mind and body (see above, pp. 87-89), there is an etymological element to Hoccleve's 'brainsickness'. *Delirare* provides the root for the modern term delirium, but also means to deviate, go astray, or wander off the beaten path.<sup>13</sup> The overwhelming impression the reader of the opening stanzas of the *Complaint* is left with is of Hoccleve both literally and conceptually transgressing the boundaries he had been complicit in instantiating in the *Regiment*. The personal corollary of this sense of estrangement from normative standards of public behaviour is that, whilst mad, Hoccleve felt a sense of dislocation from a legitimate sense of being, because identity was only valid insofar as it fulfilled a designated social persona. Descriptions such as how his madness 'oute of mysilfe caste and threwe' (C. 43), how his 'witte were a pilgrim, / And wente fer from home' (C, 232-33), and the assertion that 'Debaat is nowe noon bitwixe me and my wit, / A[l]þouȝ þat ther were a disseueraunce, / As for a time, betwixe me and it' (C, 247-49), acknowledge the necessity within the Lancastrian hegemony for proper correlation between internal and external qualities, between seeming and being that we saw at play when referring to John of Gaunt. Hoccleve's personal nadir in relation to these issues comes during the

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<sup>13</sup> David Cooper, *The Language of Madness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 153, n. 1.

much discussed mirror scene. Through Hoccleve's analysis of the way perception works in relation to the categories of truth and error, the mirror indicates why he is still unable to convince his friends what he knows himself to be true: 'Manie someris bene past sithen remedie / Of that God of his grace me perueide' (C, 96-97), crystallising the terms of the debate out of which the rest of the poem will unfold.

The mirror scene is of course pivotal to the *Complaint*, and the *Series* as a whole, in that it offers an interrogation of the terms by which a self can know itself, and consequently assert that self as authentic to others. The presence of this moment of specular reflection offers inviting possibilities to modern critics of a psychoanalytic persuasion, as well as those in search of something akin to progenitors of the modern self (which, in practice, usually amount to one and the same thing). Knapp, for instance, states that the mirror scene 'is an immediate challenge to any who would still maintain that one cannot expect to find complex, interiorised representations of subjectivity in medieval poetry', going on to assert that Hoccleve 'quite intentionally evokes that sense of the uncanny that is particularly associated (by Lacan and others) with the mirror, a simultaneous presence of two images of the self and the consequent fragmentation of that self into both subject and object of perception'.<sup>14</sup> There is in the work of these critics an undoubted temptation to make Hoccleve a liminal figure in a narrative that sees

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<sup>14</sup> Ethan Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 170. See also D. C. Greetham, 'Self-Referential Artifacts: Hoccleve's Persona as a Literary Device', *Modern Philology*, 86 (1989), 242-51, also referencing Lacan (p. 247), and G. MacLennan, *Lucid Interval: Subjective Writing and Madness in History* (Leicester: University of Leicester Press, 1992), who discusses the self in terms of Keirkegaard and Adorno (p. 21). Stephen Harper, *Insanity, Individuals, and Society in Late-Medieval English Literature: The Subject of Madness*, *Studies in Medieval Literature*, 26 (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), p. 200, and Jeremy Tambling, 'Allegory and the Madness of the Text: Hoccleve's *Complaint*', *New Medieval Literatures*, 6 (2003), 223-48 (pp 241-43), both adopt more generalized psychological and psychoanalytic approaches to the poem.

medieval selves 'progress' to modern ones. Scott has claimed him as an example of early modern autobiography, arguing that due to the 'intense self-reflection' of the *Complaint*, it 'has many features that identify it as medieval but develops what seems a remarkably modern representation of the self'.<sup>15</sup> In the same volume Kelly sees the mirror as being a specific marker both indicating and facilitating this developmental phenomenon:

The mirror roots the seeing self in the realm of premodern nonreflexivity while gesturing toward those spaces and hidden depths within the self for which there is, in the period, as yet no commonly understood vocabulary. [...] the mirror's physical function spins the act of reflection into a series of epistemological uncertainties and anxieties, so that it becomes a trope of transition. Within the language of mirrors are embedded multiple reverberations, echoes, twists and contortions, and physiological and cosmological speculations.<sup>16</sup>

I am not averse to seeing Hoccleve's poetry in this manner, but, if the mirror is to prove 'a trope of transition' then it must be fully recognised what 'the familiar emblematic marks of medieval selfhood' established by the use of a mirror in the poem were before we can consider how those same tropes generated 'the internal distance and separation that gesture toward modern concepts of individuality' (Kelly, p. 80). There are indeed 'epistemological uncertainties and anxieties' evoked by contemplating the self in the mirror, but these can and should be explained first by referencing the normative understanding of how the mirror prompted self-analysis during the late Middle Ages. To do otherwise is to not simply put the cart before the horse, but to stand around cooing over the wondrous modernity of the cart whilst forgetting about the unfashionable horse altogether. Despite this seemingly obvious and completely necessary proviso, I can find no

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<sup>15</sup> Anne M. Scott, 'Thomas Hoccleve's Selves Apart', in *Early Modern Autobiography*, pp. 89-103 (pp. 89-90).

<sup>16</sup> Phillipa Kelly, 'Dialogues of Self-Reflection: Early Modern Mirrors', in *Early Modern Autobiography*, pp. 62-85 (p. 72).

example of a critic having considered Hoccleve's mirror scene in terms of the epistemology that was associated with the item according to medieval tradition.

The mirror was part of the general taxonomy of cultural tropes through which medieval persons understood themselves in relation to normative social values. As Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet states, in the Middle Ages 'notions of subjectivity and identity were first established within religious and social realms. [...] Against this backdrop, one who gazes at himself in the mirror strives to regain the resemblance that unites man with his creator and the solidarity that links him to his peers'.<sup>17</sup> The authoritative precedent for a person to use the mirror for this kind of typological patterning towards the ideal can be found in the Pauline Epistles, which itself traces a philosophical lineage back to Plato.<sup>18</sup> In *I Alcibiades*, Socrates explains to Alcibiades

Soc. Then if an eye is to see itself, it must look at an eye, and at that region of the eye in which the virtue of an eye is found to occur [i.e., the pupil, being the darkest part]; and this, I presume, is sight.

Alc. That is so.

Soc. And if the soul too [...] is to know herself, she must surely look at a soul, and especially at that region of it in which occurs the virtue of the soul – wisdom, and at any other part of a soul which resembles this? [i.e., the source of knowledge and thought, the divine] [...] whoever looks at this, and comes to know all that is divine, will gain thereby the best knowledge of himself.<sup>19</sup>

As Denyer has noted in his commentary on the text,

How a soul can know itself is explained by thinking of how an eye can see itself. An eye can see itself by looking at its reflection in the pupil of another eye; similarly, a soul can know itself by contemplating its 'reflection' in the

<sup>17</sup> Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History*, trans. by Katherine H. Jewett (Éditions Imago, 1994; trans. London: Routledge, 2001), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of one iteration of the Platonic notion of the ideal in the late Middle Ages, see above, pp. 61-68.

<sup>19</sup> Plato, *I Alcibiades*, in *Plato, with an English Translation: Charmides, Alcibiades I and II, Hipparchus, The Lovers, Theages, Minos, Epinomis*, trans. by W. R. M. Lamb, Loeb Classical Library, CCI (London: William Heinemann, 1927), 133b-c.

intellect of another soul. Moreover, an eye can see itself best by looking in a mirror; similarly, a soul knows itself best when it uses the best of intellectual mirrors, and contemplates the way that it is reflected in God.<sup>20</sup>

Grabes describes how the parable of the barber in John Chrysostom's Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew makes similar use of the notion of contemplating one's physical reflection in the mirror as an analogy for a more abstract kind of self-understanding:

The barber's mirror shows us what our hairstyle looks like and we compare this information with our idea of how it should look (or with the opinion of other people as to what is aesthetically acceptable). [...] Correction is therefore the result of comparing what is with what should be; it adjusts the actual to the normative. The mirror in this case fulfils one of the two preconditions for correction by supplying the unsatisfactory, actual image; the 'ideal' image must come from elsewhere (in the present example, in the form of opinions expressed by bystanders).<sup>21</sup>

The parable is interesting in that it makes a connection between social norms and spiritual ones that obviously become pertinent in light of Hoccleve's plight after his madness. It is also relevant to the general Lancastrian context I have suggested needs to be applied to his poetic methodology in the *Series*, on which I shall say more shortly. For now it is important simply to stress that a medieval person looking at his or her reflection in a mirror would not immediately speculate on it in terms of the subject/object split critics often turn to. Rather

In the Middle Ages, when the philosophical polarity between subject and object did not exist, 'speculation' was a consideration of a relationship between two subjects, like that between a mirror and what it reflects. This mode of thought embraces all the visible world in that it resembles the invisible, serving as a testing ground, providing the clues with which man rises beyond the known to the unknown. (Melchoir-Bonnet, p. 113)

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<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Alcibiades*, ed. by Nicholas Denyer, Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), p. 229.

<sup>21</sup> Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror Imaging in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and the English Renaissance* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), p. 141.

This imperative to conformity proves to be the crux of the mirror scene. Hoccleve attempts to make his appearance conform to ideal expectations, not of the spiritual kind, but of the social. After relating how he has heard tales of his wild behaviour and appearance during the period of his madness talked about by other men, Hoccleve realises that the sane self must fulfil certain socially determined and regulated requirements to be admitted back into the public body. To this end he tells us how ‘My spiritis labouriden euere ful bisily / To peinte countenaunce, chere and look, / For þat men spake of me so wonderingly, / And for the verry shame and feer I qwook’ (C, 147-51).<sup>22</sup> Then he hurries home and seats himself in front of his mirror:

And in my chaumbre at home whanne þat I was  
 Mysilfe aloone I in þis wise wrouȝt.  
 I streite vnto my mirroure and my glas,  
 To loke howe þat me of my chere þouȝt,  
 If any othir were it than it ouȝt,  
 For fain wolde I, if it not had bene riȝt,  
 Amendeid it to my kunnyng and myȝt.  
 (C, 155-61)

‘[O]uȝt’ here means socially normative, and Hoccleve readily admits that he would change his appearance to suit the public imperative *if* he could see anything wrong with it. However, when he looks at himself there appears to be nothing untoward:

Many a saute made I to this mirroure,  
 Thinking, ‘If þat I looke in þis manere  
 Amonge folke as I nowe do, noon errour  
 Of suspecte look may in my face appere.  
 This countinaunce, I am sure, and þis chere,

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<sup>22</sup> Knapp points out that the terms ‘peinte countenaunce, chere and look’ are commonly associated with manuscript emendation and portraiture, further reinforcing the imperative to conform to a ‘standardized’ public persona (p. 170).

If I it forthe vse, is nothing reпреuable  
 To hem þat han conceites resonable.'  
 (C, 162-68)

Observing himself in the mirror, Hoccleve considers that anyone with 'reasonable understanding' would not be able to perceive any error. However, there is an implication here, confirmed in the next stanza, that Hoccleve's ability to properly judge what is and is not normative, his 'kunynge' of where the boundary between truth and error lies, is hopelessly out of harmony with public norms:

And therewithal I þouȝte þus anoon:  
 'Men in her owne cas bene blinde alday,  
 As I haue herde seie manie a day agoon,  
 And in that same plite I stonde may.  
 Howe shal I do? Wiche is the beste way  
 My troublid spirit for to bringe in rest?  
 If I wiste howe, fain wolde I do the best.'  
 (C, 169-75)

The acknowledgment that 'Men in her owne cas bene blinde alday, / [...] And in that same plite I stonde may' seems to be a concession that it is his perceptions that could be out of line with public norms, i.e., still infected with madness. This poses a problem in terms of the consistency of the poem. If Hoccleve's principle argument is that he is sane, then why is he now admitting to fallibility? Has he not fatally undermined himself by admitting that, yes, his friends may have some justification in thinking him to still be mad, because he cannot actually tell for sure that he has re-established 'conceites reasonable'? However, in the next line we find the assertion that 'Sithen I recouered was' (C, 176), after which the rest of the *Complaint* is given over to arguing his sanity. How are we to make sense of this? Is Hoccleve subject to an error in perception or is he not?

The answer is that yes, he is, but that it is not a consequence of his madness. In the Chrysostom parable social norms (the ‘ideal’ image suggested by observers as to what is an aesthetically acceptable haircut) are presented as an analogy for spiritual norms (God’s *imaginem*), via which man can correct the actual (the unkempt hair or bad haircut/the improper state of the soul). In both its religious and social contexts the trope envisages the transformation or progression of a person from errant individualism to ideal states of conformity. Clearly, any such project undertaken by a person would be tested against the Lancastrian imperative to police the boundary between the socially and religiously orthodox and the erroneous. The mirror’s function as a corrective mechanism for the individual would thus be subsumed under the larger demands of maintaining the rigorously demarcated conceptual boundaries of the Lancastrian hegemony. There is of course no inherent difficulty in doing this – in the Middle Ages orthodox religious belief was always correlative to normative social structures as the best manifestation of God’s order in the temporal world. But as we saw, stabilising the idealised vision of the Lancastrian regime required holding at bay the undeniable reality of its situation in the temporal world. For Hoccleve, the same is true of the mirror trope. It cannot function as a means to realise an ideal self due to the material and imperfect nature of the image. However, we do not need to turn to any modern vocabulary to make sense of this problem. We can turn again to the Pauline Epistles to make sense of how Hoccleve understands his dilemma. Paul makes clear the limitations to which human vision is subject when surveying the ‘ideal’ *imago*:

Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate: tunc autem facie ad faciem. Nunc cognosco ex parte: tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum.



(We see now through a glass in a dark manner: but then face-to-face. Now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known. I Corinthians 13. 12)<sup>23</sup>

The stress here is on the imperfection of human vision. Perfect knowledge is reserved for the afterlife. But it was not only human vision that was seen to be the cause of false apprehension; the quality of the image in the *speculum* itself was imperfect. Plato registers the tension in his *Cratylus*:

Soc. The image must not by any means reproduce all the qualities of that which it imitates, if it is to be an image. [...] Would there be two things, Cratylus and an image of Cratylus, if some God should not merely imitate your colour and form, as painters do, but should [...] place beside you a duplicate of all your qualities? Would there be in such an event Cratylus and an image of Cratylus, or two Cratyluses?

Cra. I should say, Socrates, two Cratyluses.

Soc. Then don't you see [...] how far images are from possessing the same qualities as the originals which they imitate?<sup>24</sup>

The problem of the faulty image was easily transposed into a Christian framework in which the inimitable nature of divine perfection was a central tenet:

The first and greatest sin of the mirror is that of fabricating mirages and providing a simulacrum of Creation. [...] The mirror replaces divine reality with a deceptive world. The almost perfect resemblance of reflection opens up the same condemnation as painting: superficial imitation representing a plagiarism instead of truth. (Melchoir-Bonnet, p. 192)

In the mirror, the left hand becomes right, and we see perspective on a flat surface. To realise ourselves in relation to such an image would not be to take a step towards the ideal but to try to conform with a deception.

This problematises the relation of the flawed individual to the image, which is now also flawed. The faculty of vision in the individual could be flawed,

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=1&b=7&c=13> [accessed on 12 February 2009]

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *Cratylus*, in *Plato, with an English Translation: Cratylus, Parmenides, Greater Hippias, Lesser Hippias*, trans. by H. N. Fowler, Loeb Classical Library, CLXVII (London: William Heinemann, 1926), 432c-d.

but it is also the case that what he or she looks at could be a plagiarism. This is important because it opens the possibility of error residing elsewhere than in the individual. In fact, he could be right and the supposedly ideal *imago* towards which he is striving could be erroneous. And this, as we saw previously, is the charge made by Strohm against the Lancastrian regime as the apogee of the crisis of representation in late medieval culture. Whilst Hoccleve would never assert that the divine *imago* could be flawed, he knew the claims made by the new dynasty to similar perfectibility was predicated on a series of spectacular counterfeits, as he had been involved in creating the poetic prism through which they functioned. The mirror as a trope of self-understanding spins out an epistemological uncertainty between which Hoccleve is suspended: I am wrong/you are wrong. It is important to note that no definitive assertion that social norms are wrong is made: Hoccleve knew that to do so invited the weight of authoritative censure, that invitation into the discursive minefield to which Badby was drawn, and a debate he could not win, because it was no debate at all. Therefore error within the ideal image is only suggested and left latent, a possibility not fully realised but unarguably present. In the mirror scene itself, as we shall now see, Hoccleve leaves this issue unspoken, instead focusing on the error that can arise due to the first fault in the Pauline economy of specularity: the problematic nature of human vision. But Hoccleve has activated in the text the possibility that a mirror claiming to offer an idealised social image could be flawed. This is vitally important to bear in mind when we move onto our discussion of the *Dialogue*, where the friend who arrives is portrayed as possessing the attributes of a perfect mirror. The friend-as-mirror supposedly does not need to rely on the flawed human faculty of sight to bring genuine hope that

the erroneous subject can adhere to idealised norms. He embodies a Lancastrain fantasy in which the heretic, madman, and dissenter becomes fully transparent when in dialogue with the avatar of authority as a prelude to full submission. It is a dream which Hoccleve ostensibly claims to adhere to in his effort to reintegrate with society. But error is already abroad in the *Series*, and Hoccleve will actually show that the friend-as-mirror is no more perfect than the actual mirror.

Before we can look at this, we must briefly complete our analysis of the mirror scene by returning to the problematic nature of human vision as it relates to Hoccleve's moment of self-contemplation. The problem with perception as it is figured in the mirror scene is a general epistemological one rather than a specific psychological issue. The phrase 'Men in her owne cas bene blinde alday, / As I haue herde seie manie a day agoon, / And in that same plite I stonde may' (C, 170-72) does not refer to Hoccleve's specific situation (i.e., 'I am blind to my own situation, in which I am still mad'), but means all men are blind to the fallibility of their own perceptions. This is entirely consistent with the kind of speculation the mirror, with its heritage in the Pauline glass, would evoke in the medieval person observing him or herself in it. Even though Hoccleve knows that he is sane, he still looks in the mirror and sees that as a man (but, crucially, not a madman) his vision can still be subject to the possibility of error as it relates to an ideal image – in this case, of what sanity should be. He thinks that the faces he makes represent this sanity on the outside. But this is no guarantee that he has apprehended the ideal image correctly, and he could be behaving inappropriately in public. All the act of looking can do is suspend him once again between two possibilities, 'I am mad/I am not mad', even when he knows he is not mad. The best he can do is to recognise the necessary oscillation between the two positions. He cannot verify

his 'being' through the process of 'seeming', of being beheld, to either himself or to others. This is why he can alternate between stating that he has recovered (*C*, 176) and has 'conceits resonable' (*C*, 168) when looking in the mirror, but also be 'bene blinde alday' (*C*, 170) during the same action, in the space of three (admittedly confusing, but then that, of course is the point!) stanzas. According to the terms of medieval epistemology, he cannot definitively verify that he appears sane, even though he knows that he is sane. Melchoir-Bonnet states that for a medieval person 'in his self-study, he may also leave the reassuring boundaries of known models and discover a strange and troubling representation of himself in which he perceives traces of the radical other, and where his awareness of himself becomes troubled and alienated' (p. 6). Although I do not like the use of the term 'radical other' here, suggestive as it is of too many modern concerns, I think the notion of leaving the boundaries of known models is important. Hoccleve indicates the inadequacy of the mirror trope to address the concerns of his position. It offers him the possibility of appearing how he 'ouȝt' in society whilst simultaneously denying that appearing how one 'ouȝt' is any guarantee of a person's 'þouȝt'. If the mirror here does function as a 'trope of transition' (Kelly, p. 72) for a medieval self, a moment of the 'uncanny' in which the self fragments, it is nothing to do with Lacan, or anything else of that ilk. It arises out of very specific medieval conditions: a medieval poet interrogating the paradox at the heart of the Pauline specular dichotomy as it is realised under the pressure of Lancastrian psycho-social imperatives.

## THE 'GLAS' OF FRIENDSHIP

In the immediate context of the *Complaint* this seemingly no win situation is horribly debilitating. If looking is useless as a tool of authentication of the inner man, then it follows that other men cannot authenticate the inner man through the same method. With no way to reliably externalise his inner sanity Hoccleve is seemingly lost, prompting the troubled question 'Wiche is the beste way / My troubrid spirit for to bringe in rest?' (C, 174-75). We receive two answers to this in the *Complaint* itself. The one intimated by the larger framework of the *Complaint* is that Hoccleve finds a sense of closure within consolatory and contemplative traditions. As Knapp notes, 'Boethius provides the ultimate philosophical horizon to much of Hoccleve's work, and the widespread penitential stoicism that was grounded in the *Consolation* organises Hoccleve's many narratives of misfortune and redemption' (p. 94).<sup>25</sup> Goldie shows that in order to fulfil the precedents of the Boethian model Hoccleve has to suffer torment, only after which he can be cured of mental distress and confusion (p. 42). This process also corresponds to the *consolatio* tradition of the penitential lyric, as noted by Thornley.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, at the end of the *Complaint* Hoccleve describes how sometime after his recovery

Of a wooful man in a book I sy,  
 To whom wordis of consolacioun  
 Resoun gaf spekeynge effectually,  
 And wel esid myn herte was therby,  
 For whanne I had a while in þe book reed,  
 With the speche of Resoun was I wel feed.  
 (C, 310-15)

<sup>25</sup> See David Lawton, 'Dullness and the Fifteenth Century', *ELH*, 54.4 (1987), 761-799, for a discussion of how Boethius formed the general context for Lancastrian political poetry.

<sup>26</sup> Eva M. Thornley, 'The Middle English Penitential Lyric and Hoccleve's Autobiographical Poetry', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 68 (1967), 295-321.

This book has been identified as a version of Isidore of Seville's consolatory work, the *Synonyma*.<sup>27</sup> The advice is typical in that it tells man he has been sent his suffering as a consequence of his own wrongdoing, and to be patient in the hope of God's mercy:

But þus þou shuldist þinke in þin herte,  
 And seie, 'To þe, lorde God, I haue agilte  
 So sore I moot for myn offensis smerte,  
 As I am worthi, O Lorde I am spilte,  
 But þou to me þi mercy graunte wille.  
 I am ful sure þou maist it not denie.'  
 (C, 365-70)

As Simpson notes, 'This is the voice of traditional penitential authority, cited from an authoritative book. It implies a model of personal coherence based solely on one's relationship with God, in solitary acceptance of God's judgements' ('Madness and Texts', p. 24). By activating these various complementary discourses throughout his poem, Hoccleve seems to be accepting a 'persona [...] predicated in terms of responsibilities and duties with their correlative enabling liberties or rights' (Condren, p. 36). By adopting the Boethian pose Hoccleve finds a position within a spectrum of authoritatively sanctioned personae via which he would be allowed to reintegrate into normative society.

The dissemination and promotion of Boethian personae were expedient to those seeking to maintain a rigorous divide between orthodoxy and error. It fixed past representatives of instability within an economy of self-definition where compliant and unquestioning orientation within the temporal social body offered the consolation and reward of incorporation into the body of the saved. However, a Boethian persona does not allow for the type of specifically social

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<sup>27</sup> See A. G. Rigg, 'Hoccleve's *Complaint* and Isidore of Seville', *Speculum*, 45 (1970), 564-74, and J. A. Burrow, 'Hoccleve's *Complaint* and Isidore of Seville Again', *Speculum*, 73 (1998), 424-28.

'reintegration' that is the concern of the *Series* as a whole. Critics generally agree that in the *Series* the consolatory discourse of the *Complaint* is a feint towards this type of submissive integration into society, but that it is invalidated by a more active vision outlined in the discussion that takes place during the *Dialogue*. As Simpson puts it, the Boethian model 'clearly does not answer completely to Thomas's condition [...] The very fact that Thomas intends to publish the *Complaint*, as part of his poetic and social rehabilitation, itself implies the insufficiency of solitary resignation: any one who intends to publish his or her intention to suffer solitary patience is clearly not prepared to suffer solitary patience' ('Madness and Texts', p. 24).<sup>28</sup> Simpson's point is endorsed by Hoccleve's announcement that he has 'maad þis compleint forth to goo / Amonge þe peple' (*D*, 23-24) at the start of the *Dialogue*, setting the terms of the debate with which he will engage with the friend. Similarly, Knapp states that 'Although Boethius is inescapable, Hoccleve's use of the tradition is marked by a dynamic of constant resistance. Specifically, he deploys the language and themes of Boethian culture in such a way as to expose their social and epistemological limitations' (pp. 94-95).<sup>29</sup> The limitation of the model for Hoccleve is that although it provides 'a model of personal coherence' before God, it clearly does nothing for one's social standing in the here-and-now, a concern which, as we have seen, provides the real driving impulse behind the composition of the poem. But the *Complaint* does briefly outline a methodology that can solve Hoccleve's social concerns and answer the specific question 'Wiche is the beste way / My troublid spirit for to bringe in rest?' In doing so, it sets the precedent for the action of the *Dialogue*.

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<sup>28</sup> See also 'Nobody's Man' on the manipulation of the Boethian traditions in the *Regiment of Princes*.

<sup>29</sup> See also D. Mills, 'The Voices of Thomas Hoccleve', in *Essays on Thomas Hoccleve*, ed. by C. Batt, Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies, 10 (London: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Queen Mary and Westfield College/Brepols, 1996), pp. 85-107 (pp. 96-97).

In the immediate aftermath of the mirror scene we find a methodology for reconciling the self to society completely different to that of solitary contemplation and consolation. Despite the despairing specular contortions underpinning the mirror scene, the failure of 'looking' to serve as a suitable grounding for knowledge invites Hoccleve to offer up another model.

Uppon a look is harde men hem to grounde  
 What a man is. Therby the soothe is hid.  
 Whether hise wittis seek bene or sounde,  
 By countynaunce is it not wist ne kid.  
 Thouȝ a man harde haue oones been bitid,  
 God shilde it shulde on him contynue always.  
 By commvnyng is the beste assay.

(C, 211-17)

Man cannot determine the inner 'truth' of another person 'Uppon a look'. '[C]ountynaunce' does not make public a person's mental or spiritual condition. Most importantly, this is equally the case whether the beholder's wits are 'seek' or 'sounde'. A little later Hoccleve explicitly invokes the language of the Pauline mirror as it had been transmitted in the pseudo-Dionysian tradition of negative mystical theology, culminating in the late fourteenth-century works such as the *Cloud of Unknowing*. Referring to other men's faulty diagnoses of his condition, Hoccleve states that 'A dirke clowde / Hir sijt obscured withynne and wipoute, / And for al þat were ay in suche a doute' (C, 293-94). The total failure of the specular endeavour is again stressed; sight in man is obscured whether he looks inwards at himself or outwards at others. There are no grounds in either case for the secure establishment of a person's true being. Rather, 'commvnyng' is the best test of a person's inner condition.

It is important to note that the methodology adopted here by Hoccleve explicitly addresses Lancastrian concerns. His eventual rejection of one



authoritatively sanctioned model of being, the Boethian persona, is predicated on his apparent acceptance of another set of strictly delineated criteria. To say that looking is not enough to tell what a man's being is chimes with Lancastrian paranoia concerning error lurking beneath outward appearances. Announcing that conversation is the true test of a man's inner condition assuages those same concerns. In the *Regiment*, Prince Henry is portrayed as the enforcer and embodiment of orthodoxy, telling Badby 'If he renounce wolde his error clene' (*RP*, 304) he can be readmitted into the social body. Immediately preceding this, the Old Man tells the troubled Hoccleve

For and he keepe him cloos and holde his pees,  
 And nat out shewe how seek he inward is,  
 He may al day so sitten helpeless;  
 [...]
 Right so, if thee list have remedie  
 Of thyn annoy that prikkith thee so smerte,  
 The verray cause of thyn hid maladie  
 Thow moot deskevere and telle out al thyn herte.  
 (*RP*, 253-5, 260-63)

Confessional dialogism is here figured as a pathway to reintegration, as it tests inner condition against social norms to which it can then be corrected.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, when Hoccleve is discussing the *Complaint* with the friend in the *Dialogue*, he defines it as 'an open shrifte' (*D*, 84) in which the epistemological uncertainties of looking can be overcome. This full transparency between inner and outer achieved through 'commvnyng' is also explicitly linked to the unlearned condition Lancastrian authority saw as making for ideal subjects (see above, pp. 202-03).

I mene, to commvne of thingis mene,  
 For I am but riȝt lewde, douteles,

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<sup>30</sup> See Pearsall, 'Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes*', pp. 409-410, and Little, pp. 112-28 for an extended discussion of confession in relation to the *Regiment* and the *Series*.

And ignoraunt. My kunnyng is ful lene.  
 ȝit homely resoun knowe I neuerthelees.  
 (C, 218-21)

The fact that conversation is an instance of ‘homely resoun’ rather than the high flown rhetoric of artists or the interminable speculations of the philosophers and theologians is the guarantor that the inner meaning of the thing will not be obscured in the presentation. To excuse oneself of ‘kunnyng [...] ful lene’ in matters of self-revelation is as unnecessary as excusing oneself for ‘unkonnyng’ (RP, 325) in theological matters. The person who fashions himself so artlessly, an unreflecting reflection of normative standards of behaviour, represents the ideal subject of the Lancastrian hegemony. In the immediate aftermath of the mirror scene the methodology of self-verification delineated by Hoccleve panders to these fantasies, whilst also offering him an escape route from the developing Boethian framework in which he will, by the close of the *Complaint*, become fully enmeshed.

Having defined the method by which he will be able to overcome the fallible faculties of human vision, prove his sanity, and reintegrate into society during this section of the *Complaint*, the realisation of the means is deferred until the start of the *Dialogue*.

And, endid my compleinte in this manere,  
 Oon knockid at my chaumbre dore sore  
 And creide alowde, ‘Howe, Hoccleve, art þu here?  
 Open thi dore. Me thinketh ful ȝore  
 Sithen I the sy. What, man, for Goddis ore  
 Come oute, for this quarter I not the sy,  
 By ouȝt I woote’: and oute to hym cam I.

This man was my good frende of fern agoon,  
 þat I speke of, and þus he to me seide:  
 ‘Thomas, as thou me louest, telle anoon

What didst þou whanne I knockede and leide  
So faste vppon þi dore?’

(*D*, 1-12)

The dialogic universe in which ‘commvnyng is the beste assay’ that Hoccleve so wished for now springs to life. Echoing Simpson, Knapp describes how in this section

We are meant to imagine that just as Hoccleve has been penning his high toned lines of stoic resignation and tragic solitude, one of these late lamented friends has actually been pounding away on the door, trying to get in. The sudden enlargement of the dramatic focus suggests that the solitary voice of complaint and the genre of consolation it serves to enact can be made coherent only at the cost of a wilful suppression of the larger social context. (p. 175)

The entrance of the friend admits this larger social context into the framework of self-understanding available to Hoccleve in the *Series*. In answer to the friend’s question ‘What didst þou’ when he was knocking on the door, Hoccleve shows him a copy of the *Complaint*. Having read the freshly completed poem, the friend asks Hoccleve if he intends to publish it. When Hoccleve replies in the affirmative, the friend pleads

‘Nay, Thomas, war, do not so.  
If þou be wiis, of that matter ho.  
Reherse þou it not ne it awake.  
Kepe al that cloos for thin honours sake.’

(*D*, 25-28)

Clearly, like those friends described in the *Complaint*, this one is also yet to be convinced that Hoccleve’s madness is past. However, rather than have to resign himself to the stares of absent interlocutors, Hoccleve can now test his ‘conceitis resonable’ in his preferred arena of ‘commvnyng’.

The figure of the friend stands as the avatar of normal society and social norms in the manner of the Old Man or a Prince Henry, or indeed a Genius, holding out the promise of social reintegration should the errant individual adhere to his ministrations. Although no dedicated treatise was written during the Middle Ages dealing with friendship, per se, there was an extensive body of classical literature dealing with both real and idealised conceptions of what a friend should be and do, constituting a definite authoritative tradition which medieval authors were keen to work into their own texts and commentaries. Again, this has largely gone unremarked in most criticism of the *Series*, with scholars tending to gravitate towards a highly wrought metafictional interpretation that investigates how the *Dialogue's* retroactive revision of the *Complaint* as a text determines our reading of the poem (we shall comment on these interpretations in a moment). This desire to once again head straight for modern analytical paradigms seems odd, especially in light of the fact that the friend as an idealised figure is commonly associated with the mirror, thus providing a link between *Complaint* and *Dialogue* which Hoccleve cannot but have intended his readers to make, and yet which has been up until now totally ignored.

Although Plato dealt in places with the theory of friendship, it is fragmentary at best, and never amounts to a complete system. However, for our purposes it is important to note that he did theorise a place for the friend in order to satisfy the deficiency in the image we saw in the *Cratylus* (see above, p 221):

Man, according to Plato, must care for the soul that constitutes his essence. Like the eye, the soul must have a reflection in order to see itself. Like the eye, the soul cannot see itself unaided. To study himself, Alcibiades couldn't be satisfied with the mirror that Cratylus, the follower of Heracleitus in Plato's dialogues, used, where only a replica appears – a substitute for his forms and colours, but lacking both voice and thought. Thus the true mirror,

loyal, constant, alive, is the one presented by the lover or friend who offers his eyes and his own soul as mirrors. (Melchior-Bonnet, pp. 105-6)<sup>31</sup>

Here, rather than the aid to self-understanding being figured in terms of the divine, the true mirror is the earthly friend. In fact, the friend provides what the flawed material mirror, in its deficiencies, cannot: a true appraisal of our inner man. It fell to Aristotle to develop the implications in Plato's work regarding friendship in its temporal form into a complete system. His *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*, alongside his *Magna Moralia*, represented the most fully realised system of thought concerning friendship in the classical world. It is in the *Magna Moralia* that we find the friend and the mirror, and the friend as a mirror, most explicitly linked together:

Since, then, it is both a difficult thing, as some of the sages have also said, to know oneself, and also a most pleasant thing (for to know oneself is pleasant) – moreover, we cannot ourselves study ourselves from ourselves, as is clear from the reproaches we bring against others without being aware that we do the same things ourselves – and this happens because of our passion, which in many of us obscures the accuracy of judgements; as, then, when we ourselves wish to see our own face we see it by looking in a mirror, similarly, too, when we wish to know ourselves, we would know ourselves by looking to the *philos*. For the *philos*, as we say, is another oneself.<sup>32</sup>

To briefly consider the work of an author similarly concerned with friendship who was writing some 200 years later than Hoccleve, we find the imagery of the friend as a corrective mirror still present in the writing of Sir Francis Bacon.

Observing our faults in others is sometimes improper for our case; but the best receipt (best, I say, to work, and best to take) is the admonition of a friend. It is a strange thing to behold what gross errors and extreme

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<sup>31</sup> See also Klaus Oschema, 'Sacred or Profane? Reflections on Love and Friendship in the Middle Ages', in *Love, Friendship and faith in Europe, 1300-1800*, ed. by Laura Gowing, Michael Hunter, and Miri Rubin (Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 43-65 (p. 45), for further discussion of Platonic friendship, particularly its relation to *eros*.

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes, Bollingen Series, LXXI, 2 vols (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), II, 1213a10-26.

absurdities many (especially of the greater sort) do commit, for want of a friend to tell them of them, to the great damage both of their fame and fortune: for, as St. James saith, they are as men, that look sometimes into a glass, and presently forget their own shape and favour.<sup>33</sup>

As with Aristotle, Bacon asserts that to study ourselves can only lead to errors in judgement regarding our true nature, but he of course refers to a Biblical precedent when attacking the fallibility of the mirror image. The relevant passages in James read:

Estote autem factores verbi et non auditores tantum fallentes vosmet ipsos. Quia si quis auditor est verbi et non factor hic comparabitur viro consideranti vultum nativitatis suae in speculo. Consideravit enim se et abiit et statim oblitus est qualis fuerit.

(But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. James 1. 22-24)<sup>34</sup>

Here, the man who deviates from the ideal of the word by hearing but not doing is like the man who looks in the mirror and sees his own 'natural face' and 'goeth his way', trying to imitate his own flawed nature rather than striving to match the divine *imago*. The real mirror promotes a self-regarding gaze and draws man away from the ideal of the word, which is also his true self. In Bacon's analogy, the real mirror draws man away from the idealised model of behaviour in the social world, and the corrective is a secularised word given by the friend. His 'admonition' corrects the 'gross errors' that gazing at oneself creates. As Kelly notes, 'the glass of friendship counters scopic self-involvement. In observing and defining one's passage through the world, a friend can ward off the absurdities of pride and wilful blindness' (p. 76).

<sup>33</sup> Francis Bacon, *Bacon's Essays*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn., ed. by Richard Whately (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 304.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=1&b=20> [accessed on 20 February 2009]

It was the *Nicomachean Ethics* in particular that proved to have the most direct influence on late medieval discussions of friendship, a version having been made available in translation around 1246 thanks to Robert Grosseteste. As McEvoy notes ‘The availability of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the latter half of the thirteenth century made possible a vast extension of intellectual horizons for its first readers and commentators. [...] Commentaries on the *Ethics* proliferated in the course of the fourteenth century, since the book itself formed part of every university arts course.’<sup>35</sup> Books VIII and IX deal specifically with friendship, developing Aristotle’s definition of the friend as another self with regards to what responsibilities such a definition entails.

Each of these characteristics is found in the good person’s relation to himself [...] He is at one with himself, and desires the same things in his soul considered as a whole. Therefore he wishes for himself what is good and what appears to be good, and does it [...] And he wishes himself to live and be preserved, and especially the element with which he thinks. [...] And such a person wishes to spend time with himself, since he finds it pleasant to do so. [...] And he, more than others, shares his own griefs and joys with himself [...]

So, because each of these characteristics belongs to the good person in relation to himself, and he stands in the same relation to his friend as to himself (his friend being another self), friendship too seems to be one of these characteristics, and those who have them to be friends.<sup>36</sup>

Here once again we find a recognisable heritage of the friend-as-mirror who could correct what the actual mirror could not. The appearance of a friend figure in a poem such as the *Series*, with its obvious social concerns with regards to the main protagonist, which had already made use of a mirror scene, and which had laid out a methodology of ‘commvnyng’, would activate in the learned reader all of these

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<sup>35</sup> James McEvoy, ‘The Theory of Friendship in the Latin Middle Ages: Hermeneutics, Contextualization and the Transmission and Reception of Ancient Texts and Ideas, from c. AD 350 to c. 1500’, in *Friendship in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Julian Haseldine (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), pp. 3-44, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by Roger Crisp, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), IX, 4, 1166a.

associations. Specifically, the appearance of the friend offers the promise of reintegration for Hoccleve. The friend has only Hoccleve's best interests at heart, particularly the proper ordering of his mental faculties towards the good ('Therefore he wishes for himself what is good and what appears to be good, and does it [...] And he wishes himself to live and be preserved, and *especially the element with which he thinks*'). As both a pseudo-confessor ('And he, more than others, shares his own *griefs* and joys with himself') and an infallible mirror ('his friend being another self') he is able to provide the 'best assay' that Hoccleve saw as the only way he could prove his sanity. Whereas looking in a real mirror leads only to uncertainty and error in the act of self-comprehension, and the look of others at the self is equally fallible as a test of the inner man, the friend reflects back the true state of the inner man, testing it against social norms through 'commvnyng', offering correction where needed, and validation following the conformity of the real to the ideal.

Indeed, this path of integration is the trajectory most critics, to a greater or lesser degree, have seen Hoccleve taking in the *Series* as a whole. Doob's argument is typical in stating that the poems in the *Series*

have as their central theme the usefulness of physical disorder for recalling men to spiritual sanity. [...] In the first two poems, we see the movement from the actual physical madness caused by sin and eventually cured by God, to the moral madness of melancholy and despair finally cured by Reason and an actual Consolation, to the complete sanity and rationality of the humbled Hoccleve who is willing to combine the story of his own humiliation with other fictions and with a moral treatise as examples from which other men may profit.<sup>37</sup>

Arguing for the reconstruction of the fragmented self from inside out, where the error of madness is gradually expurgated through adherence to normative models

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<sup>37</sup> P. B. R. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 220.



of behaviour, Doob here summarises the general tenor of most criticism of the poem. Tambling states that Hoccleve's 'melancholia made him transgressive within the discourse of Lancastrian hegemony [...] But the move towards reterritorialisation, re-incorporation within the dominant order is present in Hoccleve' (p. 231).<sup>38</sup> For MacLennan, 'the poet tests his renewed self-identity in progressively externalised contexts, so that he is finally ready to re-emerge into public life. [...] a disabled self-identity is reconstructed from the inside out' (pp. 22-23). Harper argues that over the course of the poem 'it becomes clear that only an act of faith – a commitment to "ethical maxims" – can deliver Hoccleve from solipsism into truth' (p. 208). In particular, it is the act of writing moral tales (of which, as Doob notes, his own story is one) that critics tend to see as central to Hoccleve's recovery. In his edition of the text, Ellis states that 'the *Series* as a whole dramatises the reintegration into the community of the writer-as-solitary' (p. 31). Davis focuses on the fragmentation of the Hocclevean narrator through the personification of his various body parts and his mind, stating that 'His poetry does not keep the narrator "hoole" but rather parcels him into pieces' (p. 153). Recovery is effected through 'The translation of edifying, homiletic texts', a process that 'washes and rinses the narrator's soul so sullied by his filthy body. Vernacular translations of moral tales [...] remove a surface tarnish to expose a newly sanitary self' (p. 154).

A more complex analysis of the act of writing is offered by Burrow and Simpson, but one in which a path of recovery is still traced. For them it is the

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<sup>38</sup> He goes on to say that 'A desire towards an assertion of normality could account for the attitude taken by the sane Hoccleve towards Lollardy. The discourse that judges the heretic also constructs the self as not heretical, not different.' I am indebted in particular to this section of Tambling's essay, as it prompted me to make the connection between Strohm's work on Badby in the *Regiment* and the work of other scholars on Hoccleve's madness in the *Series* as being different orders of error within the same Lancastrian context, and consequently open to the same type of poetic manipulation and interrogation.

poem's incessant focus on its own textuality (what I briefly referred to above as its metafictional qualities) that indicates that Hoccleve has been able to regain his sanity and social position. For Burrow, Hoccleve not only includes translations of moral treatise and the story of his own recovery in the *Series*,<sup>39</sup> but constantly draws our attention to the process of their coming into being, giving 'the impression of a book whose contents are being inscribed, as it were, before the reader's very eyes'.<sup>40</sup> It is not just the case that Hoccleve tells his readers he is recovered, but that he demonstrates to them his recovery by focusing their attention on the act of poetic composition behind the very book they are reading. 'Hoccleve sees writing and publication of his latest book as an important stage in the process by which he may finally be rehabilitated after his illness and its long aftermath. Furthermore, the book itself seems to trace the steps of such rehabilitation' (p. 268). The possession of a physical item in the reader's hand becomes a guarantor of the author's sanity. Finally, for Simpson, Hoccleve's problem is that, because the public perceive him to be mad, any attempt to declare himself sane through a written tract will 'simply be further grist for diagnostic readings, readings which give further evidence of Thomas's continued instability' ('Madness and Texts', p. 21). Hoccleve therefore produces a sense of 'extra-textual' reality through the *Dialogue*, which, because it is not, like the *Complaint*, a text, but rather a 'real' conversation, acts as incontrovertible proof of his recovery.

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<sup>39</sup> Although he also made this point, stating that the *Series* 'begins in solitude and alienation, with the *Complaint*; progresses with the ministrations of the friend; and ends with the poet comfortably ensconced in the orthodox role of *père de famille*, responding to his friend's anxious request for help with his own wild and uncontrollable son' ('Autobiographical Poetry', p. 404).

<sup>40</sup> Burrow, 'Hoccleve's *Series*: Experience and Books', in *Fifteenth Century Studies: Recent Essay's*, ed. by R. F. Yeager (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1984), pp. 259-73 (p. 265).

More recently critics have been more comfortable in allowing for the fact that the potential for error may persist in the *Series*, complicating these teleological narratives of recovery. For Scott, the potential for error is a consequence of Hoccleve being an Early Modern subject who 'is at pains to fashion or construct a self to conform to society's norms, while fiercely defending the rightness of his own judgements about himself' (p. 97). This disjunction at first creates a divided sense of self. However, rather than integration occurring through acquiescence to normative public standards and acceptance of the public role of *auctor*, for Scott, Hoccleve's recovery is a consequence of the assertion of the private self, who is integrated and error free, whilst it is society, those who judge him, who are 'divided from the truth' (p. 99).<sup>41</sup> Goldie finds in the *Series* an admission by Hoccleve that 'he still has a long-standing, even recurring sickness' which 'contradicts his arguments for recovery in the *Complaint*. He is not well, his sickness can return, and even God cannot cure him' (p. 48). All we find in the *Dialogue* is the assertion that 'only the self and not the public can have knowledge of the self, and that the self is not well' (p. 51). This interpretation allows for the persistence of error in the poem, but its presence is seen purely as a consequence of Hoccleve's psychology, resulting in him being simply an uncured symptom of medieval society. The *Series* as a whole is seen as self-diagnostic, but lacks the power to restore the self.

Closest to my own interpretation of the poem is the argument put forward by Knapp. He sees the *Series* not as 'a narrative of recovery and consolation but a sophisticated meditation upon the irresolvable fragmentation of the self' (p. 163). It is the emphasis on the persistence of a sense of disintegration of coherent

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<sup>41</sup> Scott's interpretation seems to be a little too eager to find progenitors of the 'modern' private subject, ignoring the pressure medieval persons felt to conform to social models that I have been at pains to argue were still very much alive, even as competing attitudes proliferated.

personal being, combined with an awareness of the problem of defining a stable criteria for judgment of that being, that is crucial to my reading of the poem. In my own argument I have tried to point out that in the *Series*, error is conceived of as something more than just psychological. The epistemological uncertainties that Hoccleve saw as endemic to the condition of man in society when trying to define his sense of self made it ‘an elusive thing whether mad or sane’ (Knapp, p. 163). However, a reintegration or recovery of sorts is possible.<sup>42</sup> It is what might be defined as recovery by default, because what Hoccleve is at pains to show is not himself becoming a legitimised member of society with a role in which he can provide ‘stable’ readings of both himself and other texts. Rather, he demonstrates that the potential for error in judgement terrorises those who would proclaim themselves to be the arbiters of what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate, truth and error. In effect, Hoccleve makes a claim for his re-admittance to society on the basis that, ‘mad or sane’, establishing which side of the divide both oneself and others are on is not so easily accomplished, and that within the context of the Lancastrian hegemony even those who stand as the arbiters of authority could find themselves mistaken. To make this point, he undermines the authority of the friend, the avatar of normative social values that steps into the poem to ostensibly aid his recovery. Hoccleve has shown the paradox inherent in the mirror’s claim

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<sup>42</sup> Indeed, despite his assertions that the *Series* is not a ‘narrative of recovery’, Knapp’s argument seems to lapse back into describing one anyway. Madness is duly located in the *Complaint* (pp. 164-74), but when discussing the *Dialogue* (pp. 175-83), Knapp sees the friend’s continual input concerning the composition of the *Series* as illustrating that ‘Hoccleve’s poetic activity’ over the course of the poem is a ‘product of dialogue and negotiation’ and a ‘vision of collaborative labour and textual compilation’ that is representative of the world of the Privy Seal (p. 181). In particular, Knapp ends the chapter with the assertion that when the friend ‘finds an error, like any good colleague, he supplies an exemplar with the appropriate addition. The *Series* thus presents a portrait of the friend as a good copyeditor, and poetry as an art of bureaucratic collaboration’ (p. 183). I am unsure how, if the *Series* shows the error of madness being located and corrected through poetic collaboration and dialogue, it cannot be a narrative of recovery.

to facilitate the progression from error to truth. Now he will show that any claim that the friend-as-mirror can use 'commvnyng' to the same end is also flawed.

## THE REALITY OF FRIENDSHIP

Aristotle's dictum that the friend is 'another self' who 'wishes for himself what is good and what appears good, and does it' raises the question of how we define what is 'good'. For the purpose of this discussion let us define the self as friend1, and the other self, who wishes for friend1 'what is good', as friend2. Is it 'good' for friend2 to simply agree with friend1 in all matters, since friend1 knows what is 'good' for his own condition? Or is it the case that what is 'good' is held as an objective set of criteria by friend2, criteria with which he should aim to bring friend1 to comply with? Obviously, from both a classical and medieval perspective, the second situation is the one required by orthodox discussions. For Aristotle, to be concerned with what is good for a friend is to be concerned with helping him to achieve a state of virtuous wisdom, as the attainment of truth through this state is the proper goal of human action. As Lynch explains:

Aristotle associates the good man's essential nature with his rational capacities and with the practice of virtues; more specifically, he identifies the good and truly wise man with the practice of the intellectual virtues and with contemplative activity. Thus for the Aristotelian good man, to be concerned with a friend in himself is to be concerned with his goodness, with the cultivation of his intellect, with aiding him in virtuous and contemplative activity and in the achievement of wisdom.<sup>43</sup>

The function of friend2 is to align friend1 with transcendental absolutes, achieving what the flawed image that appears when friend1 looks at himself in a

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<sup>43</sup> Asandra Lynch, *Philosophy and Friendship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 167. See also Paul Schollmeier, *Other Selves: Aristotle on Personal and Political Friendship* (New York: State University Press, 1994), pp. 28-30 (p. 48).

material mirror is unable to do. Cicero's formulation of friendship is, as one would expect, firmly based in the Aristotelian model, and he offers an identical formulation of the friend as mirror image: 'he who looks upon a true friend, looks, as it were, upon a sort of image of himself'.<sup>44</sup> His definition of friendship as 'nothing else than an accord in all things, human and divine, conjoined with mutual goodwill and affection' (*de amicitia*, vi, 20), and the derivation of the notion of *amicitia* from *amor*, was widely interpreted by Christian commentators as illustrating the loving relationship between man and Christ as part of the larger spiritualisation of structures of social relations. 'Divine sanction thus underlined friendship's value as a social institution along with its duties and norms of behaviour' (Oschema, pp. 46-47).

Readings of Cicero by the first wave of Christian commentators understandably emphasised the spiritual dimension that could be taken from his *Laelius*. However, in comparison with the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Laelius* is very much concerned with the role of friendship in its socio-political aspects. The function of friend2 is still defined as being principally corrective of errors in friend1 in order to bring friend1 into compliance with an idealised pattern of behaviour. But the ideal is structured around what Laelius, in referring to his own relationship with the deceased Scipio, calls 'the whole essence of friendship – the most complete agreement in policy, pursuits, and in opinions' (*de amicitia*, iv, 15). These are clearly intended to indicate secular fields of interest. Friend2 must 'dare to give true advice with all frankness; in friendship let the influence of friends who are wise counsellors be paramount, and let that influence be employed in advising, not only with frankness, but, if the occasion demands, even

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<sup>44</sup> Cicero, *de amicitia*, in *De senectute, de amicitia, de divinatione*, trans. by William Armistead Falconer, Loeb Classical Library, MCMXXX (London: William Heinemann, 1923), vi, 23.

with sternness, and let the advice be followed when given' (xiii, 44). Cicero also offers an explicit rebuttal of friend2 agreeing with friend1's assessment of his own condition. The worst limitation of friendship is 'that whatever value a man places upon himself, the same value should be placed upon him by his friends'. This is because 'often in some men [friend1] the spirit is too dejected, or the hope of bettering their fortune is too faint. Therefore, it is not the province of a friend [friend2], in such a case, to have the same estimate of another that the other has of himself, but rather his duty to strive with all his might to arouse his friend's prostrate soul and lead it to a livelier hope and into a better train of thought' (xvi, 59).

What is striking about both Aristotle and Cicero's conception of ideal friendship is that it does not seem to countenance the possibility for a third definition of the 'good', one which is an agreement of compromise reached through discussion. It is always the prerogative of friend1 to conform to the advice of friend2, since this friend, in acting in accordance with what is 'good', can only be acting in the best interests of both – and, by implication, ordered society as a whole. The transcendental ideal found in Aristotle and the social ideal found in Cicero was readily mixed and distilled into the context of late medieval socio-political debate, where compliance with the strictly delimited Lancastrian 'good' became an imperative. As we have seen in the case of the Badby episode in the *Regiment*, in the context of the Lancastrian hegemony, 'commvnyng' was not conceived of as a methodology in which goodness (orthodoxy) could be defined through negotiation as a mid-point between prior truth and error. The choice for friend1, like that faced by the heretic, is predicated in an either/or configuration: acquiesce to the conceptual and behavioural paradigm outlined by

the bearer of social norms (Henry/confessor/friend2) or remain excluded. The need to have one's 'prostrate soul' led into a 'better train of thought' by another self takes on an entirely new urgency in the context of Lancastrian purges and burnings.<sup>45</sup>

It has been a key tenet to my own argument, drawing on Strohm's work, that the assertion of the ideal can only be achieved through the suppression of the real in Lancastrian culture. Since the trope of the friend-as-mirror, as it arrives through classical philosophy, serves so neatly as a means to promote compliance amongst those subject to 'commvnyng', could it be the case that these classical theories are marked by the same evasions? If we look at the texts again, we find that they do register these tensions, both implicitly and explicitly. Various conceptual problems arise for both Aristotle and Cicero when they try to assert the primacy of their notions of an ideal unity and affinity between friends against the realities of a socio-political context that is fragmented and riven with self-interest. As Lynch shows, Aristotle's ideal model is predicated on a forced silence that suppressed the possibility of difference between friends owing to concrete historical circumstances. Aristotle did in fact consider his notion of friendship in terms of its manifestation as social phenomena, but only to dismiss them as irrelevant. True *philia* based in the pursuit of virtue was one of three types, the other two being friendships of advantage, in which practical benefit was sought out between

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<sup>45</sup> Here I must make one disclaimer. I am not suggesting that for a madman not to submit to the directions of an authoritative interlocutor presented the same threat as a dissenter or an heretic in the eyes of those in power. In this sense there was far less at stake for Hoccleve in chancing his arm and contesting the authority of the social body's sole dominion over definitions of truth and error. What my argument is meant to indicate is that, because he understood how definitions of truth and error were assigned and regulated due to his previous role as pseudo court-poet, Hoccleve was able to equate his position as an accused madman as being, within the conceptual structure of power and authority current at the time he wrote the *Series*, equivalent to the position of the accused heretic. He would obviously be aware that the two positions were not equivalent in terms of the consequences of what would happen if he failed in his gambit. 'Exclusion' for him meant only continued shunning by society. 'Exclusion' for the heretic meant death.



participants, and friendships of pleasure (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 3). According to Lynch, Aristotle's focus on the ideal or perfect kind of friendship 'reflects an inclination to search for best instances but it also creates a tension between actual friendships and the ideal form' (p. 16) because it deliberately avoids considering the realities of friendship in its socio-political context.

Aristotle's civic ideal of the polis as a community of friends [...] was vitiated by the restriction of citizenship to a minority or the inhabitants of the state, by the practice of slavery, by the rigid sexual division of labour, and by the rejection of the family as an institutional framework of socialisation. Thus the ideal appears to have been maintained only by the exclusion of those who would threaten its cohesion. This exclusion minimises the potential for conflict between citizens with competing conceptions of the good; but it also turns a blind eye to difference within the community of friends. (Lynch, p. 75)

Price highlights what seems to be the crucial issue in this regard. Referring to Aristotle's conception of a 'perfect' friend being another self who does 'what is good' for the other:

Yet from my point of view [friend1] it adds nothing to require [...] that they [friend2] be good men; for within my perspective being good and having a character like mine are equivalent, and it no more underpins the perspective that it is mine than it undermines it that it may not be somebody else's. This more permissive conception of friendship (explicitly so if it replaces talk of goodness by talk of likeness, effectively so if it keeps talk of goodness but leaves notions of goodness as matters of taste or opinion) is suggested, at least to a modern reader.<sup>46</sup>

Here, the 'good' does not refer to objective criteria, but is defined conditionally. In its most basic formulation, this can be stated simply by saying that one man's good [friend1] is not the same as another's [friend2]. This ambiguity in Aristotelian thought introduces the question of relative goods (an error that is good) into a conceptual framework, be it Hellenistic or Lancastrian, which sought to maintain the strict representational divide between truth and error. What Price

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<sup>46</sup> A. W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), p. 127.

calls the 'permissive conception of friendship' questions whether friendship in its ideal form can address the reality of human experience, not at an interiorised and subjective level (although it does of course offer this potential), but at the level of lived experience in the public domain, which is, as I have emphasised over the course of this thesis, where the medieval subject considered his or her sense of being to be primarily validated. Projected into the domain of the real, Derrida suggests that 'there is no longer a friend in the sense of what the entire tradition has taught us'. Whilst Aristotle instantiates a paradigm of what human relations should be, that paradigm is 'blurred, complicated, neutralised' by the constant pressure of excluding what it cannot acknowledge.<sup>47</sup> This is the same pressure we have identified as undermining Lancastrian fantasies of complete division along the divide of truth and error: the presence of error at the heart of a usurping regime. Exemplars of the ideal cannot properly acknowledge this ambiguity, for obvious reasons. But it is there, and it offers a potential gap for exploitation to those accused of standing on the wrong side of the authoritative line.

In Cicero's more nuanced treatment of friendship he traces out the tensions in the ideal model of friendship that Aristotle could not or would not acknowledge. Starting from the familiar premise that 'there should be between [friends] complete harmony of opinions and inclinations in everything without exception' his train of thought momentarily causes him to define 'good' behaviour as being when friend2 agrees with friend1, even if by doing so it conflicts with normative social demands: 'even if by some chance the wishes of a friend [friend1] are not altogether honourable and require to be forwarded in matters which involve his life or reputation, we [friend2] should turn aside from

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<sup>47</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London, New York: Verso, 1997), pp. 299-300.

the straight path'. Perhaps sensing he is on dangerous ground here, Cicero immediately retreats to a more orthodox position, adding 'provided, however, utter disgrace does not follow, for there are limits to the indulgence which can be allowed to a friendship' (*de amicitia*, xvii, 61). This important passage clearly envisages a context in which dissent from social norms is countenanced under certain conditions – the assertion that a friend should 'turn aside from the straight path' ('*declinandum de via sit*') to help another anticipates Rolle's *errare* and Hoccleve *delirare*. However, on what those conditions might be Cicero is tellingly vague. There is no further elaboration of how one should balance the need to stick by a friend with regard to matters 'not altogether honourable' with the need to avoid 'disgrace', nor what constitute matters of 'life or reputation' within this context. Cicero immediately goes on to say that 'We ought, therefore, to chose men who are firm, steadfast and constant' (xvii, 61), which seems to imply that simply by choosing friends with these qualities they would know by virtue of their nature as 'good' friends when to 'turn aside from the straight path' and when to lead the erring friend back to it so he can avoid disgrace.

However, it is clear that Cicero holds out little hope of finding such a man in the context of the Roman Republic. 'True friendships are very hard to find among those whose time is spent in office or in business of public kind' because when men's own affairs are prosperous they 'hold a friend of little value', or they 'abandon him when his are adverse' (xvii, 64). As Lynch points out,

In principle, *amicitia* might well have acted as a civic bond, but in the context of the fierce political partisanship of the late Roman Republic it became a fragile and pragmatic relationship. It came to consist of rendering services and protection between *amici* in pursuit of power, public office and the spoils associated with the expansion of the Roman Empire. The word *amicitia* was once used interchangeably with *factio* to refer to a band of friends; however, *factio* gradually acquired a pejorative connotation. By the time of the late Roman Republic *amicitia* had largely degenerated into *factio*,

so that the language of friendship was employed as a disguise for political conspiracy. (pp. 55-56)

Cicero never gets as far as defining how the 'good' friend distinguishes between when to adhere to relative good and when to adhere to absolute good because he does not think that in the context outlined by Lynch he will ever find a 'good' man anyway. The hope of defining a framework in which the 'good' friend could legitimately authorise error is shut off because there is always the possibility that the 'good' friend is in fact no friend at all. An ideal friend<sup>2</sup> approaching friend<sup>1</sup> with benevolent advice carried the threat of surveillance and betrayal. Friend<sup>2</sup> may agree to follow friend<sup>1</sup> off the straight path only with the intention of reporting where the latter is going. We find in Cicero an awareness of the ambiguity in the ideal model of friendship between relative and absolute good. The figure of the 'good' friend offers the hope of Price's permissive model of friendship as well as the more orthodox model that aims at bringing the erroneous self into alignment with social norms. But we also find a nascent fear that, when attempting to explore the possibilities of permissive friendship and relative good, the orthodox friend could become authoritarian, wielding the language of friendship to search out, interrogate and discipline rather than to gently correct and absolve. It also invites suspicion and mutual distrust with regards to motives and ends of moments of 'commvnyng' that promise recovery and reintegration.

It should not need to be explained in any great detail the real and conceptual parallels between the Roman Republic of Cicero and the late medieval Lancastrian regime. I am not, of course, suggesting that medieval authors had detailed historical knowledge of Roman politics. But it was undoubtedly the case that they saw the parallels between the issues and problems of their own time and

those dealt with by Cicero, both in theory and in practice.<sup>48</sup> In fact, they were quite prepared to articulate and elaborate the ambiguities and paradoxes implicit in classical models, paying particular attention to the problems of relative goods and under what circumstances it was proper to dissent from normative standards of behaviour, as well as recognising that a language of friendship functioned as a matter of political and personal expedience, for all its claims to be directing interlocutors towards the ideal. For instance, with regards to the issue of when it is proper to dissent from orthodox behaviour, McEvoy describes how in the twelfth century, John of Salisbury encountered in Gellius's *Noctes Atticae* 'a lengthy account of Cicero's [...] regarding topics such as whether it is always forbidden to do wrong when a friend's life or reputation is at stake' (p. 28). Similarly, Oschema notes that the question discussed in antiquity of 'whether the obligations towards friends could be more important and more binding than civic duties towards the *res publica*' was revived during the twelfth century when Salisbury 'discussed the legitimacy of tyrannicide and Abelard underlined the importance of the individual's conscience'. Oschema argues that although 'No treatise actually legitimised revolutionary acts in the name of friendship' the fact that 'philosophers and theologians started to ask the question' was significant because it increased the 'discursive options which were at the disposition of the authors' (p. 52). Aquinas deals with the notion of relative 'goods' by arguing that the lack of complete 'accord in all things' between two people does not mean that they cannot be called friends. Disagreements can and will occur in friendships because although the friends have a formal union of wills, in as much as they both will

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<sup>48</sup> In fact, as McEvoy notes, having recovered the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the earliest medieval commentators on books VIII and IX recognized it as the source for the *Laelius*, and hence paid little attention to the Roman text (p. 27). They were therefore making explicit the same evasions and silences that modern commentators have been keen to deal with in Aristotle's thinking.

what is ‘good’ for each other, their material wills, which are their opinions on the best method of obtaining what is ‘good’, will differ due to incomplete human knowledge.<sup>49</sup>

In linguistic terms, Alan Bray identifies the ‘language of friendship’ being employed to commemorate the deaths of the knights Sir William Neville and Sir John Clanvowe, who died within four days of each other in October 1391. The orientation of the heraldry, and the facing helmets on the imagery of the tomb as if in a kiss, indicate they were *fratres iurati* (sworn brothers), whilst the chronicle entry at Westminster Abbey records

It was also on 17 October that in a village near Constantinople in Greece the life of Sir John Clanvowe, a distinguished knight, came to its close, causing his companion on the march, Sir William Neville, for whom his love was no less than for himself, such inconsolable sorrow that he never took food again and two days afterward breathed his last, greatly mourned, in the same village.<sup>50</sup>

Bray then traces the dissemination of this model of sworn brotherhood through the writings of Chaucer, who was himself part of Clanvowe and Neville’s circle. He notes its presence in the ‘Knight’s Tale’, but also finds it is depicted in non-chivalric society, in, for instance, the ‘Shipman’s Tale’, the ‘Friar’s Tale’, and the ‘Pardoner’s Tale’. Looking at late medieval culture more generally, Bray states that although it is:

difficult to say how common sworn brotherhood was in strictly statistical terms [...] The most telling evidence is [...] the impression one has in late medieval England of hearing, again and again, the same story of sworn friendship tried and tested: among learned courtly knights reading Chaucer, among merchants or their families reading romances, or among peasants in the English countryside listening to a storyteller at a fair or a church ale. One can only make a reasoned guess at the actual incidence of sworn friendship;

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<sup>49</sup> Daniel Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 41.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 14-15.

but of the hold it had on the imagination – on its ability to articulate a world of fantasies and fears – there can scarcely be any doubt. (pp. 32-33)

The language of the *fratres iurati* is clearly a medieval re-imagining of the ideal Aristotelian model of friendship as pure affinity and unity, attempting to suture disparate and divergent human motives to a common end via high-minded rhetoric.<sup>51</sup> It was no less prone to collapsing under the pressure of the real, as Chaucer amply demonstrated in the ‘Knight’s Tale’.<sup>52</sup> That medieval authors were fully cognisant of the cynical, manipulative implications underpinning the use of language in this manner is demonstrated by Yoko Hirata and Brian McGuire. Hirata also examines the figure of John of Salisbury, looking at his correspondence with his ‘friend’ and rival in ecclesiastical politics, Gerard Pucelle. Hirata explores the Ciceronian undertones to the relationship, noting that ‘Bonds of friendship were easily established among [Salisbury’s] fellow clerks in administration when they needed to cooperate in pursuit of mutual interests, but as easily terminated or interrupted by political situations, strategic considerations, or the wishes of their masters’. So although their epistolary dialogue is highly developed in terms of ideals of friendship, deploying all the positive tropes we have identified, it is simply a mask for the power play going on beneath the surface. ‘The more sophisticated the language of *amicitia* was, the stronger the tension between the two correspondents. [...] In the communication between John of Salisbury and Gerard Pucelle the language of *amicitia* was used merely as a tool to bring about a desired relationship in which one party was persuaded to do

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<sup>51</sup> Davis describes Hoccleve’s relationship with his colleagues in the Privy Seal as being a ‘pseudo-monastic’ brotherhood bonded together by ‘monastic negotiations of the philosophy and theology of labour’ (p. 143).

<sup>52</sup> In *The Disenchanted Self*, Leicester argues that the Knight who narrates the tale sees through any claim made by proponents of the ethics of knighthood that its system of values are a metaphysical reality. Rather, the Knight reveals through the telling of the tale that he is fully aware of the reality of knighthood as a tissue of fragile institutions held together by little more than efficacious myth-making of the type he is currently engaged in (pp. 346-47).

what the other party wished'.<sup>53</sup> McGuire's analysis of the writings of Jean Gerson (1363-1429) brings us right into the present of this study. McGuire argues that Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris from 1395 and one of the most respected theologians of the later Middle Ages, experienced a profound loss of faith regarding the worth of bonds of friendship. 'A few years after Gerson took the chancellorship in 1395, he went through a period of deep misgivings about his position in the university and even about the salvation of his own soul. [...] Gerson felt trapped in a world where friendship was used in order to gain position and privilege'. Consequently, he became 'aware of a *language of friendship* available for every medieval Christian writer in classical literature and the Bible' that could be made use of as needed, 'as a rhetorician who made use of any materials he could find in order to make his case'.<sup>54</sup> This prompted him to see bonds of friendship as little more than tools for coercion and manipulation, and his suspicion of the language of friendship caused him to conclude that in order to save his soul he had to sacrifice any concern for friends and family altogether.

The example of Gerson, writing almost concurrently with Hoccleve, shows that medieval authors were under no illusions as to what the reality underpinning the ideal of friendship was. Beneath the benevolent façade of 'commvnyng' as an idealised discussion between truth and error, in which a self-evident transcendental 'good' was the goal of both interlocutors, lay a disciplinary addendum to the conversation: agree, or suffer the consequences. Within this context the language of friendship became politically expedient, open to use and

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<sup>53</sup> Yoko Hirata, 'John of Salisbury, Gerard Pucelle and Amicitia', in *Friendship in Medieval Europe*, pp. 153-65 (pp. 160-61).

<sup>54</sup> Brain McGuire, 'Jean Gerson and the End of Spiritual Friendship: Dilemmas of Conscience', in *Friendship in Medieval Europe*, pp. 229-50 (p. 232). See also his discussion of the poetry of Alain Chartier in the same essay (p. 242), and McEvoy's analysis of the writings of the Italian courtier Baldessare Catiglione (pp. 23-24).



abuse, another ‘disenchanted’ discourse which sought to enforce orthodoxy first and foremost rather than enlighten. But the very fact that the ideals and language of friendship had been irrevocably severed from any pretence of being ‘truth’ made it available to those who found themselves on the wrong side of the enforced divide in Lancastrian culture. There existed the possibility of articulating relative notions of the ‘good’, of finding, or perhaps more accurately, of creating that context in which the friend might turn aside from the straight path. So whilst the friend as the avatar of authority is viewed with suspicion, distrust, and fear, he can himself be coerced, manipulated, and duped by the very language with which he seeks to discipline the errant individual.

This is what we find in the *Dialogue* – not an idealised ‘commvnyng’ in which Hoccleve is gradually corrected of his errors and brought into line with public norms, but two protagonists bending the language of friendship to force the other to acquiesce to their own position, taking up and discarding models of behaviour and rhetoric, saying one thing and meaning the exact opposite. Having read Hoccleve’s *Complaint*, the friend begins to dissemble straight away. He tells Hoccleve not to publishing his *Complaint* because

Howe it stood with thee leide is al aslepe.  
 Men han forȝete it. It is out of mynde.  
 That þou touche therof I not ne kepe.  
 Lat be, þat reede I, for I cannot finde  
 O man to speke of it. In as good a kinde  
 As þou hast stonde amonge men or this day  
 Stondist þou now.

(*D*, 29-35)

Hoccleve apparently has no need to publish his work to advertise his sanity because men have already forgotten his madness. But Hoccleve knows that this is not the case: ‘Thouȝ I be lewde I not so ferforthe dote. / I woote what men han

seide and seien of me' (*D*, 36-37). Hoccleve seems somewhat bemused at the fact that his friend has tried to ignore what is written in the *Complaint*:

But greet meruaile haue I of þow, that þe  
 No bet of my compleint avisid be,  
 [...]
 If þe took hede, it maketh mencioun  
 That men of me speke in myn audience  
 Ful heuily.

(*D*, 39-40, 43-45)

We might expect a certain level of anger on Hoccleve's part at this barefaced lie by a person who is supposed to be another self, wishing 'for himself [Hoccleve] what is good and what appears to be good' and doing it. But Hoccleve is of course fully aware that his friend is acting as the avatar, and potentially the enforcer, of normative social good. Indeed, the friend appears to be trying to shut down any hope that Hoccleve can articulate his own relative good before the 'commvnyng' gets under way. His attempt to placate Hoccleve by announcing that Hoccleve's madness is long forgotten and so does not need to be discussed is easily decoded as meaning that Hoccleve's madness is still very much in the minds of his friends and colleagues, but that they would rather not have to deal with it again. His advice not to publish the *Complaint* is similarly not a benevolent gesture of concern but an attempt to keep the document of Hoccleve's madness out of the public domain. In both cases the friend's function is to police the boundary between error and truth that publication of the *Complaint* threatens to permeate. The ostensible affirmation by the friend that Hoccleve's reintegration into the social body is complete is in fact an attempt to keep him firmly located out of sight.

Hoccleve's grimly ironic remark 'Of þoure entencioun / I thanke þou, for of beneuolence, / Woote I ful wel, procedeþ þoure sentence' (*D*, 45-47) indicates that he has seen straight through the friend's opening ruse. But he is also nonplussed by his friend's behaviour. As we noted at the start of this chapter, Hoccleve is fully conscious of the language-game he is in, and of its treacherous rules, by virtue of his prior role as semi-official court poet to the regime that now seeks, in the guise of the friend, to delimit his persona. And he is prepared to play.<sup>55</sup> Responding to the friend's crude manoeuvrings, Hoccleve immediately launches into a far more elaborate series of pretences. Ostensibly submitting to the friend's projected model of behaviour, Hoccleve ironically redeploys his earlier consolatory pose, arguing that he is publishing his *Complaint* to glory God for causing his recovery:

Sithen my seeknesse sprad was so wide  
 That men knewe wel howe it stood with me þo,  
 So wolde I nowe vpon þat othir side  
 Wist were howe oure lorde Ihesu, wich is gide  
 To all releef and may alle hertis cure,  
 Releued hath me sinful creature.

(*D*, 58-63)

He also states that he plans to translate 'a small tretice, / Whiche Lerne to Die called is' (*D*, 205-06). This text, which appears later in the *Series*, is a translation of Henry of Suso's *Horologium Sapientiae* II. ii. As Ellis notes, 'It belongs to a well established tradition of meditation on the last things' (p. 226), with Hoccleve

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<sup>55</sup> Lynch notes how 'Cicero drew attention to the illogicality of attempting to be the friend of a person one anticipates will some day be one's enemy. A relationship built on that kind of cynicism would imply that one ought to conceal vulnerability and withhold any communication that could later be used vindictively by the "friend-turned-enemy"' (p. 60). But Hoccleve recognized the necessity of keeping open channels of dialogue and attempting to form friendships to further one's own interests, even whilst maintaining a healthy level of suspicion with regards to the motives of others in the socio-political context of the Lancastrian regime in which he lived and worked. In addition to the problems caused him by his episode of madness, we can find evidence of him reflecting on the use and abuse of friendship bonds in the *Regiment*, 1486-1550.

clearly prompted to write it thanks to his appreciation that sickness and death can come at any time. In composing the piece, he hopes that ‘Many another wixt eke therby shal / His conscience tendirly groope, / And wix himsilfe acunte and reken of al’ (*D*, 219-21), therefore allowing him to cleanse his ‘bodies gilte foule and vnclene’ (*D*, 215).<sup>56</sup> This leads Hoccleve into an extended meditation on his own advancing years (*D*, 246-59), before circling around to a reflection on the transient nature of earthly riches and the foolishness of loving life, in which the language consciously looks back to the consolatory laments of the *Complaint* (*D*, 260-94, echoing *C*, 8-14, 99-119, and 309-413).

Having apparently broken out of the economy of consolation within which the *Complaint* was operating at the start of the *Dialogue*, why return to it? On the one hand, it is an acknowledgement by Hoccleve that he is playing a risky game in contesting the authority of the friend. To claim that he is making an ‘open shrifte’ (*D*, 83) so he does not hide what he has had of God’s ‘gifte’ (*D*, 84) of recovery is true in the sense that Hoccleve is making public knowledge his debt to God for his recovery. In doing so he assumes the façade of an incontestably orthodox persona, defusing the tension generated by the shift from monologue to dialogue, with its inherent promise of debate and dissent. But that orthodoxy is in the end only a pose. The main aim of Hoccleve’s poem is to show that he has recovered from his illness and is fit to re-enter the social body – glorying God for helping him to do so is a happy benefit of having such a divine ‘friend’. And whatever orthodox pose he takes up, the very fact that he is discussing it with the friend in a dialogic context holds out the possibility of error, of establishing the context in which relative ‘good’ could be legitimated. By reiterating consolatory

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<sup>56</sup> See Davis, p. 154 for further discussion of translation as bodily purification.

logic within a dialogic context that retroactively makes that logic conceptually inadequate to the needs of the current situation, Hoccleve pokes fun at the friend's simplistic and naïve attempts to wield authority over him. It is a tautological necessity that because Hoccleve and his friend are in dialogue debate and dissent *will* occur because they *are* occurring.

Hoccleve's nonplussed reaction to the friend's deception, and his own ironic recapitulation of his earlier pose, indicates that a willingness to dissemble to achieve one's aims, and the concomitant presence of a mutual distrust, is understood by both protagonists to be implicit in the 'language' of friendship being used. Consequently, the friend is no less taken in by Hoccleve's rhetoric than Hoccleve was by his. Taking up Hoccleve's insistence that his writing will be proof of his sanity, the friend counters by arguing that it was the act of writing that sent Hoccleve mad in the first place. In reply to Hoccleve's proposal that he will write edifying moral texts for the guidance of others, the friend states

Yis, Thomas, yis, thow hast a good entente,  
 But thy werk hard is to parfourme, I dreede.  
 Thy brayn, par cas, therto wole not assente,  
 [...]  
 Thy bisy studie aboute swich mateere  
 Hath caused thee to stirte into the plyt  
 That thow wer in, as fer as I can here.  
 And thogh thow deeme thow be therof qwyt,  
 Abyde, and thy purpos putte in respyt  
 Til þat right wel stablisshid be thy brayn,  
 And therto thane I wolle assente fayn.

(D, 295-97, 302-08)

The friend here proposes that Hoccleve put off his project of writing until the point when his faculties are fully restored, after which the friend will gladly readmit Hoccleve and Hoccleve's writing to the public domain. The problem, of course, is that no criteria is outlined for how anyone is to judge when Hoccleve's

'brayn' is 'wel stablisshid'. It clearly can't be down to Hoccleve, as he has already judged himself 'therof qwyt' of his madness, a judgement that is not good enough for the friend. But since the friend offers no programme of rehabilitation other than 'let's wait and see,' the moment of possible reintegration is put off until some indefinite moment in the future, a future which will in fact never arrive, because no grounds will ever be established by which Hoccleve can prove himself sane. Indeed, the friend's decision to assert that study was itself the cause of madness invokes a powerful exclusionary nexus of late medieval thought. Excessive study was considered a common symptom of madness in the Middle Ages (Harper, pp. 50-51), and we have already noted how distrust of excessive learning and an emphasis on the virtues of being 'unkonnyng' was widely promoted under the Lancastrian regime. The friend's ostensible concern that study could cause Hoccleve to relapse into madness carries an implicit warning that, even if it does not, his texts will continue to be read as evidence of madness, and, worse, as examples of wilful dissent against 'good' advice, so it is simply best to remain silent and marginalised.

Hoccleve's own response to this is simply the reassertion of his basic (and only) position, that he is sane (*D*, 316-18). In an effort to make the friend accept this assertion, he invokes the Ciceronian dictum that 'there should be between [friends] complete harmony of opinions and inclinations in everything without exception' even when those assertions demand that the friend 'turn aside from the straight path'.

Whoso nat leeueth what þat a man seith  
 Is signe þat he trustith him but lyte.  
 A verray freend yeueth credence and feith  
 Vnto his freend, whatso he speke and wryte.  
 Frenshipes lawe nat worth wer a myte

If þat vntrust vnto it wer annexid.  
Vntrust hath many a wight ful sore vexed.

I with myseluen foreward  
Whan with the knotte of frendshipe I me knytte  
Vnto yow, þat I neuere aftirward  
Fro þat hy bond departe wolde, or flitte,  
Which keepe I wole ay. O, your wordes sitte  
Ny to myn herte, and, thogh yee me nat loue,  
My loue fro yow shal ther no wight shoue.

Tullius seith þat frendshipe verray  
Endurith euere, howso men it assaill.  
Frendshipe is noon to loue wel this day,  
Or yeeres outhir, and aftirward faille.  
A freend to freend his peyne and his trauaill  
Dooth ay, frendshipe to keepe and conserue  
Til dethes strook þat bond asondir kerue.  
(D, 330-50)

We can be certain that Hoccleve did not expect the friend to acquiesce to this plea for solidarity. He knew as well as Cicero that in the crucible of an unstable political regime the ideal of friendship as an unquestioning unity of opinions and purpose between two people was an unsustainable fallacy. For the friend who was aware of divergent opinions, dissent, and error in another, too much was at stake in terms of risk to choose to follow the other down the wrong path, whilst the rewards for the same friend who monitored, controlled, and disciplined those same errors were potentially great. The figure of the friend, then, offers little hope of reintegration. Tropes of solidarity and affinity unravel to expose suspicion and surveillance. At the same time, the friend stands as the arbiter of the representational divide between truth and error. The avatar of social orthodoxy, he passes judgement on those who find themselves branded as deviants, heretics, and madmen, assessing their suitability for reincorporation to the social body. Subject to the ministrations of this ominous figure, how can Hoccleve assert the essential truth of his own condition?

## 'SALOMON SEITH' AND THE FALLIBILITY OF 'COUNSEL'

The dialectic underpinning the *Dialogue* is one of mutual suspicion and deceit rather than any drive to willing reconciliation. Hoccleve and the friend exemplify the model of friendship found in the letters of Salisbury and Pucelle by Hirata, in that the language of *amicitia* is being used 'merely as a tool to bring about a desired relationship in which one party was persuaded to do what the other party wished'. In Hoccleve's case, he wishes to persuade the friend to accept that he is sane and is fit to recommence a functioning role in normative society. In the friend's case, he wishes to persuade Hoccleve to remain silent and marginalised because Hoccleve is either insane or still presents the threat of insanity. The problem with this situation is that, from the perspective of the dominant authority, Hoccleve is still on the wrong side of the representational divide between sanity and insanity, truth and error. Further, the two protagonists' asserted positions are still incompatible because, according to the terms the friend is using to judge Hoccleve, no criteria has been, or indeed can be, established in which he can prove his sanity – as far as the friend is concerned, for Hoccleve to act is to prove his potential for madness, placing the poet in the ultimate catch twenty-two. And finally, the friend stands in the position of authority where he can subject Hoccleve to the absolute, non-negotiable either/or choice of inclusion on his terms (which is, as far as Hoccleve is concerned, no inclusion at all), or exclusion. At this point in the *Dialogue*, although Hoccleve has been using the language of friendship to argue with his friend, he has not been able to make the friend concede anything that can further his own position, that he and only he is able to judge if he is sane or not.



Of course, Hoccleve, as creator of the *Dialogue*, and *Series* as a whole, has been purposely crafting what appears to be this no-win situation. The reason for doing so is twofold. The first, which is clear from what we have seen so far, is to demonstrate that ‘commvnyng’, far from being an idealised pattern of behaviour which offers the chance for reintegration to the erroneous subject through negotiation and choice, is in fact simply designed (to paraphrase Strohm) to bring the subject to the realisation he has to submit to the role offered by the orthodox system. Hoccleve adopts various rhetorical ploys and poses within the language of *amicitia* not because he expects his friend to relent and agree with him, but to illustrate that ‘commvnyng’ arrives at the same impasse as looking, unable to deliver any criteria within which self-understanding can be reconciled with the understanding of the self held by others in the context of non-negotiable normative social standards. One gets the impression from Hoccleve’s writings that he would find such a situation hilarious were it not for the grim personal implications it held for himself, and indeed, for anyone straying into the ‘wrong’ side of the divide between truth and error: an unending nightmare of exclusion on the grounds of pseudo-heresy.

Consequently, Hoccleve is not going to leave himself in this situation if he can see a way out of it. The second reason for placing himself in the catch twenty-two of the *Dialogue* is in order to perform a Houdini-like escape. The invocation of Cicero in the stanzas quoted above offers divergent possibilities between submission and self-fashioning. Although on the one hand the *Laelius* envisages circumstances in which ideals of friendship are irreversibly corrupted due to their necessary existence in the socio-political sphere, it also, as we discussed above, raises the possibility of being able to articulate a model of relative, personal good

in which a man can stand in sole judgement over his personal kingdom 'in matters which involve his life or reputation'. To escape from his Lancastrain nightmare, Hoccleve needs to find the context implied in Cicero's argument in which the friend should turn aside from the straight path and agree with him. But of course, in authoritarian regimes the arbiter of the truth/error divide cannot and will not do this simply out of goodwill and a discredited notion of 'ideal' friendship. Consequently, Hoccleve is left with only one possibility – he has to create a context in which the friend cannot be sure of his own authority to judge Hoccleve by the absolute standards which he has previously demanded. In the end, this is what we find: the friend does not agree with Hoccleve that Hoccleve is sane, but rather he agrees (or is in fact forced to agree) that he is not qualified to make that judgement. Hoccleve's method in the final section of the *Dialogue* I will be looking at is not to argue with the friend to let him pass from the side of error to the side of truth, but rather to attack the epistemological basis of the friend's position so that he is no longer sure the categories 'true', 'false', and 'error', are valid when one man judges another's interior state.

The wisdom of the sapiential books and the words of Solomon provides this context. They form the interpretative framework within which Hoccleve is finally able to force the friend to 'turn aside from the straight path' and relinquish his authority. 'Salomon' is cited four times between line 351, the stanza cited above which names 'Tullius', and line 484, in which the friend finally concedes that he is not in a position to judge Hoccleve's sanity – twice by Hoccleve and twice by the friend, each in support of his own position. In his edition of the poem, Ellis has stated that 'Since Solomon is adduced in support of both sides of the argument, references to him contribute to a secondary theme of the *Series*: the

problematic nature of interpretation' (p. 157). I obviously go further than this, seeing the problematised nature of interpretation as the principle theme of the poem, since it is this problem that ultimately allows Hoccleve to escape the binary dialectic of inclusion/exclusion which he has so far portrayed himself as trapped within. Key to my reading of this part of the *Dialogue* is the notion that the knowledgeable medieval reader will be happy to read beyond and behind the immediate and obvious implications of verses cited or paraphrased from Biblical (and other) texts, examining the original context from which the individual citations are drawn to see how they verify or contradict (or, for the most part, simply confuse) the argument in the *Dialogue* which they are adduced in support of.<sup>57</sup> The question of maintaining a divide between truth and error is rendered nonsensical due to the irresolvable complications the two protagonists encounter when citing the 'authority' of Solomon in support of their cause.

The invocation of Solomon at this point in his argument is not, however, merely a matter of expedience by Hoccleve. The rediscovery of Aristotle in the thirteenth century which brought the *Nicomachean Ethics* into secular arts courses within the universities had a concurrent, if not a greater, influence on the interpretation of scripture. Smalley has documented how the rediscovery of the *Politics* led medieval theologians and schoolmen straight to the sapiential books due to the texts' shared interests in politics and ethics. Consequently, the possibility for literalistic exegesis offered by Aristotle caused the words of

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<sup>57</sup> For a justification of this methodology, see Smyth, pp. 51-53. I argue that from the late-fourteenth century onwards a chirographic literary culture was firmly established in which the manuscript or book as physical object 'can be put down and returned to by the reader, a source or reference to another text can be checked in the interim, and the reader can move forward and backwards through the text to check for errors' (p. 52). The obvious application of this situation was that an author could aim for a greater level of consistency in his or her narrative or argument than was possible in an oral culture, in which the amount of information that could be processed was limited by the capacity of an individual's memory. More intriguingly, an author could deliberately contradict his sources so that, when checked, they would produce dynamic inter- and intra-textual effects on the ostensible argument.

Solomon to rapidly multiply outside of commentaries on the sapiential books themselves.<sup>58</sup> According to Smalley, postillators began

to let themselves be entangled in discussions on political questions. Earlier teachers had only touched on them in so far as they concerned the relations between Church and State. [...] In the thirteenth century one discerns a sincere though naive interest in the problems of secular government. [...] Then for the first time we find short treatise on the duties of kingship inserted in commentaries. (pp. 325-26)

For instance, Smalley states that ‘John of Varzy’ on Proverbs ‘deserves to be called a *De regimine principum* in miniature’ (p. 328).<sup>59</sup> It is clear that by the start of the fourteenth century, never mind the fifteenth, this cross-pollination of classical philosophy and scriptural wisdom concerning matters of council and advice, and the proper ordering of secular society, was fully established. Hoccleve’s deployment of Cicero and Solomon in support of each other (and of course himself) taps into a by now well-established repository of authoritative material.

That said, Hoccleve’s first deployment of sapiential wisdom is characteristically generic, so much so that it cannot be said to further his position, but rather serves to re-inscribe the central dilemma. Following directly on from the last stanza cited above (*D*, 344-50), Hoccleve goes on to say

To this matir accordith Salomon—  
 Yee knowe it bet than I by many fold—  
 Ones freend, and holde euere thervpon.  
 In your frendshipe wer a slipir hold  
 If it abate wolde and wexe cold

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<sup>58</sup> Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 324-25.

<sup>59</sup> For a more detailed discussion of classical philosophy’s impact on scriptural exegesis, see her series of articles, ‘Some Thirteenth-Century Commentaries on the Sapiential Books’, in *Dominican Studies*, II (1949), 318-55, and III (1950), 41-77 and 236-74.

pat vnto now hath been bothe hoot and warm.  
 To yow wer it reproof, and to me harm.  
 (D, 351-57)

A gloss in the scribal copies of the poem (not the holograph) cites from Proverbs 17. 17: 'he that is a friend loveth at all times' ('Omni tempore diligit qui amicus').<sup>60</sup> However, the format of Proverbs, where, as its name suggests, we find single line maxims regarding ethical behaviour, never adds up to a coherent overall theme or argument, which in turn does not facilitate any deeper understanding of the situation in the *Dialogue*. Proverbs 17. 17 simply functions as a discrete unit within an incoherent mass of ethical instruction which stops inter-textual interpretation dead. Given that Hoccleve has so far prompted his readers to search for inter- and extra-textual contexts in order to decode his poem, I would suggest the poet is hinting at a more dynamic framework of interpretation. Ellis notes that, in a 1968 thesis, M. A. Pryor related the 'commonplaces on friendship' in lines 351-57 of the *Dialogue* to Ecclesiasticus 6. 1-17, but Ellis then dismisses the passages as insufficiently close to Hoccleve's version (p. 157). Whilst it may be true that Hoccleve's lines do not mimic verbatim the Biblical text, if we look again with an eye on the problems regarding friendship we have already found in classical discussions and isolated as relevant to Hoccleve's situation, we can see that the sapiential wisdom Pryor suggests as an analogue is actually highly pertinent.<sup>61</sup>

Chapter 6 of Ecclesiasticus is concerned with the same issue of true and false friends that we have seen discussed in the classical texts. Although the

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<sup>60</sup> See *Thomas Hoccleve's Complaint and Dialogue*, ed. by Burrow, EETS o.s. 313 (London: OUP, 1999), x-1, for a full discussion of the holograph manuscripts and their variants.

<sup>61</sup> In actual fact, Hoccleve does appear to cite directly Ecclus. 1. 6 a little later in the poem, although Ellis does not attribute these lines of the poem to this particular Biblical precedent. I discuss this issue in more detail shortly as it becomes relevant to my overall argument.

Biblical passages lack the sophisticated reflection on the problems of transferring ideal friendship into the realities of human existence, it certainly implicitly inscribes the same tension. On the potential for the friend to desert or betray oneself, Ecclesiasticus advises

Si possides amicum in temptatione posside eum et non facile credas illi. Est enim amicus secundum tempus suum et non permanebit in die tribulationis. Et est amicus qui egreditur ad inimicitiam et est amicus qui odium et rixam et convicia denudabit. Est autem amicus socius mensae et non permanet in die necessitates.

(If thou wouldst get a friend, try him before thou takest him, and do not credit him easily. For there is a friend for his own occasion, and he will not abide in the day of thy trouble. And there is a friend that turneth to enmity; and there is a friend that will disclose hatred and strife and reproaches. And there is a friend, a companion at the table, and he will not abide in the day of distress. Ecclus. 6. 7-10)<sup>62</sup>

None of this advice would be out of place in either the late Roman Republic or late medieval England to the man used to moving in perilous political circumstances. Indeed, it is remarkable just how close the Biblical passages are to the Ciceronian advice in the pivotal book XVII of the *Laelius*. Just as Ecclesiasticus admonishes the reader to *tempare* (test/try) the would-be friend, in *de amicitia* Cicero is also concerned with the fact that when choosing friends ‘it is very hard to come to a decision without a trial’ (‘et iudicare difficile est sane nisi expertum’) (xvii, 62). Similarly, the friend who in Ecclesiasticus ‘is a friend for his own occasion’, and the ‘companion at the table’ who ‘will not abide in the day of distress’ correspond respectively to the ‘two charges that men are most convicted of fickleness’ in Cicero: ‘they either hold a friend of little value when their own affairs are prosperous, or they abandon him when his are adverse’ (xvii, 64). And of course, the friend ‘that turneth to enmity’ and ‘disclose[s] hatred and

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<sup>62</sup> <http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=26&c=6> [accessed on 5 March 2009]

strife and reproaches' is the embodiment of the friend who haunted the Ciceronian imagination, and, consequently, that of the late medieval man of status, for whom the language of *amicitia* is in reality nothing more than a tool for furthering the interests of one's *factio*.

The Biblical text then immediately goes on to describe an ideal friendship in the same terms of unity and affinity we have seen in classical philosophy, with an understandable modulation towards crediting the divine for the occurrence. The central image is once again the friend as another self: 'A friend, if he continues steadfast, shall be to thee as thyself' ('Amicus si permanserit fixus erit tibi quasi coequalis' Ecclus. 6. 11). It then goes on to say

Amicus fidelis protectio fortis qui autem invenit illum invenit thesaurum. Amico fidei nulla est comparatio et non est digna ponderatio auri et argenti contra bonitatem fidei illius. Amicus fidelis medicamentum vitae et immortalitatis et qui metuunt Dominum inveniunt illum. Qui timet Deum aequae habebit amicitiam bonam quoniam secundum illum erit amicus illius.

(A faithful friend is a strong defence: and he that hath found him, hath found a treasure. Nothing can be compared to a faithful friend, and no weight of gold and silver is able to countervail the goodness of his fidelity. A faithful friend is the medicine of life and immortality: and they that fear the Lord shall find him. He that feareth God, shall likewise have good friendship: because according to him shall his friend be. Ecclus. 6. 14-17)<sup>63</sup>

It is clearly this second depiction of friendship from Ecclesiasticus that Hoccleve is citing as an example for the friend to follow in the *Dialogue*. But, as with the analogous Ciceronian model of complete and unhesitating fidelity to another, such ideal formulations are haunted by the possibility that they can collapse into self-serving expediency. To 'holde euere thervpon' (*D*, 353) after you have found someone who seems to be a friend seems like advice that, in reality, one can ill afford to take. From Cicero to Solomon to the action of the *Dialogue* itself, the

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<sup>63</sup> <http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=26&c=6> [accessed on 5 March 2009]

iteration of uncertainty and suspicion mitigates against any meaningful progress in the ‘commvnyng’ of the two protagonists.

As if to drive this home, the friend makes a curious statement. Returning unmoved to his premise that study has sent Hoccleve mad and will do so again, he argues

Of studie was engendred thy seeknesse,  
 And þat was hard. Woldest now again  
 Entre into þat laborious bisynesse  
 Syn it thy mynde and eek thy wit has slayn?  
 Thy conceit is nat worth a payndemayn.  
 (D, 379-83)

In his edition of the poem, Burrow notes that ‘payndemayn’ is a loaf or roll of fine white bread, deriving from *pain-demeine*, and that its appearance here is the only example of it being used to indicate worthlessness (*Complaint and Dialogue*, p. 98). Ellis glosses it simply as ‘anything’. ‘Conceit’ is of course a loaded word in the context of the *Series*, referring back to the crucial ‘conceitis resonable’ (C, 168) of the *Complaint*. There, Hoccleve found himself unable to determine the worth of his own ‘conceitis’ in assessing his condition. Here, the friend appears to pick up on this lack of self-assurance. Hoccleve’s ‘conceit’ (glossed by Ellis as ‘idea’) to get back to work in order to prove his sanity is ‘not worth anything’. Hoccleve should therefore ‘Let be, let be, bisye thee so no more, / Lest thee repente and reewe it ouer sore’ (D, 384-85). Any attempt to re-enter the public domain and prove his sanity through the act of writing will leave him rueing the day he hit on the idea, as it will only lead to further accusations of madness. Of course, we could also read these lines as a sympathetic gesture on the part of the friend, meaning something like ‘your conceit [i.e., Hoccleve’s mental condition on the whole] is not so lacking in worth as a loaf of bread, so therefore don’t go



back to work or it will end in disaster.’ The friend’s words carry the potential for sympathy or threat. Indeed, they can be read as a threat veiled in protestations of sympathy. The point is that we cannot, as readers, be sure – and neither, within the fictional framework of the *Dialogue*, can Hoccleve. Such is the nature of the language of *amicitia*.

To reinforce his position the friend argues that he is only following the authoritative advice to treat Hoccleve as if he were another self:

My reed procedith nat of forward wil,  
 But it is seid of verray freendlyhede,  
 For if so caused seeknesse on me fil  
 As dide on thee, right euene as I thee rede,  
 So wolde I do myself, it is no drede.

(*D*, 386-90)

Were the friend to fall prey to the same condition as Hoccleve, he would be following exactly the same advice as he is now giving out. He then backs up this statement by providing his own snippet of sapiential wisdom: ‘And Solomon bit aftir conseil do, / And good is it conforme thee therto’ (*D*, 391-92). This common maxim derives from Ecclesiasticus 32. 24: ‘Do thou nothing without counsel, and thou shalt not repent when thou hast done’ (‘Sine consilio nihil facias et post factum non paeniteberis’).<sup>64</sup> The friend’s use of it at this point is designed to head off the implications caused by the ambiguities inherent in the model of friendship Hoccleve has been trying to foster in the *Dialogue*. The following verse of the Biblical text provides an imagistic antidote to the Ciceronian injunction for the good friend to ‘declinandum de via sit’: ‘Go not in the way of ruin, and thou shalt not stumble against the stones: trust not thyself to a rugged way, lest thou set a stumblingblock to thy soul’ (‘In via ruinae non eas et non offendes in lapides ne

<sup>64</sup> <http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=26&c=32> [accessed on 5 March 2009]

credas te viae laboriosae ne ponas animae tuae scandalum' Eccles. 32. 25).<sup>65</sup> 'Commvynge' is here subsumed by the necessary imperatives of 'conseil' as the ideal, indeed the only, model of discourse available to the erroneous subject. Discussion as negotiation with many possible paths is delimited to a narrow procession towards singular truth. The friend hopes one last piece of sapiential wisdom will prove to be the final nail in the coffin of Hoccleve's persistent dissent:

This rede I thee, for aght þat may befall,  
 Syn þat seeknesse God hath thee byreft,  
 The cause eschue, for it is good left,  
 Namely, thing of thoughtful studie kaght,  
 Perilous is, as þat hath me been taght.  
 (D, 395-99)

The final two lines reconfigure the common Lancastrian paranoia concerning subjects who engaged in too much thought within an authoritative Biblical context. They refer to Ecclesiastes 12. 12: 'Much study is an affliction of the flesh' ('frequensque meditatio carnis adflictio est').<sup>66</sup> But again, it is the following Biblical verse, left unsaid by the friend, that provides the key to interpreting his words: 'Let us all hear together the conclusion of the discourse' (finem loquendi omnes pariter audiamus' Eccles. 12. 13).<sup>67</sup> The implications of the friend's words are very clear: this is the end of the conversation.

Except, of course, that it is not. It is at this point that the friend's capacity to control the implications of his argument begins to fail under the pressure of the multiplying contexts activated by Hoccleve. Rather than providing the basis for stable interpretation and determination, the constant citing of authorities becomes

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> See Burrow, *Complaint and Dialogue*, p. 98.

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=23&c=12> [accessed 5 March 2009]

counterproductive to the friend's aims. The authoritative precedents of Ecclesiasticus and Ecclesiasties re-contextualise each other to undermine the friend's assertions about the ability of 'conseil' to effectively close down the discussion. Whilst Ecclesiasties 12. 12 warns against too much study, and 12. 13 calls for an end to vain discussions, another interpretative paradigm is suggested by the first part of verse 12. 12: 'Of making many books there is no end' ('Faciendi plures libros nullus est finis'). The obvious implication of this statement is that the *Dialogue*, within the context of *Series* as a textual whole, is not yet over, and that there is much still to resolve. More specifically, it refers to the fact that the friend's use of Ecclesiasticus 32. 24 is itself just the latest example of a commonplace maxim that has been endlessly remade in previous books. There is one particularly relevant author who made much use of the phrase that Hoccleve would here expect his reader to bring to mind at this point. Doing so creates profoundly problematic implications for the friend.

The final section of the *Regement of Princes* concludes, as one would expect, with a discussion of 'how to a kyng / It needful is to do by conseil ay' (*RP*, 4859-60). Various exemplars and maxims are cited to this end, principle among them the familiar refrain 'Do nothing reedlees: do by conseillynge / Of heedes wyse, and no repentance / Ther folowe yow shal in your governance' (*RP*, 4932-35). The same verse, Ecclesiasticus 32. 24, is cited in a marginal gloss. Hoccleve goes on to recommend that the Prince should 'Cheesith men eek of old experience' (*RP*, 4943) to offer this advice because with old age comes a fully developed intellect. This leads Hoccleve to muse upon his own poetic counsellor, 'The firste fyndere of our faire langage' (*RP*, 4977), Chaucer. Specifically, Hoccleve refers to an instance of Chaucer writing 'in cas semblable, and othir mo'

(*RP*, 4988). Given the preceding stanzas' focus on counsel, this 'similar case' is likely to be Chaucer's own use of the same theme, and in particular his common deployment of the sapiential maxim of Ecclesiasticus 32. 24. We find it in the 'Miller's Tale' (*CT*, I, 3529-30) and the 'Merchant's Tale' (*CT*, IV, 1483-85). However, the tale in which it is repeated most often is the 'Tale of Melibee' (*CT*, VII, 967-1888). This is the 'cas semblable' to which we must now turn.

The central dilemma in 'Tale of Melibee' concerns the worth of 'conseil' as a means to lead a ruler out of error. The 'Tale' is structured around the same locus of sapiential wisdom in politicised form that we saw was facilitated by the rediscovery of Aristotle in the late thirteenth century. As such, it has aspirations to be counted amongst the genre of advice literature which the *Regiment* would come to belong, laying claim to timeless wisdom for the instruction of kings and princes. However, told as it is by the inept pilgrim 'Chaucer', it fails to accomplish this feat in spectacular fashion. But as is always the case with Chaucer, the failure of his literary alter ego is indicative of larger issues for consideration. Over the course of the 'Tale' the refrain 'Salomon seith' and the assertion that one should listen to 'conseil' are repeated *ad nauseum*. They appear in support of so many different arguments and positions that they become virtually meaningless in terms of providing practical interpretative paradigms for Melibee to correct his behaviour. A singular, easily defined and readily accepted pattern of behaviour is undercut by what Kempton calls the 'restless discourse of quotation' in which proverb is cited against proverb and would-be morals collapse under pressure from their unclear exempla.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, for Leicester, the constant to-ing and fro-ing between competing authoritative positions 'decenters "original"

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<sup>68</sup> Daniel Kempton, 'Chaucer's Tale of Melibee: "A Litel Thyng in Prose" ', *Genre* 21 (1988), 263-78, (p. 274).

logocentric meaning as stable, timeless wisdom'.<sup>69</sup> After Melibee's family are attacked and wounded by his enemies, he agrees with his wife Prudence that he should do as 'Salomon seith, "Werk alle thy thynges by conseil, and thou shalt never repente" ' (VII, 1003). The process is an unmitigated disaster. Melibee begins by calling on everyone from physicians to surgeons, 'olde enemys' only superficially reconciled to him, 'neighebores that diden hym reverence moore for drede than for love', and 'subtille' flatterers and 'lerned' lawyers (VII, 1005-06). This motley crew proceed to display all the characteristics we would expect from those dissembling to be 'trewe freendes alle' (VII, 1002) whilst really engaging in *factio*, making 'semblant of wepyng' and 'preisyng greatly Melibee of might, of power, of riches, and of freendes' (VII, 1019), and counselling Melibee a 'certeyn thyng' privately and 'the contrarie in general audience' (VII, 1049). In an effort to rectify the muddle Melibee finds himself in, Prudence takes it upon herself to provide the necessary 'conseil', only for the 'Tale' to descend into farce again. As Ferster notes, in 'trying to correct the damage done by the incorrectly constituted council [...] she provides [Melibee] with advice about advice, material that sounds some traditional themes from mirrors for princes' (p. 97). But all she actually succeeds in doing is to highlight the multiple and contradictory paths those seeking proper criteria upon which to found their judgement have available to them if they follow what 'Salomon seith'. To cite Ferster again:

Melibee is to take counsel in himself and keep the results secret because secrecy is the only way to avoid being betrayed (VII, 1138-53). Neither friends nor foes are trustworthy (VII, 1141). Then he is to choose a few tested friends who are faithful, wise, and old to be counsellors (VII, 1154-

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<sup>69</sup> Leicester, ' "Our Tonges Différance": Textuality and Deconstruction in Chaucer', in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. by Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 15-26 (p. 25). See also Ruth Waterhouse and Glen Griffiths, ' "Swete Wordes" of Non-Sense: The Deconstruction of the Moral of Melibee' Part I & II, *Chaucer Review*, 23 (1989), 338-62, and *Chaucer Review*, 24 (1989), 53-63.

65). He must not consult all his friends but just 'a few' (VII, 1166). Yet he must not have just one counsellor, he should have 'many' (VII, 1170). Not only is the recommended number of counsellors unstable, it is not clear that it is a good idea to have counsellors at all. (p. 97)

The same pattern of contradiction and redundancy plays out over the rest of the 'Tale'. Prudence cites one authoritative piece of wisdom, Melibee replies with another which contradicts the first – often from the same source. By the close of the 'Tale', Melibee has still failed to correct what Prudence considers to be his error, his intention to wreak vengeance on his assailants. Any pretension to divine enlightenment is lost amongst a muddle of texts and the vagaries of history. As Patterson argues, since 'Prudence's task is to teach Melibee how to interpret', the close of the 'Tale' is 'an aporetic moment that subverts the pedagogical program the [Tale of] Melibee simultaneously espouses and enacts'.<sup>70</sup> The medieval king's claim to infallible authority is based upon his imitation of Biblical paradigms which are themselves analogous to divine truth. If this proves to be nothing more than misrepresentation and false display then the strictly demarcated boundaries between truth and error that disseminate outwards from the king's divine person to form the limit for normative social behaviour become blurred and permeable. Rather than simply existing as a potentiality, the presence of error at the heart of the regime becomes an unavoidable reality.

In the *Dialogue*, the friend is projected as the avatar of authority, occupying the position of ideal mirror and confessor to Hoccleve's pseudo-heretic. He purports to offer a final and incontestable path to singular truth. The 'Tale of Melibee' explodes any pretensions those in these positions of power make to possess that truth, ruthlessly exposing it as a spectral fantasy crafted out

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<sup>70</sup> Patterson, ' "What Man Artow?": Authorial Self-Definition in the Tale of Sir Thopas and The Tale of Melibee', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 11 (1989), 117-75 (p. 158).

of a seething mass of contradictions. In having the friend cite the seemingly innocuous and generic maxim ‘Salomon bit aftir conseil do’, Hoccleve invites us to cast our mind back through many books, first to the *Regiment*, which, as we saw in the opening to this chapter, is itself never fully resolved to the efficacy of ‘conseil’, then to the ‘cas semblable’ of the ‘Tale of Melibee’, in which the entire edifice of authoritative instruction comes crashing down under the weight of its own premises. The friend’s words create a conceptual circuit of uncertainty regarding the ability of ‘conseil’ to correctly direct the errant individual. The paradoxes and ambiguities concerning the worth of friendship, council, and absolute and relative truths that are left implicit in the *Regiment* and the *Series* burst to the surface and spin out of control when we cast our mind back to the absurdities of the ‘Tale of Melibee’. The refrain ‘Salomon seith’ becomes an indicator not of infallible authority but a point of weakness ripe for exploitation. For the would-be enforcer of normative standards of behaviour in the public body, claims to be able to provide proper ‘conseil’ for the erroneous individual to follow are fatally undermined. Under such conditions, to stand in judgement of others seems like nothing more than folly and vanity.

This is the stark reality that Hoccleve drives home in the moments before the friend finally cedes his fallibility. Ignoring the friend’s attempts to halt their discussion, Hoccleve once again simply asserts ‘þat neuere studie in book / Was cause why my mynde me forsook’ (*D*, 424-25). The friend similarly refuses to give any ground, restating the conventional sapiential wisdom he hopes will eventually cow Hoccleve into submission:

O Thomas, holdist thow it a prudence  
 Reed weyue, and wirke aftir thyne owne wit?  
 Seide Y nat eer þat Salomons sentence

To do by reed and by conseil men bit?  
 And desdeynest for to to folowen it.  
 What, art thou now presumptuous become,  
 And list nat of thy mis been vndirnome?  
 (D, 449-55)

Hoccleve responds by citing Solomon back at the friend, this time confident of mobilising the full range of subversive and mischievous uncertainties implied by the textual signifier 'Salomon seith'.

Nay freend, nat so, yee woot wel, elleswhere  
 Salomon bit, 'Oon be thy conseilour  
 Among a [thowsand], and if þat yee were  
 As constant as yee han been or this hour,  
 By yow I would be red, but swich errour  
 In your conceit I feele now, sanz faille,  
 That in this cas yee can nat wel consaille.  
 (D, 456-62)

Hoccleve here returns to the section of Ecclesiasticus (6. 6-17) he first referred to in D, 351-57. But now he cites directly the crucial first line, 'Salomon bit, "Oon be thy conseilour / Among a [thowsand]"'. This line constitutes the *Dialogue's* own 'aporetic moment', opening a yawning abyss of uncertainty concerning the friend's right, indeed, anyone's right, to be that man who can 'wel consaille' the erroneous subject.

In the holograph this quotation is accompanied by the marginal gloss 'Vnus sit tibi consiliarius inter mille', which Burrow argues refers to Ecclesiasticus. 6. 6: 'let one of a thousand be thy counsellor' ('consiliiarii tibi sint unus de mille').<sup>71</sup> In contrast, Ellis thinks that the 'ultimate Latin original' of the marginal gloss is Ecclesiastes 7. 29 (p. 158). However, the marginal gloss is at the very most an extremely loose paraphrase of the relevant verse of Ecclesiastes in

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<sup>71</sup> Burrow, *Complaint and Dialogue*, p. 99.



the Vulgate, and, if we are to be completely truthful, is actually nothing like the Biblical text. Ecclesiastes 7. 29 reads ‘Virum de mille repperi mulierem ex omnibus non inveni’ (‘One man among a thousand I have found, a woman among them all I have not found’).<sup>72</sup> Given that the marginal gloss is much closer to the Latin of Ecclesiasticus than that in Ecclesiastes, it would seem necessary to conclude that Ellis is mistaken in his attribution of the quotation to the latter.<sup>73</sup> However, we cannot be definitive about this assertion. Hoccleve invites his readers to consider both possibilities. The possibility for error undermines any attempts to read in a definitive manner. As with Chaucer, the indeterminacy of interpretation, conveniently exemplified in the contradictory attributions of the line by the *Series*’ modern editors, cannot be resolved. The point seems to be reinforced when we return to the ‘Tale of Melibee’ and find both maxims are cited in the course of arriving at that poem’s impasse. Melibee attacks the authority of his wife to tell him anything by stating ‘I seye that alle women ben wikke, and noon good of hem alle. For “of a thousand men,” seith Salomon, “I foond o good man, but certes, of alle wommen, good womman foond I nevere” ’ (VII, 1057 / Eccles. 7. 29). Ironically, Prudence later attempts to become that good woman, but as we have seen, proves Melibee’s point by arguing first that ‘Salomon seith, “Many freendes have thou, but among a thousand chese thee oon to be thy conseilour” ’ (VII, 1167 / Ecclus. 6. 6), only to moments later state ‘And werke nat alwey in every need by oon counseillour alone; for sometyme bihooveth it to been conseilled by manye. / For Salomon seith, “Salvacion of thynges is where as

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<sup>72</sup> <http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=23&c=7> [accessed on 5 March 2009]

<sup>73</sup> Having consulted the Durham holograph (*Durham, University Library, MS Cosin V. iii. 9*) I can confirm that there is nothing in the manuscript that indicates we should treat Ecclesiastes as more pertinent to our interpretation given the more obvious linguistic affinities the gloss has with Ecclesiasticus.

ther been manye conseilors” ’ (VII, 1170-71).<sup>74</sup> That Melibee is proved right about his wife not being a ‘good womman’ who can offer useful counsel is not any sort of triumph in the larger scheme of things, as he never finds the ‘o good man’ either. Although the citations from Solomon appear here in a form where they can be properly attributed to the relevant Biblical texts, it still does not prove to be any more useful in establishing the worth of ‘conseil.’

At the same time as reinforcing the circuit leading back to Chaucerian uncertainty, the ambiguity concerning the attribution of the line opens out a horizon for consideration of the original sapiential context(s) in which it appears. As we saw above, the verses in Ecclesiasticus following 6. 6 serve only to reinscribe the dilemma found in classical philosophy regarding the disparity between ideal and real models of friendship. It is even more problematic for the friend’s position if we follow the line back to Ecclesiastes and develop the context suggested there. If we look at the larger argument of Ecclesiastes, it has very definite points to make about the possibility of giving infallible counsel. C. L. Seow describes how the core of Ecclesiastes’ theology is that in an arbitrary world any claim on the part of human beings to full knowledge is *hebel* (vanity):

Humanity is set in a world over which mortals have no control. It is a world that is full of inconveniences, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Nothing that human beings do or have is ultimately reliable: not wealth, not pleasure, not wisdom, not toil, not life itself. There are no fail-safe rules, no formulas that guarantee success. Justice may not be found where one might expect it. People may not get what they deserve. There is no telling who will have a good life and who will not. And even if one has a good life one moment, it may be gone the next. It is an arbitrary world in which human beings live, one that is full of risks but no guarantees. Social, economic, and political forces are at work, creating uncertainties to which everyone is subject. There are dangers in daily life, too, as accidents happen even amid life’s routines. Some amount of wisdom may help reduce the risks, but accidents happen nonetheless. This is what it is like ‘under the sun.’<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> The relevant Biblical passage is Proverbs 11. 14.

<sup>75</sup> *Ecclesiastes*, ed. by C. L. Seow, *The Anchor Bible* vol. 18c (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 55.

Of course, this vision of the world makes it as uncertain for Hoccleve as for anyone else. He may not, for instance, be accepted back into society; he may not get his rewards in heaven for suffering in this life; he may not even be fully sane. But the point Hoccleve is concerned to make is that such uncertainties apply as much to the friend as they do to him. For either of them to make any pretensions otherwise is simply *hebel*.

Hoccleve is, understandably, not shy in making this point.

[...] if þat yee were  
As constant as yee han been or this hour,  
By yow I would be red, but swich errour  
In your conceit I feele now, sanz faille,  
That in this cas yee can nat wel consaille.

For, God woot, a blynd conseillour is he  
Which þat consaille shal in mateere,  
If of a soothe him list nat lerned be,  
(D, 458-65)

In light of the interpretative fallibility that it has been demonstrated resides at the heart of models of 'conseil', Hoccleve can triumphantly assert that 'error' lies in the friend's 'conceit'. The 'soothe' that the friend is 'blynd' to is his own partial and limited knowledge, constructed out of an unstable web of contradictory textual precedents in a universe structured around the whims of an inscrutable deity.<sup>76</sup> Under such conditions, it is *hebel* to pronounce on the inner condition of another man. Hoccleve now makes his final case within these terms:

Freend, as to þat, he lyueth nat þat can  
Knowe how it standith with another wight  
So wel as himself. Although many a man  
Take on him more than lyth in his might  
To knowe, þat man is nat ruled right

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<sup>76</sup> The God of Ecclesiastes, and therefore the God of the *Series*, is once again very much in the neo-Augustinian, even Bradwardinian mould. Nothing can be asked for with any sense of surety, things can only be hoped for.

þat so presumeth in his iugement.  
 Befom the doom, good we auisament.  
 (D, 477-83)

The final two lines, advising careful consideration of man's capacity for 'iugement' in light of the final 'doom', puts a suitably, and this time genuinely, incontestable coda to the 'commvnyng'.

Faced with the folly of his presumption, the friend finally relents from his insistent assertions that he can act as the arbiter of Hoccleve's inner condition.

Now, Thomas, by the feith I to God owe,  
 Had I nat taastid thee, as þat I now  
 Doon haue, it had been hard, maad me to trowe  
 The good plyt which I feele wel þat thow  
 Art in. I woot wel thow art wel ynow,  
 Whatso men of thee ymagyne or clappe.  
 (D, 484-89)

His choice of language is here indicative of his newfound understanding (or to be more specific, the acknowledgement of his lack of it). His claim to have 'taastid' Hoccleve refers back to the stanzas immediately following the mirror scene in the *Complaint*. There, in despair of a world in which men were judged on the basis of the fallible capacity of 'looking', Hoccleve asserted

But by the preef ben thingis knowen and wiste.  
 Many a doom is wrapped in the myste.  
 Man by hise dedis and not by hise lookes  
 Shal knowen be. As it is written in bookes.

Bi taste of fruit men may wel wite and knowe  
 What that it is. Othir preef is ther noon.  
 Euery man woote wel that, as þat I trowe.  
 Riȝt so, thei that deemen my wit is goon,  
 As ȝit this day ther deemeth many oon  
 I am not wel, may, as I by hem goo,  
 Taste and assay if it be so or noo.  
 (C, 200-10)

These lines seem to look forward to a moment when Hoccleve's inner condition will be 'taastid' and proved to be palatable for general public consumption. It is on the basis of these lines that he formulates his methodology of 'commvnyng' in *C*, 211-17 (see above, pp. 228-30). But as we have seen, that 'commvnyng' ultimately proves to be insufficient to the task it proclaims it can accomplish. When the friend now refers in the *Dialogue* to having 'taastid' Hoccleve, he is recognising that there are certain flavours that mortal sensory faculties cannot hope to discern.<sup>77</sup> In light of this, he can only acknowledge that Hoccleve is as he says he is, in a 'good plyt'. Finally, we also find in the friend's words recognition of the possibility of relative goods within the social body. Whereas previously the friend stood as the limit and embodiment of normative social behaviour, in ceding his fallibility his opinion is dislocated from collective opinion; the friend 'woot wel' Hoccleve is recovered 'Whatso men of thee ymagyne of clappe'. Into the fantasy of a unified and undifferentiated social whole which Hoccleve assumed must either wholly assimilate or exclude him, the hinted at world of Ciceronian divergence in which men can assert the primacy and privacy of their own path is tentatively but unavoidably admitted.

In the *Dialogue* Hoccleve is not seeking to displace order with chaos or truth with error. Rather, he works to expose the potentiality for error that exists within paradigms of authority that make claims to universal truth. A vision of society in which a representational divide between truth and error is strictly

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<sup>77</sup> There is an interesting shift in imagery that occurs during these sections of the *Series*. After the attempt to use sight/'lookes' as the means to properly understand a person's interior state of being fails, 'taste' is presented as the more reliable sense (even if in this specific instance, it cannot ultimately produce the desired result). *Sapio* encompasses the notion of 'having a flavour of taste', but also 'to have sense, or be wise', giving us *sapor* and *sapience* respectively. The idea that the faculty of taste is somehow more in tune with, or conducive to the cultivation of, abstract wisdom is certainly intriguing, and offers potential for further study of Hoccleve's poetry to ascertain if 'taste' functions in the same context elsewhere.

imposed along an either/or basis of inclusion and exclusion is nothing more than a hopeful fantasy on the part of the ruling classes, endlessly recycled and enforced, but never adequate. Out of this potentiality he is able to argue for his place in society because although he cannot definitively prove his recovery, neither can anyone else properly prove that he has not. In this sense, the *Dialogue* is not an assertion of a unified and unknowable private self, but rather the negation of a normative public discourse that presumed upon the full transparency of the self to objective scrutiny. That the second of these positions *potentially* facilitates a progression to the first is of course entirely plausible. However, it does not mean that the authorisation of a fully private subject will *necessarily* follow causally from the de-authorisation of the self as public property. In this sense we can see Hoccleve as cordoning off a space around the terrain that moderns have come to call the 'private' self without investing it with the positive significance it would accrue under modern theories of the subject. He was after all, chiefly concerned with being able to reintegrate into the social body, to re-legitimise his identity through engagement with – but not total subservience to – known personae. As we noted in the introduction to this thesis, to be fully ostracised from the social body, a fully individuated and autonomous being, was not something that a medieval person would conceivably desire within the cultural frame of reference in which they oriented their sense of self. Hoccleve's ultimate desire to simply *belong* is motivated by the same impulse that led Rolle to strive so hard to maintain a connection to patterns of orthodox behaviour and belief, even as he asserted his exceptionalism, and that lead Gower to subjugate human systems of knowing and being to God's grace in the quest for real order. To wander outside the body politic represented self-abnegation, death, and being cut off from God himself. As

a result, in the *Series* we find a poet who, owing to a unique set of personal circumstances, had to define a conceptual limit with regards to what a private self was, beyond which the disciplinarian gaze of public authority could not penetrate. It would be later generations of writers who would fill that space with significance.

## CONCLUSION

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It has been the concern of this thesis to come to a more complete understanding of the notion of individuality in the late Middle Ages than has hitherto been reached. Rather than once again re-visit the question of whether a medieval person was aware of themselves as an individual – a contention which, drawing on the work of earlier critics, I believe has been firmly established – this thesis has sought to ascertain what *value* that awareness was assigned given the prevailing socio-cultural expectations of the late medieval period. To be an individual set over and against societal norms held only a very uncertain appeal during the Middle Ages, if, indeed, any at all. To be able to find correspondence between one's life as lived and idealised paradigms of thought and behaviour was fundamental to a person's sense of psycho-social and spiritual well-being. However, the theoretical and actual attainment of such a condition was undermined by the practice of corporeal existence, the contingent historical accidents that were inimical to a person's quest to establish an identity that was flawlessly congruent with ideal patterns of being. The tension that existed between the 'as-is' and the 'ought-to-be' that was instantiated in medieval culture, and in the minds of the persons who comprised that culture, was fundamental to how they understood their own identity, and the awareness of one's individuality was therefore bound up with a complex understanding of what it was to be a person, functioning as what Reiss called a 'negative marker' (p. 243). The three authors examined in this thesis were concerned to eliminate this negative marker when constructing a personal avatar in their respective texts. However, the errant individualism inherent to the human condition could not be entirely expunged.



In our discussion the *Incendium Amoris*, we saw how Rolle asserted that he had achieved one such idealised state by effecting a full mystical union with the divine logos. The *Incendium* is an extended paean of (self-)legitimation, in which the author lays claim to a fully transparent model of non-being, through which his reader's can perceive the divine song that animates all of existence. But the veracity of these claims are undermined by the accusations of personal error that were levelled at Rolle, errors which forced him to address issues that lay outside the paradigm within which he is trying to construct his persona. Consequently, Rolle is forced to frame those errors within other patterns of thought and behaviour in an effort to normalise them. In order to establish the underlying truth which he sees as animating his every word, thought, and action, Rolle is forced to plot a course from the facts of his biography, through the orthodoxies established by Biblical, patristic, and mystical authorities, before finally coming to rest in his repose of transparent non-being. However, I would argue that Rolle is ultimately unsuccessful in his project. The *Incendium* is irrevocably marked with the force of Rolle's own persona, that individuality that emerges in spite of his best efforts to refract it through the kaleidoscope of inherited tradition. Rather than limning a state of contented detachment from corporeal concerns, the text enacts most vividly the struggle to become something other over and against the travails of earthly life. As readers, we perceive a self strung out over time rather than existing in a state of transcendence; we notice the constant process of negotiation between 'as-is' and 'ought-to-be' rather than the asserted final repose. Indeed, I do not think it unlikely that, rather than any lack of personality, the reason for Rolle's popularity amongst both those he met in person and those who read his works was the strength of his personality, the contours of

his individual identity with which another person could identify as being all too human.

Much the same can be said when we turn to our analysis of the *Confessio Amantis*. Gower imposes a soteriology on his poem that renders the sphere of human action redundant. Only God can raise the individual out of error, any expectation otherwise is simply misplaced vanity. It is a position Gower claims has been bestowed upon him at the end of the poem; the enlightened *auctoritas* brought to a proper understanding of the human condition through the infusion of grace. But this ultimately causes the reader reflect on the interminable nature of human struggle to overcome sin. If, in the end, only God has the power to lift us out of sin, and his will is arbitrary, unable to be affected by human actions, then we are left to our own devices, to struggle with and within the endless, ultimately irresolvable, dilemmas that are the lot of man living in the world. In the *Confessio*, Amans enacts this incessant process of failure. The various frameworks that offer hope of effecting one's own recovery from error – confession, education, politics, ethics, reason – are all shown to be futile. In the final moments of the poem, Amans is granted the gift that allows him to overcome his divided condition, but not based on anything he has achieved himself. Grace did not have to be granted; Amans could still be searching fruitlessly amongst the diversions of man-made institutions for that thing that could give him personal coherence. Gower's message is that it is our individuality, the infinite failures of our everyday lives, which define the human condition. It is something that we forever struggle to overcome, but can never achieve without the intervention of the highest power. Hope of transcendence exists, but it is not our place to demand it on the basis of deeds.

Rolle's text focuses the reader's attention on the vagaries of life lived in the here-and-now, in spite of his professed intentions to demonstrate a model of being that has moved beyond such concerns. Gower's poem claims much on the part of its author, but also directs the reader's attention back towards the contemplation of his or her own errant individualism. The final author examined in this study also begins his work by trying to establish an identity that no longer has to deal with corporeal matters. However, by the close of his text, Hoccleve has dealt directly with questions of how the self might best define itself in the corporeal world, not simply by making the best of a bad lot, but by shaping an identity within which psycho-social and spiritual security might be established, despite the inevitable failures to properly *know* and to *be* that plague the individual human condition. His *Complaint* initially envisages a moment of pure Boethian transcendence in which the author reconciles the travails of his earthly life by fixing it within God's eternal pattern. But, unlike in the *Confessio* and the *Incendium*, this projected moment is never asserted to have arrived. The ostensibly longed for parting from the troubled realities of mortal existence is deferred beyond the scope of the text due to the self's necessary survival in the established social milieu. The epistemological certainty of a pure moment of knowing is simply beyond the capacity of the mortal mind. Consequently, the terms for personal legitimacy can and must be renegotiated constantly between the self and the expected norms of the culture in which it exists. In a society constructed according to the whims of men, an individual man might equally construct and legitimate his own sense of being from the personae available to him.

This dialectic between the theoretically abstract and the practically particular permeated how a person understood their identity at all levels of society. Crucial to our understanding of how this tension functioned is that it caused identity to be a constant process played out over time, a continuous negotiation between ideal and real that could never be finally settled in this life. When dealing with medieval texts that thematise the debate between error and truth, it is often tempting to look for singular instants of revelation or conversion, that moment on the road to Damascus in which improved (self-)understanding occurs and the protagonist announces 'Here, everything changed. My error was put behind me, and I became as new.' This would be a mistake, a consequence of a reductive notion amongst moderns of how identity was understood in medieval culture, of what *being* a person entailed. The modern impulse has often been to see the medieval mind as too simplistic for complex self-analysis conducted in a constant state of flux, only able to think of itself in the black and white of before and after, sin and redemption, error and truth. Perhaps we should not be too critical of such reductive. It is certainly the case that many medieval authors actively sought to project the impression that they did indeed possess such stable, clear-cut identities. Both Gower and Rolle attempt to portray their textual avatars as having achieved a clean-cut separation between their old, erroneous self and the newly enlightened and integrated persona.

However, we should be very much aware that all three authors examined in this study cannot or will not allow themselves to make the assertion of a definitive moment of pure before and after in their texts. This is most obvious in Hoccleve's writing. As we have noted, his poetic project of self-legitimation is based on the fallibility of human judgement, the impossibility for both the self and

for others to define when, and even how and what, that moment of transition from error to truth actually *is*. By contrast, Gower and Rolle are stridently assertive. The integrity of their respective textual projects are based upon being able to say with certainty that they have indeed achieved a condition in which they are distinctively other than they were before. But if we look closely, we find that they too cannot define the exact moment of *being* new. The crucial cap. 15 of the *Incendium*, in which Rolle ostensibly outlines the various stages of his conversion from sin to sanctity, and the level of spiritual (self-)understanding he was privy to at each, is in fact incredibly confusing over the specific chronology of the event (see above, p. 51, n. 9). At certain moments, Rolle claims to have fully transcended his human condition, at others, he is only at a certain step on the ladder to where he will eventually reach. The persistence of patterns of error into his post-conversion persona also deny to him the pure demarcation between past and present that he seeks. Similarly, the moment at which Amans attains the improved level of self-understanding that allows him to become the enlightened poet 'John Gower' is also difficult to pinpoint. Venus finally assigns the name 'John Gower' at VIII, 2907 (see above, p. 175), but this seemingly decisive moment actually occurs after the crucial moment of 'revelacion' (VIII, 2806) that Amans experiences following the removal of the 'lancegay' by Cupid (see above, p. 167). It is this act which entails the retroactive re-reading of the poem, which is, I have argued, the crucial moment where understanding occurs. Except that it is not simply *one* moment of understanding, but many. When we reach the moment of 'revelacion' we can and should read forward so that we come to the poem's final pronouncements, but we must also obey the logic of revelation and constantly return to the beginning of the poem to (re-)read once again. And in this

act of (re-)reading we encounter for a second time, or a third, ad infinitum, Amans's, and humanity's, constant struggle, and constant failure, to become as they should be. The fantasy of a final definitive moment when corporeal uncertainty is transcended by an absolute moment of understanding is envisaged, but only for the author; for the rest of us, it is endlessly deferred.<sup>1</sup> In Rolle and Gower's texts then, it is striking that neither will assert the actual moment of being totally new and other. In both cases the transition occurs through sleight of hand, endlessly stated as having happened after the fact, but never actually realised or described during the crucial moment. As readers, we are necessarily confronted by the unavoidable presence of uncertainty and doubt that permeate all three authors' work, a presence that points towards the complex understanding each had of his identity when it was placed in the context of what it ought to be.

In his book examining the interaction of memory with narrative in different forms of life writing, James Olney has suggested that for Augustine, a plot

was nothing more nor less than God's eternal design working itself out in human time and human destiny. [...] The duty of the reader for Augustine was to interpret this divinely emplotted story, and to emplot one's own life, so as to fit the individual plot to the all-encompassing, supervenient plot of God's mind.<sup>2</sup>

However, in the case of those lacking a world-view conditioned by the norms of Christian theology, the salient problem in trying to enact such a perfect emplotment in one's own life is the 'mess' of existence, and of the 'mess' of

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<sup>1</sup> Also see pp. 171-72, n. 61 above for a further discussion of how chronological imprecision and temporal paradoxes necessarily arise when human agents lay claim to moments of absolute (self-) understanding that limn divine knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 295.

consciousness born of such existence – those aspects of a life that are entirely inescapable and that cannot be tidied up into a teleological sense of being. Olney sees the recognition of the unavoidability of ‘mess’ as the defining characteristic of modern Western writing concerned with the nature of the self. Structuring their texts around this recognition, modernist authors portray the fundamental existential anxiety inherent in contemporary understandings of being. They show (a) consciousness shorn of all the certainties of prior forms of self-knowing, prior forms that could look forward to a resolution of the narrative of one’s life in the ‘supervenient plot’ already written by God and disseminated through the created order of the universe, world, and society in proper models of existence. Naming Beckett, Kafka, and Giacometti, Olney states that ‘each would have given his life for a narrative’ (p. 296) in order to make sense of the ‘mess’ that both loomed over and lay within any attempts to capture a stable sense of being.

In one sense, then, little has changed between the works of the three paragons of modernism named by Olney and the authors I have dealt with in this study. Rolle, Gower, and Hoccleve were also deeply concerned with the necessary problem of the ‘mess’ of life as they moved inexorably forward through time in what could and did often seem an entirely arbitrary and contingent manner. However, the norms of their culture also impelled them to believe in the presence of ‘plots’ that underlay and overarched their lives, narratives within which they were embedded and subsumed, all of which were ultimately iterations of the ‘supervenient plot’ already written. Their texts stage an awareness of the gap between these two senses of being, of the need to bend divergent paths that individual lives take to the normative demands of narratives present at and in all levels of existence. The value of a life is cast into relief depending on the

proximity that life has to known forms of being instantiated within medieval culture. At the same time, succeeding in being as one should in any temporal sense is not something that can be attained. Rather, the focus is always on how one can avoid failing to too great a degree. I would argue that the three authors looked at in this study were willing to give their lives for a narrative that ended in the recognised goals of medieval culture, even if the routes had to be newly forged, because to fail to do so was to risk the alternative ending of social, psychological, and spiritual desolation.

Each of the texts examined in this thesis thematise delegitimisation, exclusion, and error, in relation to their central protagonist. The authors invoke normative paradigms of thought, behaviour, and belief, in an effort to contain the 'mess' of their protagonists' errors and plot a course towards a fully integrated identity, but what stands out in each case is the fragility of the enterprise, the precariousness of the sense of being articulated in each work. This might seem an odd assertion in light of the fact that both Rolle and Gower claim to have achieved a state of divinely guided enlightenment by the close of their texts. But we should remember what it costs each of the textual protagonists – the total theoretical annihilation of self in the here-and-now of historical existence. That the historical author behind their textual avatar still stands very much alive, above and beyond that text shows that correcting errant individualism, rendering it indistinguishably opaque against the background of idealised forms of being, is not so easily achieved. The tension evoked by the discrepancy between the imagined state of textual non-being, where the protagonist is finally imagined as simply a cipher for God's eternal pattern, and the being of history, cannot be resolved. The failure to achieve full correspondence between the dreamed of textual self and dreaming



historical self still stalks their respective enterprises. In this sense, Hoccleve is more honest. Living in history is what matters to him. He therefore recognises and confronts more completely the individualism predicated by such an existence. But still, belonging matters to him, *being* within existing paradigms of thought and behaviour has very real value. Consequently, he does not seek to examine his errors before retrospectively annihilating them in a progression to the opaque non-identity of a transcendent *autos*. Rather, he seeks new ways to understand the confusing contingencies of his existence within existing cultural forms. This leads him to finally question the complete validity of those forms, not to overthrow them in favour of a being *outside* of medieval culture, but to make a tentative exploration of private spaces *within* known models.

An implied process of negotiation is common to all three texts, regardless of any claims to transcendent authority made by their protagonists. Their texts cannot be written or received anywhere but the temporal world. To a greater or lesser degree each certainly looks upwards in anticipation of better things to come, as we would expect, but they are principally intended to modulate the expectations of a readership in contemporary medieval society. Rolle, Gower, and Hoccleve look to create new understandings of normative paradigms of thought and behaviour relating to the individual errors of their textual proxies so that those errors do not appear to contradict those norms. Such a programme of writing is certainly self-serving, but, crucially, it is not cynically self-interested in legitimising that self *at the expense of* society. Whatever the difficulties of realising a self in line with each author's methodology of being, or of the inherent contradictions within that methodology itself, all three considered themselves to be writing with benevolent intent, fashioning new paths via which a reader could

(re)imagine an identity whilst still preserving a sense of socio-cultural and psychological legitimacy. In Rolle's case, this was through an affective journey of the emotions towards God within the context of an Augustinian pattern of confession and conversion. Gower imagines a self bounded by a complex network of inherited traditions that try but ultimately fail to legitimise proper being, before advocating the total submission of the historical self in a pose of prostrate hope. Finally, Hoccleve locates a private space within the psycho-social world beyond which politicised authority could not pass. In each case, these authors sought, in theory, to allow the reader to contain the 'mess' of their individual lives within the paradigms they offered, however difficult such a programme might prove in practice. But 'individualism' did not possess any positive value. As each of their projects demonstrate, to be an individual was unquestionably to have failed to assume proper identity. None of these texts, then, represent any necessary or causal steps on the road to a 'modern self' in which individuality is the fundamental marker of proper identity and being. Rather, they are unique moments of negotiation, explorations of contradictions in discourse and social practice inherent in late medieval culture, in which gaps and spaces are articulated that we can look back upon in order to try to better understand how individuality related to what is was to *be* a person.

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