

Love, Labor, Liturgy:  
Languages of Service in Late Medieval England

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Department of  
English in the Graduate School  
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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the complex vocabularies of service and servitude in the Age of Chaucer. Working with three major Middle English texts—William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* (chaps. 1 and 3), Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love* (chap. 2), and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* (chap. 4)—my thesis argues that the languages of service available to these writers provided them with a rich set of metaphorical tools for expressing the relation between metaphysics and social practice. For late medieval English culture, the word “service” was an all-encompassing marker used to describe relations between individuals and their loved ones, their neighbors, their church, their God, and their institutions of government. In the field of Middle English studies, these categories have too often been held apart from one another and the language of service has too often been understood as drawing its meanings solely from legal and economic discourses, the purview of social historians. *Love, Labor, Liturgy* sets out to correct this underanalysis by pointing to a diverse tradition of theological and philosophical thought concerning the possibilities and paradoxes of Christian service, a tradition ranging from Saint Augustine to Martin Luther and beyond.

*For Amy,  
who deserves more than diss*

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how words work in the world would be very much poorer. Maureen Quilligan gave crucial support to the project both early and late, with characteristic enthusiasm and wit.

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## INTRODUCTION

*You may be a preacher preachin' spiritual pride,  
May be a city councilman takin' bribes on the side,  
May be workin' in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair,  
You may be somebody's mistress, may be somebody's heir,*

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody.  
Yes, you are, you're gonna have to serve somebody.  
Well it may be the Devil, or it may be the Lord ...  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

—Bob Dylan, “Gotta Serve Somebody”<sup>1</sup>

*You're gonna have to serve somebody.* Bob Dylan's lyric gets it right about the fourteenth century. For the men and women of late medieval England, questions of personal and communal identity were tightly bound to the question “Whom do you serve?” This dissertation explores the complex vocabularies of service and servitude in England at the time of Chaucer. Working with three major Middle English texts—William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (chs. 1 and 3), Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love* (ch. 2), and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (ch. 4)—each of my chapters explores variations on a single question: What counts as service in a

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<sup>1</sup> “Gotta Serve Somebody,” from *Slow Train Coming*, sound recording (Columbia Records, 1979). Lyric transcribed by the author.

culture for which that word designates multiple and seemingly incommensurable forms of life? How is it possible, for instance, for activities as diverse as singing in church, fighting the French, and dishing up soup in a tavern to be authorized under the linguistic sign of “servyse” without emptying the word of all meaning? The story I tell in my thesis is one of uncovering the submerged architecture of theological and philosophical thought which allows these diverse forms of life to coexist under a single roof.

Yet to acknowledge that these ways of life are in fact commensurable, rather than not, and to base that observation on shared foundations which are theological and philosophical, as opposed to social and political, is to order things differently from the way historicist criticism normally orders things. This reordering is deliberate, on my part, but needs explaining. Asked to think about the idea of service in Middle English literature, the historicist critic turns to a powerful set of hermeneutic tools provided in recent decades by the work of social historians. Through microhistorical accounts of lords and retainers, masters and servants, priests and parishioners, these scholars have supplied Middle English literary studies with narratives of social relations that emphasize conflict. The picture of Chaucer’s England painted with this brush is all slashing lines and clashing colors, a vorticist montage of competing factions: peasants against landowners, gentry against nobility, merchants against producers. I do not wish to deny this picture’s validity, but want rather to soften its edges just enough to show its continuities with a wider and less contentious horizon.

Certainly, an atmosphere of debate can be constructed around the concept of “servyse” in late medieval England, much as we speak of debates about poverty or dominion or the sacraments. And this was indeed the model I had in mind when this project began. But what my readings in Middle English have taught me—supplemented by the radically hopeful vision of language articulated by philosophers like Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell (whose collective work is essential to this project)—is that before constructive *disagreement* can begin, there must first of all be agreement: a consensus on the capacity of words and their speakers to *project* and be projected into an astonishing variety of new contexts. Like their theology, Julian’s and Langland’s visionary language presupposes an ontology of peace. Disagreements and complications will inevitably arise, in human language and in human institutions (like Langland’s Barn of Unity). But we can agree about our mutual ability to use complex words in multiple and competing ways without implying one user/usage’s mastery over another. Mastery, of course, is the semantic flipside of service. Each in its own way, these texts tap into the metaphors of service in order to show their readers how to put on the habit of humility: as readers of texts, as possessors of the gift of language, as pilgrims (like Langland’s Long Will), as lovers (like Troilus and Criseyde), and as interpreters of things shown to us (like Julian).

The words in my title—Love, Labor, and Liturgy—name key categories for late medieval and early modern cultures in which the language of service was used to bridge the gap between metaphysics and social practice. In the development of

my thinking about how this bridging is accomplished by writers of very different sensibilities, one passage from *Piers Plowman* has remained a touchstone throughout this project. The C.5 *apologia*, as this passage is known, stages a scene of interrogation. The poem's narrator, Will, who is both a figure for human volition and an avatar for the poet himself, is accosted on the streets of London by two menacing figures called Reason and Conscience. "Can you serve?" asks Reason, "or sing in church, or harvest hay, or make sheaves, or herd sheep?" Can this Will do anything useful, Reason wants to know, to serve his community? Will replies that yes, he can serve, just not necessarily in the ways Reason has prescribed for him.

But in addition to paying close attention to how the language of service in this passage refuses to conform to the neat distinctions normally thought to apply here—between the personal and the political, for example, or the literary and the liturgical—my reading of the C.5 *apologia* goes further to enact a bold historical substitution. I shift the scene to Wittenberg in the 1520s and replace Langland's Will with the historical figure of Martin Luther, whose preemptive response to Reason's question — Can you serve? — is an emphatic "NO!" The Reformer does not allow his questioner to itemize the forms of life that count as serving. Instead, he interrupts after three words, making it clear that he understands the question as asking, in a radical theological and anthropological sense, whether or not the human will is capable of doing good at all. "Serving" comes to stand not just for working at one's earthly vocation, but also for the possibility or impossibility of earning salvation. For Luther, the grammar that connects serving with deserving is utterly broken.

As this brief example demonstrates, I read late medieval texts in a way that encourages us to “see an aspect” of service vocabulary (the Wittgensteinian formula is deliberate) that cuts across the standard period divisions underwritten by economic history and its narrative of transition from feudalism to capitalism. *Love, Labor, Liturgy* contributes instead to a different narrative, the story Charles Taylor has variously called “the rise of the service society” or “the affirmation of ordinary life.” In this tale, the language of service plays an overt and high-profile role. It provides a metaphorically rich way for the men and women of this period to think and talk about human moral agency—about their capacities and limitations as creatures committed both to social justice here below and oriented toward a supernatural end. But in the standard account, this phenomenon is understood as distinctly Protestant: Reformation theology insists on the bankruptcy of the Catholic model of special vocation and replaces it with the idea that men and women can serve God and society through their everyday work in the world. Through its commitment to bring metaphysics back into history, as well as in its careful attention to the fierce ambiguity of ordinary language, my thesis reinterprets major Middle English texts as part of a wider trans-Reformation tradition in which everyday earthly forms of service are affirmed as legitimate expressions of the moral life.

But herein lies a paradox. In denying human agency any traction in working its own salvation, Luther and the reform tradition seem to open up endless possibilities for doing useful work in the world. Modernity has wanted to see this as

a good: a gainful step on the path to human welfare. What is lost, from a medieval perspective, is a different construal of the grammar of serve and deserve (a rhyming pair whose formal power my Middle English authors never failed to exploit). For Langland and the tradition he exemplifies, serving can still be coupled with deserving, but only under conditions of perfect transitivity: there must be a direct object, a *somebody* to receive the gift of service. Only then can the giver (the *servant* to be precise) expect to *deserve* anything in return. For Langland this condition of transitivity, this perpetual passing-through of a gift originating outside the self, is called grace; or sometimes “kyndenesse”; or sometimes simply “servyse.” With this piece of prehistory in place, the connections modernity makes between the idea of “service” and problem categories like slavery, altruism, and sacrifice can be seen as having a different genealogy. Medieval service-talk, unexpectedly, supplies resources of critique through which to view modernity’s own complicated relationship with forms of service — public, military, and bound.

For medieval English speakers, “service” was a word encompassing an extraordinarily diverse set of social practices and forms of life. Its meanings could be inflected in language that ran the gamut from the coarsest sexual pun to the most sublime love poetry to the most abstract theological proposition. Our own (twenty-first century) ways of using this word are likewise very diverse and complex, but in ways that may in fact lead us to misunderstand its medieval usages. As mentioned, there are three big categories in particular that modern uses of “service” may lead

us to think are central to an understanding of the word. So let's be clear: medieval service is not slavery; it is not altruism; it is not sacrifice.

Service is not slavery for mundane historical reasons. In the English language we speak today, "service" is, or can be, a racialized discourse. This is due to the particular history of Atlantic slavery and its continuing consequences in our culture. In late medieval Europe, by contrast, chattel slavery did not exist. It had been replaced by feudal forms of servitude that were, arguably, no less pernicious in their effects on the lives of those who served at the bottom of the social hierarchy. But the ideal of service as understood even by the lowliest of medieval peasants was that they too were being served—from above. Medieval service is always bi-directional. And however much this ideal of reciprocity failed at the level of practice—Langland's *Piers Plowman* contains an acute diagnosis of its failures—it did set a standard of mutual service (underwritten by the Christian language of inversion of hierarchy) that was widely considered a good.

Service is not the same as altruism for slightly more complicated reasons, but these are also historically determined. The word altruism is a nineteenth-century coinage, first used by Auguste Comte in *Système de politique positive* (1851–1854) to mean something like "the totality of other-regarding sentiments." It is not a renaming of Christian charity. Charity always involves a state of pure giftedness, which in being directed *through* a charitable person to another in need is in essence a reflection and reduplication of the mystery of the Incarnation at the level of social practice. Comtean altruism, by contrast, locates the source of this good "sentiment"

at the biological level; it originates in the self. Such a conception of charitable service would be completely alien to the medieval Christian writers represented in this study. Altruism's objects, its "others," are abstractions. Service serves *somebody*.

Neither, finally, should medieval service be read as synonymous with sacrifice. This is another way in which the proximity of two concepts in modern English can cloud, retrospectively, our view of the past. In our culture, those who "serve" their country in uniform are those said to be willing to make the "ultimate sacrifice." But service need not be coupled so closely with death. In the Christian version of sacrifice shared by the writers discussed here, Christ's own death is understood as a totalizing event that is meant to end "once for all" (Heb. 10:10) the need for ritual sacrifices. This event in turn opens out for Christ's followers the living way of discipleship, the form of service exemplified by the God who "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil 2:7). Martyrdom is still possible, of course. But you can only be martyred once; you can *serve* every day.

So if these three are examples of what medieval service is not, then what is it, speaking in positive terms? As I have already suggested, it is charity, it is "kyndenesse," it is humility. It involves explorations of big questions—about love, labor, and liturgy, among other things. Questions like: When you pledge life-long service to another, whom do you really serve? Yourself or the other? What do you deserve in return and when do you deserve it? Should you be rewarded *now*, in anticipation of services rendered? Or later, as a reward for a job well done?



In order to get at this question of what service *is*, as opposed to what it is not, I suggest we consider the following proposition, in modern English, as a starting point: "To serve is to perform an action on someone else's behalf." This definition can be usefully and accurately applied to a very wide range of examples in our language. Let's divide the examples into two broad types. Call the first type "service as exchange." In these instances, I perform an action on your behalf which you are either unable or unwilling to perform yourself, as in:

- a) I fix your car (auto service)
- b) I clean your house (domestic service)
- c) I prescribe you medicine (medical service)
- e) I answer questions about a product you purchased from my company which is no longer working properly (customer service).

Notice that it is not very important here whether you have paid in advance for my services or if you pay me upon completion. (You may have a warranty on your car or your computer that obliges me to repair it free of charge, but you paid for that service in the price of the product.)

The second type we can call "service as gift." In this group, I can still say that I perform actions on your behalf which you are unable or unwilling to perform yourself, as in:

- e) I fix your car
- f) I lend you my donkey
- g) I heal your wounds

h) I wash your feet

i) I pray for your soul.

All of these instances could also be labelled as types of service. And all of these instances of “service as gift” share a grammatical form with those in the category of “service as exchange.” Indeed some of these instances are not only grammatically parallel to one another, but are identical propositions. So what is the difference between them?

One way of answering this question has been to point to the similarity of grammatical form and to claim evidence thereby that in fact these two types *are* the same, or rather that the second type (gift) is only masquerading as something distinct from an exchange, when in fact there is no such thing as a gift.<sup>2</sup> My way of answering this question, as seen from the perspective of Langland and Julian, is to say that the important difference between these two categories (exchange and gift) lies in the posture of the serving agent—the stance, as it were, of the servant with respect to the objects of his or her action. In acts of service *as gift*, the stance is one of “redynesse,” to borrow a word from Julian’s parable of the lord and the servant. On the other side, a stance of “unredynesse” characterizes acts of service *as*

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<sup>2</sup> Modern and postmodern critique of the very idea of the Gift and the Given is widespread across the humanities and social sciences, but its key texts are Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don* (1922), and Jacques Derrida, *Donner la mort* (English trans. *The Gift of Death* [1996]). John Milbank and Jean-Luc Marion, among others, have offered a counter-critique from the perspective of Christian theology, for which the reality of gift is a given (as it was for Langland and Julian).

*exchange*, because the self-giving action is perpetually deferred, cut off and turned back toward the self by the thought of and anticipation of reward.

Put in this way, I am suggesting that there is a freedom involved in how one chooses to position oneself in one's service, and in how one describes the relation between oneself and the objects of that service. The object can be an earthly master, or God, or my beloved, or, as Dylan suggests, it may be the devil. So in speaking of the *will to serve*, there is a choice involved. There is "free will"—not forgetting the complexities that that term entails. But if you were a serving subject in late medieval England, the relevant context here, your free will, while undeniably present, was also severely constrained in the sense that you could not always choose the objects of your service. These objects would have been, more likely than not, chosen for you. Maybe you were born into a tenurial bond connecting your land or your labor to a baron whom you have never met. Maybe you were married to a stranger according to your parents' wishes. Maybe you were pledged, as a child, to serve God in a religious order.

So in one sense Middle English "servyse" does involve a choice as to what posture I will assume in performing my service. But I do not always have a choice about whom I will serve. And I really do not have a choice when it comes to the question of whether I will serve at all. The existential *non serviam* of Milton's Satan or Joyce's Stephen Dedalus is not available as an option. For the men and women of Langland's England, to exist meant to serve *somebody*. The force of the question then becomes not whom or what do you serve—not "Can you serve?"—but *how*.

This shift in emphasis to the adverbial “how” is an important part of the mythology of Protestant Reform in its ostensible shaking up of the theology of grace and merit—what Charles Taylor calls the “Puritan theology of work and ordinary life.” “God loveth adverbs” says one seventeenth-century Protestant clergyman, “and cares not how good, but how well.”<sup>3</sup> Part of my task in what follows will be to shake up, in turn, some cherished historiographical notions about how Catholics and Protestants differed in their theologies of “work and ordinary life.” Focusing on the medieval side, I show how the relation between serving and deserving was both problematic and productive as a locus of theological thought long before Luther. But in placing Luther beside Langland (as I do in chapter 3), I also show continuities in their understandings of large areas of Christian theology and its consequences for the will’s work in the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Hall (1574–1656), quoted in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 224. Previous quotation at 230.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Form of a Servant: Langland's Christology and the Poetics of Service

*Sed semetipsum exinanivit formam servi accipiens . . .*

– Philippians 2:7, Vulgate

And aftur, god auntred hymself and toek Adames kynde

– *Piers Plowman*, C.20.231

Taken together, these two quotations—one from Paul's letter to the Philippians and the other from the Harrowing of Hell sequence in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*—form the center and the boundaries of this chapter. I leave the Latin untranslated purposefully, for now. A substantial portion of what follows attempts to show why: because, that is, the late-fourteenth-century English translators of the Latin Bible could not decide on the right way to render it. The choice had serious consequences for determining how the model of Christ's personhood was to look and sound in English. Placed as the cornerstone of competing vernacular theologies in late medieval England, such a model would shape the versions of Christian selfhood, polity, and social relations which emerged alongside these competing theologies. While not technically a translation of Philippians 2:7 (though there are

textual grounds for thinking it may have begun as one), I will suggest that the line from Langland given above can be read as taking part in this same christological conversation. This chapter listens in on the conversation from two directions. Part one describes the figure of Piers the Plowman as a participant in late medieval debates about what it means to serve Truth and serve an earthly master at the same time. Far from seeing these forms of life as mutually exclusive, Piers offers himself as an embodiment of the complex metaphysics of Christian service. Part two sets Wycliffite responses to Philippians 2 alongside the orthodox commentary tradition, sketching out a background for Langland's choice of "auntred" as an English verb of incarnation: a choice that neatly connects the dots between metaphysics and social practice while resisting assimilation to fixed doctrinal polarities.

### **Part I: Form of a Servant**

In his Exposition on Psalm 100 (c. 403), Saint Augustine explains the meaning of the verse "Serve the Lord with gladness" in terms of an apparent paradox. While "all servitude is full of bitterness," he writes, service to God is set apart as "a *sweet* service, because we are all redeemed":

Great happiness, brethren, it is to be a slave in that great house, although in bonds. Fear not, bound slave, confess unto the Lord: ascribe your bonds to your own deservings ... At the same time you are slave, and free; slave, because you are created such; free, because you are loved by God, by whom you were created: yea, free indeed, because you love Him by whom you were made. Serve not with discontent; for your murmurs do not tend to release you from serving, but to make you a wicked servant. You are a slave of the Lord, you are

a freedman of the Lord: seek not so to be emancipated as to depart from the house of Him who frees you.<sup>1</sup>

You are born into servitude, but made free by loving and being loved. This is what Augustine means by “sweet service,” a state of being that is entirely conditioned by the fact of redemption. Writing over a thousand years later, Martin Luther was still struck by the paradoxical nature of Christian service. He begins his treatise *On Christian Liberty* (1520) with two propositions “concerning the freedom and bondage of the spirit”:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Admitting that the two statements “seem to contradict each other,” Luther holds out hope that “should [they] be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully.” In going on to adduce the texts from Paul in which he finds this contradiction expressed, Luther caps his list with the same verses from which I drew my epigraph to this chapter. Christ, he says, “was at the same time a free man and a servant, ‘in the form of God’ and ‘of a servant.’”<sup>2</sup> What Luther refers to is “one

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<sup>1</sup> I use here the older translation in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8 (available from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801100.htm>; Internet; accessed 4 November 2009) because its vocabulary of bondage and servitude is closer to the Middle English word-forms discussed in this chapter. But compare the newer rendering in Augustine of Hippo, *Expositions of the Psalms: 99–120*, trans. Maria Boulding O.S.B., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, part 3, vol. 19 (New York: New City Press, 2003), 18–19, here numbered as Psalm 99.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Christian Liberty*, ed. Harold J. Grimm, trans. W. A. Lambert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 7. A full account of Augustine’s and Luther’s treatments of Christian service would need to carefully distinguish the cultural milieux from which they speak: in Augustine’s case a late Roman empire in which chattel slavery is still central to economic organization; in Luther’s an early modern Europe transitioning from late feudalism and its no less pernicious forms of economic servitude.

of the most theologically significant passages in the New Testament.”<sup>3</sup> This is Philippians 2:5–11, the text that lies behind the concept of *kenosis*: the “self-emptying” of Christ in the Incarnation. Since I will be referring to this passage frequently in the coming pages, I quote it here in full from the Douay-Rheims version:<sup>4</sup>

(5) For let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: (6) Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: (7) But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. (8) He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. (9) For which cause God also hath exalted him, and hath given him a name which is above all names: (10) That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth (11) And that every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father.

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Compare, for example, Augustine’s comments on slavery as punishment for sin in *City of God*, bk. 19, chs. 15–16 [*Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 1972, 2003)] with Luther’s authoritarian response to the peasant risings in Swabia and Thuringia in 1525–26: *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, trans. Charles M. Jacobs, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 46, ed. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 47–55.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005). Fowl’s commentary is an excellent introduction to the massive amount of scholarly literature on this passage, much of which has been devoted to the text’s formal structure in Greek and the possibility of its independent existence as a poem or hymn to Christ—perhaps used in the early church prior to its incorporation into Paul’s epistle. Fascinating as it is, this debate has no bearing on my arguments concerning Langland’s use of Phil. 2. Like all readers in the medieval West, he would have known the verses primarily in Jerome’s Vulgate version, which bears no traces of the original’s poetic form, and in liturgical recapitulations of that version.

<sup>4</sup> Vulgate: (5) hoc enim sentite in vobis quod et in Christo Iesu (6) qui cum in forma Dei esset non rapinam arbitratus est esse se aequalem Deo (7) sed semet ipsum exinanivit formam servi accipiens in similitudinem hominum factus et habitu inventus ut homo (8) humiliavit semet ipsum factus oboediens usque ad mortem mortem autem crucis (9) propter quod et Deus illum exaltavit et donavit illi nomen super omne nomen (10) ut in nomine Iesu omne genu flectat caelestium et terrestrium et infernorum (11) et omnis lingua confiteatur quia Dominus Iesus Christus in gloria est Dei Patris.



As Jaroslav Pelikan points out, kenosis does not stand on its own as a theological concept. Rather, it represents the middle stage in a three-part process of “preexistence, kenosis, and exaltation” as this theology was worked out by the Latin fathers in the hundred-plus years between the councils of Nicea (325), where the doctrine of the Trinity was formalized, and Chalcedon (451), where the christological debate was settled with the formula of “one person, two natures.”<sup>5</sup>

*Piers Plowman* quotes directly from the text of Philippians 2 only once, but this lack of explicit textual linkage has not prevented Langland scholars from identifying the incarnational poetics of *Piers Plowman* as distinctively kenotic.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, vol. 1, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 256. My limited account of the fifth-century christological debates is drawn largely from Pelikan, ch. 5, 226–77, with reference also to Rosemary Woolf, “Doctrinal Influences on *The Dream of the Rood*,” *Medium Aevum* 27.3 (1958): 137–53; and Pope Pius XII, *Sempiternus Rex Christus*, Encyclical on the Council of Chalcedon (1951), available at [http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs\\_pi12sr.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_pi12sr.htm); Internet; accessed 4 November 2009. Written just before the convening of the council at Chalcedon, Pope Leo I articulated the theology of hypostatic union in his *Tome*, recognizing that the representation of “one person, two natures” in language posed special problems at the level of simple narrative. He borrowed from Cyril of Alexandria the theory of *communicatio idiomatum*, which attempts to provide a set of guidelines for the grammar of Chalcedonian christology (Woolf, 140): Leo I, *Tome*, trans. William Bright, in E.R. Hardy, ed., *Christology of the Later Fathers*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 359–70. Scholastic theologians wrote treatises on the problem of *communicatio idiomatum* as well. One version by Nicole Oresme (late fourteenth century) is found alongside Wyclif’s *De benedicta incarnatione* in Oxford MS Oriel College 15. Oresme’s text is edited in Ernst Borchert, *Der Einfluss des Nominalismus auf die Christologie der Spätscholastik* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1940). Aquinas treats the subject in part III of the *Summa*, question 16.

<sup>6</sup> See John A. Alford, *Piers Plowman: A Guide to the Quotations* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992), 133; see below for the details of this quotation. In addition to Watson and Aers in the works cited in this section, critics who have made specific use of the concept of kenosis in their readings of Langland include: A. V. C. Schmidt, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Everyman, 1995), xlix–l; D. Vance Smith, *The Book of the Incipit: Beginnings in the Fourteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 130; and Cristina Maria Cervone, *Love’s Leap: Incarnational Poetics in Late Medieval England* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 2004), ch. 3, esp. 187–90.

David Aers and Nicholas Watson have been among the most persistent in underscoring the affinities between *Piers* and the theology of kenosis. Watson, for example, has read the “plonte of pees” lyric in passus 1 as providing a vernacular version of the “myth” (his word) of kenosis, centered on the apparent emptying in the words “hevene myghte nat holden it, so was it hevy of hymselfe, / Til it hadde of the erthe eten his fille” (B.1.153–54; C.1.149–50).<sup>7</sup> For Watson, kenosis forms part of a trajectory he likens to “Fortune’s wheel in reverse”—moving from high to low to high again in God’s eternal deity, incarnation, and exaltation. This image implies a circularity, albeit a distinctively medieval form of circularity (the wheel of fortune), that is absent in Pelikan’s tripartite scheme. It is absent for the good reason that the Latin fathers saw this process as linear and teleological, not circular. “The wicked walk in a circle,” says Augustine.<sup>8</sup> Yet for Watson, the myth built around this cycle and the doctrines into which it developed remained open-ended, never complete, so that by Langland’s time, and even now, “its metaphorical structure is in tension with

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Watson, “Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God,” *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997): 86–124. The C text revision arguably makes Watson’s case more strongly: “so heuy hit first semede, / Til hit hadde of erthe y3oten hitselue.” Throughout this chapter I quote the B-text from Schmidt, *Vision of Piers Plowman*. I quote the C-text from the edition of Derek Pearsall, *Piers Plowman: The C-text* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> *City of God*, bk. 12, ch. 14, adapted from Psalm 11. See Lee Patterson’s engaging application of the “tragic view of history” entailed in this circularity to the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, ch. 6 in *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), at 226.

itself at a deep and permanent level.” This tension, he suggests, allows the myth to underwrite both radical and deeply conservative versions of Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

In work going back as far as 1975, David Aers has chosen to link Philipians 2 to *Piers Plowman* at a later stage in the poem, when the incarnational energies latent in Holy Church’s plant of peace lyric have taken on a more concrete narrative form. Writing about the Harrowing of Hell sequence in passus 18 of the B-text, Aers insists that even at the moment of his triumph over the devil, “Christ’s humanity remains the key.” He continues:

the poet depicts God’s Incarnation as a process of divine learning about the grimmer realities of human experience (B.18.212–15), an existential exploration of “alle wo” by the being that is source of “alle ioye” (B.18.221–25). Christ chose a form of life that set aside dominion and “taking the form of a servant” took on the risks of unmerited, unjust suffering (Phil. 2:6–11). Out of this choice comes a solidarity with humans and the grounds for the Christian fraternalism repeatedly affirmed in the poem.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Conceptions of the Word,” 87–89.

<sup>10</sup> “The Humanity of Christ: Representations in Wycliffite Texts and *Piers Plowman*,” ch. 2 in David Aers and Lynn Staley, *Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park, Penn.: Penn State University Press, 1996), 43–76, at 72. See also Aers, “*Piers Plowman*” and *Christian Allegory* (London: Edward Arnold, 1975), 106–9. The corresponding passage in the C-text is C.20.208–34. More recently, Aers has extended the application of Phil. 2’s “form of a servant” and the form of life it implies in order to speak of the *lack of* humility and “compassionate solidarity” exhibited by the figure of Trajan, the Roman emperor who is “broken out of helle” in passus 13 (C.13.73). “The absence of even a hint of christology or Trinitarian faith in [Trajan’s] words,” he argues, “suggests he still knows nothing of God’s own humility, nothing of God taking the form of a servant ... But *Piers Plowman* teaches us to recognize such lacks together with their human consequences”: David Aers, “Remembering the Samaritan, Remembering *Semyuief*: Salvation and Sin in *Piers Plowman* (the C Version),” ch. 4 in *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland, and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 126.

As these readings from Watson and Aers suggest, Langland's theological imagination had internalized the version of incarnation and redemption so powerfully expressed in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Moreover, they show that the language of kenosis—of self-emptying, of taking the form of a servant—is applicable as a hermeneutic key to parts of the poem in which the issues of Christ's incarnation and redemption are not, at surface level, primary.

I mentioned above that Langland scholarship ordinarily credits the poem with only one unambiguous *quotation* from Philippians 2. Alford's *Guide* identifies the Latin line at C.21.80a (B.19.80a) as a not-quite-verbatim borrowing from the Vulgate's Phil. 2:10: *Omnia celestia, terrestria, flectantur in hoc nomine Iesu* [All things in heaven and earth bow down at the name of Jesus]. But that only accounts for Langland's Latin. As Pearsall points out in his note to this line, the poet had already Englished a piece of this verse earlier in the same passus, as part of Will's query on the two names of Christ:

Whi calle 3e hym Crist, sennes Iewes callede hym Iesus?  
Patriarkes and prophetes profecied bifore  
*That alle kyn creatures sholde knelen and bowen*  
*Anoon as men nemned the name of god Iesu.*  
(C.21.15–18; my italics)

Likewise, there are several more places where it can be argued that Phil. 2 lies behind Langland's Middle English. For example, at C.18.206–7, Faith explains that

God, that bigynnyng hadde neuere bote tho hym goed thouhte,  
*Sente forth his sone as for seruant that tyme*  
To occupien hym here til issue were spronge.

Then again at C.20.221–24, Peace makes the case to her sisters that

god, that bigan al, of his gode wille  
Bycam man of a mayde, mankynde to saue,  
*And soffred to be sold to se the sorwe of deyngre,*  
The which vnknyttyth alle care and comsyng is of reste.<sup>11</sup>

As I hope this brief catalogue suggests, the possibilities for reading Langland's poem as a multifaceted commentary on the theology of kenosis have not themselves been emptied out. In what follows, I will extend the application of this scriptural key-text to include a reading of the figure of Piers the Plowman himself, whose self-introduction in passus 7 insists that we recognize him in the form of a servant. Not, I should emphasize, as a servant of Richard II, or John of Gaunt, but as a servant of Truth.

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*'Peter!' quod a plouhman, and potte forth his heued.* With this line, Langland's Piers the Plowman introduces himself bodily and speechfully into the poem bearing his

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<sup>11</sup> Aers also suggestively links this passage to Phil. 2, along with a pair of lines from B.16 that were cut from the C version: "*Deus meus, deus meus, ut quid dereliquisti me?* / That is, creatour wex creature to knowe what was bothe" (B.16.214–15). Here he sees Langland showing how "Christ the Creator in his manhood learns the desolation of the believing creature who finds himself cut off from his Creator." "It is clear," he further suggests, "that this notion of the Creator become creature to learn the existential situation of his creatures, is one which fascinated the poet," "*Piers Plowman*" and *Christian Allegory* 108 and n. 80). Using a different set of passages, Watson likewise ties Langland's treatment of kenosis to a daring theology of reciprocity between God and the human soul, with dramatic consequences for the scope of salvation. "God needed humanity to fall," he writes, "so that both could understand 'kyndeliche' the reality of suffering and joy: in part, that is, so that God, by becoming something less than himself, might understand his own fullness. This is why, at the harrowing, Christ can argue that he has now attained such intimacy with his 'bretheren of blood' that it is almost impossible for him to damn even the unbaptized to eternal punishment" ("*Conceptions of the Word*," 117).

name. He does it with a one-word exclamation—“Peter!”—that is both oath and self-naming.<sup>12</sup> From the perspective of the ongoing narrative, it is appropriate as an oath because Piers at this point is intervening in a speech situation in which he is not, at first, a participant. He needs to get the attention of this unruly group of would-be pilgrims whose conversation he has just overheard. The pilgrims’ interlocutor is himself a professional shrine-seeker, adorned with badges from across Europe and the Middle East (7.161–76). Piers’s “Peter!” in this sense is like a handclap; it is designed to abruptly shift the auditory focus of its hearers toward the speaker. But it is also appropriate in at least two additional figurative senses. As an abbreviation of “by St. Peter,” the oath authorizes Piers’s subsequent avowal that he “knows” Truth “as kyndely as a clerk doth his bokes” (7.183). He underwrites his truth-claim by appealing to the ecclesiastical hierarchy for which Peter, as vicar of Christ, metonymically stands.<sup>13</sup> The force of Piers’s statement, heard this way, is something like “I swear by St. Peter that I know this guy called Truth.” At the same time, it seems necessary to read “Peter!” not as an oath but rather instrumentally, as in “*through* St. Peter I have come to know Truth.” Taking Peter to be a stand-in for the visible institutional church, Piers’s statement could mean that he has come to know

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<sup>12</sup> See Pearsall’s note to 7.182. On the provocative erasures of Piers’s name throughout the most important C manuscript, MS Huntington Hm 143, see the pair of essays by Michael Calabrese and John Bowers in *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 19 (2005).

<sup>13</sup> I am aware that what I call the figurative senses of Piers’s self-introduction are only available in the retrospective knowledge provided by the poem’s final two passus, in particular the moment of Piers’s transformation into Peter in C.21.257 ff., where Grace gives him the responsibility of establishing the church, making him “procuratour ... and reue / And registrer to reseyuen *Redde quod debes.*”

Truth through the church, a reading the poem can readily accommodate. If, however, we take Peter to refer not to *Saint* Peter (a posthumous designation bestowed by the church) but rather to the historical person of Peter the Apostle, whose original *peregrinatio* ends in martyrdom at Rome, then the emphasis shifts (momentarily at least) from institutional to personal agency, from sainthood to sanctification.<sup>14</sup> “Peter!” comes to signify the story of the life so named, and names Piers as the embodiment of that life.

In the speech that follows, Piers’s language at first underscores the emphasis on personal agency by describing his relation to Truth as an interpersonal service relationship. He has just overheard two queries from the pilgrims: first, “Knowest thou auht a cor-seynt ... that men calleth Treuthe?,” followed by “Kouthest wissen vs the way whoder out Treuth woneth?” (7.176–77). Do you know this saintly person called Truth? Can you show us where he lives? Piers’s response treats these

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<sup>14</sup> Part of Langland’s project will be to close the distance between these oppositions. Or it may be more accurate to say these are oppositions imposed on the poem by secular liberalism of a type that was influential in Langland studies in the late twentieth century, and to which I am not immune. See for example Anna P. Baldwin, “The Historical Context,” in Alford, ed., *A Companion to “Piers Plowman”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 67–86, where Baldwin consistently ties her very helpful discussion of Langland’s engagement with contemporary events to an understanding of the poem as “more about moral than political reform” (83). In the same volume, Robert Adams summarizes critical approaches to Langland’s theology as divided over the question of “whether the poem’s center of focus is social or individual” (“Langland’s Theology,” 87–114, at 88). See Aers’s rebuttal to such splittings in *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), at 34. Wittgenstein’s notion of “forms of life” is very much behind my reading of late medieval service as a category which, in Langland’s use, renders such oppositions helpless.

questions separately. To the first he says he does indeed “know” Truth, “as kyndely as clerk doth his bokes” (7.182), to which he adds the detail that “Consience and Kynde Wyt kenned me to his place” (7.183). The word “kyndely” in Piers’s analogy here should give us pause. Through Will’s conversation with Holy Church in *passus* 1, the poem has already shown how the concept of “kynde knowing”—natural knowledge—is fraught with difficulties. The difficulties are now compounded by their association with clerkly learning and the object of that learning as it is found in “bokes.” If “bokes” refers to Christian scripture—revealed theology—then knowing it “kyndely,” by means of human intellectual powers like Conscience and Kynde Wyt, seems a bold claim. I think it is meant to be a bold claim, disguised as a humble simile. It is probably also a little joke at the expense of clerics, whose book learning must appear to a plowman as anything but “natural.” But as Piers extends his answer, it becomes increasingly apparent that he conceives his relationship to Truth not as one of knowledge in an intellectual sense, but as one of service. Verbs of knowing in this passage give way to verbs of serving.

‘I knowe hym as kyndely as clerk doth his bokes.  
 Consience and Kynde Wyt kenned me to his place.  
 And maden me sykere sethen to *seruen* hym for euere,  
 Bothe to sowe and to sette the while y swynke myhte,  
 And to sowen his seed, suewen his bestes,  
 Withynne and withouten to wayten his profit,  
 Iich haue ybe his foloware al this fourty wynter  
 And *yserued* Treuthe sothly, somdel to paye.  
 In alle kyne craftes that he couthe deuise  
 Profitable as for the plouh, a potte me to lerne,  
 And, thow I sey hit mysulf, y *serue* hym to paye.



Y haue myn huyre of hym wel and other whiles more.  
(7.182–94; my emphasis)

Grammatically, Truth and its pronouns figure much more prominently in this passage as objects than as subjects. We learn a great deal more about what Piers does *for* and *on behalf of* Truth than we do about Truth's own actions. Accordingly the three verbs of serving are all used in transactive structures.<sup>15</sup> They each take Truth as object: "[I] serve him for ever"; "I have served Truth sothly"; "I serve him to paye." And yet the verbs are curiously non-transactive too, in the sense that the action of *serving* is not described by the verb itself. Insofar as it signifies action at all, the verb is a placeholder. It can represent a huge class of potential kinds of actions, both transactive (involving subject-verb-object) and non-transactive (involving only subject-verb). Insofar as it signifies not action but a state of being, the verb *serve* is descriptive enough, and I will discuss this different modality in more detail elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> But here, what Piers's service actually consists of is named by the constellation of action verbs that surround his claims of service: these words are *sowe*, *sette*, *swynke*, *sowen*, *suewen*, and *wayten*. These are verbs denoting types of manual and agrarian labor. Piers, after all, is a plowman.

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<sup>15</sup> On the distinction between *transitive* and *transactive* as identifying surface structure (grammar in a narrow sense) and deep structure (relations of causality) respectively, see Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress, *Language as Ideology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1993), 39–40.

<sup>16</sup> See my discussions of Julian's servant in chapter 2 and Langland's C.5 *apologia* in chapter 3.

Piers's self-introduction is not the first time the poem has used "serving truth" as a descriptor for a particular form of life. In passus 1, Holy Church uses the same formula to talk about the "pure order" of knighthood exemplified by King David's men:

Dauid in his daies dubbed knyghtes,  
Dede hem swere on here swerd to serue treuthe euere. (1.101-2)

As with Piers's service in passus 7, the specific content of "serving truth" is not left to Will's imagination. Holy Church provides the specific verbs appropriate to the military classes, their "trewe accion":

Kynges and knyhtes sholde kepen hit by resoun,  
Rydon and rappe adoun in reumes aboute  
And take *transgressores* and teyen hem faste  
Til Treuthe hadde termyned here trespas to the ende,  
And halden with hem and here that han trewe accion  
And for no lordene loue leue the trewe partie.  
Treweliche to take and treweliche to fyghte  
Is the professioun and puyr ordre that apendeth to knyghtes,  
And ho-so passeth that poynt is appostata of knyghthed;  
For thei sholde nother faste ne forbere the serk but fyghte and  
fende treuthe  
And neuer leue for loue in hope to lacche syluer. (1.90-100)

For kings and knights, serving Truth is not an abstract idea at all. It means to *kepen*, *rydon*, *rappe adoun*, *take*, *tyen*, *halden*, *fyghte*, and *fende*. Yet despite providing specific verbal content for the placeholder formula "serving Truth," Langland's subsequent explorations of the here-and-now actions of the clerical, military, and agrarian classes clearly reveal the distance between *do* and *ought to do*. Or to put it in the poem's own terms, between doing and doing *well*, *better*, and *best*.

Piers concludes his self-description of service to Truth with three lines in which Truth is not object but subject. "He is," claims Piers

... the presteſt payere that eny pore man knoweth;  
He with-halt non hewe his huyre ouer euen.  
He is as louh as a lombe and leel of his tonge. (7.195–97)

Until now, Piers's mixing of past and present tenses, of active and passive modes, his ordering and reordering of subjects and objects has seemed quite ordinary, entirely comprehensible as a linguistic representation of a human form of life. But now he gives us a triad of statements, each exactly one line in length, in grammatically parallel propositional form: *He is... He withholds not... He is....* The contrast suddenly seems striking. Is this the grammar of Truth? The lexical linkage of service with satisfaction (*paye*: 7.190, 193) that Piers's speech insists upon is clearly picked up here in the words *payere* and *huyre*, words that also clearly link the first two of these lines back to the Conscience's privileging of *mercede* as proper reward for services rendered.<sup>17</sup> But the agency is now, momentarily, one-directional. For the space of these three lines, the service side of *serve and deserve* has dropped away, and the *paye* is unearned. The *huyre* is the redemption. *He* is Christ, as the word *lombe*

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<sup>17</sup> See Pearsall's notes to 7.193 and 196. I would add that the third line, 197, "louh as a lombe and leel of his tonge," points back to the part of Holy Church's speech in passus 1 that immediately precedes the exemplum of David's knights as servants of Truth: "When alle tresores ben tried, Treuthe is the beste - / I do hit upon *Deus caritas* ... For who is trewe of his tonge and of his two handes (1.81–84). The allusion to 1 John 4, *Deus caritas*, further reinforces the structural parallels between these two passages. As Pearsall notes (1.82), the text *God is love* is strongly linked in John's letter to keeping the commandments: "haec est enim caritas dei ut mandata eius custodiamus" [For this is the charity of God, that we keep his commandments] 1 John 5:3. For an account of the pressures on the idea of "fair wage" in post-plague England, and Langland's response, see David Aers, chapter 1 in *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360–1430* (London: Routledge, 1988).

suggests. Yet all of this is accomplished without breaking the narrative frame. The sense of the literal level remains intact. *He* is still the lord of the manor, and the *huyre* is still a day's wages.

Despite the concreteness with which Piers has articulated his model of service to Truth—a model that has internalized and converted to practice the lessons taught by Conscience about *mede* and *mercede* as, respectively, payment before and payment following services rendered—the pilgrims have not understood him.<sup>18</sup> Astonishingly, they offer Piers money: “‘Ye, leue Peres,’ quod thise pilgrimes, and profrede Peres mede” (7.200). His response is simultaneously hilarious in its slapstick exuberance and deadly serious in its moral force:

‘Nay, bi the perel of my soule!’ Peres gan to swerie,  
‘Y ne wol fonge a ferthyng, for seynt Thomas shryne!  
Were it itolde Treuthe that y toke mede  
A wolde loue me the lasse a long tyme aftur. (7.201–4)

Acceptance of improper payment (in this case pre-payment) annuls the efficacy of the service offered, and the consequence of misdirected service is deadly sin, the peril of souls. The theological stakes have been ratcheted up significantly since the prologue's early chastisement of clerics in political service (Prol.90–94) and those sergeants serving at the bar (Prol.160) about whom Langland wrote: “Thow

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<sup>18</sup> In my view, Langland does not accept Conscience's market-based model of *mercede* as proper payment for proper work, but the full implications of his rejection of it are not made clear until the final third of the poem when the context has shifted from earthly economic activity to soteriology and the theology of grace. For Piers at this point in the poem, about to assume his role as overseer of the laborers on the half-acre, Conscience's model of work and reward (“serve and deserve”) is the best available.

myghtest betre meten [measure] myst on Maluerne hulles / Than gete a mum of here mouth ar moneye were hem shewed" (Prol.163–64). Now, the pilgrims who have just "blostrede forth as bestes" over those same hills have offered money to another servant, and he has rejected it. What he does instead is to put himself literally at their service, bodily and speechfully. "This," he says, the pronoun encompassing the speaker himself, the form of life he has just described, and the topography of his soon-to-be-unfolded map to Truth, "this is the way theder" (7.205).

Pointing inwardly and outwardly at the same time, what Piers references by means of this little deictic pronoun ("this") is exactly the kind of *thing*, imagined as a material object, that the pilgrims have requested: a map. This map, however, displays as its most conspicuous landmarks a series of verbal imperatives which have been briskly transformed grammatically into compound nouns. Once familiar as commands [*mandata*], they seem less familiar as placenames: a ford named "3oure-fader-honoureth"; a croft called "Coueyte-nat-menne-catel"; two stumps called "Sle-nat" and "Stele-nat" (C.7.214–24). This allegorical transformation is so lightly handled by Langland that the more prosaic catechetical materials which made this move available to him are submerged. But there are precedents for Langland's move here: not just for the map, but also for Piers's prickliness over what constitutes proper service.

Take one example from a Ten Commandments commentary in an early fifteenth-century devotional collection. Eerily echoing Piers's "forty winters" speech, it begins:

Where is any man now-o-dayes that askyth how I schal loue God and myne euene Cristen? How I schal fle synne and serue God treuly as a treue Cristen man schulde? ... A lewyd seruaunt is he that seruyt a mayster fourty yere or thrytti, and at the laste ende knowith not the leeste of his maysteres byddyngis. Rytli so we seyn alle that we haue serued oure Mayster and oure Lord Ihesu Crist, Goddys sone of heuene, summe furty yeer, three skore yeer, four skore yeer, and 3yt vnnethe knowith ony of us trewly his ten Comaundementis, thanne wher-of haue we servyd hym, how haue we seruyd hym, sythen we knowe not his byddyngys?<sup>19</sup>

The set of associations made in this passage between service to God, serving a master, and knowing the Ten Commandments turns on a piece of Latin/English wordplay of the kind that was standard fare in the bilingual clerical culture of late medieval England. Vernacular homiletic and devotional texts deriving directly or indirectly from Latin sources could readily accommodate residual Latin vocabulary, English/Latin puns (explicated or not), and quotations from scriptural and patristic

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<sup>19</sup> Oxford, Bodleian MS Laud Miscellaneous 23, fol. 3r. This commentary is extant in only three manuscripts: Laud Misc. 23, where it is the first item; the St. Albans Cathedral MS; and British Library MS Cotton Titus D.xix. (Judith Jefferson also includes BL Harley 211 in this group; see following note.) It is classified by the *Manual of Middle English Writings* as an "orthodox treatise on the Decalogue" [7:2516], although the presence of undeniably Wycliffite materials in the MS suggests that further analysis is required on this point. I quote from the edition by D. J. Lloyd, "An Edition of the Prose and Verse in the Bodleian Manuscript Laud Miscellaneous 23," unpublished dissertation (Yale University, 1943), hereafter cited in the text as Lloyd plus folio numbers.

texts as well as from contemporary or near-contemporary clerical discourses.<sup>20</sup> The commonplace Latin tag for “keep/obey the Commandments” is *serva mandata*, derived from Proverbs 7:2 “*serva mandata mea et vives*” [keep my commandments and thou shalt live] and echoed in Matthew 19:17 “*si autem vis ad vitam ingredi serva mandata*” [but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments] and John 14:15 “*si diligitis me mandata mea servate*” [if you love me, keep my commandments].

The passage quoted above wastes no time in exploiting the ability of the Middle English verb *serven* to draw together meanings from two distinct but etymologically connected Latin words: first, *servire*, with the senses of “to be a slave, serve, wait on; be of use (to); be subject (to); labour for”; and *servare*, meaning “save, preserve; protect; keep, observe; look after; pay attention to.”<sup>21</sup> The same semantic split in the verb-forms connected with *servus* [servant/slave] is found in

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<sup>20</sup> For the historical background and catechetical context of the whole genre of vernacular decalogue commentaries, see Judith Jefferson, “An Edition of the Ten Commandments Commentary in BL Harley 2398 and the Related Version in Trinity College Dublin 245, York Minster XVI.L.12 and Harvard English 738 Together with Discussion of Related Commentaries,” Ph.D. thesis (University of Bristol, 1995). See section entitled “The Commentaries in Context,” xciv–cxix, and clxxxiv–ix on the version found in this group of MSS, which Jefferson classifies as “Discursive Version X.” The text under discussion here can be dated very imprecisely to the period mid-1380s to 1410, based on textual overlaps with datable versions, Jefferson cxx. On late medieval English Latin in relation to Langland and his sources, see the detailed overview and bibliography in Fiona Somerset, “‘Al the comonys with o voys atonys’: Multilingual Latin and Vernacular Voice in *Piers Plowman*,” *YLS* 19 (2005): 107–36, esp. 107–17.

<sup>21</sup> *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, *servio* [4<sup>th</sup> conj.] and *servo* [1<sup>st</sup> conj.]. See also the entries for “deseruyn,” “seruyn,” “seervyys” and “servyse” in the *Promptorium parvulorum*, an English-Latin dictionary compiled by “Galfridus Grammaticus,” a Dominican from Lynn, c. 1440: *The Promptorium Parvulorum: The First English-Latin Dictionary*, ed. A. L. Mayhew, EETS e.s. 102 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1908). References to this text will be cited as *Promptorium*.

the compilation *On the Properties of Things* by the thirteenth-century Franciscan writer, Bartholomaeus Anglicus.<sup>22</sup> John Trevisa's Middle English translation of this text, completed in 1399, begins its chapter headed "On the servant" by invoking this distinction, but, following the authority of Isidore of Seville, it puts the direction of derivation the other way around. The Latin noun-form comes after the verb, naming the person to whom the action of the verb is applied:

Seruant hatte *seruus* in latyn, and hath that name of *se[r]uare* 'to kepe', for somtyme prisoners were ikept to be hedid or to be raunsound . . . Othir they haue that name of *seruire* 'to serve', for they ben iput to vile seruise of office that bene nou3t couenable for lordis nothir for here children. (*Properties* 6.15)

Embedded in the distinction between *seruire* and *servare* is a difficulty in prioritizing between ontology and praxis, between who one *is* and what one *does*. To serve [*seruire*] a master or to serve [*servare*] the divine law is still in either case to *be* a servant. Langland's *Piers the Plowman* recognizes this and extends it to a second related distinction: to serve *Truth* from within a Trinitarian metaphysics is to make a nonsense of any distinction between serving *somebody* and serving *something*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> M. C. Seymour, ed. *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's translation of Bartholomeus Anglicus "De Proprietatibus Rerum,"* 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–88), vol. 1, book 6, chapter 15. Further citations given in the text as *Properties* plus book and chapter numbers.

<sup>23</sup> The secularized versions of service prevalent in our culture and in our universities have either rejected this or forgotten it, resulting in an unreflective language of serving abstractions (society, the good, the nation) cut off from the human persons who are the objects of Langland's vision of service to neighbor—what the Samaritan's Trinitarian lyrics in C.19 will call simply "kyndeness."



Put another way, Piers must overcome the gap between Trevisa's "vile service" and Augustine's "sweet service."

The Laud commentary goes on to catalog a wide range of versions of Christian service (to God, to neighbor, clerical, lay, male and female) under the general heading of *serva mandata*. Read in this light, Piers's allegorical map to Truth can be seen as a Ten Commandments commentary in its own right, but one whose catechetical thrust is quite differently conceived. Having established the analogous relationship between serving an earthly master and serving God and his commandments, the Laud author next makes clear the alternative: serving the devil.<sup>24</sup> "[W]her-of haue we seruyd hym," he asks,

how haue we seruyd hym, sythen we knowe not his byddyngys? It semyt wel that we han seruyd the feend of helle, for we kunne bylye oure euen Cristen, bakbyte hem, sclaudere hem, scorne hem, curse hem, warye hem, and swere many ydyl othes. And so it semith we been not Goddys seruautys, but the fendys, for whos byddyngis we don, his seruautys we been. (Lloyd 3r-v)<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson notes that the copy found in St. Albans Cathedral MS ascribes the text to a William Trebilvile. *Index of Middle English Prose: Handlist XVI: Manuscripts in the Laudian Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 3, item 2. Trebilvile, or "Turberville" was apparently an official of the archdeaconry at St. Alban's. See G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c. 1350-1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 292-93, where he calls the Laud Misc. 23 commentary "an insignificant *Tractatus* in English."

<sup>25</sup> Compare the language of this passage with Will's question to *Liberum Arbitrium* at C.16.172: "Whareof serue ye? y saide, 'sire *Liberum Arbitrium*?' — discussed in greater detail below, chapter 3.

As if in a diabolical mirror-image of the positive verbal descriptions of agrarian and knightly service in Langland's poem, here again we are given a catalog of verbs as an extended gloss on serving. And here again the emphasis on serving marks a turn, as in the pilgrims' original query, away from questions of knowledge: from knowing someone (Truth) or something ("hys byddyngys") to the forms of practice that *count* as service.<sup>26</sup> But here the verbs are sinning verbs, naming sins of the tongue: *bylye*, *bakbyte*, *sclaundre*, *scorne*, *curse*, *warye*, and *swere*. The service therefore counts not as serving God, but as serving the fiend. The pattern that is emerging here is independent of whatever generic distinctions one might like to make between the Laud commentary (prose, homiletic, didactic, extraliterary, etc.) and Langland's poem. Whatever is *called* serving, whatever is placed under the sign of service, is accompanied by particular examples of what *counts as* serving. To serve means to ride, rap down, take, tie, hold, fight, and fend; or it means to sow, set, swink, sue, and see to; or it means to lie, backbite, slander, scorn, curse and swear. It means all of this and more. What becomes essential to know, or to notice, is how the speakers and writers of this language *do the grammar* that connects these words, these "paths of action," to their subjects and objects.<sup>27</sup> What resources of thought, language, soul, and community can they bring to bear on the conventions—the cultural

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<sup>26</sup> For an extended meditation on what "counting" in language entails, in the sense in which I use the word here, see Stanley Cavell, "Natural and Conventional," ch. 5 of *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 125.

grammars—that dictate how they are to understand the matrix of social and interpersonal relations into which they are born? In Langland’s culture, this matrix goes under the name of service.

But in doing the grammar that makes service to God and service to an earthly master equivalent terms in the logic of salvation, Langland’s poem begins to depart from the clerical commonplaces that structure the Laud commentary’s conflation of these two kinds of action. In the lists of serving verbs I combined a moment ago into a single sentence, there is an odd sense of equivalence suggested between the forms of service directed to God and those directed to the devil. Combined in this way, there is an implication that the human agents doing the “serving” in these cases can choose to do the grammar any way they wish. The paths of action that count as serving God are as free from obstructions as the paths that lead to the devil. So for the Laud commentator, if not for Langland, the analogy proceeds as if uncomplicated by the realities of agricultural labor in post-plague, post-1381 England. Lying, backbiting, swearing, slandering and so on (all sins of the tongue) are the kinds of obstructions, in linguistic form, which inevitably accompany those agents’ day-to-day conversations and interactions in the world. But in Langland’s hands, the desired conflation of “sweet” service with vile comes very quickly into confrontation with the real material conditions of the manorial half-acre, where verbal dissimulation is seen as a real response (however sinful) to the demands of hunger, famine, and need.

From this perspective, the forms of humility recommended by the commentator seem troublingly close to political quietism. For example, the first command's injunction to "loue me and kepe my comaundementys" is combined with a warning to avoid pride and know one's place: "grucchy3t not, but holde yow apayd with that that God sendyth 3ow be 3ore resounable trauayle. When 3e be temptyd to pride holdy3t 3ow apayd with the astat that God hath set 3ow inne" (Lloyd 6r)<sup>28</sup>.

Under the seventh commandment's prohibition of theft, he goes on to say that

seruantis and werkemen that don falsli here labour and taken here ful hire ben theues to here maystris, for Seynt Paul byddy3t seruantis to do trewly and wilfulli her labour, not as seruynge men oneli, but seruynge God in this labour that is don to men bi the ordinaunce of God; and of God thei shul reseuye mede if thei do truli her seruise, and peyne if thei don it falsli. (Lloyd 19v)<sup>29</sup>

This mode of talking about service and reward echoes the way Langland's

Conscience had defined *mercede* in economic terms as the kind of payment you

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<sup>28</sup> In fairness to the commentator, he also recognizes, like Conscience, that service obligations under this model run in both directions. Lords and masters have debts to their servants too. And to renege on those debts is to sin against Justice: "Also lordis and maystris that payen not trewli to her seruaun3tis and her hyred men her due hire be theues and manquellerys, for thei wi3tdrawe from pore men her lijflode, her catel, her fleysch, and her blod. And this synne cryeth speciali to God for veniaunce, as it is wretin opynli in Iames epistel" (Lloyd 19v). But the Justice imagined here, even considering its advocacy of unpaid servants, is still a top-down model of an authoritarian God punishing masters and servants alike for their failures of service. It begins to sound like the justice of the "Lutheran" God in James Simpson's account; see below chapter 3. Compare the Samaritan's call for vengeance against homicides at C.19.262–70.

<sup>29</sup> The Laud commentator is translating and adapting a passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians (6:8), a crucial text for medieval discussions of master-servant relations and the economics of serve and deserve. See Anna Paues, *A Fourteenth Century English Biblical Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 75: "knowing that what good deed any man do, he schal underfongen it of God, whether he be a serfaunt or a free man," and my discussion below, chapter 3, n. 43.

deserve after having completed your agreed-upon work (C.3.290–313). Here, the workman gets what he deserves in wages from his earthly master, and gets what he deserves from God by serving him, too, “in this labour that is don to men.” It is a model of merit in which good works are reciprocated in proportion, according to the terms of a market economy, “on[e] peneworth for another” (3.313). The Laud author makes no mention here of the necessity of God’s grace as a precondition for performing good works.<sup>30</sup> A closer look at the terms of Piers’s service agreement with Truth, however, reveals a different model of merit at work. He not only rejects the pilgrims’ offer of mede in advance, but his insistence that Truth pays him his due hire “and other wiles more”—a surplus above the market wage—suggests that this service agreement already envisions, down to the level of its grammar (He is ... He withholds not ...), the inworking and supervening grace that will later enter the poem’s economy in the form of another servant, the second person of the trinity.

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<sup>30</sup> For discussion of Langland’s use of contemporary economic language (esp. in C.3) and its relation to his theology of grace, see Robert Adams “Mede and Mercede: the Evolution of the Economics of Grace in the *Piers Plowman* B and C Versions,” in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. Edward Kennedy, Ronald Waldron, and Joseph Wittig (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988), 217–32; James Simpson, “Spirituality and Economics in Passus 1–7 of the B Text,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 1 (1987): 83–103; D. Vance Smith, “The Labors of Reward: Meed, Mercede, and the Beginning of Salvation,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 8 (1994): 127–54, along with Samuel Overstreet’s response, 147–51, Smith’s response to Overstreet in *YLS* 11 (1997): 195–97, and Smith’s reprise and expansion of this work in ch. 6 of *Book of the Incipit*; A. J. Minnis, “Looking for a Sign: The Quest for Nominalism in Chaucer and Langland,” in A. J. Minnis, Charlotte C. Morse, and Thorlac Turville-Petre, ed., *Essays on Ricardian Literature In Honor of J. A. Burrow* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 142–78.

Something very close to this model of the salvation economy is articulated in a sermon of Thomas Brinton, exactly contemporary with Langland, and again expressed in the language of agricultural service:

Temporal lords rarely give servants their earned and agreed upon wages. In truth it frequently happens that lords are false towards God's law by withholding wages, and servants are thieves in bearing away the goods of the lord according to their own judgement; but Christ the Lord pays above what his servants themselves have earned because *the Lord gives grace and honor*, as the Psalm says.<sup>31</sup>

Brinton's explicit analogizing of the lord of the manor with Christ the Lord provides an important gloss to the lines I have partially quoted (twice now) from Piers's opening speech, lines linking the "pretest payere" with the lamb who is "louh [meek] ... and leel of his tonge" (C.7.195–97). Further, Brinton's introduction of the term of grace into the service economy says outright what Piers's initial self-description only hints at here, but the poem will articulate in full voice later on: that serving well and deserving a just reward, on the one hand, and serving badly and deserving a just punishment, on the other, share a basis in a contractual, legal-juridical framework in which "serve" and "deserve" form the two halves of a life-structuring rhyme. In much Middle English devotional writing, and certainly in the the Laud commentary, this rhyme rings true regardless of whether the final result on the "deserve" side is salvation or damnation. The rhyme is beautiful and

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<sup>31</sup> Sermon 48 in Sister Mary Aquinas Devlin, ed., *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester (1373–89)*, Camden Society, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, vols. 85 and 86 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1954), I:215, my translation. Brinton's sermons are recorded in Latin only, but some, at least, may have been first delivered in English; Devlin, introduction to *Sermons*, xxi.

seductive in its symmetry and simplicity. In Langland's dialogical development of the theology of grace and merit, however—from Lady Mede's debate with Conscience in passus 3, to Piers's "other whiles more" in passus 7, to the debate in hell over the terms of atonement in passus 20 (to which I will turn momentarily)—the upshot of Grace's intervention in the poem will be to decouple "serve" from "deserve" and to expose as fallacious the model of merit that the rhyme underwrites.

Given Langland's persistence in his formal and theological *unrhyming* of service and desert, it comes somewhat as a surprise that when he brings the third person of the trinity fully into his narrative in passus 21, he does so in a climate of linguistic conditions which are much more favorable toward harmony. Combining the pentecostal narrative of Acts with the enumeration of gifts in 1 Corinthians, Langland assigns to the figure he calls Grace ("cristes messenger") a crucial task: to redefine the forms of serving outlined above as nothing less than the gifts of the Holy Spirit (C.21.207–45). In this (final!) catalogue of verbs, Grace/Holy Spirit expands the forms of life that count as service to include a number of seemingly incommensurable activities, some of which could not be accommodated within the traditional estates model which gave us both the list of knightly actions and the plowman's humble labor. Actions once criticized as too susceptible to corruption and misdirection are now given sanction by the gift of grace. To some men, says Langland, Grace

3af wyt with wordes to shewe,  
To wynne with treuthe that the world asketh,  
As prechours and prestes and prentises of lawe:  
They leely to lyue bi labour of tonge  
And bi wit to wissen othere as grace hem wolde teche. (C.21.229–33)

To the labors-of-the-tongue of the clerical classes, Grace adds not only the labor of hands (to *till*, to *thatch*, and to *cook*) but also *buying* and *selling*, *divining* and *dividing*, *carving* and *compassing* and *coloring*. Astronomers and philosophers who *see* and *say* “what sholde bifalle” are placed, line-by-alliterative-line, alongside military men who *ride* and *recover*, and pursuers of rough justice who *fetch* through “Foleviles lawes” (21.235–47). Langland’s list then returns to renunciative religious vocations to describe those who “lyue in longyng to be hennes, / In pouerte and in pacience to preye for alle cristene” (248–49), before closing with a gesture of inclusiveness in which all of these disparate kinds of worldly action are made equal participants in the apprenticeship of Grace: “In al he lered to be lele, and vch a craft loue othere, / Ne no boest ne debaet be among hem alle” (250–51).

No boasting among them. No debate. Langland’s vision of the gifts of the Holy Spirit presupposes not merely that all crafts are commensurable in and through the gift of grace, but also that in speaking to one another in and through the gift of language they can *communicate* in a way that sets aside debate and disagreement. The idioms native to particular forms of life are not given up or replaced with some abstract universal language of Truth. It is rather that Truth *inhabits* these local idioms. The space between metaphysics (here Trinitarian theology) and social



practice (here a charity-centered conception of human vocation and craft) is bridged by a radically hopeful vision of language. This is not to deny that the vision of unity achieved here is momentary and ultimately unsustainable. The movement from this point—with Will on his knees singing *Veni creator spiritus* in unison with “many hundret” (21.210–11)—through to the poem’s final image of Conscience leaving the church to “gradde aftur Grace” (22.386) is a rough progress through a Barn of Unity that is fragile, leaky, and perpetually besieged.<sup>32</sup> But if to take Langland’s vision of unity seriously means to acknowledge its difficulties in the face of the world as it is, it means also emphatically to affirm the need to try, patiently, to reach agreement in our languages and peace in our politics. “*Pacientes vincunt*”—the patient conquer—as Piers says in one brief and mysterious appearance in the poem, not through domination but through “kynde speche” (15.138–46).<sup>33</sup>

## Part II: A Servant of Serving

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<sup>32</sup> Compare on these passages Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, 68–70, and “Justice and Wage-Labor after the Black Death: Some Perplexities for William Langland,” ch. 3 in *Faith, Ethics, and Church: Writing in England, 1360–1409* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000). Chapter 4 of the latter, “Wyclif’s Understanding of Christian Discipleship,” is also relevant to my discussion here. See also James Simpson’s reading of the gifts of the holy spirit in relation to the contentious context of guilds and fraternities in Langland’s London, “After Craftes Conseil clotheth yow and fede’: Langland and London City Politics,” in *England in the Fourteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1991 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Nicholas Rogers (Stamford, Eng.: Paul Watkins, 1993), 109–27.

<sup>33</sup> For discussion of the poem’s figure of Patience in relation to pacifism and English foreign policy in the 1370s and 80s, see Anna Baldwin, “Patient Politics in *Piers Plowman*,” *YLS* 15 (2001): 99–108, and the response by Fiona Somerset, *YLS* 15 (2001): 109–14.

Langland's clerical culture had a word in Latin that captured this double sense of human communication as both anchored in the self's relation to the tripartite God and fully invested in day-to-day social relations. They called it conversation [*conversatio*]. It is, not coincidentally, a word that shows up prominently in the commentary tradition on Philippians 2:7, specifically in the second half of the verse, where Paul writes that having taken on the form of a servant, Christ was "made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man" [in similitudinem hominum factus et habitu inventus ut homo]. The *Glossa ordinaria*, for instance, responds to Paul's distinction between likeness and habit by saying simply "*habitu: id est conversatione.*" To be found "in habit" as a man, that is, means not only to take on human nature at a metaphysical level (involving both body and soul) but also to participate fully in human *conversatio*, understood as external, embodied, and historical forms of human life, including human language.<sup>34</sup> In his influential twelfth-century commentary on the epistles, Peter Lombard picks up the gloss's reading and then suggests that Paul puts it this way "as if to say that ... [Christ] was found as one wanting to try out this way of life [*conversatione*], just like any other man, because he eats, drinks, rests, etc."<sup>35</sup> A little further on, I will show that when Thomas

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<sup>34</sup> *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, ed. R. E. Latham (London: British Academy, 1981), fasc. 2, s.v. *conversatio* 2, 3a–3d: "intercourse, association; life in a religious community or as a hermit; habitation; manner of life." See also the figurative use of the word in Vulgate Phil. 3:20: "but our conversation is in heaven" [*nostra autem conversatio in caelis est*].

<sup>35</sup> "Quasi dicat: Factus est in similitudinem hominum, et etiam suo habitu, id est sua conversatione inventus est alicui volenti experiri, ut alius homo, quia comedit, bibit, sedit, etc.": Peter Lombard, *Collectanea*, quoted from J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Cursus Completus: Series Latina* (Paris 1844–64), vol.

Aquinas comes to these verses in his commentary on Philippians, he too will bring out this sense of Christ's incarnation as being fully exposed to the vicissitudes of human conversation. But first I want to return to the late fourteenth century and Langland's own linguistic and cultural milieu in order to better situate the poet's choices.

As I suggested with my brief epigraphs at the head of the chapter, when Langland needed to put into the mouth of Peace an English verb to describe God's decision to take on human nature, and thus to share fully the joys and difficulties involved in inhabiting human skin, he turned to Philippians 2 and the words available in English to render *semetipsum exinanivit*. But rather than merely providing another option by which to "rend[er] the bible / And precheth to the peple seynt Paules wordes" (C.10.88–89), the poet's decision to say that "god *auntred* hysulue and toek Adames kynde" wonderfully captures the fragility of the moment, the sense of risk involved in putting oneself—bodily and speechfully—into conversation, in language and in action. Our apprehension of this sense of the word is dependent, though, on its place in the full narrative and liturgical context.

Here is the scene as it unfolds in passus 20. The crucifixion is complete and Christ has descended to hell. The four daughters of God (Mercy, Truth, Righteousness, and Peace) have come from the corners of the earth to discuss what

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192, col. 234, my trans. The ordinary gloss is quoted from *Biblia Latina cum Glossa Ordinaria: Facsimile Reprint of the Edition Princeps of Adolph Rusch of Strassburg 1480/81*, ed. Karlfried Froehlich and Margaret T. Gibson (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992).

these events —“this grete wonder”—can mean (C.20.114–30). Arguing that the account of the atonement given by Righteousness is incomplete, its emphasis too juridical and its judgments too final (“[humankind’s] peyne is perpetuel – no preyer may hem helpe,” 20.205), Peace implores her sisters to consider a more hopeful scenario. She constructs a three-part analogy around the idea that knowledge is acquired by means of contraries: joy is learned through suffering, abundance through hunger, color through whiteness (206–19). Linking Adam’s first disobedience to Christ’s incarnation and to humankind’s capacity to learn “what loue is” through “here folye and here synne” (235–36), Peace’s eloquent speech creates a narrative frame, grounded in human *conversatione*, through which to articulate the metaphysical language of kenosis—not in scholastic mode but in English. This is the context in which the not-quite-translations of Philippians identified in part 1 ask to be read:

So god, that bigan al, of his gode wille  
 Bycam man of a mayde, mankynde to saue,  
 And soffred to be sold to se the sorwe of deyng,  
 The which vnknytteth alle care and comsyng is of reste  
 . . .  
 Forthy god of his goednesse the furst gom Adam  
 Sette hym in solace furste and in sovereyne merthe;  
 And sethe he soffrede hym to synne, sorwe to fele,  
 To wyte what wele was ther-thorw, kyndeliche to knowe.  
 And aftur, god aunted hym sulue and toek Adames kynde  
 To wyte what he hath soffred in thre sundry places,  
 Both in heuene and in erthe — and now to helle he thenketh,  
 To wyte what al wo is, that woet of alle ioye.  
 (C.20.221–24; 227–34)

In the liturgical calendar of the Sarum Use, Philippians 2:5–11 is the epistle reading for Palm Sunday, thus associating it with the Passion sequence of Easter week and not, as one might expect, with the Incarnation sequence of the Advent season. Surviving Middle English sermons on these verses are not common, but the Wycliffite cycle includes an epistle sermon for Palm Sunday which foregrounds the christological questions raised by the language of kenosis.<sup>36</sup> Far from having been settled once and for all by the Chalcedonian formula of “one person, two natures,” this Wycliffite preacher’s engagement with the text of Phil. 2 shows signs of a vigorous and ongoing medieval debate about the social, political, and ecclesiological consequences of Christ’s having emptied himself and taken on the form of a servant. This conversation, moreover, has an argument over English words at its heart. The words chosen either to translate or gloss the Vulgate’s *exinanivit* (i.e., “emptied,”—itself a controversial choice for Paul’s Greek verb, *kenōō*) could represent serious theological differences, both between Wycliffites and their orthodox opponents, and within late medieval theology more widely.<sup>37</sup> I believe that Langland’s ear was attuned to the murmurs of this conversation as early as the composition of the B-text, and sensitive to the directions it would take in the coming decades. More than that, I suggest that *Piers Plowman*’s “auntred hym sulue” proposes an adventurous

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<sup>36</sup> Pamela Gradon and Anne Hudson, eds., *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–96), 1:565–67 (Sunday epistle sermon 21); 5:44–46 (notes).

<sup>37</sup> See the excellent discussion of Paul’s kenosis-vocabulary in Fowl, *Philippians*, 95–97.

literary and theological solution of its own to the problem of how to render *semetipsum exinanivit* in Middle English.

But what exactly is controversial about this choice of words? Why do I want to say Langland's choice is a solution to a problem, rather than just another way of putting it? To say that *auntred* is a novel and linguistically potent Langlandian substitution for the ordinary way of rendering *exinanivit* in English is to imply that there must have been a more common word that he rejected. Readers familiar with the conventions of medieval romance will recognize, as Langland's earliest readers did, that Peace's suggestive word "auntred" is a form of the verb *aventuren*—meaning "to expose to risk or danger; hazard (one's goods); risk (one's life); to endanger oneself; ... to venture."<sup>38</sup> The word has a set of associations in Middle English that cuts across military, economic, and amatory discourses. It is a key term in chivalric romance in particular, where its uses are sometimes inflected with theological concerns (as they are, I suggest, in Chaucer's *Troilus*; see chapter 4). But it turns up much less frequently in overtly religious contexts, as the *MED* entries attest. Langland's use here is therefore characteristically daring in drawing the word into a christological context in which the earlier medieval commonplaces of the

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<sup>38</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, "auntren," 2(a), 3(a).

Christ-knight—the *Christus miles* or *Christus victor*—have been conjured up only to be set aside.<sup>39</sup>

So what were the other English equivalents available for rendering the kenosis-verb, and what would the theological ramifications have been for each of the available choices? The answer is provided, albeit in negative form, by the Wycliffite preacher who wrote the Palm Sunday sermon. “Poul grauntuth not,” he says, referring to the text of Phil. 2:7, “that this person *anentyschide hym*.” The fifteenth-century compiler of the English-Latin dictionary known as the *Promptorium Parvulorum* confirms this reading. He gives the English equivalent of

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<sup>39</sup> Aers, “Humanity of Christ,” 72, but compare the different emphasis in his “Visionary Eschatology: *Piers Plowman*,” *Modern Theology* 16 (2000): 3–17. This assertion may be too controversial to let stand without further comment, given the large amount of work in Langland scholarship on passages evoking either Christ’s kingship or his figuration as a medieval warrior. Although not always put in these terms, the issue of whether Langland’s christology is “low” (emphasizing the humanity) or “high” (emphasizing the divinity) is one not likely to be resolved through recourse to external doctrinal influences. On the contrary, Langland’s power as a theological poet is often expressed most forcibly in his choice *not* to choose between dogmatic polarities. My emphasis here on Christ’s servanthood is not meant to deny the significance of Christ’s kingship as represented in the poem. That said, I think it crucial to note that Langland does not choose to end his narrative with Christ conquering hell or ascending to heaven, but instead by showing the human institution of the church in the process of breaking apart and attempting to reform. For scholarship exploring the “high” end of Langland’s christology, see Rosemary Woolf, “Doctrinal Influences,” and “The Theme of Christ the Lover-Knight in Medieval English Literature,” *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 13 (1962): 1–16; R. A. Waldron, “Langland’s Originality: The Christ-Knight and the Harrowing of Hell,” in Gregory Kratzmann and James Simpson, eds., *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature: Essays in Honour of G. H. Russell* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1986), 66–81; Lawrence Warner, “Jesus the Joust: The Christ-Knight and Medieval Theories of Atonement in *Piers Plowman* and the ‘Round Table’ Sermons,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 10 (1996): 129–43; Sarah Wood, “‘Ecce Rex’: *Piers Plowman* B.19.1–212 and its Contexts,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 21 (2007): 31–56. And for a wide-ranging meditation on Langland’s Christ as “transgressing boundaries” between high and low, inner and outer, Mary Clemente Davlin, O.P., *The Place of God in “Piers Plowman” and Medieval Art* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2001), ch. 3 “God’s Body,” 64–89.

"*Exinanio*" as "Anyyntyschyn, or eneyntyshyng."<sup>40</sup> Now obsolete, the word *anientishen* and its variants (derived from Old French *á nient; anientir*) can mean either "to bring to nought, annul, annihilate, destroy," or "to make of no account, to bring low, reduce." To these, the *MED* adds a third, reflexive sense of "to humble (oneself), be humble."<sup>41</sup> Here, under this third definition, the editors of the *MED* place the word as it appears in a Middle English version of Philippians 2:7: "He anentyschid hymselfe, takande the schape of the servaunt." As it happens, this version is quoted from a *non*-Wycliffite translation of Paul's epistles, written in a northern English dialect in the second half of the fourteenth century, very likely predating the early Wycliffite version of the New Testament.<sup>42</sup> A different (but also

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<sup>40</sup> *Promptorium*, ed. Mayhew, col. 21.

<sup>41</sup> *OED*, "anientise, -ish, v." defs. 1 and 2 respectively. *MED* "anientishen" def. 3. The word does appear in *Piers Plowman*, although in the abbreviated form *anyenten*, -ed. Later in the same passus which contains the *auntred hymsulue* lines, Langland uses it to mean "destroy," figuratively to kill (a human person): "So lyf shal lyf lete ther lyf hath lyf anyented" (C.20.386). It is of course possible, given the poem's textual disposition and the orthographical similarities between *an[y]ented* and *auntred* (u/n minim confusion comes into play here, as does y/r similarity in some hands) that Langland actually wrote "God an[y]ented hymsulue" and not "God auntred hymsulue," thus rendering Phil 2:7 in a more traditional way. An argument could certainly be made that "an[y]ented" is the *durior lectio* in this context. At the very least, a glance at the MS variants for "anyented" and related forms recorded in the Athlone B and C texts reveals some scribal confusion over this word (fourteen variants for "an[y]en[t]ed" at C.20.386, in the most extreme case). For trenchant comments on Langland's use of scripture and the difficulties it creates for his modern editors (as well as medieval scribes), see Robert Adams, "Editing and the Limitations of the *Durior lectio*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 5 (1991): 7–15: "this poet is so immersed in the sacred page that scriptural rhetoric permeates every stylistic register. The result is that even some of the most original utterances of such an author sound vaguely biblical, while his actual scriptural references tend to be camouflaged by their stylistic conformity with the immediate context," 10.

<sup>42</sup> M. J. Powell, ed., *The Pauline Epistles contained in MS. Parker 32, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge*, ed. Margaret Joyce Powell, EETS e.s. 116 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1916). Powell concludes that the translation was made for use in preaching and/or teaching, but not for university



probably pre-Wycliffite) version of the epistle, composed in a southern dialect at around the same time, likewise renders *exinanivit* as “anentysched.”<sup>43</sup>

By contrast, when the Wycliffite translators of the Bible arrived at Phil. 2:7 and *semetipsum exinanivit* (likely sometime in the late 1380s or early 1390s, roughly synchronous with Langland’s work on the C revision), they appear to have gone out of their way to avoid using the word *anentysched* with its connotations of annihilation or making void. They chose instead to use “lowyde” or its variants “lesside” or “meekide,” eliminating the problematic pairing of *exinanivit* = *anentysched* and making the problematic Latin verb synonymous with the following verse’s main verb “humbled” [*humiliavit*].<sup>44</sup> But why? What is driving this deliberate avoidance of *anentysched* and its associations with making void?<sup>45</sup> The question is

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study, its glosses being too simple and its translation “very rough and pedestrian” (Introduction, xxxiv). On its orthodoxy Powell is in no doubt, based largely on the glosses’ respectful treatment of the priesthood; see her examples, liii–lxvii.

<sup>43</sup> Paues, *A Fourteenth Century English Biblical Version*, 77. The Pauline epistles included in Paues’s collection are from Cambridge MS Selwyn College 108.L.1; on the dialect see her Introduction, lxxi.

<sup>44</sup> “Lowyde” appears in Josiah Forshall and Frederic Madden’s edition of the Wycliffite Bible, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal Books, in the Earliest English Versions Made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and His Followers* (Oxford, 1850), available at <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AFZ9170.0001.001>, retrieved 4 November 2009; and in Conrad Lindberg, ed., *King Henry’s Bible: MS Bodley 277: The Revised Version of the Wyclif Bible*, 4 vols. (Stockholms: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1999), 4:231. The alternate form, “less[i]de,” appears in the Wycliffite epistle sermon for Palm Sunday (*EWS* 1:565ff); see below for further discussion of this context. “Meekide” appears as a variant in five of the manuscripts collated by Forshall and Madden. Further references to Forshall and Madden will be designated in the text as *WB* plus chapter and verse.

<sup>45</sup> See the fascinating study on the possibility of human self-annihilation in Christian eschatology by Paul J. Griffiths, “Self-Annihilation: A Disputable Question in Christian Eschatology,” *Pro Ecclesia* 16.4 (2007): 416–44, with reference to Augustine and Aquinas, among others.

answerable in christological terms, and, closely related to these, by recalling Wycliffite views on the sacraments, especially the sacrament of the altar. These views are marked by a vehement rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation on both philosophical and scriptural grounds. In Wyclif's ultra-Realist metaphysics, the bread and wine cannot be annihilated in substance (becoming the Body of Christ) and yet remain visible according to their accidental forms.<sup>46</sup> By the same logic, God cannot "anientise" himself in the Incarnation: this would amount to self-destruction, the most extreme form of logical contradiction. Wycliffite writers habitually argue by analogy in making this point. Just as Christ is both true God and true man, so the host is *both* the body of Christ and material bread:

And right so as the persone of Crist is verray God and verray man, verray godhede and verray manhede, ryth so, as holy kirke many hundruth wyntur has trowyde, the same sacrament is verray Godus body and verraye brede, os it is forme of Goddus body and forme of brede ...<sup>47</sup>

For Wyclif and his followers, this logic was very plain and was authorized by Saint Augustine, Saint Hilary, and the full weight of tradition (*SEWW* 20). The analogy

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<sup>46</sup> For the relation of Wyclif's metaphysics to his sacramental theology, see Anthony Kenny, *Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) ch. 7; Gordon Leff, "The Place of Metaphysics in Wyclif's Theology," in *From Ockham to Wyclif*, Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, for the Ecclesiastical History Society, 1987), 217–32; also David Aers, "John Wyclif: *De Eucharistia (Tractatus Maior)*," ch. 3 in *Sanctifying Signs*, 53–65.

<sup>47</sup> Hudson, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997 [1978]), item 1, p. 18. See also items 2, 3, 21a, 21b. The text is Wyclif's "confession" on the Eucharist as recorded in Knighton's *Chronicle*. For details of source and context see Hudson's notes, 141–44. Hereafter cited as *SEWW* plus page number.

worked to deny an understanding of transubstantiation which entailed an annihilation of the bread's substance, leaving only the substance of Christ's body under the accidents of the bread. Wyclif's claim—in agreement with Aquinas—was that such annihilation was impossible; one couldn't logically speak of Christ "annihilating" any part of the hypostatic union at the moment of Incarnation; likewise one couldn't speak of annihilating any part of the sacrament as Christ had instituted it in the words "This is my body." It is arguable whether any serious theologian in late medieval England actually held this view of the eucharist, but the Wycliffite preacher of the Palm Sunday sermon clearly found the idea disturbing enough to merit a warning against it. The sermon does not move overtly into the territory of sacramental theology, but its reading of Phil. 2:7 underscores its opposition to any understanding of the eucharist that involves *anient*-izing anything. This preacher's take on *semetipsum exinanivit* is unequivocal: "Paul graunteth not here that this persone *anentyschede* hym, but he made hym lesse and comun servant whonne he made him thus man" (EWS 1:566/38–40).

Before he arrives at this negative gloss on *exinanivit*, however, the sermonist prepares the ground by presenting a remarkably compressed treatise on the Incarnation, which I will explicate here in some detail.<sup>48</sup> Keyed to the text of

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<sup>48</sup> This sermon, like all in the English Wycliffite cycle, is anonymous; it draws to a certain extent on Wyclif's Latin sermon on this text, but Gradon and Hudson's notes indicate that the parallels "on closer inspection ... appear to be uncertain and it may well be that they derive from a common source, in some cases perhaps the *De ben. incarn.* On the other hand, much of the material in the sermons is a matter of common scholastic debate and is to be found in [Lombard's] *Sentences*,"

Philippians 2, this homily is especially instructive as a case study in the difficulty of rendering the technical vocabulary of Chalcedonian christology and its medieval variations and complications into the vernacular. The writer strains to articulate not just an English explanation of the hypostatic union which is philosophically and theologically rigorous, but one which duly emphasizes the stakes, for church and polity, of achieving clarity on this issue in England in the 1380s. By the end, the sermonist all but concedes defeat: “Al this sauerith more to clerkis than to comunte of men, and therefore men mote passe ouer this spekyng to the comun puple” (*EWS* 1:567/66–67).

The preacher begins by emphasizing Christ’s meekness and humility as the attributes most recommended to his followers:

Poul tellith in this epistel how that men schulde suwe Crist, and algatis in mekenesse that is grownd of othre vertuwis. He bidduth that *3e schulden fele that in 3ow that is and was in Crist Iesu*, not only the kynde of mekenesse but al the flood by som part. The spryng of this mekenesse and the welle was in Crist Iesu, and by takyng part therof alle Cristis children moten be meke ... And so putte thow away false mekenesse ... and take the vertu of mekenesse that hath ground in Iesu Crist. And, haue thow neuere so lytul therof, thow mayt fele that that was in Iesu. (565/1–12)

The language here shows signs of an underlying philosophical stance that is characteristic of Wyclif’s thought: call it a metaphysics of participation. The notion

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*English Wycliffite Sermons* 5:44. My references to this sermon will be given in the text as *EWS*, volume, page number/line number. The treatise referred to is Wyclif’s *De benedicta incarnatione*, ed. Edward Harris (London: Wyclif Society, 1886).

that one is “grounded” in Christ; that one can therefore “feel” what was in him; that a modicum of meekness will give one access to a “flood” of Christ’s virtues: these are hints that the author imagines himself in dialogue with a philosophical position that would dispute with him on the extent of human capacity to model oneself after Christ. We have hints here, in short, that this author is engaging not only in a battle of heterodoxy versus orthodoxy (as seen from our retrospective position), but is also skirmishing around the edges of the debate known as Realism versus Nominalism. This is not the place to open that giant can of worms. I want only to point out, as we look further at the text of this sermon, that the kinds of distinctions made by scholastic theologians about universals and particulars — distinctions which when applied to incarnational theology are expressed as arguments about “kynde,” “forme,” “habite,” and “liknesse” — are present and foregrounded in this short sermon in ways that are not so easily discernible in a text like *Piers Plowman*.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the preacher goes on to suggest that such abstract

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<sup>49</sup> Langland scholarship has tended to overemphasize the influence of fourteenth-century Realism/Nominalism debates on *Piers Plowman*, as well as positing too close a connection between Nominalist philosophy and the “Semi-Pelagian” theology which many critics have ascribed to Langland. On Langland’s semi-Pelagianism see especially Robert Adams, “Piers’s Pardon and Langland’s Semi-Pelagianism,” *Traditio* 39 (1983): 367–418, which heavily influenced the influential accounts by James Simpson in *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007; orig. pub. Longman 1990) and *Reform and Cultural Revolution: Oxford English Literary History, Vol. 2: 1350–1547* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 7, “Edifying the Church,” 322–82. For a corrective to Adams and Simpson see Minnis, “Looking for a Sign,” and Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, ch. 4. On the relation of Nominalism and other “schools of thought” to fourteenth-century theological debates, centered in Oxford, see the clarifying summary by William J. Courtenay, “Theology and Theologians from Ockham to Wyclif,” in J. I. Catto and Ralph Evans, ed., *History of the University of Oxford, vol. 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1–34, in which Courtenay explains

categories, when read through the scriptural lens of Paul's letter to the Philippians, can actually help to clarify our perception of what happens when Christ is said to lessen himself and take the form of a servant. He continues: "And it helpth myche to men to thenke how *Crist was in forme of God*, for he is verey God in godhede" (565/13–14). The use of the word *forme* here is tricky. Does he mean *form* in the Platonic sense of a universal essence, the inner shaping principle of a thing? Or does he mean *form* in the sense of visible, external form? If the former, the Platonic sense, the "forme of God" in this context would mean his divinity, his "godhede." This reading is further strengthened by analogy: "And this godhede is forme of [God]<sup>50</sup>, for that is a forme of thing of whom that thing hath a name, as of manhede man is man, and of whitnesse a thing ys whit" (565/14–16). The passages parallel to this one in Wyclif's Latin sermon perhaps express more clearly the idea that "form" must be understood to mean "inner shaping principle" as opposed to an external or accidental form. Wyclif adds a Trinitarian element to the discussion:

Just as "humanity" is the form by which man is said formally to be man, so "godhead" [deitas] is the form by which the Trinity is said formally to be God ... Just as common humanity is the form by which any human person is said truly to be a man, so common godhead

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that for a rising theologian in this environment, adherence to the principles of a particular "school" was less important than making an original contribution to an important debate.

<sup>50</sup> The sermon text reads "godhede" again at this point. Following Gradon and Hudson's note (*EWS* 5:44/13–19) I emend to "God" on logical grounds following the rest of the analogy.

[communis deitas] is the form of God by which any divine person is said truly to be God.<sup>51</sup>

But for the English sermonist, the main point of these distinctions is to be sure that his audience doesn't take Paul's saying "Crist was in forme of God" to mean something other than "Christ *is* truly God." He therefore concludes, before moving to the next verses, that "thus Poul seith in a maner that Iesu Crist is *verey* God" (565/19).

None of this Wycliffite explication of Phil. 2 falls afoul of Chalcedonian christology. What is noteworthy in this treatment of the text is its repeated emphasis on meekness, humility, and, as we saw in the Laud Ten Commandments commentary, on obedience. When he comes to explain the second half of verse 6, the Vulgate's "non rapinam arbitratus est esse se aequalem Deo," the English version sounds strained: "*Crist feyned not by arbitracion of reueyne that he was euene with God, sith he was the same God*" (566–67/20–21). It may be the case, as Gradon and Hudson suggest, that the author has "not perceived that *arbitratus est* is a verb"; but it also seems possible that *feyned not* was added deliberately in anticipation of the counter-exemplum that follows.<sup>52</sup> "The furste aungel Lucifer," he says, "feynede by false arbitracion that he was lich to God." And like Lucifer, the analogy continues,

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<sup>51</sup> Wyclif, *Sermones*, iii.xxiv.185/24–33. Quoted in note, *EWS* 5:44: "Sicut enim humanitas est forma qua homo formaliter dicitur esse homo, sic deitas est forma qua Trinitas dicitur formaliter esse Deus ... Sicut enim communis humanitas est forma, qua quelibet persona hominis vere dicitur esse homo, sic communis deitas est forma Dei qua quelibet persona divina vere dicitur esse Deus" (my trans.).

<sup>52</sup> *EWS* 5:45, note 20.

men who sin here on earth are “inobedient,” as if “they hadden no God aboue hem” (566/21–24). Christ’s action in the Incarnation is then set in contrast to both Lucifer and man, beginning with a reminder of Christ’s “godhede” but placing greater emphasis on the need for Christ’s “manhede.” Here is where the substitution of an alternate translation for *exinanivit* first comes in:

But for Crist my3te not bugghe [buy] mon only by his godhede, (for he muste make hym that kynde that synned in our furste fadyr, so that the same thing make asseth [compensation], whiche thing synned of man), therefore seith Poul heere that *Crist lessude* [exinanivit] *hymself*. For, whanne he made hymself man, he made hym a creature withoute whiche creature is but veyn to regard of the godhede. And thus seith Poul that *he tok a special forme of seruaunt*; and this forme was this manhede that is only in Iesu Crist. (566/24–31)

Again, the christology articulated here is far from heterodox. Similar expressions of the three main points in this passage—1) that it is fitting for the redemption of man to be carried out by the God who is also truly man, 2) that Christ, like man, is a creature with regard to his human nature, and 3) that Christ’s taking up of a human nature (not a human *person*) in the Incarnation was in both logical and historical terms a “special” case—can be found, for example, in Aquinas’s treatise on the Incarnate Word in part III of the *Summa*.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> On “fittingness” [*conueniens*] see ST III.1.1–6 and q.3 a.8; on Christ as “creature,” III. q.16; on the assumption of a particular human nature, III. qq. 2–4. Excellent summary discussions of Aquinas’s christology, including emphasis on his novel (for the 13<sup>th</sup> century) use of conciliar documents, especially Chalcedon, can be found in Joseph Wawrykow, “Hypostatic Union,” in Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow, ed., *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 2005), 222–51; and in the same volume, Paul Gondreau, “The Humanity of Christ, the Incarnate Word,” 252–76.



But when we turn to Aquinas's own commentary on Philippians and its treatment of the the kenosis-verb, his gloss on the Vulgate's *exinanivit* gives a different twist to the primary meaning—and picture—of “emptied himself.” Reaching past the insistence that Christ's emptiness is synonymous with meekness and humility, Saint Thomas exclaims

How beautiful to say that He emptied himself, for the empty is opposed to the full! For the divine nature is sufficiently full, because every perfection of goodness is there. But human nature and the soul are not full, but capable of fulness, because it was made as a slate not written upon. Therefore, human nature is empty. Hence he says, He emptied himself, because He assumed a human nature.<sup>54</sup>

The picture here is not of the divine nature pouring itself out, much less annihilating itself, but of the capacity of the human nature, which has been assumed by the Word, *to be filled up*. To be filled with what? Aquinas goes on to explain that in assuming human nature, Christ also assumes “all the defects and properties associated with the human species, except sin.” Yet as he expands on this idea, Aquinas reveals his understanding of *form* to be quite different from what I took it to mean in the Wycliffite text. “Therefore,” he goes on, “Paul says,”

*and being found in human form, namely, in His external life [in exteriori conversatione], because He became hungry as a man and*

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians and Philippians*, trans. F. R. Larcher (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1969), sec. 2-2, pp. 77–83. Quotations given hereafter as Larcher plus page number.

tired and so on ... Thus, we can refer *form* to outward activities [*ad exteriores habitudines*]. (Larcher 81)<sup>55</sup>

In Christ, this is to say, to take on the form of a servant is to be filled with the “defects and properties” of human bodies, including hunger and fatigue, and it is to participate in the “outward activities”—the culturally and historically specific forms of life [*conversazione*]<sup>55</sup>—that have grown up around these human properties. This emphasis in St. Thomas on “outward activities,” pushing “form” into a synonymous relationship with “habit,” seems to work in contrast to the Wycliffite desire to see form as interior. In fact I do not see the two writers as opposing one another here; both are moving in the same direction, from theology towards social practice. What separates them, in part, is the pressure put on the sermon text by the scholastic apparatus that had grown up around christological theory in the century between Aquinas and Wyclif.<sup>56</sup> Add to this the strain of Englishing that apparatus, and

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<sup>55</sup> Aquinas’s English translator takes the liberty, without acknowledgment, of rendering *habitus* as “form” throughout this section. His choice may be justified on the grounds that St. Thomas views the form/habit distinction (carried over in Latin from Paul’s *morphe* and *schema*) as leading to misunderstanding; but in his commentary Thomas maintains the distinction, at least at the verbal level. I quote the Latin text from Aquinas, *Expositio in Omnes S. Pauli Epistolas* (Parma, 1862), 514–15.

<sup>56</sup> On medieval christology before and after Aquinas, see Wawrykow, “Hypostatic Union” and Gondreau, “Humanity of Christ” (both in Van Nieuwenhove and Wawrykow, *Theology*); W. H. Principe, “Some Examples of Augustine’s Influence on Medieval Christology,” *Augustiniana* 41 (1991): 955–74; Alister E. McGrath, “Homo Assumptus? A Study in the Christology of the *Via Moderna*, with Particular Reference to William of Ockham,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 60 (1984): 283–97, esp. 283–85; Richard Cross, “Nominalism and the Christology of William of Ockham,” *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 58 (1991): 126–56; Stephen E. Lahey, “Wyclif’s Trinitarian and Christological Theology,” in Ian C. Levy, ed., *A Companion to John Wyclif: Late Medieval Theologian* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 127–98; Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*, 2 vols. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), I:979–1007; and Ian C.

distinguishing in a very short space what “trewe men” ought to believe about the Incarnation, and it is easy to see why the Wycliffite author wishes to “passe ouer” this material and leave it to the clerks.

But in fact he does not pass over it; instead he makes a move which abruptly and powerfully connects the metaphysical conundrums of Paul’s kenosis-language to the forms of life of the Christian community—the forms of life lived in the city of saints. Picking up where I began my discussion of this text, the preacher has just given an admirably succinct summary of orthodox christology, complete with comparison to the three-in-one of the Trinity (lines 31–36). He then says,

But Poul grauntuth not here that this persone *anyntischede* hym, but he made hym lesse and comun servant whonne he made him thus man. Thus Crist is seruaunt of seruyng, but not seruaunt of synnyng, ne seruaunt of bondage, al 3if his kyn was such a seruaunt foure hondred 3eer in Egypte, as Godus lawe witnessuth. (*EWS* 1:566/38–43)

We have already established a context for understanding the force of “*not anyntischede*” and its replacement with the humility of a “comun servant.” Now the latter identification is expanded to distinguish among three types of servants, from which Christ is singled out as a “servant of serving.” What does this mean? For a reader of Langland, the temptation may be very strong to link the idea of Christ so eloquently captured in this alliterating phrase—“servant of serving”—with Saint

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Levy, “Trinity and Christology in Haimo of Auxerre’s Pauline Commentaries,” in Ineke van ’t Spijker, ed., *The Multiple Meaning of Scripture: The Role of Exegesis in Early Christian and Medieval Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). Special thanks are due to Professor Levy for sharing this article with me and providing much helpful advice on the commentary tradition.

Thomas's explicit identification of the life of the saints with outward forms of service, with *conversatione*, with Charity as concrete forms of "kyndenesse": ministering to the poor, healing the sick, giving alms, serving at table. Such a reading gets support not from any actual listing of activities in the sermon text, but rather through its denial that Christ is a servant in any narrow political or economic sense ("ne servant of bondage"), and despite its recognition that the allegorical life of the church may sometimes take the form of a servant in historical time, as in the case of the nation of Israel in exile ("foure hundred yeare in Egypt").

There is another possible reading of "servant of serving," however, that is perhaps less Langlandian in the sense in which I have tried to articulate the poet's attitude to service. In their notes on the sermon, Hudson and Gradon do not identify a source for the scheme "servant of bondage .... sinning ...serving," but it may derive from Bartholomaeus via Trevisa's translation of *On the Properties of Things*. Indeed the same passage which contains the *servare/servire* distinction (discussed above in relation to Piers's decalogue) goes on to distinguish among three kinds of servants, first according to their origins, then according to their actions. Again paraphrasing Isidore of Seville, he separates out servants who are "born in bondage" from those who have been captured in war and may therefore be bought and sold. From these two, a third type stands apart: "The thridde manere of seruantes," he says, "is bounde frelich and by here owne good wille, and serueth for mede and for hire, and this [ben] propirlich iclepid *famuli*, and haue the name of *famulando* 'seruinge'" (*Properties* 6.15). According to this model, there is again a split at the level of

ontology and praxis, or of origins and actions. On one hand you are either born into servitude or you are sold into it. On the other you may choose of your free will to serve “for mede and for hire.” In identifying Christ with the category “servant of serving,” then, the sermonist seems to treat service for hire with approbation. As if to say to his listeners, the kind of service in which you can choose to be “bounde frelich,” and for which you will be rewarded, is modeled after Christ’s choosing to lessen himself, and not, emphatically, to *anientise* himself. Yet we have seen how Piers the Plowman, the primary figure Langland uses to represent *humana natura* as perfected in Christ’s humanity (C.20.22) , while calling himself a “servant of Truth,” has no interest in the mede and the hire which distinguishes this type of freely-bound service from its unfree counterparts. Does Piers have it wrong? Or does the Lollard sermon have something different in mind when speaking of Christ as a “servant of serving”?

Faced with the question of what it means for Christ to be a “servant of serving,” the texts and contexts I have provided can offer several ways forward. These are not neatly divisible into orthodox and heterodox positions. On the contrary, these texts show the late medieval language of service as caught up in a web of interpenetrating theological and social discourses in which the relations between economics and the theology of grace, or between christology and sacramental theology, are seen to be elusive and resistant to predetermined doctrinal affinities. The Lollard preacher’s picture of Christ as the prototypical “servant of serving” can be assimilated, if we wish, to the vision of unity and

charitable social practice exemplified in Langland's treatment of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Or we may choose to link it to the powerful but contingent picture of sacramental unity expressed by another Lollard preacher, who, in a fascinating example of historical *translatio*, recasts a well-known sermon by Augustine into a poignant reminder of the all-too-visible ruptures in the English ecclesial body under the leadership of Archbishop Arundel and his predecessors: a body which, like the grains of wheat in a loaf of bread baking in an oven, ought to be united by the "hote and the charitable loue of his God and his nei3bore," but is instead divided against itself, for "whoso takith the mysterie of vnyte and holdeth not the bonde of pees, he takith not misterie for himself but witesse a3enst himself."<sup>57</sup> (Here is Langland's Barn of Unity.) Or we might react to the "servant of serving" model—with its promise of free choice and its rewards of mede and hire—by rejecting the works-righteousness model implied in the coupling of service and desert, insisting instead that through the agency of grace, Truth will pay in excess of what is deserved, "other whiles more." (Here is Piers's service agreement.) Or we might turn again to the symmetrical language of filling and emptying which Aquinas picks up in his commentary on Philippians, seeing in the "servant of serving" a doubled image, whereby Christ's emptying himself in order to be filled with human *conversacione* is

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<sup>57</sup> Anne Hudson, ed., *The Works of a Lollard Preacher*, EETS o.s. 317 (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 2001), 195–96. This entire text may be fruitfully compared to Langland's treatment of the barn of Unity (C.21 and 22) and the issues he raises there concerning catholicity and the possibility of unity in the absence of peace. The Augustine text is Sermon 272 (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 38:1246).

mirrored in the lives of human persons by a filling in of the empty and defective human nature with a full and perfecting grace. (Here is Langland's "God *auntred* himself.") And to conclude, here too is Langland's vision of Love as "plant of peace, most precious of virtues," which instead of presenting a picture of God's incarnation as a perpetually turning wheel-of-fortune-in-reverse, seems rather to suggest a divine fecundity whose fruit is human flourishing. Langland might have chosen words from the book of Isaiah to say much the same thing:

For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace.

(Isaiah 55:10–12, Authorized Version)

Here is the sense I think Langland wants in saying that God *auntred* himself: a sense of the incarnate Word as the source and the medium of human conversation—in language and in all outward forms of life—pursued in the presence of peace.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Namely of Thy Youth: Julian of Norwich and the Servants of God

This is their life in words; their life is this in deeds.

—Father Carre to Bishop Richard Smith, France, 1636

The subject's self-knowledge can reach its actuality only by taking a detour by way of the knowledge of another; only in going out of itself, in creatively serving the world, does the subject become aware of its purpose and, therefore, of its essence.

— Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*

The call to renounce doesn't negate the value of [ordinary human] flourishing; it is rather a call to centre everything on God, even if it be at the cost of forgoing this unsubstitutable good; and the fruit of this forgoing is that it become on one level the source of flourishing to others, and on another level, a collaboration with the restoration of a fuller flourishing by God. It is a mode of healing wounds and "repairing the world."

—Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*

In my discussion of *Piers Plowman* in chapter 1, I began to explore the set of relations between action and reward that I called Langland's theology of serve and deserve.<sup>1</sup> Writing at roughly the same time but in a different formal idiom, Julian of

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<sup>1</sup> Epigraph quotations in order: (1) *Saint Austins Rule Translated out of his 109 Epistle verbatim Together with the Constitutions Of the English Canoness Regular's of our B. Ladyes of SION in Paris* (Paris 1636), vol. 45 in *English Recusant Literature*, ed. D. M. Rogers (repr. Menston, Yorkshire: Scolar Press, 1971), 3v. Further citations noted in the text as *Austin Rule* 1636. When quoting from this text I sometimes make minor changes in orthography and punctuation for clarity. For bibliographic details see A. F. Allison and D. M. Rogers, *The Contemporary Printed Literature of the*



Norwich returns to this theme in her text known as *A Revelation of Divine Love*, introducing into the discussion an extraordinarily powerful narrative of a lord and a servant (chapter 51).

“Seryse” for Julian, as for Langland, is neither pure metaphysics nor pure practice. It is both and neither. Taken in its full theological sense, service is a disposition of being which articulates itself in acts of outward charity. In this sense it is structurally parallel to the kenosis of Philippians 2 as this was understood by Aquinas, as an emptying that creates the possibility for a filling-up in return, and further, a filling-up that will inevitably overflow the boundaries of the kenotic individual. The paradox of emptying oneself in order to be filled to overflowing for the benefit of others is exemplified first of all in Christ’s own self-emptying, in which he creates a space within the Godhead for human nature to take up residence, a space in which fully human sufferings and fallibilities are embraced in their finitude and transformed into gift. This gift is then offered simultaneously back to the Father and displayed to humanity as the highest example of self-giving.

But this version of service as kenotic self-giving is arrived at by Julian only as the result of her long meditation on the relations between action and reward—serving and deserving, to use her own language—which begins in her early vision of the degrees of bliss available to God’s servants in heaven. This initial vision is set out

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*English Counter-Reformation between 1558 and 1640*, 2 vols. (Aldershot, Hampshire: Scolar Press, 1989), 2:643. (2) Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory: Volume I: Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, [1985] 2000), 62. Quoted by Fergus Kerr in his very helpful study, *Twentieth Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 127. (3) Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 17.

in chapter 14 of *A Revelation*, a chapter which begins with the voice of the Lord saying to Julian, “I thanke the of thy servys and of thy travelle and namely of thy youth.” The reading of chapter 51 offered here develops out of this notion of “youthful service”—a deliberately opaque formula which critics have traditionally taken to refer to some form of rule-bound religious life prior to her enclosure—and accordingly treats the lord and servant narrative as, in part, a meditation on what Charles Taylor calls “renunciative vocation.” Taylor’s category and the story he tells about its history and development provide contrastive complements to Julian’s story of the onto-theology of service, as I see it, and he is therefore an important interlocutor in these pages.

Other interlocutors will include some obscure and even anonymous figures recalled from the history of “renunciative vocation.” These figures will appear as characters in several historical interludes—or perhaps “parables” is a better word—which are placed in the chapter as limit cases and testing grounds for the ideas of service, renunciation, and vocation that arise directly out of Julian’s text. By extension, these parables also point toward a revised history of these terms as they are deployed by writers and religious practitioners on both sides of the Reformation divide.

Despite a vast scholarly literature focused on the lord and servant material, readers of *A Revelation of Love* have been slow to make the connection between the metaphysical and theological senses of Julian’s service-language on the one hand,

and its connections to late medieval historical-social practice on the other.<sup>2</sup> On the historicist side, a recent pair of articles by Alexandra Barratt sets out to explore the vocabularies of lordship and service in Julian's text in relation to their "bastard feudal" context, claiming that "in late medieval England *good lord* and *good lordship* were in fact fixed collocations with meanings specific to the society of the time."<sup>3</sup> The same treatment is given to the word "service" and related forms. Barratt rightly contends that "we do Julian a profound disservice if, with the laudable desire of making her accessible to our own time, we occlude the way in which she is firmly embedded in a specific historical era" ("Lordship, Service," 177). Thus we should expand our analysis to include more of the "words and concepts drawn from bastard feudalism that we find in Julian's writings" (178). Drawing the vector of influence in this direction, it seems clear that the way to get at Julian's real meaning is to turn to (modern) historical accounts of bastard feudalism, as if this move onto more stable discursive ground will assure us of success as we "attempt to deepen and re-focus our understanding of Julian through a heightened awareness of her historical context" (178). But having made this move out into context and having summarized some of the social historians' accounts, Barratt's attempts to apply her

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<sup>2</sup> A short list of notable exceptions would include work by David Aers, Lynn Staley, Nicholas Watson, and the three critics whose work is discussed in the pages ahead (Newman, Warren, and Bauerschmidt). The overall impression of the scholarship I mean to convey is that most critics choose to read Julian either theologically *or* historically but not both.

<sup>3</sup> "Julian of Norwich and the Holy Spirit, 'Our Good Lord,'" *Mystics Quarterly* 28.2 (2002): 78-84, quotation at 78. The second article is A. Barratt, "Lordship, Service and Worship in Julian of Norwich," in E. A. Jones, ed., *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VII: Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 2004* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 177-87. From this point on I cite these essays parenthetically in the text.

contextual schema to Julian's text are met with forms of resistance that she must finally gloss over or occlude altogether. She concludes, for example, that "the overarching concept of the Holy Spirit as feudal lord and patron comes through very clearly" when Julian distinguishes (in chapter 58 of *A Revelation*) between "rewardyng" and "gefyng," or between "rewards for services rendered, and the generous giving of gifts not earned or deserved" ("Our Good Lord," 81). But there is no mention in Barratt's account of the troublesomeness of this distinction in practice, as explored by Langland in the debate between Mede and Conscience in passus 3 of the C-text (mede vs. mercede), or of the scholarly debates that have sought to illuminate the connections between earthly models of service and desert and their theological analogues.<sup>4</sup> Thus despite the salutary step of bringing Julian's use of this language to our attention, Barratt's analysis does not do enough, in my view, to elucidate the connections between her particular socio-economic context and the fundamental theological questions about which Julian's showing is

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<sup>4</sup> See the bibliography on Langland's mede/mercede distinction in chapter 1 above, note 30. Barratt's account also lacks any mention of the late-fourteenth-century debates about lordship and grace and the relations between human and divine *dominium*. Stephen Lahey's summary of Wyclif's intervention in this debate gives a sense of the stakes involved: for Wyclif, "the essential characteristic of every instance of human *dominium* is the grace God lends to the individual lord, which itself is grounded in the grace of the Holy Spirit. The human lord appears to have proprietary and jurisdictional authority by virtue of his own excellence, but this is really only an instantiation of divine *dominium*, a grace-realized agent of God's lordship. This makes the human lord both master and servant; from the divine perspective, the lord is God's servant, but from the viewpoint of the subject, he is master. Wyclif is tireless in his emphasis on the illusory nature of this mastery; grace allows the human lord to recognize that he is, in fact, the servant of his subjects, ministering to them as a nurturing steward, not lording over them as would a powerful sovereign." Whether Julian would have assented to this view or not, we will not find the answer by recourse to the terminology of "bastard feudalism." Lahey, "The Political Philosophy of John Wyclif," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wyclif-political>; accessed 5 November 2009). See also the fuller discussion of Wyclif's *dominium* in Lahey, *Philosophy and Politics in the Thought of John Wyclif* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

concerned. No doubt Julian's language is "figurative" and "metaphorical" ("Our Good Lord," 83). But how? To what ends? Julian is very far from simply adapting an economic vocabulary for religious purposes. She inhabits the internal dynamics within this vocabulary and renders its metaphoricity productive of new theological insights with real-world consequences.

Other sensitive readers of Julian have experimented with literary genre as a possible way to unlock her text. Here the working assumption seems to be that if we can put Julian in the right category, if we can apply the correct label, then the force of her project will become clear and we will know what to say about her. And such generic reconfiguring has in fact generated some wonderfully fruitful readings. Barbara Newman includes Julian of Norwich (along with Hildegard, Henry Suso, Meister Eckhardt, Marguerite Porete, Dante, Langland, et al.) in a capacious new generic category of her devising, called simply "imaginative theology."<sup>5</sup> For Newman, this category needs to be distinguished from scholastic, monastic, pastoral, mystical, and "vernacular" theologies, claiming that while the new category "may be compatible with any or all of these," its difference lies in its emphasis on method. "Imaginative theology," she says, "focuses on *how* theology might be performed; it draws attention to theological method and epistemology ... For the imaginative theologian, like the poet, works with images and believes, with

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<sup>5</sup> *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), ch. 7, 291–327. Citations hereafter in the text by page number. I put quotation marks around "vernacular" only to indicate, as Newman does, that "vernacular theology" is itself a contested category, with two very different sets of meanings attached to the term by Bernard McGinn and Nicholas Watson, among others. See Newman's discussion, 295–297.

Christine de Pizan, that ‘the road of the imagination ... reveals the face of God to whoever follows it to the end’” (297). Further,

the hallmark of imaginative theology is that it “thinks with” images, rather than propositions or scriptural texts or rarefied inner experiences—although none of these need be excluded. The devices of literature—metaphor, symbolism, prosopopoeia, allegory, dialogue, and narrative—are its working tools. (298)

In this formulation, the barrier between historicity and metaphoricity that was erected by Barratt’s reading of Julian is understood as a much more porous frontier. In this genre of writing, credit is given to the creative power of both the theological and the poetic imaginations.

In an essay whose broader concerns overlap with Newman’s idea of “imaginative theology,” Nancy Bradley Warren places Julian’s book together with Langland’s *Piers Plowman* in the slightly narrower generic niche of what she calls “incarnational (auto)biography.”<sup>6</sup> Influenced by the monastic genre of the *forma vitae*, quasi-autobiographical texts like Julian’s *Revelation*, says Warren, set out to do more than give a factual account of a life lived. These texts, she claims, “[seek] to order a life ... to become a lived life, to take bodily form”:

Middle English life writing is fundamentally incarnational, both in its poetics and in its epistemologies ... Medieval life writings are texts in which the experiences of an “I” that exists in history (experiences admittedly themselves shaped and mediated to various extents by and through texts) take on a textual body, become a textual corpus. (371)

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<sup>6</sup> “Incarnational (Auto)biography,” in Paul Strohm, ed., *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 369–85. Further citations by page number in my text.

If biographical writing seeks to turn persons into words, then we might think of Warren's "incarnational autobiography" as doing the reverse: it turns words into persons, into textual-spiritual bodies with whom readers may converse in their own idiom and at their own level of intellectual and spiritual engagement, even across the frontiers of time and bodily death. And in this it is (not by accident, I think) closely akin to the technique of personification allegory as practiced by Langland, for whom words becoming persons—Conscience, Reason, Will, Truth, Mercy, Peace — is a fundamental poetic act which mimics, in human language, the originary event of Word becoming person in the Incarnation. Texts like Langland's *Piers* and Julian's *Revelation*, Warren suggests, "fundamentally seek to insinuate themselves into and to shape other lives, to become ... shared experiences in their own day and afterwards" (371–72).

In his book-length study, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ*, Frederick Bauerschmidt splits his chapter on the lord and the servant into sections of theological ("theo-dramatic") and socio-political analysis, attempting in the second part to link Julian's parable to the events of the English peasant rising in 1381.<sup>7</sup> He suggests that her response "involves a very radical critique of the feudal ideology of hierarchy and stability, as well as of modern notions of freedom and liberality" (127). While it is right to say that Julian "deploy[s] the structuring

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<sup>7</sup> Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999). Page numbers given in parentheses in my text.

conventions of feudalism in quite unconventional ways,” I do not think it necessarily follows that “the production of such a text in the context of late-fourteenth-century England is a political act” (176). On the basis of her text as we have it, there is not much reason to think Julian was as concerned about material conditions on the ground in England as Langland was. As with Newman and Warren, however, Bauerschmidt also attempts to rename Julian’s genre. Borrowing from the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, Bauerschmidt convincingly reads the parable of the lord and the servant as a “Theo-drama” in which the analogous distances between the servant and the lord, the Son and the Father, and humanity and God are instances of the same dynamic of sending forth and giving back that is the fundamental characteristic of the triune life. As he eloquently puts it:

the temporal *missio* of the Son as servant is grounded in the eternal *processio* of the Son from the Father, and in the Son’s mission he takes upon himself distance-as-sin in all its pain, bringing it within the distance-as-gift that lies between him and the Father—the space of the Spirit’s donation ... Humanity therefore acts upon a stage defined by this confrontation of infinite and finite freedom. (168)

For all of these critics, however helpful the application of new generic categories may be, there remains a basic indeterminacy at the heart of Julian’s project, the effects of which are felt most acutely in her explication of the lord and servant narrative in chapter 51. In my view, this generic indeterminacy is an articulation at the formal level of a more fundamental ontological problem that Julian will later vocalize in asking “from whence the servant came.” To see how she gets there, though, I want to back up and look in some detail at chapter 14, where the language of “servys” receives its first sustained treatment in this text.



### **“I thanke the of thy servys”**

In chapter 14 of her *Revelation*, in which she describes the sixth of the sixteen visions she received as a young woman, Julian says that she heard the Lord say to her, “I thanke the of thy servys and of thy travelle and namely of thy youth.”<sup>8</sup> But in the remainder of this short vision and Julian’s explication of it, she provides no more information about the specific content of her youthful “servys.” Instead, she pictures a heavenly scene in which she sees God “as a lord in his owne house,” and this lord has called “alle his derewurthy frendes” to “a solempne fest” (14.1–5). As Julian goes on in the next few paragraphs to describe the heavenly rewards available to these dinner guests, she leaves behind the social scene conjured up by the plural and collective “frendes” to focus instead on “ech soule”:

God shewde thre degrees of blisse that eche soule shall have in heven that wilfully hath served God in any degree in erth.

The furst is the wurshipfulle thanke of our lorde God that he shall receive when he is deliverde of paine. This thanke is so high and so wurshipfulle that him thinketh it filleth him, though ther were no more. For methought that alle the paine and traveyle that might be suffrede of all living men might not have deserved the wurshipful thank that one man shall have that wilfully hath served God.

For the secunde: that alle the blessed creatures that be in heven shalle se that wurshipfulle thanking. And he maketh his servys knowen to alle that be in heven. . .

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<sup>8</sup> In citing Julian’s *Revelation* (the Long Text), I use the new edition by Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006). Further references are given in my text by chapter and line numbers, here 14.1–2.

And for the thurde ... I saw ... that the age of every man shall be knowen in heven and be rewarded for his wilfulle servys and for his time. And namly the age of them that wilfully and frely offer ther youth to God, passinly is rewarded and wonderly thanked. (14.10–26)

The first degree of bliss is the reward of joy that comes from the end of pain and suffering. This reward (“thanke”) is so great that it fills the soul as though there were no more room for anything but joy. “Methought,” Julian says, “that alle the paine and traveyle that might be suffrede of all living men might not have deservede the wurshipfulle thank that one man shall have that willfully served God.” In the second degree, earthly service is acknowledged and publicized to the entire heavenly community. In the third, age and length of service are graded hierarchically, with special thanks and rewards given to those who have “willfully” and “freely” offered their youth in service to God.<sup>9</sup>

The emphasis in this passage on modifiers like *willful*, *willfully*, and *freely* in connection with nouns and verbs of service is striking in itself. Even more striking, though, is the stark imbalance pictured here between two different versions of serving and deserving. The composite suffering of *all* living men, Julian seems to say, is not deserving of the same reward as that which awaits *one man* who has willfully served God. But the content of this service is frustratingly opaque. What exactly

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<sup>9</sup> Notice that at this point in her text Julian does not mention the difficulties encountered by some of her contemporaries in coming to terms with the teaching of the parable of the vineyard (Matt. 20), wherein those who have labored longest are given the same reward as those who begin to work only near sundown. Compare *Pearl*, lines 601 ff.: “‘Of more and lasse in Godez ryche,’ / That gentyll sayde, / ‘lys no joparde, / For ther is vch mon payed inlyche, / Whether lyttel other much be hys rewarde.’” *The Complete Works of the “Pearl”-Poet*, trans. and intro. Casey Finch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

does this service entail? Must one get oneself to a nunnery or a friary? Or can service to God also take the form of service to my neighbor, to my community, even perhaps to my enemy? And is there not something odd and “contrarious” (one of Julian’s favorite words) about attaching adverbs like *willfully* and *freely* to verbs of serving?

### Skeletons in the Chapterhouse

... and freres mowe nought sothliche saye that children beth brought there to serue God with the more deuocioun, and therefore it is lawful to bygile hem with fraude and lesyngis and with fals byheestes ...

—Richard FitzRalph, *Defensio curatorum* (1357)<sup>10</sup>

Between 1961 and 1975, a team of British archaeologists led by George Lambrick and Humphrey Woods excavated the second site of the medieval Dominican priory in Oxford.<sup>11</sup> Situated in the southwest quadrant of the city in St. Aldate’s parish, the Blackfriars compound was, like the Greyfriars next door, massive in size and scope, surrounded by orchards, vineyards, and gardens, and incorporating within its grounds a working water mill in addition to a very large church and extensive residential and administrative buildings. At 240 feet in length, the church was the largest Dominican building in England for which dimensions are known, including

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<sup>10</sup> John Trevisa, *Dialogus inter Militem et Clericum*, Richard FitzRalph’s Sermon “*Defensio Curatorum*” and Methodius “*The bygynnyng of the World and the Ende of Worldes*,” ed. Aaron Jenkins Perry, EETS o.s. 167 (London: Early English Text Society, 1925), 55–56. Further citations in the text as *Defensio* plus page numbers.

<sup>11</sup> George Lambrick and Humphrey Woods, “Excavations on the Second Site of the Dominican Priory, Oxford,” *Oxoniensia* 41 (1976): 168–231. For more detailed history of the site, see also A. G. Little, “The House of Black Friars,” in *The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Oxfordshire*, vol. II. (London: Archibald Constable, 1907), 107–22, and William A. Hinnebusch, O.P., *The Early English Friars Preachers* (Roma: Istituto Storico Domenicano, 1951).

that of Blackfriars London.<sup>12</sup> Constructed during a flurry of building and fundraising activity between 1236 and 1286, the size and grandeur of the priory was suitable for its status as a *studium generale* within the Dominican order, as it would have been required to accommodate a large but fluctuating number of visiting scholars as well as a permanent contingent of about ninety friars.<sup>13</sup> Like most pre-Reformation religious foundations in England, the property was sold and its buildings demolished in the decades following the Dissolution (1540s to 60s). Lambrick and Woods's reconstruction of the priory plan and its construction history is therefore dependent entirely on subterranean, foundation-level excavations. Consistent with what is known of the friars' fundraising activities, which included selling spiritual services in exchange for building funds (a practice much maligned by their contemporaries, from Matthew Paris to Langland and Wyclif), a large number of human burials were uncovered in the course of excavation. Skeletons of adults, both male and female, were found in the church itself, in the two adjacent cemeteries, and in what appeared to be an anchorhold attached to the north side of the nave. These burials appear to fit the normal pattern of laypersons who made arrangements with the friars for their own burial and in some cases for their spouses, although the authors note that the ratio of male-to-female burials here (5 to 1) is unusually

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<sup>12</sup> Lambrick and Woods, "Excavations," 206.

<sup>13</sup> The official designation of *studium generale* did not come until 1261, and there is some evidence that the priory resisted it for many years because of the expense involved. Lambrick and Woods, "Excavations," 208.

high.<sup>14</sup> Even more unusual, though, was the discovery of a group of skeletons in the west end of the chapterhouse, a part of the priory that would normally have been accessible only to the friars themselves. These were not the skeletons of friars, though, whose graves appear to have been clustered in the cloister alleys. Extraordinarily, all but one of the ten skeletons exhumed in the chapter house belonged to “*children* of both sexes below the age of 13, the exception being a young man of 17 to 25.”<sup>15</sup> The archaeologists’ report goes on to suggest that “this part of the priory was set aside for the burial of children, probably of lay benefactors,” but admits that this explanation must remain a guess, for “no parallel for child burials of this sort has yet been discovered.”<sup>16</sup>

Whatever the circumstances of its development and use, the archaeological fact of this mortuary space for girls and boys, administered by Dominican friars in the private heart of their residential precinct, is both mysterious and provocative. In fourteenth century England, the friars were routinely accused of stealing, beguiling, and enticing young children into their orders, raising alarm among parents and secular priests who were subsequently denied access to them. This charge is a staple of antifraternal polemic both before and during Julian’s lifetime. In John

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<sup>14</sup> George Lambrick, “Further Excavations on the Second Site of the Dominican Priory, Oxford,” *Oxoniensia* 50 (1985): 131–208, at 203.

<sup>15</sup> “Excavations ” (1976), 184, 203.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 203. See also the updated discussion of burials in the 1985 report, “Further Excavations,” 203–4. Caroline Bruzelius, whose work on mendicant architecture focuses on continental, mainly Italian, foundations, tells me she has come across no other cases of child burial like this one (personal correspondence, November 2008).

Trevisa's translation of Archbishop FitzRalph's *Defensio curatorum*, for example, we find the Oxford "general studyes" singled out for particular censure:

by occasioun of priuyleges that beth graunted to freres for to here schriftes [confessions], children in general studyes and in her fader hous beth homliche and priuy with freres; for in the fader hous freres beth priuy by cause of heryng of schriftes, and children beth y-schryue to freres, and freres begileth hem with smale giftes and gileful, and maketh hem come into her ordre ... And as the comyn fame tellith, after that children ben bigiled in-to her ordre, the children haueth no fredome for to wende out, but beth holden with hem a3enus her owne wille for to thei be professed in the ordre. (*Defensio* 55–56)<sup>17</sup>

By 1402 the "comyn fame" of these practices had apparently grown voluble enough to merit a Parliamentary response, as a petition of that year asked Henry IV to limit friars' recruitment activities to youth of twenty-one years and older. The king went along but significantly reduced the minimum age, to fourteen.<sup>18</sup> But the skeletons in the Blackfriars chapterhouse were of male *and* female children who died, apparently, before reaching the age of fourteen. Who were these children and what did they do to deserve such unusual treatment in death?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See discussion in David C. Fowler, *The Life and Times of John Trevisa, Medieval Scholar* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 42, 168. Fowler dates Trevisa's translation of FitzRalph to 1362–72, 248. Both the Dominican and Franciscan priories in Oxford were designated *studium generale*, but FitzRalph does not mention either order by name in this passage.

<sup>18</sup> "The king wills that no friar of the aforesaid four orders henceforth should take nor receive any child into their said order unless he has attained the age of fourteen years, without the agreement of his father and mother, or his other next of kin, or other kinsmen or guardians in whose keeping the child is continually dwelling or residing." *Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, Henry IV (September 1402), iii-502, item 62. Translation quoted from online edition: *PROME*, ed. Chris Given-Wilson et al. (2005), <http://www.sd-editions.com/PROME/home.html>.

<sup>19</sup> As I suggested above, the obvious answer that they were children of lay benefactors is certainly possible but unlikely given the massive documentary evidence of adult burials that fit the pattern of lay benefaction and enhabitation (burial in a friar's habit, another frequently condemned practice) and the nearly complete lack, to my knowledge, of evidence of these practices involving children. But

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The question brings me right back to Julian's meditation on her youthful service and her imagining of the three degrees of bliss to be awarded at the "solemne fest" in heaven (*Revelation* 14). It also suggests a highly speculative biographical context against which to gloss her word "servys" — a gloss and a context that, once suggested, reveal the limits of historicist interpretation here even as they participate in its techniques. Julian's youthful service is still historically and biographically opaque, and barring the discovery of any new documentary evidence, it will remain opaque. This is due in part to the diversity of forms of life and the multiple paths of action that counted as service in Julian's language and culture, as I have tried to show in chapter 1. But also and more importantly, I think Julian wants "servys" to remain opaque — a blank slate — here in chapter 14 so that she can put all of its imagined associations into play and put these under pressure in her massive revision of the theology of serve and deserve in chapter 51, the parable of the lord and the servant. In other words, she wants her youthful service to stay biographically and materially indeterminate in order to force us to read the word *theologically*.

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see Lynn Staley's discussion of the bizarre case of Isabel de Bohun (b. 1384), youngest daughter of Richard II's uncle Thomas of Woodstock, who "was donated to the house of the Minoresses without Aldgate in infancy, clad in a monastic habit," *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 214. Staley argues that the maiden in *Pearl* actually is this same Isabel, whose oblation was the occasion for the poem.

In the passages I quoted above from chapter 14, Julian had outlined a vision of service and reward in which the reward side of the equation (the three degrees of bliss available at the solemn feast) was much more fully described than the service side. One day of service to God, we were told, would merit a higher reward than all the ordinary suffering of all other people put together. But, importantly, she didn't tell us anything about what her youthful service to God consisted in. "Servyse" was left a blank slate. Moving forward from the heavenly feast, it becomes clear in the chapters leading up to the lord and servant material in chapter 51 that Julian has become very uncomfortable with what she senses is a "contrariousness," a contradiction, between God's ultimate mercy as it has been revealed to her in her visions, on one hand, and what both her experiential knowledge and the church's teachings would suggest on the other—that is, that we are indeed "mekille blameworthy" and that "we sin grevously all day" (50.6–7). She says outright in the fiftieth chapter: "For I knew be the comen teching of holy church and by my owne feling that the blame of oure sinnes continually hangeth upon us, fro the furst man into the time that we come uppe into heven" (50.9–11). "Contrariousness" is for Julian a very uncomfortable state of affairs. She means by it an absence of peace, both in our interactions with others and within ourselves. "Contrariousnes" she claims, "is cause of alle oure tribulation and alle oure wo" (49.39–40). For Julian though, the split implied in my last sentence between inner and outer, while surely thinkable, is nevertheless undesirable. There can be no peace *without* unless there is also peace *within*, and vice-versa. And the particular form of absence of peace that is



so exercising Julian at this point in her book is her own inability to reconcile humanity's blameworthiness with God's refusal to assign any blame.

By the end of chapter 50 she is at a crisis point. She cannot summon the resources she needs to overcome this contrariness within. She says she "cried inwardly with all my might," asking "how shall I be esede?" And as she ends the chapter, she frames the crisis that is to be resolved in the parable of the lord and the servant explicitly as a pedagogical problem, as a problem of teaching and learning: "Who shall tell me and tech me that me nedeth to wit, if I may not at this time se it in the?" (50.31-33).

The answer she is given comes in the form of a "shewing," a "wonderful example of a lorde that hath a servant" which Julian proceeds both to describe and to explicate as a two-level allegory. She writes:

I sawe two persons in bodely liknesse, that is to sey, a lorde and a servant, and therwith God gave me gostly understanding. The lorde sitteth solempnely in rest and in pees. The servant stondesth before his lorde reverently, redy to do his lordes wille. The lorde loketh upon his servant full lovely and swetly, and mekely he sendeth him into a certaine place to do his will. The servant not onely he goeth, but sodenly he sterteth and runneth in gret hast for love to do his lordes wille. And anon he falleth in a slade, and taketh ful gret sore. And than he groneth and moneth and walloweth and writheth. But he may not rise nor helpe himselfe by no manner of weye. (51.6-14)

He may not rise or help himself. The servant *cannot* serve. Julian's picture of the servant in the slade brings out forcefully the ability of Middle English service vocabulary to be ontologically destabilizing: to serve another is already in a sense not to be myself. And furthermore, if my very identity is tied up with my bonds of service, real or metaphorical, then being *incapable* of serving, *failing to serve*, like

Julian's servant here, leaves me stripped of my capacity to act at all: to act bodily, speechfully, or intellectually. At the same time, though — and working in tension with this destabilizing force — the Christian metaphors of servitude as pictured in the Gospels and Saint Paul's epistles insists on the opposite: that to serve another is to be myself in the fullest sense: that to perform charity-driven acts of service is to make stable my identity with and within the body of Christ, the body of love that is in Julian's formula, "the ground of all our beseeching."

As Julian continues her explication of the showing she remarks more than once on her inability to "take full understanding to my ees" (51.56). She knows the vision of the lord and servant was given in answer to her question, "how shall I be eased," but she can't quite grasp how. In thinking through the source of her failure, however, she lights on the idea that her initial understanding of the servant as standing for "singel Adam" has too narrowly limited her exegesis, and that this misunderstanding is the cause of her unease (51.56–58). Adam's singularity, his "alone-ness," bothers her a great deal. In her initial reading of the servant as "singel Adam" she has not yet made the break away from the individualistic, solipsistic version of serve and deserve that she provided in the "solemn feast" of the fourteenth chapter. What is missing is the social dimension of her theology of service: she is dramatizing for her audience the process of realizing, through a highly compressed narrative of serving and deserving, that just as no one *serves* alone, neither does anyone *deserve* alone. And when she narrates in biographical time the story of her return to the parable, "twenty yere after the time of the shewing, save thre months" (51.74) she registers a radical shift in her reading of the

servant as “singel Adam.” An individual human being, she now believes, cannot adequately express the social and communal nature of her theological ethics.

Remarkably, she manages to work this transformation within the space of a single sentence: *one* becomes *alle* with a Langlandian efficiency. She says “The lorde that sat solemply in rest and peas, I understonde that he is God.” No change here. God is still God, as the present tense of “understonde” indicates. But then she writes: “The servant that stode before him, I understode (past tense) that he was shewed for Adam: that is to say *one man* was shewed that time, and his falling, to make thereby to be understode (implied future) how God beholdeth (present tense) *alle man* and his falling” (51.86–88). *One man*, she says, shown in the aspect of human time and language, is grammatically parallel to *all manne* in the perspective of God’s beholding. “Behold” in Middle English can mean both to see and to embrace. And just in case her reader didn’t pick up on the transformation as that wonderfully complex sentence unfolds, Julian now glosses her own gloss and gives it to us straight: “For in the sighte of God alle man *is* one man, and one man *is* alle man” (51.88–89).

Much of what follows in Julian’s reinterpretation of the parable is her description of the means by which this transformation from *one* to *alle* takes place in historical and liturgical time, namely through the incarnation of Christ who is both truly God and truly man. What she has learned, and what she now feels confident she can also teach about the relationship between serving and deserving is this: the specific content of my service, what counts as serving for me, is not

ultimately as important as the fact that I cannot *serve* alone, and, a fortiori, I cannot *deserve* alone either.<sup>20</sup>

### **Renunciative Vocation and the Affirmation of Ordinary Life**

Now we have seen, on the one hand, a picture of youthful (and willful) service to God as a privileged path to individual salvation; and, on the other, a picture of humanity-as-servant whose capacity to act is only realized as the expression of its unity with Christ's human nature. And in a sense the movement between these two poles traces a line parallel to the narrative line proposed by Charles Taylor in the quotation at the head of this chapter. For in Taylor's version of "renunciative vocation" there is a built-in mechanism of exchange in which what is seen as good for the individual is given up, so that the good in question may be returned to the "fuller flourishing" of all. Here is Taylor's encapsulation of the idea with a fuller context provided, from the introductory chapter of his 2007 book, *A Secular Age*:

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<sup>20</sup> For the persistence of this teaching across Catholic tradition, compare the language of Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical letter, *Spe Salvi* (2007), section 48: "Our lives are involved with one another, through innumerable interactions they are linked together. No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone. The lives of others continually spill over into mine: in what I think, say, do and achieve. And conversely, my life spills over into that of others: for better and for worse. So my prayer for another is not something extraneous to that person, something external, not even after death. In the interconnectedness of Being, my gratitude to the other—my prayer for him—can play a small part in his purification. And for that there is no need to convert earthly time into God's time: in the communion of souls simple terrestrial time is superseded. It is never too late to touch the heart of another, nor is it ever in vain ... Our hope is always essentially also hope for others; only thus is it truly hope for me too. As Christians we should never limit ourselves to asking: how can I save myself? We should also ask: what can I do in order that others may be saved and that for them too the star of hope may rise? Then I will have done my utmost for my own personal salvation as well." (Available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20071130\\_spe-salvi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi_en.html); retrieved 5 November 2009.)

In the Christian case, the very point of renunciation requires that the ordinary flourishing foregone be confirmed as valid. Unless living the full span were a good, Christ's giving of himself to death couldn't have the meaning it does. In this it is utterly different from Socrates' death, which the latter portrays as leaving this condition for a better one. Here we see the unbridgeable gulf between Christianity and Greek philosophy. God wills ordinary human flourishing, and a great part of what is reported in the Gospels consists in Christ making this possible for the people whose afflictions he heals. The call to renounce doesn't negate the value of flourishing; it is rather a call to centre everything on God, even if it be at the cost of forgoing this unsubstitutable good; and the fruit of this forgoing is that it become on one level the source of flourishing to others, and on another level, a collaboration with the restoration of a fuller flourishing by God. It is a mode of healing wounds and "repairing the world."<sup>21</sup>

This passage is as beautiful as it is idealizing; as hopeful as it is unhistorical. As with Julian's refusal to particularize the terms of her youthful service to God, what counts here as "ordinary flourishing" is entirely occluded, along with the particular institutions, social practices, and teleologies through which this flourishing is authorized, and without mention of alternative versions of "flourishing" which may or may not have been suppressed in the name of "all."<sup>22</sup>

But it would not be fair to Taylor to critique his model on these grounds without considering the much fuller historical account he gives of the development, beginning with the Protestant Reformation, of what he calls the "affirmation of ordinary life." For Taylor this label designates a movement away from the exclusive vocations of the medieval monastic tradition towards a version of religious practice

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<sup>21</sup> *A Secular Age*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to David Aers for clarifying talk about this passage.

that flattens out distinctions between “higher” clerical and religious vocations and other more mundane kinds of work.<sup>23</sup> Further, Taylor says, the theological origins of the shift can be found in two of the Reformation’s most fundamental principles (both of which involve telling stories about the medieval church): 1) the rejection of ecclesiastical and clerical mediation; and 2) the utter helplessness of man with regard to his salvation. “The medieval church as [the Reformers] understood it,” Taylor writes, involved “a corporate body in which some, more dedicated members could win merit and salvation for others who were less so.” Rejection of this view was shared across all Reform theologies. For them, “there could be no such thing as more devoted or less devoted Christians: the personal commitment must be total or it was worthless.”<sup>24</sup> The corollary to this all-or-nothing individual commitment was a stark non-voluntarist anthropology, a view of humanity in which the capacity to perform salvific actions (for oneself or others) has been dramatically minimized in contrast to “an almighty and merciful God” who saves us “against all rational human hope and utterly disregarding our just deserts.”<sup>25</sup>

When Taylor needs to provide textual exemplification of this new theology underpinning the “affirmation of ordinary life,” he turns not to Luther or Calvin but

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<sup>23</sup> *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). Part III of Taylor’s *Sources* is titled “The Affirmation of Ordinary Life”: “Ordinary life” designates “those aspects of human life concerned with production and reproduction, that is, labour, the making of the things needed for life, and our life as sexual beings, including marriage and the family,” 211.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 215.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 215. For an argument about the inadequacy of this version of the Protestant God, in response to James Simpson’s reading of the “Lutheran moment,” see chapter 3 below.

to a group of Protestant reformist writers of the seventeenth century, both English and American, overlapping very closely with the period of English Catholic recusant activity through which Julian's texts were uniquely (and fortunately) preserved. To take just one of Taylor's examples, Joseph Hall (1574–1656) writes that

the homeliest service that we doe in an honest calling, though it be but to plow, or digge, if done in obedience, and conscience of God's Commandement, is crowned with an ample reward; whereas the best workes for their kinde (preaching, praying, offering Evangelicall sacrifices) if without respect of God's injunction and glory, are loaded with curses. God loveth adverbs; and cares not how good, but how well.

For Taylor, this passage “captures the essence of the transvaluation implicit in affirming the ordinary.”<sup>26</sup> The transvaluation enacted is explicitly verbal. The noun “service,” once denoting special vocations and their hierarchy of rewards, has been saddled instead with the adjective “homeliest” and hitched to a pair of agricultural verbs, “plow” and “digge.” The grammatical road between serving and deserving has been drastically levelled, if not made entirely redundant.

Likewise, in doing the grammar between her early expression of “youthful service” and the transformed figure of the servant in the parable, Julian has altered her readers' expectations about how the “sentence” that connects those two events will be resolved. In other words, one could reasonably expect her youthful service to develop according to one of the traditional pathways to the contemplative life in her culture. And in a sense it does, at the level of biography at least, since the opacity of her youthful service stands in contrast to the historical certainty of her life as a

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 224.

grown-up anchoress attached to St. Julian's church in Conisford. But Julian's text blocks this path; she does not attempt to connect her youthful service with her adult form of renunciative vocation; in fact she doesn't mention the latter at all. Instead she leaps over the biographical datum of her adult service and describes the metaphysical/ontological life of the serving subject in parabolic form. This move is parallel, I would argue, to the move within the parable itself from "one" to "all" which I described earlier. And as I've said, both of these moves have a place within the grand narrative that connects medieval forms of renunciative vocation with the early modern development of the "affirmation of ordinary life." In the medieval version, one person's extraordinary renunciation is deemed of benefit to all, but this "all" is still defined as a local network of connections.<sup>27</sup> By the seventeenth century this version is being supplemented and gradually replaced by a form of renunciative vocation that is available to everyone via his or her everyday work-in-the-world, and is deemed of benefit to All, where the capitalized form signifies the growth of "all" into ever larger and more abstract formations of state and society.

Janet Burton has suggested that the shift I am describing was already afoot by the late middle ages, when "ascetic renunciation was no longer seen as the only, or indeed the best, way to salvation." "It was not that the ideal of renunciation was

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<sup>27</sup> For a very good example of what I mean by "local network" here, see the surviving wills from early fifteenth-century Norwich which explicitly name Julian as the recipient of bequests. As Watson and Jenkins put it, these "wills treat gifts as only one part of a wider network of giving, comprising both works of charity and implicit or explicit appeals for prayers. Friars, nuns, hospitalers, anchoresses, prisoners, lepers, and the sick are all potential recipients, as are parish churches, favorite altars, and colleagues and friends. Medieval wills are some of the most powerful reminders of the functional reality of the community Julian calls 'alle mine evenchristen.'" *Writings*, 432. Three of the four extant wills naming Julian are included in Watson and Jenkins's appendix B, 431-35.



rejected,” she says, “but that it began to take different forms. For the active Christian, life within society involved renunciation in different ways.”<sup>28</sup> This change came on the heels of a shift in practices regarding children’s paths to the renunciative life. I have already discussed the political pressure brought to bear on the mendicant orders for their recruitment of young children. The older monastic orders had undergone a similar reform, Burton writes, although perhaps for different reasons. From the twelfth century onwards, she claims, the model of obedience embodied in the Benedictine Rule, in which monks and nuns “were to have *no will of their own* but became cogs in ... a liturgical wheel, praying for the salvation of humankind” was superseded by a time in which “greater emphasis was laid on the importance of the *individual will* in the decision to enter the religious life, and the centuries-old practice [called oblation] of placing children in monasteries for entry into the religious life at an appropriate age came to an end” (357–8; my emphasis).

### **Out of the Fountain ... Branching into Practice**

Taking its cue from Taylor’s grand narrative of the transformation of renunciative life, my second historical interlude turns to the lives-in-exile of the English Recusant communities in France whose libraries preserved, uniquely, the textual record of Julian’s longer *Revelation*. The religious and cultural identities of these men and

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<sup>28</sup> Janet Burton, “Renunciation,” in *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 356–368, at 368. Further citations in text.

women were defined in relation to what had become, from the mid-sixteenth century onward, an absence: that is, to Catholic England and the associated forms of life that had underwritten Julian's youthful "service"—including whatever biographical details that word is taken to represent.<sup>29</sup> But rather than focus on the Benedictine nuns of Cambrai and the influence of Father Augustine Baker on their reading habits—scholarship has tended to associate Julian strongly with this group, to the exclusion of other possible homes for her textual legacy—I want to draw attention to a group of women religious not normally associated with Julian.

In 1634, an English Catholic priest named Miles Pinkney (alias Thomas Carre), based at Douai, together with his friend Richard Smith, bishop of Chalcedon and vicar apostolic of the English church, worked to establish a house of Augustinian canonesses to be called Notre Dame de Syon. The original plan was to establish the house in Douai, near the English College for priests, but the plan was changed when the would-be abbess (and chief benefactor) insisted on locating the new Our Lady of Syon in Paris instead. The abbess was an Englishwoman and Roman Catholic convert named Letice Tredway (1593–1677), whose name in religion was Mary. After receiving letters patent from the French king Louis XIII in 1633, Mary Tredway added £3000 from family sources to the expected dowries of five postulants who

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<sup>29</sup> Kim M. Phillips neatly summarizes the excesses of the speculative narrative of Julian's early life and learning, composed by well-meaning scholars: "She was a nun before becoming a recluse, *or* she had been a wife and mother; she was learned in Latin and theology, *or* she had no more formal or Latin learning than other women of her era; she was intensely orthodox and her ideas were steeped in patristic authorities, *or* she was original and radical in her construction of a distinctively feminine theology. The level of speculation sometimes becomes painful..."; "Femininities and the Gentry in Late Medieval East Anglia: Ways of Being," in Liz Herbert McAvoy, ed., *A Companion to Julian of Norwich* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 20 and n. 6.

had come from England, and by 1635 these first five had been professed as regular canonesses. From 1638 the community was settled on the eastern outskirts of Paris in the rue des Fossés Saint-Victor, and survived there, remarkably, through the French Revolution. In the 1860s the canonesses moved the convent and school to a second site in Paris, and in 1910 the community moved to England, eventually settling on the site in Ealing which it still occupies as St. Augustine's Priory and School.<sup>30</sup>

Father Carre (Pinkney, d. 1674) apparently served as spiritual guide and mentor to the canonesses of Our Lady of Syon, playing a role similar to that of Augustine Baker at the Benedictine convent of Our Lady of Consolation in Cambrai, where an "old manuscript book of [Julian's] Revelations" is known to have been part of the library, and may have been the exemplar for the surviving Paris manuscript.<sup>31</sup> Like Baker, Carre was himself a writer and translator of devotional and theological works, ranging from a series of meditations designed for the use of the canonesses at Our Lady of Syon, to an account of Catholic piety in Paris (*Pietas Parisiensis*, 1666), to translations of French ecclesiastics like Francis de Sales and Cardinal Richelieu. He was connected to the court-in-exile of Henrietta Maria, wife of Charles I of England, and delivered her funeral sermon in 1670. Carre was an acquaintance

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<sup>30</sup> For the history of the priory, see Antony F. Allison, "The English Augustinian Convent of Our Lady of Syon at Paris: Its Foundation and Struggle for Survival During the First Eighty Years, 1634–1713," *Recusant History* 21 (1992–93): 451–96. Biographies of Miles Pinkney, Letice Tredway, and Richard Smith are available in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *DNB*), online edition. The current convent and school maintains a website at <http://www.saintaugustinespriory.org.uk>.

<sup>31</sup> *DNB*, "Pinkney, Miles." Watson and Jenkins, *Writings*, 13–14.

of the English Catholic poet Richard Crashaw, and played a significant role in the first (posthumous) printing of his *Carmen Deo nostro* in 1652. Along with Mary Tredway he established a residential college in Paris, St. Gregory's, for English Catholic clergy who were studying theology at the Sorbonne, and made the college a gift of his books.<sup>32</sup>

In providing this brief account of the milieu in which Tredway and Carre, Crashaw and Smith lived and worked in the years between 1630 and 1670, it is not my intent to add fuel to the fires of speculation surrounding the creation and transmission of the Julian manuscripts. This brief picture is enough to suggest a wider range of possibilities for such transmission, even within the relatively small world of English recusants in France and the Low Countries. It is just as likely, and just as difficult to prove, that the copies of Julian's *Revelations* preserved in the Paris and Sloane manuscripts were made at Our Lady of Syon or at St. Gregory's college in Paris, than that they were made in Cambrai by the followers of Augustine Baker.

But I want to turn now from this speculative book history to the history of one specific book, one also connected with the Paris Augustinian convent of Our Lady and its circle. When Mary Tredway left the Augustinian house of Notre Dame de Beaulieu at Douai, in Flanders, where she was professed, and went to Paris to found her new convent, she took with her a copy in French of the Douai convent's constitutions. These in turn had been copied from a medieval manuscript at the Augustinian abbey of Sion, near Douai, where they had been used in conjunction

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<sup>32</sup> *DNB*, entries for "Pinkney" and "Tredway"; Allison, "English Convent," 467.

with a version of St. Augustine's fifth-century "Rule" for religious communities.<sup>33</sup>

Father Carre translated both the "Rule" and the constitutions into English for the use of the canonesses, and had a small edition of the resulting handbook printed in Paris in 1636. Only one copy of this book is known to survive, now in the library at Downside Abbey, Somerset.<sup>34</sup> The work opens with a "Dedicatorie epistle" addressed to "Richard Smyth, Bishope of Chalcedone," in which Smith is figured as spiritual father to the young women of the convent, those who in following the ensuing precepts under his guidance and protection will become as "prosperous plantes [who] offer their first frutes to the Gardner who planted them" (*Austin Rule*, a.ii). This little book, Carre continues, is nothing less than that "upon which their life is framed: by which their stepps are guided. Within the compas of which all their actions doe run. This is their life in words, their life is this in deeds" (a.iii). In this formulation, words and actions share the same grammatical relation to life, where life is conceived as service to God. In this version, the call to renounce insists on the impossibility of dividing up such service into speechful acts (praying, singing, reciting, vowing, promising) and other forms of bodily action. The dedicatory letter is followed by a brief translator's preface addressed directly to the women religious. Here Carre claims to have rendered Augustine's rule "purely out of the fountaine, I

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<sup>33</sup> Allison and Rogers, *Contemporary Printed Literature*, 2:643; Allison, "English Convent," 454, 461. Following Allison, I place Augustine's "Rule" in quotation marks (in this instance only) to indicate that the textual history of what is called Augustine's Rule is extremely complex. A very good introduction can be found in the commentary by Gerald Bronner in Saint Augustine, *The Monastic Rules*, ed. Boniface Ramsey (New York: New City Press, 2004), which outlines the four distinct texts that historically have been given the misnomer of "Augustine's Rule."

<sup>34</sup> Allison and Rogers, *Contemporary Printed Literature*, 2:643.

meane the 109 epistle ... Word for Word,” to which he has appended the much lengthier constitutions, which are “properly speaking ... but an explication, *naifement* issu[i]ng out of the said Rule, and branching into practice” (*Austin Rule* a.viii).

*Purely out of the fountain ... branching into practice.* I take this composite metaphor as a substantial gloss on Carre’s earlier conflation of words and deeds: as in fact providing a simple but eloquent picture of the relation between a foundational text and the specific forms of life it authorizes. But despite his easy articulation of traditional organicist metaphors, Carre himself is not *naif* enough to pass over the potential for messy complications where real human communities and ideal codes of conduct come into contact. To the contrary, he expressly acknowledges the need for a structure incorporating error and renewal. The language of penance becomes a necessary part of the framing of the rule-bound life:

Their ayme is God’s honour: to be governed in that, they must be taught substance, and ceremonie. In both, they may erre, for both, pennances must be enjoined. Subjects cannot be continued without new supplies; new ones then must be receaved: in that, order must be observed. *They must be served, that they may more freely serve God,* thence Laysisters. These are the whole contents of the Constitutions. (*Rule*, a.viii; my italics)

The introduction of a status distinction here between those who serve God (the Dames, or vowed religious) and those who serve the servants of God (the Laysisters) is of particular interest because it draws on a cluster of medieval service-talk commonplaces. First, the women of lower spiritual status in this community, the laysisters, are implicitly defined as the servants of the servants of

God. But for a Catholic community, the ostensible humility of that station is complicated by its relation to the traditional epithet given to the pope, who is also *servus servorum Dei*, an honorific which is itself deliberately an inversion of hierarchy. (Chaucer famously takes advantage of the papal epithet's status-ambiguity in having his *Troilus* narrator claim to serve the servants of the God of Love).<sup>35</sup> Secondly, the laysisters' role here aligns them with the exemplarist tradition of Christ as servant, based on his words to the disciples in Matthew 20:28 (Mark 10:45): "Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" [Vulgate: sicut Filius hominis non venit ministrari sed ministrare].<sup>36</sup> In Matthew's Gospel, this chapter begins with the parable of the workers in the vineyard and its meditation on service and reward. But in Mark's Gospel the context demands an even stronger emphasis on the abrupt shift that happens in the continuation of this verse—a shift from ethics to soteriology, from serving to saving.<sup>37</sup>

Mark's version sets up Christ's identification with the role of servant by calling to mind the larger political context of his ministry. This is the beginning of

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<sup>35</sup> Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), *Troilus* 1.15. See also Stephen Barney's note on this line, page 1025, and my discussion in chapter 4 below.

<sup>36</sup> The Latin verb *ministrare*, following the Greek *diakonein*, is an attempt to distinguish menial household service, as in serving at table, both from more exalted forms of service (as in *militare*) and from the ontological status of being a slave. The ecclesiastical sense of "minister" as one who paradoxically both presides and serves is rooted in these verses, as are contemporary debates in the Roman Catholic church about the ministerial role of the (post-Vatican II) permanent diaconate. See especially the work of John N. Collins, beginning with his study of *diakonia* ("service") in Hellenistic Greek sources and in the New Testament: *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), esp. chapter 2, "The Servant Son of Man." Collins argues that the modern tendency to replace "minister" words with "service" words in translating the Greek *diakon-*group is a misreading imposed by Reform theology.

<sup>37</sup> Noted by Collins, *Diakonia*, 47.

the passion narrative: the twelve disciples are described here as “going up to Jerusalem” [ascendentes in Hierosolyma]. They are “amazed” and “afraid” because Jesus “began to tell them what things should happen unto him” (10:32, Authorized Version). Then, faced with James and John’s inopportune request for glorification after death, that they might sit on their Lord’s right and left hands, Christ replies: “But to sit on my right hand or on my left is not mine to give to you, but to them for whom it is prepared.” And addressing the other ten disciples, he says,

You know that they who seem to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them: and their princes have power over them. But it is not so among you: but whosoever will be greater shall be your minister [*minister*]. And whosoever will be first among you shall be the servant [*servus*] of all. For the Son of man also is not come to be ministered unto: but to minister and to give his life a redemption for many [*et dare animam suam redemptionem pro multis*]. (Mark 10:40–45; Douay-Rheims)

These two scriptural touchstones, the vineyard parable and Christ’s self-identification as servant and savior, provide both lexical and narrative materials for Julian’s meditation on her youthful service. I am suggesting that Father Carre’s preface to the 1636 constitutions draws on the same materials in his framing of the *Austin Rule* and its “branching into practice.” In both writers the linkage seems clear enough between the call to renounce of religious vocation and the inversion of hierarchy described in Mark 10, the willful acceptance of servile status. What is less clear is how one who is *not* Christ (in these cases it is necessary to stipulate a *woman* who is not Christ) can do the grammar between the two halves of the verse: between, that is, the exemplary injunction “not to be served but to serve” on the one hand, and “to give [her] life as a redemption for all” on the other. If in Christ’s case



the move is described as a shift from ethics to soteriology, then in the case of an ordinary religious vocation it may be described as transforming the ethics of service into the ethics of self-sacrifice.<sup>38</sup> A very grave, high-stakes transformation. So why force it? But isn't this what Taylor insists upon in linking the "call to renounce" with "healing the world"?

What can we say about these laysisters whose role it is to serve—not God it seems, at least not directly—but *other* women, in order that these other women (the Dames) might in turn "more freely serve God"? What kind of freedom is it which depends on unfree service to enable its form of life? What is being renounced and what is being promised? I cannot in the space of this chapter provide anything like a full discussion of this fascinating and little-known text (the 1636 *Austin Rule*) or fully describe its relations to earlier rules for women religious, including the Brigittine and Benedictine rules in Middle English which have survived.<sup>39</sup> Such a

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<sup>38</sup> "The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice," is coincidentally the title of a brief essay by John Milbank in which he critiques a group of "recent ethical thinkers" (Derrida, Levinas, Patocka, Marion) on the grounds of their mistaken assumption that "the highest ethical gesture is a sacrificial self-offering which expects no benefit in return." For Milbank, the supposed fact of bodily death that makes this unreciprocated gift possible is itself dependent on a narrowly individualistic and solipsistic model of the self and concomitant depersonalization of the other. He counters that "resurrection, not death, is the ground of the ethical": *First Things* 91 (March 1999): 33–38. See also Milbank's wide-ranging critique of the concept of sacrifice as used by writers in the mostly francophone tradition of the "human sciences" and its Victorian precursors: "Stories of Sacrifice," *Modern Theology* 12.1 (1996): 27–56.

<sup>39</sup> For Brigittine texts connected with the English abbey of Syon, see *The Rewyll of Seynt Sauioure*, James Hogg, ed. (Salzburg: Institut fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 2003), and *Myroure of Oure Ladye*, J. H. Blunt, ed., EETS e.s. 19 (London: Kegan Paul, 1898). Benedictine versions are published in Ernst A. Kock, ed., *Three Middle-English Versions of the Rule of St. Benet and Two Contemporary Rituals for the Ordination of Nuns*, EETS o.s. 120 (London: Kegan Paul, 1902). The best available discussion of these rules is in chapter 2 of Nancy Bradley Warren, *Spiritual Economies: Female Monasticism in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). I am grateful to Professor Warren for conversation and advice about this chapter at an early stage.

study would no doubt tell us more about the contexts of Julian's reception in seventeenth-century recusant communities than has been available through the study of Cambrai alone. For now I will limit my discussion to the laysisters, since it is they who perhaps most visibly body forth the distinction brought out by Carre's preface between serving God and serving others, and the paths of action connecting the two.

The fifth and final part of the constitutions outlines the role of the laysisters, including instructions for their reception into the order, their novitiate, profession, clothing, discipline, and finally their work. The last category contains the crucial differences marking out laysisters from their superiors, the dames. The fifth chapter of the fifth part, rubricated "Of their worke," sets out the terms of their service:

1. Upon workdayes the Laysisters must ioyfully and faithfully worke not as slaves, to the ey[e] onely, but as handmaidens of Iesus Christ, the labours of their whole life being consecrated to his service: and they are to continue working from Prime till after Compline, which when they have done, preferring the common good before their owne ease and commoditie, they may be assured, they have gayned in the point of perfection, and made progresse in the way of heaven.<sup>40</sup>

2. They are to labour together mildly and sweetly, remembering that of the Rule, that they are to have but one hart and one soule in Iesus Christ: and that of the holy Apostle, that to fulfill the law of Christ we must one beare anothers burden: and beare with one anothers imperfections. (*Austin Rule* 520–22)

The pair of "thats" in the second paragraph point, respectively, to a passage in Augustine's Rule as it is presented earlier in the book, and to Paul's advice in

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<sup>40</sup> "Not as slaves, to the eye only, but as handmaids..." is a adaptation of Eph. 6:6.

Galatians 6:2 to those who are servants of the house of faith [domesticos fidei] that they should “bear ... one another’s burdens, and so ... fulfill the law of Christ.”

Writing in what modern scholarship calls the *Regularis informatio*, a version of the monastic rule adapted for a female community, Augustine’s citational prose had drawn on the language of Psalm 68 (Vulgate 67) and of Acts 4 in stating the community’s first principle: “In the first place—and this is the very reason of your being gathered together in one—you should live in the *house in unity of spirit* and you should have *one soul and one heart* centered on God.”<sup>41</sup>

It will do us no good here to look down the nose of liberal modernity at this self-described unity of spirit, which is so obviously dependent on a social hierarchy, and declare it misguided. Nor do I think it will get us very far to point to the sex of the writer of this passage, whether Father Carre or Saint Augustine, and on that basis to call the whole thing off, to rule out *a priori* its claims on the women’s bodies who are its objects of address. Rather what is called for is a recognition that the use of the words *freely* and *serve* together in the same grammatical construction, like

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<sup>41</sup> *Monastic Rules*, ed. Ramsey, 132. Carre’s version, mediated through a French manuscript version, muddles the clarity of Augustine’s citational style but still makes the point: “that you live unanimously in the *house (of our Lord)* having but one hart and one soule in our Lord,” *Austins Rule*, 16, italics in original. What Carre calls the “Rule” is a version of the *Regularis informatio* which is prefaced by letter 211 (Carre’s “epistle 109”), the so-called *Obiurgatio*, in which Augustine rebukes “a community of nuns who have rebelled against their superior and appealed to Augustine to intervene in order to settle their dispute.” Many medieval manuscripts of the rule, including, it seems, the one Carre was working from, combined this letter with the *Regularis informatio*, which since the sixteenth century was widely thought to be the original Augustinian Rule, with the male version (essentially the same except for the gender of pronouns) made as a later adaptation in the twelfth century. The twentieth-century scholarship of Luc Verheijen “has cast serious doubt on this position,” *Monastic Rules*, 22. But from the seventeenth-century perspective of Carre and the women of Our Lady of Syon, the rule of life they were taking up had been written by Augustine specifically for a female community.

Julian's use of *willfully serve* in chapter 14 of the *Revelations*, is not a construction that we should briskly saddle with the critical baggage of "paradox." I myself used this language in chapter one in framing, through quotations from Augustine and Luther, the "paradoxical" nature of Christian service as I find it expressed in Langland's poetry. Instead, what is called for here is a recognition that very different concepts of freedom, liberty, slavery and servitude are in play, and that until we can shake off our own sense of these words and attend to the kinds of distinctions made in and by these texts and writers themselves rather than imposed on them from outside, we will not be attending adequately to their own sense of their words or to their sense of themselves: including their sense of themselves as servants of one another and of God.

#### **"From whens the servant came": An Onto-Theology of Service**

I have so far suggested that Julian's text plays out a shift in her theology from a perspective that privileges individual salvation to one in which the collective end of humanity has taken center stage. And paradoxically, but in a way that is characteristic of Julian's writing, the move outward from the singular to the social is represented narratively as a move inward, so that the single figure of the servant becomes readable on an ontological level as a parable of the human soul's capacity to act: more specifically, to *serve* and to *deserve*. But as the structure of the servant's story itself suggests, the late medieval theological context in which Julian worked had provided her with a multitude of options for narrating the servant's allegorical

fall and subsequent rise.<sup>42</sup> She could have drawn attention to the competing versions of human agency and the extent of God's gracious intervention that so preoccupied her more academic contemporaries, and which seem to beg to be taken up through the figure of the servant who cannot serve. She clearly possesses the intellectual resources to engage in such a discussion, as her detailed analysis of the soul and the trinity in subsequent chapters will show (*A Revelation*, chs. 53–58). Instead, like Langland, she sets aside the university idiom and its insoluble binaries, and chooses to imagine the servant's life in historical time as taking on the concrete features and vocational attributes of a gardener, an agricultural laborer who is, like Langland's Piers, a figure both literal and allegorical at once.

She now looks again at the servant in her vision and decides — *contra* the ontological inertia that her first description seemed to invite — that the servant *can* serve after all; and further, despite her earlier avoidance of specific verbal content for human “servyse,” she now provides a list of serving verbs very like the one Langland's Piers provided.

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<sup>42</sup> To Julian's modern critics, the now-familiar range of answers available in response to Langland's guiding question (How may I save my soul?) are applicable for Julian's servant too. This familiar schema posits a continuum of responses ranging from extreme “Augustinianism” (I can do *nothing* to save my soul) to extreme “Pelagianism” (I can earn my salvation through good works). The inverted commas are necessary here because the validity of this schema has been rightly questioned by recent scholarship – especially the distorted picture it gives of Augustine's understanding of grace. For a salutary corrective, see Aers, *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland, and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 2009), esp. chapter 1 on Augustine and chapter 5 on Julian, the latter including a critique of Denise Baker's influential reading of Julian's theology as a revision of “the juridical paradigm of Augustinian theodicy.” Baker, *Julian of Norwich's “Showings”: From Vision to Book* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), chs. 3 and 4, quotation at 82.

I beheld [him], thinking what maner labour it may be that the servant shulde do. And then I understode that he shulde do the grettest labour and the hardest traveyle that is: he shuld be a gardener: *delve* and *dike* and *swinke* and *swete* and *turne* the erth up and down, and *seke* the depnesse, and *water* the plantes in time. (51.162–65)<sup>43</sup>

If the whole of chapter 51 is a rewriting of Genesis 3 and its aftermath, then this passage calls to mind especially the curse of agriculture found in verses 17–19, if only to turn it on its head:

cursed is the earth in thy work: with labour and toil shalt thou eat thereof all the days of thy life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee, and thou shalt eat the herbs of the earth. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the earth out of which thou wast taken: for dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return. (Douay-Rheims)

In the context of Julian’s retelling, this is not a condemnation but a victory. In her version, the servant’s “hard traveyle” is redeemed not just through the production of subsistence-level foodstuffs, but goes beyond that to “make swete flodes to runne, and nobile and plenteous fruite to spring” (166–67). Further, her reading has a built-in protection against any charge of Pelagianism that might arise here, because the fruits of the gardener’s labor do not in any way constitute his well-being, even as they help to sustain him and his community. They are rather transitive, donative fruits “which he shulde bring before the lorde and serve him therwith to his liking” (167–68). In other words, the servant’s work does not redound to his own benefit, on earth or in heaven, but is rather passed along in an act of service to the lord, who in turn perpetually regifts the fruits of service at an ontological level through his

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<sup>43</sup> Compare with Taylor’s seventeenth-century quotation from Joseph Hall above.

infusion of creation with the capacity to serve.<sup>44</sup> The protection against Pelagianism is thus intrinsic to Julian's understanding of service writ large, and rearticulates my claim that service discourse is ontologically destabilizing: that is, that it upsets the culturally-derived distinctions that normally hold between who we are and what we do.

As if in recognition that she has moved the discussion onto a more abstract philosophical plane, Julian's text now registers her uncertainty about the origins of her own figure of the servant. "And yet I merveyed" she says, "fro whens the servant came" (51.172). Despite its abstractness, this turn to a discussion of origins and ends does not involve an abandonment of the palpable imagery of the chapter's core narrative: the seated lord, the servant standing, the servant falling, the space between them. But the basic tableau is now very briefly expanded in a passage of great formal precision (comprising just seven lines in the Watson-Jenkins edition) — a passage ending with a precise verbal echo of its opening — which simultaneously magnifies and circumscribes the content of the vision.

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<sup>44</sup> John Milbank is again helpful in articulating my sense of Julian's refusal to have her servant material explained under the aegis of the "logic of sacrifice" as understood by Bataille-Lacan-Levinas-Derrida-Girard (admittedly flattening some real differences among these thinkers). Within this logic even a living sacrifice (Taylor's "renunciative vocation") — like Julian's enclosure or the laysisters' service — can be turned toward immanent (nontranscendent) forms of flourishing as ends in themselves. Indeed the "logic of sacrifice" as drawn by this strand of thought would end its critique here and would look on such a turn toward immanence with approbation. Milbank will have none of this. For him, as for Kierkegaard, the modern misconstrual of *agape* as susceptible to appropriation by secular society as "disinterested altruism without eternal hope" is all wrong. Rather, "*Agape*, being love of neighbour *only* as love of God—therefore love of every neighbour, including oneself—specifically denies that subjectivity or self-realization may ultimately be abandoned for any superior goal, albeit universal collective peace. The latter is precisely the wisdom of this world; for Kierkegaard it is the wisdom of Agamemnon when he is about to depart for Troy. Instead what is to be abandoned is subjectivity *along with* all ultimate collective goals," "Stories of Sacrifice," 53.

*And yet I merveyled from whens the servant came. For I saw in the lord that he hath within himself endlesse life and all manner of goodnes, save the tresure that was in the erth, and that was grounded within the lord in mervelous depnesse of endlesse love. But it was not alle to his wurship till his servant hath thus nobly dighte it and brought it before him in himselfe present. And without the lorde was right nought but wildernesse. And I understode not alle what this exampil ment, and therefore I marveyled from wens the servant came. (51.172–78)*

Julian's writerly sensibilities come through strongly here in the service of her theology. The note of repetition in *endlesse ... goodnes ... deepnesse ... endlesse ... wildernesse* articulates sonically the sense of ontological unity she seeks to convey, even as the doubly-imagined "deep ground" intensifies the connection she makes between the soil and the soul. "Wildernesse" conveys both the dramatic topography of the scene and the allegorical emptiness (chaos) of all that is "without the lorde" (meaning both "outside" and "lacking.") The theological point Julian stresses here, however, is that all the good fruits of creation are already there in the garden *before* the moment of the Incarnation, but this "tresure" is not pleasing to God the creator until the servant (Adam / Man ) has "dighte it" (the English punning on "dig") and made a gift of it "in himself" back to the lord. We have to recall here that Julian has not yet named the third term in the servant's identity. She has not yet said "in the servant is comprehended the second person of the trinite" (179). This comes next. But setting the scene and narrating the servant's work in this way leads to the



disclosure of his christological nature as the inevitable outcome of his being there *at all*.<sup>45</sup>

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To speak of the idea of a vocation, a “call,” is to assert the primacy of an initiating agency outside the serving subject, someone who calls me and to whom I must respond in turn. The individual will, insofar as it is involved at all in this process, is only put into motion in reaction to the call. It then becomes an important question whether or not the will has the capacity to respond on its own — or if the capacity to respond is somehow implanted into the called subject by means of the call itself. In other words: Can vocation be willed, or is the call constitutive of the subject?

For Henri de Lubac, the question I just asked—a question also posed eloquently by Julian’s parable of the lord and the servant—has a forceful and unequivocal answer. No, he says, vocation cannot be willed as such, *because* God’s call is constitutive. The “desire to see God,” he writes,

cannot be permanently frustrated without an essential suffering ... And consequently—at least in appearance—a good and just God could hardly frustrate me, unless I, through my own fault, turn away from him by choice. The infinite importance of the desire implanted in me by my creator is what constitutes the infinite importance of the drama of human existence... For this desire is not some “accident” in me... it does not in any sense depend upon my deliberate will. It is in me as a

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<sup>45</sup> Compare Bauerschmidt, “Yet Julian also seems to say that in Christ, both as the exemplar of all created natures and as the incarnate and risen servant of God, substance and sensuality, higher and lower judgements, are *already* brought together,” *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic*, 145.

result of my belonging to humanity as it is, that humanity which is, as we say, “called.” For God’s call is constitutive.<sup>46</sup>

What de Lubac labels “the desire to see God” is for him synonymous with the notion of a “call” or vocation. Prior to God’s call, then, there is no “I” which could stand up and say “I desire to see God.” The call, the desire, and the subject all come into existence simultaneously.

If there is, as de Lubac claims, no such thing as willed vocation, then is this also to deny that there can be such a thing as “willful service” of the kind Julian imagines as being rewarded according to various degrees of bliss in heaven? Here we need to return to the text of chapter 51, which sets out to revise, in important ways, the notion of “willful service” that was portrayed in Julian’s heavenly feast.

In chapter 14’s picturing of the rewards of willful service, there is no impediment blocking the path between *servicing* willfully and *deserving* bliss. By chapter 51 these words have been recontextualized as part of the effort to explicate the “wonderful example” of the lord and the servant. In her initial, tentative, explanation of the servant’s fall, she says that “only his good will and his gret desyer was cause of his falling” (51.31). Having next established the identification of the servant with Adam, and by extension with “alle man” (51.89), she then declares that “this man was hurte in his mighte and made fulle febil, and he was stoned in his understanding, for he was turned fro the beholding of his lord.” The sight-lines

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<sup>46</sup> Henri de Lubac, S.J., *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed, introduction by David L. Schindler (New York: Crossroad, [1965] 1998), 54. On de Lubac see the study by John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005).

encompassed within the word “beholding” here go in both directions: the servant cannot see that he is beheld by the lord; nor can he behold the lord in turn. But rather than concede defeat or turn to the language of sin to explain away this apparent failure, Julian continues to insist that the servant’s *will* is good and that it is intact, unbroken by the figurative fall.

But his wille was kepte hole in Gods sight. For his wille I saw oure lorde commende and approve, but himself was letted and blinded of the knowing of this will. And this is to him gret sorow and grevous disses[e], for neither he seeth clerly his loving lorde, which is to him full meke and milde, nor he seeth truly what himselfe is in the sight of his loving lord. And welle I wot, when theyse two be wisely and truly seen, we shall get rest and peas: here in party, and the fulhede in the blisse in heven, by his plentuous grace. (51.89–96).

The promise of heavenly bliss comes back into play here, but there is a crucial difference inserted between this version and the hierarchy of service-rewards in the original vision of chapter 14. When she refers to “theyse two” things that will be seen, partially now, fully later, she means first of all the servant’s own beholding of God—the beatific vision of God from the perspective of a perfected humanity. Secondly, she means the servant’s (i.e. humanity’s) vision of himself as God sees him, as sharing in the “substantial kynde” of his creator.

In Julian’s case, the addition of this second, self-reflexive and deified gaze of the servant towards the servant signals a progression in her theological imagination that develops directly out of the language and symbolism of the story she tells. Put another way, the “shewing” of the parable of the lord and servant provides the grounds on which to develop a sophisticated onto-theological theory of humanity’s origins and ends.

Henri de Lubac, without the benefit of a “shewing” of his own but rather through the meticulous study of patristic and medieval texts, reaches a very similar conclusion. Man, he says, is a “different kind of creature” possessed of an

“unstable ontological constitution” which makes it at once something greater and something less than itself. Hence that kind of dislocation, that mysterious lameness, due *not merely to sin*, but primarily and more fundamentally to being a creature made out of nothing which, astoundingly, touches God ... By the fact of being created, man is the “companion in slavery” of all nature; but at the same time, because he is an image [of God] he is “capable of beatific knowledge” and has, as Origen said, the “precept of liberty” implanted deep within him.<sup>47</sup>

Much of the ground covered here overlaps with the way Augustine and Luther both spoke about the paradox of willing and serving in the opening pages of my first chapter. But there is a crucial difference here in Julian’s and de Lubac’s treatment of the same nexus of terms: they have not only self-consciously guided the discussion through a philosophical turn, but in doing so they have found a way of narrating humanity’s fallibility without recourse to the language of sin.

By way of summary, I want to look back to the passage that both begins and ends with the words “I marveyled from wens the servant came” (51.172–78). And in developing my reading of what follows from these words, I want to suggest that the formal symmetry by which Julian marks off this short passage as a crux in her understanding of the onto-theology of service also marks a turning point in her

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<sup>47</sup> *Mystery of the Supernatural*, 113–14, my italics. De Lubac borrows the formula “unstable ontological constitution” from Paul Ricoeur’s early work on the philosophy of the will, English trans. by Charles Kelbley, *Fallible Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986). As is frequently the case in de Lubac’s work, the prose is densely citational and his sources not always immediately identifiable. In addition to Ricoeur, this brief passage quotes or alludes to texts from Blondel, Boethius, M.-D. Chenu, St. Bonaventure, St. Basil, and St. Thomas.

understanding of the symmetry, as it were, between Adam and Christ. To put it in the kind of scholastic idiom that Julian for the most part studiously avoids, we can say that in this passage her anthropology and her christology are shown to be inextricably linked, but also in need of reordering. This textual moment is one of the hinges on which the apparently solipsistic vision of heaven in chapter 14 is turned to reveal its other face. In leading up to this point, she tells us that she had understood very quickly and intuitively that the servant in her “wonderful example” stood for “singel Adam” (51.1–2, 58). As with the “youthful” servant of chapter 14, this servant’s primary identification is with an individual human subject. But of course Julian doesn’t leave it there. In continuing to think through, across twenty years, “alle the propertes and the condetions that were shewed in the example” (74–75), she expands her understanding of the servant to mean not just “single Adam” but Adam as representative of all men. “For in the sighte of God alle man is one man, and one man is alle man” (51.88–89). Taking her analysis even further, Julian next develops the analogy between the servant and a gardener, providing as she does so a list of serving verbs (*delve*, *dike*, *swinke*, *swete*, and *turne*) that were not yet available to her vision of youthful service as heaven-directed individual action. The specificity of the gardening verbs becomes available only when they have a context; when the “condetions” for the servant’s meaningful action have been put in place. In this case, the conditions imposed by the narrative are simple. The servant wants to serve the lord but has nothing—“neither meet nor drinke”—to give him (51.160). So he sets out to cultivate the earth, to make available through his labor that “mete which is lovesom and plesing to the lord” (159).

In moving from the servant face-down in the ditch unable to serve—full stop—to the servant as gardener who has nothing to serve his lord, Julian has in effect replaced the ontological question (How can you serve?) which has no grammatical object, with a pair of questions in which the objects are front and center: *Whom* do you serve and *what* do you serve him? The servant who cannot serve enacts, by negation, a breakdown in the normative grammar of service, which expects a coherent answer to the question “Can you serve?” (“Can thow serven?” as Langland will put it; see chapter 3 herein). In Julian’s case, the grammatical transformation has been made possible by a philosophical breakthrough at the level of ontology: she simply has to put things in a different order.

When servant-as-man comes before servant-as-Christ, it seems, there is no impediment to the human grammar of serve and deserve. Action resulting in reward has the same grammatical form as action resulting in punishment. Serving *well* means deserving bliss; serving *ill* means deserving damnation. As with Langland’s Will, who early in his poem is utterly seduced by the beautiful symmetry of the economics of serve and deserve, Julian in the early part of her text expresses a similar seduction. If we sin, we should deserve blame. This is Julian’s instinct. But her analysis of her showing of the servant tells her that it is not so, that despite our sin we are not blamed. Even as she proceeds with the initial anthropological reading of the parable (i.e. the servant = Adam = all men), the “contrariousness” of the revelation that God does not blame the sinner for her sin is still perplexing to her. She thinks (and writes) her way through this perplexity by exploring the grammatical permutations of “serving”—realizing along the way that the shift from

nontransactive structures of serving (Can you serve at all?) to transactive structures (what and whom do you serve?) is analogous to the transformation that is about to take place in her understanding of the servant figure itself. She has to go through anthropology, so to speak, to arrive at christology. But once she is there, she has to revise her anthropology in light of the christology which was always there to begin with, hidden “as a treasure in the earth” (51.157). In this sense the parable is structured as a double revelation: first, the gradual revelation of the servant as identical with the second person of the trinity, which can happen only through the failure of the anthropological reading to resolve Julian’s contrariness; and second, the reverse revelation of the servant as the anthropological figure par excellence, stuck in the slade—“fallible man” in Paul Ricoeur’s phrase—who comes to realize his capacity to serve only through the retrospective realization that he shares a nature with the Son. And what comes along with this second revelation is Julian’s recognition—through the gardener’s procurement of “meat and drink”—that this connaturality with the Son’s humanity entails a commitment to service that is object-directed: to serve is always to serve *somebody ... something*.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Can You Serve? The Theology of Service from Langland to Luther

“Whareof serve ye?” Y saide, “sire *Liberum Arbitrium?*”  
– *Piers Plowman* C.16.172

... “free-will” [*liberum arbitrium*] is an utter fallacy. It is like the woman in the Gospel; the more the doctors treat the case, the worse it gets.  
– Martin Luther, *De servo arbitrio* (1525)

Picture this. Martin Luther is walking through the streets of Wittenberg on a hot summer evening in the year 1520 when he is accosted by two menacing figures called Reason and Conscience. Reason begins to question Luther, but barely gets three words out — “Can you serve ...” — before being interrupted by the reformer’s emphatic and preemptive reply: “No!”<sup>1</sup>

Middle English scholars will recognize the scene as borrowed from passus 5 of the final version of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, written nearly a century

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<sup>1</sup> I quote *Piers Plowman* from the edition of Derek Pearsall, *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008). For Martin Luther, *De servo arbitrio*, I use the translation by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, *The Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Fleming Revell, 1957). The epigraph quotation is on page 65. Throughout the essay I quote Luther’s Latin from the Weimar Edition of Luther’s works, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–). Citations are given as *WA* plus volume and page numbers, here *WA* 18:602.



and a half before Luther's imaginary placement within it. In Langland's version, the city is of course not Wittenberg but London, and the walker is not Luther but "Wille," the poem's narrator and an ostensible stand-in for the poet himself. In recent years the C.5 *apologia*, as this passage is customarily called, has become one of the most talked-about sections of Langland's poem, with considerable and continuing disagreements among scholars about its date of composition, its relation to the poet's life story, and its placement and ultimate significance in the poem.

Readers of Langland will also recognize that my transferral of the scene to sixteenth-century Germany incorporates another, more substantial, revision of the original. Langland's Will does not cut Reason off after hearing "Can thow seruen?". Instead, he hears him out for another nine-and-a-half lines, allowing him to establish a context of authorized late-fourteenth-century clerical and agricultural forms of life before answering just as emphatically that Yes! ("Sertes!"), he *can* serve, just not—or not only—in the ways Reason prescribes for him.

The point of this thought experiment is to bring into focus an aspect of Langland's C.5 *apologia* that has been mostly passed over by the massive scholarly literature that is now attached to the passage.<sup>2</sup> Luther's preemptive answer makes it

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<sup>2</sup> I list chronologically a selection of this scholarship that has been most stimulating to me in developing my thinking about *Piers Plowman* C.5. It is by no means a comprehensive list: C. Talbot Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The C-text and Its Poet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949); Ralph Hanna III, *William Langland* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Variorum, 1993), 17–24; Essays by Anne Middleton, Lawrence Clopper, Ralph Hanna, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, and Derek Pearsall in Stephen Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, eds., *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); David Aers, Review of *Written Work*, *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 12 (1998): 207–17; George Kane, "Langland: Labour and 'Authorship': A Review Article," Review of *Written Work*, *Notes and Queries* 45.4 (1998): 420–25; Joseph S. Wittig, "'Culture Wars' and the Persona in *Piers Plowman*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 15 (2001): 167–95; D. Vance Smith, *Arts*

very clear that he understands the question “Can you serve?” as asking—in a radical theological and anthropological sense—whether or not the human will is capable of doing *anything* that will contribute to its owner’s salvation.<sup>3</sup> In Langlandian terms, the question “can you serve?” then becomes synonymous with Will’s poem-structuring question to Holy Church in passus 1: “Teche me to no tresor but telle me this ilke, / How Y may saue my soule” (C.1.79–80). Seen in this perspective, verbs of *servicing* become the front end of a syntactical coupling in which the back end is made up of verbs of *deserving*. The theological grammar of *serve* and *deserve* is another way of talking about action and reward, work and wage, grace and free will, and most importantly for both writers—sin and salvation.

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*of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), ch. 4, 108–53; George Kane, “Langland, William (c.1325–c.1390),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Lynn Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 322–35; Kellie Robertson, *The Laborer’s Two Bodies: Labor and the ‘Work’ of the Text in Medieval Britain, 1350–1500*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 45–50; David Aers, Review of Robertson, *The Laborer’s Two Bodies*, *YLS* 19 (2005): 226–36; Andrew Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 66–68, 159–60; Katherine Ziemann, *Singing the New Song: Literacy and Liturgy in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), ch. 5, 150–80.

<sup>3</sup> See Harry J. McSorley, C.S.P., *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther’s Major Work, “The Bondage of the Will”* (New York: Newman Press with Augsburg Publishing, 1969). McSorley’s valuable ecumenical study of *De servo arbitrio* distinguishes between two different “unfree wills” that Luther discusses in this text. The first is a philosophical concept expressing the relationship between God’s foreknowledge and man’s will. Luther’s position here is *necessitarian*, in that he argues that the absolute and infallible foreknowledge of God “imposes an absolute necessity on all things” (21). But his position is not necessarily *deterministic*, in that it still allows for man to take free decisions and perform free actions in the realm of natural things [*naturalia*]. Luther’s second concept of “unfree will” is in McSorley’s estimation a “solidly biblical concept” which “expresses well Luther’s primary reformation concern, namely, to defend the biblical truth that the sinner can in no way break through the bonds of guilt and condemnation by any *effort of his own*.” It is this second version of the *servum arbitrium* that is “not only Johannine and Pauline, but also Augustinian, Thomistic, Lutheran and Tridentine. It is both Evangelical and Catholic.” It is also in large measure Langlandian, as we will see.

Using *Piers Plowman* as its central text and the C.5 *apologia* as its central passage, this essay argues for an intimate connection between the theological grammar of serve and deserve, on the one hand, and the vocabulary of “service” in late medieval England—in its full range of social, economic, and religious dimensions—on the other. I argue that when Langland has his narrator questioned by Reason and asked “Can you serve?” he understands the question, like Luther, in the broadest theological and ethical sense. He does so while attending in detail to the issues raised by the conventional (twentieth-century scholarly) readings: these see the *apologia* as referring to Langland’s putative clerical status, his status as a laboring body under the terms of the 1388 labor statutes, or his own vocation as a poet and maker of vernacular theology. The work that has gone into establishing these readings (notably by Talbot Donaldson and Anne Middleton) as well as the work that has gone into casting doubt on these readings as too speculatively biographical (such as George Kane and Joseph Wittig) can now be marshalled into a wider argument about Langland’s worry about the link between service/work/human agency and his theology of grace and free will. The dominant view within Langland scholarship has been that Langland is semi-Pelagian in his views on these topics.<sup>4</sup> If this were the case, then Langland’s theology of serve and deserve

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<sup>4</sup> Langland scholarship has tended to overemphasize the influence of fourteenth-century Realism/Nominalism debates on *Piers Plowman*, as well as positing too close a connection between Nominalist philosophy and the “semi-Pelagian” theology which many critics have ascribed to Langland. On Langland’s semi-Pelagianism see especially Robert Adams, “Piers’s Pardon and Langland’s Semi-Pelagianism,” *Traditio* 39 (1983): 367–418, which heavily influenced the influential accounts by James Simpson in *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007; orig. pub. Longman 1990) and *Reform and Cultural Revolution: Oxford English Literary History, Vol. 2: 1350–1547* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 7, “Edifying the

should look almost nothing like Martin Luther's, whose 1525 treatise *De servo arbitrio* makes it absolutely clear that the Pelagian motto of "I ought, therefore I can" is an impossibility for fallen humanity.

But there is also a wider historiographical context in which my reading of C.5 must find a place. The study of reform and Reform in medieval and early modern studies is at this moment in a state of turmoil. Questions long considered answered and distinctions long thought fixed have been reanimated by scholarship which rethinks traditional boundaries and offers counter-narratives where "traditional" ones (notably the progressive story of Protestant or "Whig" historiography) have come to be seen as inadequate. The danger now is that the success of the counter-narratives found in, most notably, James Simpson's *Reform and Cultural Revolution* and Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* has created in effect a new orthodoxy in which the Catholic and the Medieval are valorized as discursively diverse, communitarian, horizontally oriented ideals against which the Protestant and the

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Church," 322–82. For a corrective to Adams and Simpson see Alistair Minnis, *Translations of Authority in Medieval English Literature: Valuing the Vernacular* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), ch. 2; and David Aers, *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland, and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), ch. 4, 203 n. 3, and 217 n. 102. On the relation of Nominalism, semi-Pelagianism, and other "schools of thought" to fourteenth-century theological debates, centered in Oxford, see the clarifying summary by William J. Courtenay, "Theology and Theologians from Ockham to Wyclif," in J. I. Catto and Ralph Evans, ed., *History of the University of Oxford, vol. 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1–34, in which Courtenay explains that for a rising theologian in this environment, adherence to the principles of a particular "school" was less important than making an original contribution to an important debate.

Modern are juxtaposed as monologic, hierarchical, tyrannical, and “fundamentalist” interruptions.<sup>5</sup>

In Simpson’s Reform-versus-Revolution schema, Langland stands out as the hero of the Reformist cause, while Luther—or rather Simpson’s understanding of Luther’s doctrine of *sola fide* as reflected in English Protestants like Tyndale, Frith, and Barnes—stands out among the chief villains. Simpson’s type-casting of his heroes and villains works powerfully as a narrative device, but his case depends on the structural homology he posits between divine grace and earthly political power. I will say more about this homology in a moment. But if, as I believe, it is based on a mistaken understanding of trinitarian theology, then the case he makes is seriously undermined. In what follows, I display prominent strands of Luther’s sixteenth-century theology of the will which are already fully engaged with in Langland’s fourteenth-century dialectical poem. It is not my aim to construct here a “Lutheran

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<sup>5</sup> See Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*; Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2007); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992). Duffy’s preface to his second edition (2005) contains an unusually frank account of what he perceived as a personal loss “of what had seemed immemorial” in the reforms of Vatican II – thus acknowledging an autobiographical source for the analogous narrative of loss he so powerfully depicts in *Stripping of the Altars* (xiv). Wittig, in “Culture Wars,” also registers an autobiographical investment in his reading of Langland and C.5 in particular. Recalling Morton Bloomfield’s famous characterization of *Piers Plowman* as a commentary on a lost book, Wittig suggests that for him, Langland’s lost book is the whole teaching of pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism, “the shared body of basic Christian moral theology” (184). Simpson opens *Burning to Read* with his own Protestant version of the confessional-professional *apologia*, recalling his schoolboy shock on being taught that “Luther believed that works were utterly useless” (1). I cite these examples not to ridicule them but to point to the larger intellectual issue at stake in these confessional moments, an issue I cannot pursue here at length. Each of these scholarly narratives has a deep-seated analogical historiography in its underlying code; in each the transition from medieval to modern is also analogized either to the author’s contemporary political scene or to his own religious formation, or to both. The consequences of these analogizing structures need careful consideration and open discussion at a field-wide level.

Langland.”<sup>6</sup> Rather, by showing areas of overlap between these two writers in their treatment of the theological grammar of serve and deserve, I hope to make better sense of their real differences on what follows from that grammar at the level of human moral agency. Here Luther can help us grasp the distinctiveness of Langland’s charity-centered understanding of service (to neighbor, to earthly masters, and to God). In Langland’s hands, the word “servyse” becomes synonymous with “kyndenesse.”<sup>7</sup>

Of course I am not alone in wanting to recognize continuities in theological thinking across the Reformation divide.<sup>8</sup> A recent article by Debora Shuger titled “The Reformation of Penance,” written largely in response to Simpson, sets out to show that the “Reformation neither made virtue irrelevant to salvation nor divorced

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<sup>6</sup> Britton J. Harwood in *Piers Plowman and the Problem of Belief* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) comes perhaps as close as any scholar has come to adopting this position, with both positive and negative results for his reading of Langland. See Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, 203 n. 3 and 205 n. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Reading C.5 as refracted through a Lutheran theology of the Will can also be seen to complicate another grand narrative that goes well beyond Luther and into the seventeenth century. The story I have in mind is what Charles Taylor has called “the Affirmation of Ordinary Life,” in which “service” under a Protestant reading becomes detached from its narrow, Catholic, renunciative-special-vocation connotations and comes to stand in for the idea that the Christian subject “serves” all the time, in all of his most humble everyday activities. See my discussion of Taylor alongside Julian of Norwich and seventeenth-century English recusant communities in chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> My criticisms of James Simpson and Debora Shuger in what follows here must be prefaced by a general statement of admiration for their work and acknowledgement of the crucially important questions they have posed to scholars working on both sides of the Reformation divide. Diachronicity is difficult. My attempt here, writing as a scholar of Middle English literature, to put Luther’s sixteenth-century theological writings into conversation with Langland and Julian of Norwich, is a testament to that difficulty. Despite our disagreements, I share with these scholars a commitment to this kind of diachronic inquiry, which seems to me essential to the ongoing relevance of humanistic fields in the contemporary academy.

interior repentance from material restitution.”<sup>9</sup> For Shuger, the medieval penitential practice of “material restitution”—that is, making good on sins committed against your neighbor before seeking absolution from a priest—was retained by the Reformers in an extra-penitential context and valorized as exactly the kind of thing Christians engaged in the world and in community with fellow Christians *ought* to be doing. This is opposed to “penal satisfaction” which she characterizes as a strongly juridical, tit-for-tat system of debts and payments. She finds real-world consequences for this delegitimation of penance in early modern chancery courts in England, with their emphasis on judgement *ad personam*, including all the messy human details that that entailed, rather than judgements rendered *ad litteram* in accordance with the letter of the law. But Shuger herself admits there is not enough evidence of medieval legal reasoning to make this argument stick.

Turning to *Piers Plowman* and its centrality in Simpson’s pro-penitential, anti-revolutionary narrative, Shuger suggests that this idea of making it right with your neighbor before making it right with God is an exceptional part of Langland’s theology, running against the grain of ordinary medieval penitential practice (569). But was Langland exceptional in his valorization of restitution (paying back your neighbor) over satisfaction (paying back God)? For Langland, as for Aquinas (whose “more subtle” understanding of penance is glossed over by Shuger in a footnote, preferring the rigid tit-for-tat model of William Allen’s 1565 manual *Defense of*

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<sup>9</sup> Shuger, “The Reformation of Penance,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 71.4 (2008): 557–71, at 571. I give page numbers parenthetically in the text hereafter.

*Purgatory*), this distinction would not have made sense.<sup>10</sup> Langland's theology, and the language he uses to articulate it, are shaped by a radically christocentric and kenotic understanding of the incarnation, one which makes any distinction between serving God and serving your neighbor unintelligible.

Finally, the disagreement between Simpson and Shuger boils down to differing interpretations of Langland's treatment of his catchphrase "redde quod debes"—pay what you owe. On Shuger's reading, the truly medieval understanding of penance was one in which "penal satisfaction"—payment of debt to God, the wages of sin—dominated any consideration of the debt owed to the actual human victims of sin (neighbor, wife, husband, child). According to Shuger, Langland may have recognized restitution as the true meaning of "redde quod debes." But most medievals, she claims, did not see it this way. The early reformers on the other hand, like Melanchthon and Tyndale, saw it very quickly and took the reasonable and humane step of enshrining "restitution" at the center of their teachings on sin and forgiveness. "Protestantism rejected penal satisfaction [but] retained, largely

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<sup>10</sup> Shuger, *ibid.*, 559 n. 6, "It seems only fair to point out that Aquinas's doctrine of purgatory is considerably more ethically nuanced than Allen's, since he understands *satisfactio* as voluntarily undertaken out of love of justice – and not merely endured to pay off debt" (citing *Summa Theol.* 3.90.2). It is nevertheless bizarre that Shuger insists on holding up Allen's stridently counter-Reformation text *Defense of Purgatory* as being representative of the main stream of medieval penitential theology and practice. This is the same William Allen, who, in Eamon Duffy's words, had "wholeheartedly endorsed the uncompromising religious vision of Marian Catholicism, including the persecution of protestants" and whose founding of the English College at Douai was envisioned as "a forcing ground for missionary storm troopers in the fight against Elizabethan protestantism" ("William Allen," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/391>; retrieved 5 November 2009). By contrast, practically nowhere in fourteenth or fifteenth century vernacular theology in English—not even in the *Prick of Conscience* (!)— can one find a measure-for-measure model of penance as inflexible as Allen's.



unchanged, the medieval teaching on restitution. It was the only external part of penance that did carry over” (569). James Simpson, though, in denigrating Protestantism’s “jettisoning of the medieval penitential system,” has apparently made a mistake. He has “confused two different parts of penance” (569).

Shuger’s impulse to question Simpson’s revisionary picture of Reformation theology as being uninterested in works (what Simpson approvingly calls “the accretions of the individual life”) is in some respects well-founded. For Simpson, just as the God of the Reformation is an anthropomorphized tyrant who brooks no dissent, so the movement’s political prime mover, King Henry VIII, is a tyrannical man-giant whose personal destructiveness is matched only by his zeal for (literally) smashing up cherished institutions. This conjunction is the analogical engine that drives Simpson’s thesis, and with it his reading of *Piers Plowman*, now viewed retrospectively as a glowing egalitarian counter-narrative to the Reformation “revolution” of disruptive divine and monarchical power. As he puts it in the opening paragraph of his chapter “Edifying the Church,” (a chapter organized as a Langlandian critique of the Henrician church):

Despite its superficially demotic tone and its laudable promotion of the vernacular, [Protestant] theology centralizes grace in the hands of God, and consequently demolishes institutional and historical stabilities. Centralization and demolition of this kind find striking parallels in the cultural centralizations and literal demolitions of Henrician England.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 322.

In Simpson's hands, the homology between grace and political power which he sees as central to the transition from medieval "reform" to Tudor "revolution" becomes a controlling metaphor of extraordinary explanatory force. He organizes his archive of textual evidence according to the two sides of the homology: political narratives of authoritarian intervention are matched with literary texts produced in the service of narrow polemical or propagandistic aims. It works in his favor when such pairings cut across heterodox/orthodox and Catholic/Protestant battle lines: so both Wycliffites and their attackers are writing within the "revolutionary" mode, as are both Thomas More (at his worst) and his Lutheran enemies. But it seems to me that at the center of this structuring homology there is an odd kind of theological mistake. I do not mean an "error" in the sense of my accusing Simpson of choosing the wrong side of an old debate about grace and works, but something more fundamental (to use a word in which he has a stake). The issue is crystallized in the words quoted above, in his claim that "this [Protestant] theology centralizes grace in the hands of God." One has to ask a simple question that he does not appear to have considered. Where else could grace be centralized? In what sense could it ever have been outside or independent of the hands of God? On both sides of the Reformation divide, grace itself is understood as being uncreated. It has a supernatural origin and a supernatural end, regardless of how differing theological systems may have historically understood its diffusion into human institutions and the diverse forms of creaturely participation in it. So when Simpson goes on to say that this centralized grace "consequently demolishes institutional and historical stabilities," he is in a sense exactly right. Grace is certainly destabilizing, but at an ontological

level—it is not literally destructive of buildings, persons, or institutions. Grace does not demolish buildings, people do. Does Simpson mean then that Langland’s model of grace, by contrast, works to underwrite dominant “institutional and historical stabilities”? This would suggest a counter-intuitive reading of some key passages in Langland’s poem, among them the description in C passus 21 of the gifts of the Holy Spirit—“Cristes messenger ... cometh from the grete god, Grace is his name”—in which the members of the Christian community in all their diversity of gifts and talents assent to Grace’s teaching that “none lacke othere bute loueth as bretherne / And he that moest maistries can, be myldest of berynge” (C.21.207–8; 21.254–55). Langland’s personified conflation of Grace and Holy Spirit, who together “come from the great God,” nicely shows the extent to which the poet’s theological imagination is saturated with trinity. Langland cannot think about God without thinking about Christ and Holy Spirit. *He saw three and worshipped one [Tres vidit et unum adoravit]*.<sup>12</sup> Insofar as Grace is diversified and diffused here, as Simpson would have it, rather than centralized, it is nevertheless still “centralized in the hands of God.” As Langland has his Samaritan explain later:

For God that al bygan in bigynnyng of the worlde  
 Ferde furst as a fuste [fist], and yut is, as Y leue,  
*Mundum pugillo continens,*  
 [Holding the world enclosed in his fist]  
 As a fuste with a fynger yfolde togyderes  
 Til hym likede and luste to vnlose that finger  
 And profered hit forth as with the paume to what place hit sholde.  
 (C.19.113–17)

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<sup>12</sup> Verse from an antiphon quoted by Langland at C.18.241a, and “elsewhere widely quoted as an ocular proof of the Trinity.” See Pearsall’s note to this line, 306n241a.

But this is Langland talking, the hero of Simpson's narrative of pre-revolutionary "reform." What of the Reformer himself? Wouldn't Luther agree that "grace is centralized in the hands of God"? He would—but, like Langland, only in the sense that "grace" and "God" are unintelligible outside of a fundamentally incarnational and trinitarian framework. Even in *De servo arbitrio*, Luther's most straightforwardly acerbic, systematic, and arguably least christological exposition of the Reformation position on grace and salvation—he can write (against Erasmus's suggestion that some parts of scripture are recondite) that

I certainly grant that many *passages* in the Scriptures are obscure and hard to elucidate, but that is due, not to the exalted nature of their subject, but to our own linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it does not in any way prevent our knowing all the *contents* of Scripture. For what solemn truth can the Scriptures still be concealing, now that the seals are broken, the stone rolled away from the door of the tomb, and that greatest of all mysteries brought to light—that Christ, God's Son, became man, that God is Three in One, that Christ suffered for us, and will reign forever? Are not these things known, and sung in our streets? Take Christ from the Scriptures—and what more will you find in them?<sup>13</sup>

What begins as a statement of biblical hermeneutics ends up as a catalogue of doctrinal affirmations of the Christian mysteries, beginning with resurrection and moving through incarnation, trinity, passion, and glory. If there is a centralizing force at work here for Luther, then it is rather a centralization in and around the person of Christ, who is also, like the human nature he assumes, "in the hands of God."

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<sup>13</sup> *The Bondage of the Will*, 71.

In his account of “Lutheran” reading practices in *Burning to Read*, Simpson chooses this same quotation from *De servo arbitrio* to underscore his central contention that Luther’s understanding of scripture “is driven both by his commitment to the literal sense, and by his determinist theology.”<sup>14</sup> But his quotation of the passage tellingly skips over the words that provide for Luther the all-important reference points for *any* interpretation of scripture, literal or otherwise, namely the mysteries “that Christ, God’s Son, became man, that God is Three in One, that Christ suffered for us, and will reign forever.” Simpson simply elides this part of the passage, and elsewhere makes no mention of Luther’s exegetical commitment, not to the “plain literal sense” (110), but to a christological *sensus principalis* in which “all four interpretations of Scripture come together to one magnificent stream,” and “All of these are Christ at the same time.”<sup>15</sup> Commenting on Psalm 4, Luther says

Christ is the Head of all saints, the Fountain of all, the Source of all rivers, of whom all partake ... From this it follows that “in the roll” (that is, *in the chief sense*) “of the book,” that is, of the entire Scripture and especially of the Psalms, “it is written concerning Him.” And as all His saints flow from Him like rivers, so Scripture, being similarly constituted and thus representing Him with His saints, speaks of Him in the sense of the first source. Then it distributes the same sense to

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<sup>14</sup> *Burning to Read*, 101; elsewhere the insistence is on “the limited Lutheran account of the literal sense” (112); or “In the Lutheran moment of great polemical tension, however, it was necessary to focus insistently on the literal sense in a more restricted, literal way” (119). The discussion of this passage from *De servo arbitrio* is on 110. From here forward I put page numbers from this book in parentheses in my text.

<sup>15</sup> Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms, I: Psalms 1–75*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 10 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1974), quotations at xii, 52, 312. Cited from now on as *LW* plus volume and page numbers.

the rivers (that is, individual explanations), speaking the same words concerning the saints by way of participation. For if they participate with Him in grace and inherit all things from Him, then also the words of Scripture which speaks of Christ participate with Him in a similar way and inherit the same words of praise and description from Him and with Him and in Him, “who is blessed.” (*LW* 10:52).<sup>16</sup>

The image is indeed one of “centralizing” in the sense that the rivers of scriptural language flow together, allowing human communities (“saints”) to more fully participate in the redeeming work represented by those waters (the literal and figurative senses tied together sacramentally, in baptism). Is this the work of an exegete for whom “a theologically transcendent God always exerts pressure on the meaning of words”? (*Burning*, 130). Does this thoroughly christologically oriented reading of the Old Testament and the kinds of participation it makes available to its readers in the sixteenth century actually contribute to “the fierce Lutheran assertion of a God wholly unconstrained by human justice or human convention”? (130) Simpson’s language here begins to sound a lot like the old Freudian *imago* theory blaming Luther’s authoritarian daddy for all that has gone wrong in the world since. W. H. Auden captured the gist of it in “September 1, 1939” when he wrote

Accurate scholarship can  
Unearth the whole offence

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<sup>16</sup> I am aware that Luther is writing here in 1514, several years before his Reformation “breakthrough,” and that his more mature writings may align his reading practice more closely with Simpson’s version. But Luther scholars do not agree on the precise moment of “breakthrough” nor on whether there was such a moment, as opposed to a more gradual process of change between the years 1513 and 1520. Furthermore, the so-called “breakthrough” moment is assigned not to a change in Luther’s overall exegetical practice, including the christological *sensus principalis* which remained in place afterwards, but to his new understanding of the doctrine of justification based on Romans 1:17. See Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 85–87.

From Luther until now  
That has driven a culture mad,  
Find what occurred at Linz,  
What huge imago made  
A psychopathic god.<sup>17</sup>

In his figure of a “God wholly unconstrained” exercising absolute control over the “plain literal sense” of scripture, Simpson’s analysis of Lutheran reading practices in *Burning to Read* dovetails impressively with the reform-versus-revolution schema of his *Oxford Literary History*. But in order for Simpson’s structuring homology of disruptive divine grace and centralized political power to work as he intends, he has to accuse “Protestant theology” of breaking apart the trinity. Some versions of Protestant theology may well do just that; but he cannot hang this accusation around the neck of Martin Luther. Luther will not wear it.

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Back on the streets of London, in Cornhill, in the 1380s. It is harvest time, late August or September, and it is hot. The speaking “I” of Langland’s poem, the poet’s avatar, whose name happens to be Will, describes himself as “romyng in

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<sup>17</sup> W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1979), 86. Historical scholarship now casts serious doubt over the Father=God theory of Luther’s theological development, a theory made popular by Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958). See Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 29: “The thesis of psychoanalysis that Luther suffered under his father’s domination, and that his own image of God was determined by his father figure, cannot be documented from the sources ... His later inner conflicts (*Anfechtungen*) cannot be interpreted on the basis of his relation to his father.” But psychoanalysis by its nature is not susceptible to correction on the basis of historical evidence or the lack of it.

remembraunce” through this urban landscape when he is stopped and questioned by two figures called Reason and Conscience. Reason jumps in first:

‘Can thow seruen,’ he sayde, ‘or syngen in a churche’[?]

*Can you serve?, he said.* Taken at its most literal level, the question means simply, “Are you in clerical orders? Can you help serve at Mass?” But Reason doesn’t stop here. He goes on to list a whole range of forms of service that Will might be able to perform, but that in his apparent state of idleness he appears to be avoiding.

‘Can thow seruen,’ he sayde, ‘or syngen in a churche,  
Or koke for my cokeres or to the cart piche,  
Mowen or mywen or make bond to sheues,  
Repe or been a rype-reue and aryse erly  
Or haue an horn and be hayward and lygge theroute nyhtes  
And kepe my corn in my croft fro pykares and theues?  
Or shap shon or cloth or shep and kyne kepe,  
Heggen or harwen or swyn or gees dryue  
Or eny other kynes craft that to the comune nedeth,  
Hem that bedreden be byleue to fynden?’ (C.5.12–21)

Can you do anything at all, Reason wants to know, that contributes to the common good, or that provides food for those who cannot help themselves?<sup>18</sup>

As we saw in chapter 2, when Langland’s contemporary Julian of Norwich writes of Christ commending her for her “servys ... and namely of [her] youth,” she

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<sup>18</sup> In his new edition of the C-text, Pearsall has made several changes in the presentation of this passage that have repercussions for my argument. The word “seruen” in line 12 now merits its own marginal gloss —“serve (as an acolyte).” And he has restored line 21 to the reading of most C manuscripts, accepting the decision of the Russell-Kane Athlone edition (“Hem that bedreden be...”) rather than retaining the wording of his copy text, with its more general statement about Will’s relations to his social superiors: “That thou betere therby that byleue the fynden.” See Pearsall’s note, 111 n. 21, along with the complexity of the textual variants for this line as presented in George Russell and George Kane, eds., *Piers Plowman: The C Version* (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 287 n. 21.



leaves the specific content of that youthful service deliberately opaque. There is no list of action verbs to tell us what counts as “servyse” for her in this early part of her *Revelation*, from which I quote.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, Langland characteristically gives us a whole catalog of verbs that count as “serving” from Reason’s perspective: *seruen, syngen, koke, piche, mowen, mywen, make, repe, aryse, shap, kepe, heggen, harwen, and dryue*. In this short list of action verbs one can already see Langland pushing the original gloss on “serven” from a narrow clerical and liturgical meaning to an expanded catalogue of very specific forms of agricultural labor, and then even further, towards a general and abstract sense of serving that means “to be of use,” to perform some useful action in the world. The second of these ways of using “serven” points forward in the poem to the introduction of Piers the Plowman as the servant of Truth (C.7.182–204; see chapter 1). A very similar catalog of agricultural serving verbs appears in that context, and likewise is pushed by the poet into an allegorical register that the folk witnessing it (including Will) are not yet ready to accept. The third and final sense is also prominently attested elsewhere in the poem, namely in Will’s first interaction with the figure of *Liberum Arbitrium* [Free Choice], to whom Langland’s Will puts his own form of the same question Reason is now asking him: “Whareof serve Ye ... sire *Liberum Arbitrium*?” (C.16.172). But back in C.5, in the final clause encapsulating this movement towards the abstract and non-transactive sense of *serven* (taking no grammatical direct object), Langland tellingly has Reason

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<sup>19</sup> *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: “A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman” and “A Revelation of Love,”* ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006), 173. Page numbers to this edition given in the text hereafter.

leave out the governing verb altogether. Splicing the two ends of Reason's long question together—a move made grammatically feasible by the passage's hammering repetition of disjunctive "or" clauses—it is possible to compress the interrogatory force of the whole ten lines into this: "Can thow serven ... Or \_\_\_\_ eny other kynes craft that to the comune nedeth"? Can you (perform/do/enact) any kind of work that is needful to your community? Read in this way, the blanked-out verb of serving is not only governed by the verb in the opening question "Can you serve?" (disjointed, as it were, from its literal sense of "as an acolyte" by that little word "or"), but it also comes to stand, in its yearning blankness, for a stripped down sense of the Will as naked human agency, the *servum arbitrium*, bound to serve but unsure of its capacity to do so.

Is this then a Lutheran reading of Langland's *apologia*? Not if, with Simpson, we mean by Lutheran an adherence to a strict literal sense whose ultimate referent is an uncompromising and absolutist God the Father. But in at least two other important ways, yes, placing this passage alongside certain texts from Luther can reveal aspects of what Langland accomplishes here. First, as I have already suggested, the stark and fiercely anti-Pelagian version of the human will described in Luther's *De servo arbitrio* is one element of Langland's meaning here—mediated to him not through Luther, obviously, but very much available to a late fourteenth-century reader through Augustine, Bradwardine, and Wyclif, among others.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> By grouping these names together, I do not mean to smoothe over their serious theological differences. The point is that what looks in retrospect like a "Lutheran" stance on will and agency need not have waited for Luther to articulate it; it was already present in the remarkably diverse

Secondly, the model of christological exegesis so eloquently figured by Luther in his early Psalms lectures—as four streams merging into one—can likewise stand parallel to Langland’s own allegorical method in the C.5 *apologia*. This is especially apparent, I suggest, in the way the poet structures the episode to draw on at least three competing uses of the verb *serven* available to him in Middle English (the literal senses of liturgical and agricultural service, the moral sense of instrumental usefulness, and the theological sense of the *servum arbitrium*)—three streams coming together—to provide the hydraulic power driving the allegorical engine of the *apologia*.

In his 1949 summary of the “biographical material” in *Piers Plowman* and its relation to the meaning of the C.5 *apologia*, Talbot Donaldson sketched out for Langland scholarship the difficulty of drawing any conclusions from the first lines of the passage, and perhaps especially from Reason’s opening question—a difficulty as yet unsurmounted, despite the uncovering of new evidence related to Langland’s clerical status.<sup>21</sup> He writes:

In the dialogue between Reason and the poet in the C-text, the former asks him whether he can serve or sing in a church. This question is the first in a whole series, until the completion of which Langland has no chance to get a word in. When he does reply, he does so in a half-serious, half-jocular, and altogether ambiguous way. Furthermore, his

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landscape of later medieval Catholic theology. For Luther’s mention of Wyclif, see *Bondage*, 109. He speaks of his debt to Augustine in too many places to enumerate. On Thomas Bradwardine’s (fourteenth-century) anti-Pelagian version of will and human agency, see most recently David Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, chapter 3.

<sup>21</sup> See George Kane’s article on Langland for the *Oxford DNB*, relating some details of the records of what could be Langland’s taking of the first tonsure, discovered by Lister Matheson in the 1990s (available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16021>; accessed 5 Nov 2009).

speech is so cast that we cannot tell whether he is answering all Reason's questions, or only the last.<sup>22</sup>

Or, I want to add, is he answering only the first — Can you serve?—which seems to me to govern the rest. As Donaldson suggests, Will's reply makes it possible to read it in more than one way:

'Sertes,' Y sayde, 'and so me god helpe,  
Y am to wayke to worche with sykel or with sythe  
And to long, lef me, lowe to stoupe,  
To wurche as a werkeman eny while to duyren.' (C.5.22–25)

The opening line of the reply is broken syntactically into three units:

Sertes / *Y sayde* / and so me god helpe,

making it exactly parallel with the construction of Reason's opening question ten lines back:

Can thow serven / *he sayde* / or syngen in a church ...

In both cases the last part of the line points forward to an itemization of acceptable crafts (or ... or ... or) or to Will's excuses for not being able to perform them (too weak, too long, etc.). But, taken together, the parallel syntax in the first two parts of these paired lines has the effect of creating an auditory bracket that both isolates and links up the short form of the answer, "Sertes!", with the short form of the question, "Can you serve?"

So when Will pipes up in reply to Reason's queries and says "Sertes!"—Indeed!—he is simultaneously avoiding the questions about the specific form of life that counts as serving for him, and insisting, with gusto, that he *can serve*—that he is

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<sup>22</sup> Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The C-text and Its Poet*, 206.

of use, that he can and does contribute in a real way to the collective good of his community. And given that Will is not only a figure for the flesh-and-blood poet as he moves through the world of his poetic creation, but is also a walking talking allegory for the faculty of the human soul called *the will*, the principle of voluntary action, we can also see from this short passage that *serving* for Langland can carry a powerful metaphysical sense of acting willfully in the anticipation of some reaction, some reward. The reward side of this linguistic equation also carries a verbal designation. It is called “deserving.” Serving and deserving. Serve and deserve. We have seen this rhyme before. In Middle English, one doesn’t serve in a vacuum; rather, one serves *somebody* in expectation of deserving *something* in return. How one does the grammar, so to speak, between serving and deserving, is for the men and women of Langland’s England a very grave concern.<sup>23</sup>

Moving further into the exchange between Will and Reason, Langland now brings the language of *deserving* explicitly into play. Will has insisted that he can serve, but not according to the limits imposed by Reason’s catalog. Reason pushes deeper. Are you rich? he asks, “hastow londes to lyue by”? If not, then it seems you are a time-waster and a beggar, and this is no way to live, this is “lollarne [idle] lyf, that lytel is preyed / There ryhtfulnesse rewardeth ryht as men *deserveth*” (C.5.26–32).

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<sup>23</sup> As groundwork preliminary to C.5, Langland explores the grammar of serve and deserve explicitly and at length in the Westminster debate between Lady Meed and Conscience in C passus 3.264–339, culminating in Conscience’s distinction between “mede” and “mercede” as payment before and after services rendered, respectively. Service vocabulary is lexically prominent throughout the passage, including five instances of “serve” or “deserve” word-forms in line-ending positions.

Where is this place where “righteousness rewards men just as they deserve”? Is it England? Does Reason describe the status quo as he finds it in London in the 1380s? Or is Will’s apparent idleness a symptom of a real historical situation that is here being contrasted to an imaginary space where righteousness and reward are precisely matched? A place where *serve* and *deserve* really do rhyme?

Readers familiar with *Piers Plowman* scholarship will hear in this set of questions an echo of the dominant voice in C.5 interpretation over the past decade plus. Articulated most forcefully by Anne Middleton in her 1997 essay “Acts of Vagrancy,” this historically oriented approach to Langland’s *apologia* has striven to nail down as precisely as possible the real legal, social, political, and economic conditions underlying the irresistible passion of Will’s language.<sup>24</sup> The central plank of Middleton’s argument is, as she puts it, that the C.5 *apologia* “takes its premises and development as a narrative event from the provisions of the second Statute of Laborers—more accurately and centrally a statute concerning vagrancy—enacted by the Cambridge Parliament of September 1388.” “The statute,” she continues

supplies a narrative matrix and occasion upon which the poet reframes, at a complex new discursive juncture, several of the disparate questions of social ethics and spiritual value surrounding the receipt of alms, the meaning of labor, the practice of begging, and

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<sup>24</sup> Middleton, “Acts of Vagrancy: The C Version ‘Autobiography’ and the Statute of 1388,” ch. 5 in Justice and Kerby-Fulton, eds., *Written Work*, 208–317. I take it as given that there is a passionate remainder left in Will’s speech after all such scholarly enquiries conclude, and that this is what brings Langland’s readers back to the passage. Middleton’s influence on the reading of this passage since 1997 has been such that every single one of the scholars cited after her in my bibliographical note above (note 2) can be shown to either accept, reject, or conspicuously avoid her central premises.

the enterprise of “making” that have arisen throughout the poem in all its forms, and with heightened urgency in the C version.<sup>25</sup>

My own reading is indifferent to the adequacy or inadequacy of Middleton’s claims about the ghostly presence of the Cambridge statutes in or behind Langland’s poem. For it steps back from the frames of social and literary history (without discarding them) far enough to see the ground into which those frames are set, and onto which they each project their own lines of perspective. This ground was, for Langland, a theological ground. My use of Luther as an interlocutor here is designed to bring out just this aspect of Langland’s project—in part through the jarring diachronicity of their shared conversation that cuts across expected divisions. But to say so is not to insist that the theological as a category stands above these other categories (ethical, social, political, and economic) in the *ordinatio* of the Book of Langland. It is rather that any attempt to isolate the personal from the political in this text, or the literary from the liturgical, will come to grief until it recognizes and comes to terms with the theological vocabularies these categories share.

The rhyming pair of *serve* and *deserve*, then, is a shorthand way of representing some of the intersections between these categories. Through this pair a poet like Langland can construe a whole theology of labor, or reversing the terms, a whole economics of salvation. The difficulty comes in trying to work out the grammar that connects the two terms.

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<sup>25</sup> Middleton, “Acts of Vagrancy,” 208.

Thinking once again about my imaginary transferral of the scene of (the) Will's interrogation to early sixteenth-century Wittenberg, the expectation has to be that Luther's hollowed-out version of human volition will radically sever the two sides of the grammatical proposition: you cannot serve, thus *a fortiori* you cannot deserve either. But is this really how Luther talks about the will? Before returning to Langland's playing out of the scene, I will briefly discuss two texts from Luther in which he foregrounds the issues raised by the C.5 *apologia*. One of these texts is from prior to his Reformation "breakthrough," while one comes after.

Luther gave his first lectures on scripture as a young professor at Wittenberg in the two years immediately following his receipt of the doctorate in theology (1513–14). In his preface to the earliest talks on the Psalms he explains that he will proceed according to the traditional fourfold method, with the added proviso that all prophecy should be interpreted as speaking of Jesus Christ. In a previous section we have seen how for Luther the *sensus principalis* of the scriptural text is always Christ. As Bernard Lohse points out, Luther's christological exposition of the Psalms is not new in itself. Here "Luther was following the entire tradition." But "he proceeded with more consistency than the tradition by interpreting christologically not only the statements in the Psalter dealing with majesty but also with humility."<sup>26</sup>

Beginning with the first verses of Psalm 1, Luther is already at work on the theme of the relation of the human will to the law: *But his will is in the law of the*

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<sup>26</sup> Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 51–67, quotations at 53 and 52.



*Lord* [Sed in domini Voluntas eius].<sup>27</sup> He immediately distinguishes those Christians who live under the law in fear from those who do the works of the law “with a cheerful and free will” [hylari et libera voluntate]. “Free will” [libera voluntas] is at this point a useful way of talking, but it is constrained by its relation to the love of Christ which overcomes the law: “For although the Law could restrain the hand through fear of punishment and provoke to works through the hope of good things, it could not, I say, loose toward freedom, nor bind its desires. For this happens only by the bonds of love, which not the Law but Christ has given in His own spirit” (*LW* 10:13). This is because, he adds, “Christ does not want his rule to rest on force and violence, because then it would not stand firm, but He wants to be served willingly and with the heart and the affections” [Christus non vult vi et violentia suum regnum constare, quia tunc non constaret, sed voluntate et ex animo et affectu sibi serviri] (*LW* 10:14; *WA* 3:17).

Commenting on verse 6—“For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish”—Luther returns to the role of the will in performing the works of the law in a remarkable passage that overlaps significantly with aspects of Langland’s C.5 *apologia*. Thinking back to the first two verses of the Psalm, he wonders why, in speaking of “his will” [voluntas eius] being “in the law of the Lord,” the psalmist has not instead said “the delight *and the hand* are in the law of the Lord.” In other words, why hasn’t the psalm paired will with work, delight in

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<sup>27</sup> *LW* 10:13; Latin *WA* 3:17. From now on references to these volumes are given in the text in parentheses, English first, then Latin.

the law with practicing the law? Because after all, “faith without works is dead” (quoting James 2:26). Because, Luther explains, it makes no sense to separate will from works. These are parts of the selfsame organism:

a good tree cannot bear evil fruit, and every good tree bears good fruit (Matt. 7:17–18). Therefore the will, which is the tree, or the root of the good tree, can do nothing but good and produces good fruit in its season. For that reason he then compared man with a planted tree (Ps. 1:3–4), after he had first put down its root, namely, the will. When a man’s will is good, the whole man is good. Thus the tree is good when the root is good. Then indeed it produces good fruit, entirely according to its own kind, and if not always, it does so at least in its season, after the winter has passed over. The winter is the time of the Law and the synagog, while the spring, the loveliest time of the year, is the period of the primitive church, where the Holy Spirit produced the most lovely season with blossoms, fruits, etc. ... The summer is the fullness and progress of the church, in which greater renown was achieved and the truth of the faith was published for all to know. The autumn stands fast and then presses on, the season in which the crops and the grapes are harvested, the time of the Last Judgment. Here the chilling of love begins again. (*LW* 10:25)

This reading of the will’s progress and growth, its fruitfulness, and the harvest of its fruits according to the twin aspects of the individual Christian person and the whole body of the church is traditional, and is in concord with Langland’s allegory of the will in several respects. It first of all brings to the fore the fully eschatological dimension of the “hot harvest” time in which we encounter Langland’s Will in C.5, along with the bodily expression of the will’s work through his “lymes”:

For as Y cam by Consience with Resoun Y mette  
In an hot heruest whenne Y hadde myn hele  
And lymes to labory with and louede wel fare  
And no dede to do but to drynke and to slepe. (6–10)

It likewise brings to mind the lyrical excursus on the incarnation which Langland puts in the mouth of Holy Church in passus 1:

Loue is the plonte of pees, most precious of vertues,  
For heuene holde hit ne myghte, so heuy it semede,  
Til hit hadde of erthe ygoten hitsilue.  
Was neuer lef vppon lynde lyhtere ther-aftur,  
As when hit hadde of the folde flesch and blode taken.

...

And for to knowe hit [Love] kyndly, hit comeseth by myhte,  
And in the herte ther is the hed and the heye welle.

(C.1.148–52; 159–60)<sup>28</sup>

As Luther continues to expound his understanding of the will as the “root of the good tree” he makes it very clear that he does not attribute this power of will to man alone, no matter how blessed the man [beatus vir] may be. The tone of the discussion here is in marked contrast to the stridently polemical mode in which Luther attacks the very core of the idea of “free will” (*arbitrium*, not *voluntas*) in his post-breakthrough text *De seruo arbitrio*. Like Langland’s Holy Church, who in the continuation of the lines just quoted speaks of a power (“myhte”) which comes “of kynde knowynge of herte” (that is, it is natural to humanity) but which also “falleth to the fader that formede vs alle” (C.1.161–62), Luther speaks here of a will which “never is a will, unless it proceeds to words and deeds and becomes incarnate in them (that is, makes its appearance in the physical word and deed).” Will and works are not separable. This is why Luther has no problem quoting from the epistle of

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<sup>28</sup> To this list of parallels another obvious addition is Langland’s Tree of Charity, in particular the imagined intervention of *Libera Voluntas Dei*, the Free Will of God, into the allegory to underscore the inability of human *Liberum arbitrium* to achieve its final end on its own. This intervention makes possible the Incarnation, which the poem then goes on to describe; it doesn’t preempt it (C.18.117–36). See the excellent discussion in Harwood, *Problem of Belief*, 103–13, esp. 112.

James with approbation at this early stage in his career, because “if your own will is perfect,” he writes at the close of this section, “it is the will of the Father, from whom every perfect gift comes down” (26; James 1:17). The idea of “works-righteousness” attributed by Protestant thought to James’s letter is here not problematic so long as one understands that the will cannot perform the good of its own accord. The human person is only itself insofar as it is *of God*, and therefore the human will can only act insofar as it acts *of God*, through the agency of love made incarnate.

From the dual perspectives of the Reform future and the medieval catholic past, then, these passages give a picture of Luther gazing in both directions at the same time. To give a fuller sense of his continuity with medieval exegetical and theological traditions, as well as his departures from those traditions, I want to stay with the 1513 Psalms lectures a bit longer, to consider a passage from the “vocabulary” section which Luther included in the printed psalters he provided his students in this course at Wittenberg. Here, under the rubric of *Will*, Luther both declares his independence from late medieval scholasticism while exulting in his mastery of its technique. “*Will*,” he says, “is here [Psalm 1:1-2] not taken as in the schools, but it denotes a cheerful and spontaneous readiness and willing good pleasure.” Julian of Norwich had talked about the will’s “readiness” in strikingly similar terms. Her parable of a lord and a servant in chapter 51 of *A Revelation of Love* opens with the picture of a servant standing before his lord “reverently, redy to

do his lordes wille.”<sup>29</sup> But despite this readiness of will on the part of the servant, he nevertheless “falleth in a slade, and taketh full great sore. And than he groneth and moneth and walloweth and writheth. But he may not rise nor helpe himselfe by no manner of weye” (275). The servant wills to serve, but he cannot. Will and work have been driven apart by sin, as Julian recognizes when she describes this image as “teching ... in what maner he [the lord] beholdeth us in oure sinne.” But Julian also insists that despite the fact that “this man,” the servant who represents all men, “was hurte in his mighte and made fulle febil,” and despite his having been “turned fro the beholding of his lorde”—despite all this, remarkably, “his wille was kept hole in Gods sight” (279.)

So there is at least a surface-level similarity in the way Julian and Luther write about the human will as beginning from a posture of readiness. But is this where their similarities end? At first sight, Julian’s avowal of the continuing integrity of the servant’s will—despite the damage it has sustained from its fall into the slade—would seem to be at odds with Luther’s later pronouncement of the human will as dead on arrival. And we have already seen from Luther’s explication of the psalm that for him there can be no separation between willing and working, desire and practice, because these are the root-stock and the fruits, respectively, of God’s power working through *humana natura*. It may seem that Julian’s vision of the will’s

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<sup>29</sup> *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: “A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman” and “A Revelation of Love,”* ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006), 273. Page numbers to this edition given in the text hereafter. See my discussion of this parable in chapter 2.

“hole” integrity is far too optimistic for Luther’s taste, that he would find her soft on sin. But it may be that the parabolic form of Julian’s theology here actually conceals the closeness of her position to that of Luther. What I mean is this: in the context of Julian’s parable of the servant, the *will* she speaks of is, in a basic forensic sense, always the servant’s will, always a *servum arbitrium*. She is not making claims about Luther’s great bugbear, “free will” [liberum arbitrium], at all.

As Luther fleshes out the consequences of his early roots-and-fruits understanding of the will [voluntas] of the blessed man in Psalm 1, he turns only momentarily to the sacramental life of the church. Here he makes clear that what is traditionally called the penitential will is an unfree will. The paradoxical power of penance, for Luther, as for Julian, is that the greater the sin, the greater the grace.

This harks back to what Augustine called “sweet service.”<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, what our scholastics theologically call an act of penance, namely, to be displeased with oneself, to hate, condemn, and accuse, to desire to make amends, punish oneself, to castigate oneself and earnestly hate evil and be angry with oneself—Scripture in one word calls this judgment. Therefore as long as we do not condemn, excommunicate, and loathe ourselves before God, so long we do not “rise” and are not justified. There will not be, nor arise in us, the righteousness of God, unless our own righteousness falls and perishes utterly. *We do not rise unless we who are standing badly have first fallen ...* Thus altogether the being, holiness, truth, goodness, life of God, etc., are not in us, unless in the presence of God [*coram Deo*] we first become nothing, profane, lying, evil, dead. Otherwise the righteousness of God would be mocked, and Christ would have died in vain ... For the more sin abounds, the more God’s grace and righteousness abound in us; that is, the less of righteousness we judge

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<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, number 99, trans. Sister Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 18. See my discussion of this passage from Augustine in chapter 1 above.

we have and the more we judge and abhor and detest ourselves, the more abundantly God's grace flows into us. (*LW* 10:33–34)<sup>31</sup>

In responding to Erasmus's 1524 tract, *Diatriba de libero arbitrio*, Luther entered into dispute with a man to whom he owed a great debt: the humanist scholar's editions of Jerome and Augustine had already proved invaluable to Luther in building his case against the "skeptics and academics" with support from the fathers of the church. But the dispute about *liberum arbitrium*, while not new in itself, was now taken up by Luther with renewed vigor because it was so closely bound up with "the starting point of Reformation theology, with the radical view of sin and bondage of the human will in respect of grace."<sup>32</sup> In the *Diatriba* Erasmus had given a very succinct definition of *liberum arbitrium*: "By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them." [*liberum arbitrium hoc loco sentimus vim humanae voluntatis, qua se possit homo applicare ad ea, quae perducunt ad aeternam salutem, aut ab iisdem avertere.*]<sup>33</sup>

When Luther responded with *De servo arbitrio* ("On the Bondage of the Will") in the autumn of 1525, he chose his title carefully. As Bernard Lohse explains:

Only once had Augustine spoken of the "servum arbitrium" (bound will). By using this title Luther intended to make clear that he

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<sup>31</sup> Compare Langland's use of the proverbial text "the righteous man falls seven times a day," spoken by Will but ill-chosen in context, at C.10.21.

<sup>32</sup> Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 160, along with the full discussion on Luther's dispute with Erasmus, 160–68.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 161 and note 5.

understood himself as defender of the Augustinian doctrine of sin and grace against Pelagians old and new. With the quotation from Augustine he was appealing to the tradition of the church fathers.<sup>34</sup>

In his late writings against the Pelagians, Augustine used progressively more and more forceful formulations to express his conviction that “man was not truly free ... and was actually a slave of sin.”<sup>35</sup> Accused by the Pelagians of denying human free will altogether (which he did not), Augustine first offered a distinction between the “captive free will” [*liberum arbitrium captivatum*], which after the fall is able only to sin, and the “liberated free will” [*liberum arbitrium liberatum*], which is able to do what is truly good or just *only* when it is aided by divine grace and thereby “freed.” But this was still too subtle a distinction to convince his opponents that he did not deny humanity its “natural freedom to choose between alternatives.” So in the *Contra Iulianum* of 421 Augustine changed his wording again, and said instead that man’s free will “is so powerless for willing that which is truly good that it is not simply a *liberum arbitrium captivatum* ... but a *servum arbitrium* [enslaved will].”<sup>36</sup>

Did Luther, in deliberately choosing the more radical Augustinian formulation of the *servum arbitrium* as the basis for his title, mean to assert that man’s natural freedom to choose the good was completely annihilated by original sin? The answer is no. As we have already seen, Erasmus had specifically linked his

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>35</sup> McSorley, *Was Luther Right?*, 90.

<sup>36</sup> McSorley, *ibid.*, 91, quoting from *Contra Iulianum* 2.8.23: “et non libero, vel potius servo proprie voluntatis arbitrio.”



concept of *liberum arbitrium* with the power to “apply oneself” in the direction of salvation. But Luther would not let him get away with this, despite all Erasmus’s protestations that he was “asserting” nothing about this difficult issue of the will, merely presenting the sheer variety of views found in scripture and in the tradition.<sup>37</sup> To this Luther replied “Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity.”<sup>38</sup>

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What words of assertion concerning the will’s power to apply itself does Langland put in the mouth of his narrator, called Will? I have suggested that in pairing *serven* with *deserven* in the context of Reason’s interrogation, Langland has struck his spade into the hard ground of theological controversy about free will, grace, and salvation. In conjuring up the idea of a space where “ryhtfulnesse rewardeth ryht as men deserueth” (C.5.32), Reason has brought that controversy home to Langland’s London, merging political, ecclesial, and moral discourses into a single stream. The theological economy which governs this merged space, in Reason’s authoritative view, is an economy of serving and deserving in which human action is rewarded or punished according to a strictly reciprocal model. This model underwrites the “imperial” logic identified by Anne Middleton in her analysis of the 1388 vagrancy petitions, and, for her, both structures and limits the utterances available to the

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<sup>37</sup> Lohse, 162, 164

<sup>38</sup> *De servo arbitrio*, 67. For a sympathetic reading of Erasmus on grace and free will as concomitant aspects of what she terms “mimetic virtue,” see Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), ch. 4.

poet's juridical self as he mounts his self-defense in the face of Reason, the king's chancellor, and Conscience, the king's justice.<sup>39</sup> So when Will avoids Reason's queries about his form of service by claiming to be "to wayke to worche" [too weak to work], she understands his "ridiculous" reply as "hilariously" eliding the true reference of Will's work—the poem itself, the "work" of vernacular making—over which the 1388 statutes exert no authority, but which Will (and Langland) nevertheless takes this opportunity to defend. "The reference of Will's reply," Middleton argues, "is pointedly and wryly *in excess of the occasion*, speaking around the boundaries of the fictive prosecution to another kind of performative occasion and mode."<sup>40</sup>

But by insisting on a literal-historical sense of the "occasion" as grounded in the legal discourse of labor regulation, it may be that Middleton has reversed the direction of the allegory. Might it not be more accurate to say that the "occasion" is rather in excess of Will's reply, and that his self-revision as the passage progresses to its close—with Will now on his knees in confession, now on his way "to the

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<sup>39</sup> Reason and Conscience are assigned these roles at the end of the previous passus, C.4.180–90.

<sup>40</sup> Middleton, "Acts of Vagrancy," 249, my emphasis. See also Lynn Staley's discussion of this passage in terms of the "imperial command whereby national order and the goods of common profit are the rewards of worthy labor," *Languages of Power*, 323. Very relevant here too are Andrew Cole's comments in *Literature and Heresy*, 68: "Langland does not need a 'strategic displacement'" — Middleton's words — "or substitution to speak about the conjunction of material and spiritual forms of labor"; and on Will's "lollard" identity, 159: "Will 'wears' the 'lollard' identity as if he were literally trying on clothes ... and he does this as a way to express his own will and desire to be a provider of spiritual services, performing a legitimate form of spiritual work not accounted for by the labor statutes or ecclesiastical regulations of the late 1380s."

kyrke" (5.105)—is a marker of his recognition that he has misjudged the real stakes of the "occasion"?

Picking up where we left off, Reason continues to push Will to describe the conditions of his incapacity to work:

Or thow art broke, so may be, in body or in membre  
Or ymaymed thorw som myshap, whereby thow myhte be excused?  
(C.5.33–34)

*Are you broken*, he asks. If we understand the occasion of C.5 in the "Lutheran" sense of the human will exposed *coram Deo*, the contexts of which I have labored to outline above, then there is nothing here to prevent me from reading this "myshap" exactly as Luther might have done: as a figure for sin, as an alienation from God giving rise to the need for forgiveness, to "be excused." Moreover, Julian's servant in the ditch now becomes a revealing mirror for Langland's Will, the servant who "falleth in a slade, and taketh full great sore. And than he groneth and moneth and walloweth and writheth. But he may not rise nor helpe himselfe by no manner of weye."<sup>41</sup> As Julian continues to outline her vision of this parallel occasion, an "occasion" now revealed in its radical etymological sense of a fall (from *occidere*), she describes the servant as suffering from "sevene gret paines":

The furst was the sore brosing that he toke in his falling, which was to him felable paine. The second was the hevinesse of his body. The thirde was febilnesse that foloweth of theyse two. The fourth was that he was blinded in his reson and stoned in his minde so ferforth that almost he had forgeten his owne love. The fifth was that he might not rise. The sixth was paine most mervelous to me, and that was that he

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<sup>41</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Writings*, 275.

leye alone. I loked alle about and behelde, and ferre ne nere, he hye ne lowe, I saw to him no helpe. The seventh was that the place which he ley in was a lang, harde, and grevous. (275)

Given Middleton's investment in the idea of Langland's authorship and his self-referential marking in the form of his name, "long ... wille," "long ... londe," and so on, it should interest her to find the site of the servant's fall described also as a "lang" land.<sup>42</sup> More important for my purposes is the fourth pain, describing the servant as so badly "blinded in his reson" that "almost he had forgeten his owne love." Such language brings to mind another Langlandian parallel, one that also bears directly on my interpretation of C.5. Early in his conversation with Holy Church in passus 1, Langland's Will has to be reminded of the bonds of love that tie him to his interlocutor. He has utterly forgotten her.

Thenne hadde Y wonder in my wit what woman [s]he were  
That such wyse wordes of holy writ shewed,  
And halsede here on the hey name or she thennes wente  
What she were wytterly that wissede me so and tauhte.  
    'Holy Church Y am,' quod she, 'thou oughtest me to knowe;  
Y undirfenge the formeste and fre man the made.  
Thow broughtest me borewes my bidding to fulfille,  
To leue on me and loue me al thy lyf-tyme.' (C.1.68-75)

This passage brings together with extraordinary economy several of the strands I have been following in my readings of *Piers Plowman* alongside Luther and Julian of Norwich. Here are the "words of holy writ," the senses of scripture, along with the sacramental waters of baptism administered by the church and socially cemented

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<sup>42</sup> The full case establishing Langland's signatorial practice is found in Middleton's essay, "William Langland's 'Kynde Name': Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 15-82.

by the *borewes* (pledges) of the godparents. These are bound linguistically by the metaphor of “making free” and its built-in obverse, the servitude to death from which the baptizand emerges, as it were, a “fre man,” *liberum arbitrium liberatum*.<sup>43</sup>

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I have presented texts from Luther on both sides, chronologically, of what Simpson calls “the Lutheran moment” and which he characterizes as the watershed of the liberal tradition’s grounding of itself in a radical act of conscience, a defiant break with “the power and threat” of an “institution with the instruments of violent repression at its service.”<sup>44</sup> The success of this Lutheran moment, moreover, which “extremely powerful traditions of Western historiography continue to see ... as fundamentally positive and inspiring” was due in large part to its reading practices, which are marked by “a deep commitment to the liberties and heroism of individual conscience” (23). There are two major claims here that sit uncomfortably with my

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<sup>43</sup> Much of the work of tying all this together is done by the English verb Langland chooses to render the baptism event: *underfongen*. The word means primarily “to lay hold of, grasp, seize” and is probably related etymologically to the root of *finger*. Langland uses it more than once in the context of baptism (see C.12.53), and also in two more general senses of “to receive, take in” and “to support or hold up.” Thinking again of Simpson’s image of “grace centralized in the hands of God,” Langland’s use of *underfongen* makes it very hard to assimilate the work of God’s hands [*pugillo mundum continens*] to any centripetal scaling-up of state power. The word also appears, tellingly, in some Middle English renderings of Ephesians 6:8, where the language of bound service is related directly to the question of grace and works. See Anna Paues, *A Fourteenth Century English Biblical Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 75: “knowing that what good deed any man do, he schal underfongen it of God, whether he be a serfaunt or a free man,” translating the Vulgate “scientes quoniam unusquisque quodcumque fecerit bonum hoc percipiet [or recipiet] a Domino sive servus sive liber.” The problem of translating “bonum ... hoc percipiet” involves a potentially very difficult theological question about grace and free will. Should the grammar be construed as “what one does is repaid in equal measure” or is it rather that “the good thing” [bonum] that is done by any man is “received from the Lord” already, in the sense that the act is only made possible by virtue of its being a gift from God?

<sup>44</sup> *Burning to Read*, 23.

reading of Luther and the “Lutheran moment.” First, it needs to be said that Luther’s own understanding of the will and of human agency is very far removed from a position in which he could see himself as ever enacting a “courageous intervention” in the name of “liberty.” I will grant, though, that the subtleties of Luther’s theological anthropology are probably irrelevant to his usefulness as a historical lightning rod. Second, to characterize Luther’s way of reading scripture as a self-authorizing exercise whose aim is to valorize “individual conscience” is not accurate. While it may move gradually and consistently away from the scholastic schema in which he was trained, and despite the rhetorical bluster that makes it too easy to mischaracterize as willful and defiant (a tendency relentlessly exploited by Simpson), Luther’s exegetical practice is nevertheless always striving for just the opposite of readerly self-authorization. For him, the necessary confluence of the fourfold stream of medieval exegesis into a radically christological *sensus principalis* is rather the essence of self-abnegation. The readerly self whose intellectual work flows into and strives to articulate the fourfold scheme is finally subsumed into the unifying person of the body of Christ, who came “in the form of a servant” (Phil 2:5–8). It is a matter of working out, with difficulty, at the level of exegetical practice, the penitential thrust of Luther’s *theologia crucis*. For Luther, this “is the essence of Christian humility, the recognition of one’s total poverty, the ‘emptying out’ of human wisdom and human righteousness. It is a true ‘coming to oneself,’ in that it calls things by their proper names, penetrates the appearance, the illusion of being

successful and at home in the world, and unveils the truth of human exigency.”<sup>45</sup>

And it is this above all else that he shares with Langland.

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<sup>45</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, [1979] 1990), 160.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Passionate Speech and the Promise of Felicity in *Troilus and Criseyde*

It is naturally *always* possible (“humanly” possible) that I may be mistaken or may break my word, but that by itself is no bar against using the expressions “I know” and “I promise” as we do in fact use them.

—J. L. Austin, “Other Minds”

A performative utterance is an offer of participation in the order of law. And perhaps we can say: A passionate utterance is an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire.

— Stanley Cavell, “Performative and Passionate Utterance”

... it suffiseth, this that seyde is heere

— Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 3.1306

How are we to take Criseyde’s words, “it suffiseth,” spoken as they are at this most happy juncture in the poem, just after Troilus has pledged himself to her according to the terms of the most venerable of Romance tropes, the *Frauendienst*, the pledge of love-service even unto death, and just before the lovers’ entrance into their own private “hevene bliss” (3.1322)? Is her answer an affirmation or an interruption? Is



she saying “that’s enough” in order to cut him off, to cut him short, to accept his terms as they stand, or to leave them incomplete and therefore open-ended?<sup>1</sup>

Before turning to the full context of Criseyde’s reply, I want to begin by suggesting that the distinction made by Stanley Cavell (in the second epigraph) between “performative utterance” and “passionate utterance” can be helpful in approaching an answer to these questions, and it may, by extension, provide an innovative way to think about the relation between interpersonal communication of the most “private” kind, on the one hand, and the language of religious ritual on the other. In doing so, this chapter on Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* marks a move into new territory. The previous three chapters have explored the overtly theological senses of “servyse” and the related grammars and economies of the language of “serve and deserve.” Here we encounter the same language again and again, its prominence in the poem underscored by the formal properties of Chaucer’s *rhyme-royal* stanza. But how does the grammar of serve and deserve work in a de-theologized context like that of *Troilus* — one that is courtly, erotic, and pagan? In a poem whose generic commitments and debts are first and foremost to the courtly romance tradition as Chaucer inherited it from French and Italian sources, how can

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Chaucer’s works are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., Larry D. Benson, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). From here on I give quotations from *Troilus and Criseyde* as *TC* plus book and line numbers. The *Riverside* text of *Troilus and Criseyde* is edited by Stephen Barney. Epigraphs: (1) Austin’s “Other Minds” is quoted from *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 76–116, at 98; (2) Cavell’s extension of Austin’s category of the performative is found in his essay “Performative and Passionate Utterance,” ch. 7 in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 155–91, at 185.

the language of “serve and deserve” bear any resemblance to the theological explorations of Langland and Julian discussed in chapters 1, 2, and 3?

Responding in part to J. L. Austin’s theory of performative utterance as it applies to medieval writing, Sarah McNamer has recently suggested that certain Middle English texts might be read as “scripts for the performance of feeling.” This idea comes importantly into play here because, as we will see, Cavell’s first move in describing “passionate utterance” will be to insist that there is no script.<sup>2</sup> But as McNamer points out, “Austin was not a medievalist.” Neither, of course, is Stanley Cavell, though his passionate readings of Shakespeare are marked by an acute astonishment over premodern resources for seeing and countering Cartesian skepticism before the fact.<sup>3</sup>

The classificatory label “passionate utterance” is taken from part of Cavell’s recent work which he conceives as an extension of Austin’s theory of performative utterance. For Cavell, the notorious “skittishness” in Austin’s treatment of the passions is cause not for joy at the apparent defeat of his theory—this is how it was taken by traditional analytic philosophy on the one hand, and by Derridean-Butlerian performance theory on the other— but rather as an opportunity to

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah McNamer, “Feeling,” in Paul Strohm, ed., *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 241–57, at 246. Austin’s distinctions between kinds of speech acts as either constative or performative, and his revision of this distinction into the three categories of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary can be found in *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Cavell’s essays on Shakespeare are collected in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

philosophize on this skittishness, to ask what it means for his philosophy of language and for moral philosophy more generally that Austin “breaks off his analysis catastrophically early ... just at the point at which passion would have had to come systematically into play”.<sup>4</sup>

A crucial part of Austin’s uncovering of the workings of performative speech involved replacing true/false distinctions with the notion of “felicity.” In other words, for an utterance to be “happy”—felicitous—certain conditions had to be met: a conventional procedure would be invoked in which appropriate persons in an appropriate setting speak the appropriate words, they speak them correctly and completely, they *mean* them, and they continue to mean them in the future. Cavell’s extension of this system involves, at a technical level, proposing that there are also conditions for passionate utterances which correspond to Austin’s conditions for performatives (177). Here, for reference, is Austin’s famous list of conditions for “felicity” in performative (illocutionary) utterance, as he presents it near the beginning of *How to Do Things with Words*:

- 1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further,
- 2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.

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<sup>4</sup> “Performative and Passionate Utterance,” 156, cited parenthetically in the text from here forward. For the responses to Austin’s “failure,” see the essay by Timothy Gould, “The Unhappy Performative,” in *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995).

3) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and

4) completely.

5) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further

6) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently.<sup>5</sup>

And here, for comparison, are Cavell's analogous conditions for passionate (perlocutionary) utterance:

1) There is no accepted conventional procedure and effect. The speaker is on his or her own to create the desired effect.

2) I must *declare* myself (explicitly or implicitly) *to have standing* with you (be appropriate) in the given case.

3) I therewith *single you out* (as appropriate) in the given case.

4) In speaking from my passion I must actually be suffering the passion (evincing, expressing, not to say displaying it—though this may go undeciphered, perhaps willfully, by the other), in order rightfully to

5) Demand from you a response *in kind*, one you in turn are moved to offer, and moreover

6) Now.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *How to Do Things with Words*, 14–15. Following Cavell, I have renumbered Austin's list from his Greek-letter scheme.

<sup>6</sup> "Passionate Utterance," 180–82. Cavell presents his and Austin's lists as pairs, with a final asymmetry marked by his number 7.

Very briefly the chief differences are these: In Cavell's passionate utterance there is an *absence* of conventional procedure and a corresponding absence of conventional effect; I (the speaker) must have standing with *you*; I must single *you* out; I must be moved to speak by a passion which I am actually suffering; in order that I may move *you* to respond in kind, here, and now. But Cavell adds, crucially, a seventh and final condition which has no analogous number in Austin's scheme.

Remembering Chaucer's *Troilus* and the bedroom scene from book 3, I read this final condition with Criseyde's "it suffices" in mind:

7) You may contest my invitation to exchange, at any or all of the points marked by the list of conditions for the successful perlocutionary act, for example, deny that I have standing with you, or question my consciousness of my passion, or dismiss the demand for the kind of response I seek, or ask to postpone it, or worse. I may or may not have further means of response. (We may understand such exchanges as instances of, or attempts at, moral education.) (182)

Can we say then that Criseyde is "contesting" or "denying" or "questioning" or "dismissing" or "postponing" either Troilus or the love-service script he is using to woo her, and all that the script implies? Looking back (about six stanzas) to the beginning of this particular exchange, the first thing one notices is that Troilus's utterance is not, at first, directed to Criseyde at all—Criseyde whose arms, back, sides, throat, and breasts have just been given a stanza of their own—but rather to a miniature catalogue of supernatural others: "O Love, O Charite!" Citheria! Venus! Hymen! The apostrophic gesture is typical of the "conventional" language of *fin amour*, and taken out of context, as here, it may be hard for the reader (not to speak for Criseyde) to take Troilus at his word. To his credit, he does very quickly refocus

his utterance in the direction of Criseyde's person, but as he does so he makes what appears to be another conventional move. He reintroduces a verbal triad that has already appeared several times in the poem, usually but not always in rhyming positions, and which works as a formal flag or marker for the complex knot of promise, obligation, and reward which is conjured up by the language of love-service. The three verbs are *serven*, *sterven*, and *disserven*. Paired off as rhymes, the triad articulates two highly compressed cause-and-effect propositions which together define the lover's predicament. Serve and deserve is one of these. Serve or die is the second.

But listen to how Troilus himself puts it. Here, having turned his gaze and his speech earthward, away from his catalogue of deities, he addresses Criseyde directly. He says:

And for the love of God, my lady deere,  
Syn God hath wrought me for I shall yow serve –  
As thus I mene: he wol ye be my steere,  
To do me lyve, if that yow liste, or sterve –  
So techeth me how that I may disserve  
Youre thonk, so that I thorough myn ignoraunce  
Ne do no thing that yow be displesaunce. (3.1289–95)

Now, as Cavell would have it, *you* comes into the picture. Each of the conditions in the middle of the list required for a "passionate utterance" (items 2–6) are present here in Troilus's speech: he declares his standing with her (God made me for this); he singles her out (I will serve *you*); he reinforces the sincerity and the severity of his passion ("thus I mene"); and he seems to invite a response ("if that yow liste"). What is much less certain, though, is how to account for the first and last items on

Cavell's list, that is to say the question of "convention"—whether or not there is a script being followed here—and the question of Criseyde's freedom in responding or not responding to his speech. What I want to suggest is that we cannot know the answer to one of these questions without knowing the answer to the other. We can't know or decide whether Troilus's speech is truly "passionate" or merely "performative" until the full extent of its exposure to external forces—across the poem's entire temporal horizon—has been played out. And so despite the fact that Criseyde does accept Troilus, body and word, in this passage—"Welcome," she says, "my knyght, my pees, my suffisaunce!" (3.1309)—she prefaces her acceptance with the odd qualification with which I began: "But lat us falle away fro this matere, / For it suffiseth, this that seyde is heere." The gloss I want to give to this statement, now seen with Cavellian eyes, is that for all its emphasis on sufficiency, Criseyde's reply here recognizes the insufficiency of "felicity" in at least two senses: in the Austinian sense of a complete, appropriate, and therefore binding, exchange; and in the affective sense of that "happiness" which we know all too well can not last. The reader may still hold out hope for the lovers' felicity, even as late as Criseyde's "disjoynted" final promise that "Come I wole" (5.1618). But we all know how the story ends. What Criseyde's "it suffises" finally communicates is that the felicity of words may not suffice. They may not suffice, that is, when the terrain those words must occupy is not the certain ground of the "order of law," but rather the uncharted terrain over which human language moves as it "improvises in the disorders of desire."

This failure of words' felicity under the constraints of conventional speech-forms—especially, perhaps, in a form as stylized as this versified trope of love-service—is exactly what Chaucer the poet has in mind in one of his famous moments of speechful speechlessness. This particular moment comes just a few hundred lines further along in the happy part of book 3:

This is no litel thyng of for to seye;  
This passeth every wit for to devyse;  
For ech of hem gan otheres lust obeye.  
*Felicitate*, which that these clerkes wise  
Comenden so, ne *may nought here suffice*:  
This joie may nought written be with inke;  
This passeth al that herte may bythynke. (3.1688–94)

To say that *felicity may not suffice* is to say in the Austinian sense that there are places words cannot go. But this is not to succumb to the threat of skepticism; not to say that we cannot try for felicity; not to say that we should not “take the plunge” that is entailed in using the words “I will” or “I promise” or, in Troilus’s case, “I shall yow serve.”<sup>7</sup> “The moral of the threat of skepticism,” says Cavell, is that

since I am, as finite, threatened with consequences from unforeseeable quarters, I am at any time acting, and speaking, in the absence of what may seem *sufficient* reason. Since I cannot measure in each case *how far to invest my will*, I must trust myself to be up to calamities (the consequences of accidents, mistakes, inadvertence, clumsiness, thoughtlessness, foolishness, imprudence, hesitation, precipitousness, acts of God, and so on). The alternative is to make the world not strange but indifferent to me, and that disfigures both the world and me.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Austin, “Other Minds,” 99: “when I say ‘I promise’ a new plunge is taken.”

<sup>8</sup> Cavell, “What is the Scandal of Skepticism?” in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, 132–54, at 139–40, my italics.



It is as if to avoid exactly this investment of will, these accidents and mistakes, that Chaucer's narrator, indistinguishable from the poet himself, strikes such a "skittish" posture (in the Austinian sense) in relation to his material. The word "serve" first appears a mere fifteen lines into the proem of *Troilus*, where it forms a rhyming pair with "sterve," meaning "die." Seen in isolation, this initial coupling of service and death points toward the potential gravity of service as a locus of meaning in this poem. But in context, this gravity is already mitigated by the lightness of the framing verse:

For I, that God of Loves servantz serve,  
Ne dar to Love, for myn unliklynesse,  
Preyen for speed, al sholde I therfore sterve,  
So fer am I from his help in derknesse.  
But natheles, if this may don gladnesse  
Unto any lovere, and his cause availle,  
Have he my thonk, and myn be this travaille! (1.15–21)

The entire stanza is a humility topos; but that doesn't begin to account for the work it does in situating Chaucer in relation to the story he is about to tell.<sup>9</sup> He first describes himself as serving the servants of the God of Love, echoing the pope's traditional self-description as "servant of the servants of God" (*servus servorum Dei*).<sup>10</sup> This epithet, in the pope's case as well as Chaucer's, manages to be inclusive

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<sup>9</sup> In discussing these lines and the poem as a whole, I make no distinction between Chaucer the poet and the fictional narrator who may or may not occupy the position of the poem's "I." The reasons for this choice are best articulated in A. C. Spearing's chapter on *Troilus and Criseyde* in *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 68–100 (ch. 3), and chapter 1 for Spearing's outline of the theoretical underpinnings of his argument. See also Elizabeth Salter, "Troilus and Criseyde: poet and narrator," *English and International* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press [1982] 1988), 231–38.

<sup>10</sup> See Stephen Barney's explanatory notes for these lines in the *Riverside Chaucer*, 1025.

and exclusive at once. It posits a service relationship between the poet and an elite class of lovers (analogous to the pope's clergy) on the one hand, while suggesting that membership in this group is open to all who have loved or are capable of loving. The poet then appears to exclude himself from the group he is addressing, claiming that he cannot "dar to Love" because of his "unliklynesse," a condition he declines to explain. This aleatory language of "daring to love" sets up the first of what will be a series of "unlikely" likenesses between Chaucer and his male protagonist, Troilus.

Later in the same stanza, Chaucer will telegraph his later addition of a third rhyming term, *deserve*, without actually naming it. He does this by linking his own "travaille"—his labor in writing "thise woful vers" (line 7)—to the "thonk," or reward, that awaits the hypothetical lover whom his verse is designed to help.

if this [woful vers] may don gladnesse  
Unto any lovere, and his cause availle,  
Have he my thonk, and myn be this travaille! (18–21)

In this sense the combination of "thonk" and "travaille" is precisely synonymous with the pair *serve/deserve*, which, as others have pointed out, is a coupling that Chaucer was particularly fond of.<sup>11</sup> The initial pair is thus extended to a triad of rhyme words—serve, sterve, deserve—that Chaucer will go on to exploit in every conceivable combination throughout the poem, including several stanzas in which

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<sup>11</sup> See for example Barry Windeatt's discussion headed "Serving and Deserving" in *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 228–30; and J. D. Burnley, *Chaucer's Language and the Philosophers' Tradition* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979), 168–70, and 190 n. 21 for the links between "thonk," "deserve," and "grace."

all three words appear together as end-rhymes.<sup>12</sup> The sheer number of these end-rhyme combinations in *Troilus* should be enough to signal their importance at the thematic level of the text. Langland, as we have seen in previous chapters, was also intensely interested in the relation between serving and deserving, yet working in a different formal idiom could still draw attention to the relation without making a rhyme out of it.

So what difference does a rhyme make? To *read* a rhyme, in the sense of performing a critical action upon it, is necessarily to decontextualize the words out of their status as parts of speech, as components of human utterance. Such decontextualization is one way of understanding what ordinary language philosophers warn against when they speak of metaphysical as opposed to ordinary language, and of the need to “lead words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”<sup>13</sup> Cavell writes that “philosophers such as Austin and Wittgenstein are struck by the fact that in [classical] philosophy, for some reason,”

context seems a fragile, erasable, perhaps we can say extra-logical, feature of making sense, so that in analyzing whether and how sense is made, such a thing as intention, and a private intention at that (public space having been erased, you may say enclosed, or subjected to reduction), appears to have to do all the work of, as it were, communication. It is in such straits (straits of metaphysics) that

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<sup>12</sup> A possibility afforded in the first place by the choice of the rhyme royal stanza, with its three b-rhymes. See 2.1149–55, 3.386–92.

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §116, quoted by Cavell in his foreword to *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1969] 2002), xxxiv.

intention is to preserve, and I would say, reattain, or represent, presence (beyond myself, to someone or something).<sup>14</sup>

What Cavell notices here about philosophical erasure of context and the setting up of intention, or inwardness, as a marker for the metaphysics of presence, is analogous to the way that several influential strains of *Troilus* criticism have tended to read the poem: either by linking its overtly philosophical passages (Troilus's "predestination" speech at 4.958–1082; the "eighth sphere" epilogue at 5.1786 ff.) to the poet's true meaning (this is the Robertsonian strain, characterized by the act of "making metaphysical" at every opportunity); or, in contrast, by insisting on the impossibility of such a reading by positing a narrator whose fallibility is in ironic relation to the real controlling consciousness of the text, i.e. Father Chaucer. Call this the Donaldsonian strain; and although this approach has generated a wider variety of readings, it is nevertheless a variation of the process of "making metaphysical."<sup>15</sup>

The pitfalls of the narrator or "persona" theory as it has played out in *Troilus* criticism may point to the difficulty of separating, for this poem, the metaphysical from the ordinary; but it is not the only way the poem dramatizes the tensions built

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<sup>14</sup> Cavell, "Counter-Philosophy and the Pawn of Voice," ch. 2 in *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 53–127, at 111.

<sup>15</sup> A. C. Spearing's recent work on subjectivity in medieval narratives and lyrics shows just how alike Robertson and Donaldson were in their approaches to the poem, despite their carrying the banners for "historicism" and "formalism" respectively: he credits Carolyn Dinshaw with uncovering their mutual "concept of an omniscient poet" with its "concern to authorize, legitimate and, finally, delimit meanings," and further suggests that "'omniscient poet' and 'unreliable narrator' form an interdependent pair, functioning as an interpretative mechanism to produce univalent meaning." Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 73–74, quoting Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 37.

into this pairing. Several examples of the *serve/sterve/deserve* rhyme combination from later in the poem will serve to demonstrate the strong metaphysical pull this language exerts on a reader accustomed to the conventions of the “old romaunce”—and yet trained by the poem’s previous usage to expect a meaning that erases context (historical and generic) in favor of an enclosed and private “intention.”<sup>16</sup>

The context of the first example is book 3’s elaborately staged run-up to Troilus and Criseyde’s first night together as lovers. (This is prior to the “it suffiseth” passage discussed above.) Pandarus has just opened the closet in which Troilus is hiding and told him the time has come for his entry “into hevne blisse” (3.704). Troilus’s reaction, predictably, is to fall into apostrophe, beginning with a pledge of service unto death: “Yet, blisful Venus, this nyght thow me enspire / ... As wys as I the *serve*, / And evere bet and bet shal, til I *sterve*” (3.711–13). He then expands his pantheon of addressees to include “O Jove,” “O Mars,” “O Phebus,” “And ek Diane,” all to the amusement and annoyance of Pandarus, who, playing the bawd, is eager to cut to the sex scene. The apostrophe, as we have already seen, is a type of utterance that bears some scrutiny here and elsewhere in this poem as being characteristic of Troilus’s way of engaging with the world. It is literally a “turning away,” but also a lifting up, of the eyes and the voice, up and away from a human situation and towards an external agent, deified or personified or both. It is a fundamental posture of love poetry, perhaps especially of love lyrics, in which the loving subject

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<sup>16</sup> The very kind of book Pandarus pretends to read as he stands by the fire overseeing what will become Troilus and Criseyde’s first sexual encounter, 3.980.

draws back from the moment of communication (linguistic or sexual) with the beloved and instead “gets metaphysical.”<sup>17</sup> As a loving subject, Troilus now finds himself triangulated between the human beloved (Criseyde) and a non-human transcendent other (his list of deities, and above these, Love). In its enclosed three-sidedness, there is a geometric stasis in this relationship. He is unable to decide where, to whom, his gaze and his speech should be directed.<sup>18</sup>

The second example of the *serve/sterve/deserve* triad comes a few hundred lines further along from Troilus’s closet apostrophe, but crucially separated by the event of Troilus and Criseyde’s lovemaking. This is the passage I subjected earlier to the terms of Cavell’s “passionate utterance,” and to which Criseyde responds, in part, “it suffiseth.” Here again it is Troilus who gives expression to the combination of service, death, and reward, but he speaks neither in apostrophe nor through the mediating agency of Pandarus, but rather directly to Criseyde:<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> With apologies to Olivia Newton-John, whose 1981 song “Physical” was on heavy rotation in my older sister’s bedroom around that time. The refrain is “Let’s get physical / ... Physical ... / Let me hear your body talk.”

<sup>18</sup> It may be that his inability to decide is registered in the text’s inability to decide—its “fierce ambiguity,” to use a Cavellian phrase—which is also the poet’s difficulty in deciding what kind of poem he is writing and the reader’s difficulty in deciding what kind of poem he or she is reading, a difficulty which may take the form of proliferating generic distinctions (romance, history, tragedy) or modes (elegy, comedy). See James Simpson’s persuasive placement of *Troilus* within the modal category of the elegiac, owing more to Ovid than to Petrarch. In Simpson’s reading this mode encompasses a wide range of the discourses of desire—love, loss, mourning—as spaces of unique “discursive freedoms” in the face of increasingly authoritarian political regimes. Chapter 4, “The Elegiac,” in *Reform and Cultural Revolution: The Oxford English Literary History, Vol. 2: 1350–1547* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 121–90. One might also take Chaucer’s famous dedication to “moral Gower” and “philosophical Strode” (5.1856–57) to indicate a split between the moral and the philosophical that is parallel to what I am calling the ordinary and the metaphysical.

<sup>19</sup> Compare the exchange at the start of book 3 where Pandarus coaches Troilus and Criseyde through their initial exchange of service pledge (3.133) and acceptance of the pledge (3.161). Compare also

And for the love of God, my lady deere,  
Syn God hath wrought me for I shall yow serve—  
As thus I mene: he wol ye be my steere,  
To do me lyve, if that yow liste, or sterve—  
So techeth me how that I may disserve  
Youre thonk, so that I thorough myn ignoraunce  
Ne do no thyng that yow be displesaunce. (3.1289–95)

Just why, at this point in the poem, and in the aftermath of sexual bliss, Troilus should choose to reinvoke this language and then immediately gloss it (“thus I mene”), seems to me a perplexing question. Does he suppose that the terms of the service pledge as earlier invoked (at 3.133 ff.) were not binding? That the speech act performed there has somehow failed, or been nullified, or been misunderstood—despite Pandarus’s coaching both lovers in love-talk and despite the physical consummation? Again, are we to understand Criseyde’s response in “lat us falle away fro this matere, / For it suffiseth, this that seyde is heere” (3.1306–7), as meant to stop the proliferation of pledges and insist that enough has been said? Or is it rather that she recognizes the sexual act as a nonverbal bond, one that cannot be registered by linguistic means but can be communicated paralinguistically, as in a rhyme?

The language of binding, of Love as a binding force, but also of words as bonds, is prominent in this passage as it is throughout the poem. Here at the climax of book 3, three successive elaborations on his source reveal a poet intensely interested in how words work—or fail to work—as bonds in human relationships.

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Pandarus’s use of this rhyme triad in explaining to Criseyde what she will find in Troilus’s letter (2.1149–55); and in Troilus’s pledge of service to Pandarus at 3.386–92, where he swears lifelong service “as thi sclave” in exchange for Pandarus’s “service” of bringing the lovers together.

First, as mentioned, Troilus renews his vows of love-service only to be shushed by Criseyde's "it suffiseth." Chaucer then replaces Boccaccio's brief *occupatio* ("Long would it be to recount the joy and impossible to tell the delight which they took together...")<sup>20</sup> with four stanzas of an insufficiency-of-knowledge topos, in which he again takes up the position of the book 1 Proem in order, apparently, to deflect responsibility for his having conjured up such a powerful representation of love—one so powerful that he seems scarcely able to believe he has done it. I quote here the first and fourth stanzas of this intrusion of authorial self-doubt:

Of hire delit or joies oon the leeste  
 Were impossible to my wit to seye;  
 But juggeth ye that han ben at the feste  
 Of swich gladnesse, if that hem liste pleye!  
 I kan namore, but thus thise ilke tweye  
 That nyght, bitwixen drede and sikernesse,  
 Felten in love the grete worthynesse.

...

For myne wordes, heere and every part,  
 I speke hem alle under correccioun  
 Of yow that felyng han in loves art,  
 And putte it al in youre discrecioun  
 To encesse or maken dymynucioun  
 Of my langage, and that I yow biseche.  
 But now to purpos of my rather speche.

(3.1310–16; 1331–37)

Once again, Chaucer's deflection of responsibility onto the reader who has first-hand knowledge of love (while he himself has none) does the double work of: (1) providing an opening for subjective response and identification, for

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<sup>20</sup> *Il Filostrato* 3.31, quoted from the translation by Robert apRoberts and Anna Bruni Benson, reprinted in Stephen Barney, ed., *Troilus and Criseyde* (New York: Norton, 2006). Hereafter cited in the text by canto and stanza numbers.



acknowledgment of the lovers' reality and the reality of lovers; and (2) opening the door to the threat of skepticism. And crucially, he seems to say that the things we choose to do with his words, our choice either to "increase" (make metaphysical?) or "diminish" (make ordinary?) his language, will constitute a form of judgement: of him, of Troilus and Criseyde, of ourselves as participants in the poem's larger cultural work of testing the binding force of words. Immediately following this aside, when Chaucer moves us back into the narrative and back into the bedroom with the lovers, he has them register the same difficulty deciding between acknowledgment and skepticism that he has just posed to the reader. They mutually fear "that al this thyng but nyce dremes were / For which ful ofte ech of hem seyde, 'O swete, / Clippe ich yow thus, or elles I it meete?" (3.1342–44). But while Criseyde is quite capable of suppressing her epistemological uncertainty in order to assure Troilus that she is indeed "in this place" (3.1345–51), Troilus's own doubts continue:

This Troilus ful ofte hire eyen two  
Gan for to kisse, and seyde, "O eyen clere,  
It weren ye that wroughte me swich wo,  
Ye humble nettes of my lady deere!  
Though ther be mercy writen in youre cheere,  
God woot, the text ful hard is, soth, to fynde!  
How koude ye withouten bond me bynde?" (3.1352–58)

We can gloss the last line in several ways. First, "binding without bonds" is Troilus's way of explaining retrospectively what happened in the temple scene in book 1 (to which I will turn momentarily) wherein he was paradoxically bound by the "humble nettes" of Criseyde's eyes alone, and he is experiencing a reenactment of that immaterial binding now as he addresses his gaze and his speech to those same eyes,

at close range. Taking in the two previous lines, however, and recalling that this is once again an apostrophic utterance addressed not to Criseyde's *person* (which has the ability to respond) but to her eyes (which do not, at least not in speech), it seems possible to read Troilus's astonishment at the fact of his being bound as also a realization that this binding has taken effect in the absence of a verbal ratification, from Criseyde, of his most recent pledge of service (a pledge marked by the rhyme triad of *serve/sterve/deserve*). He searches her "cheere" for the verbal bonds, the "hard text," that would complete the agreement: the words that would not only signify "mercy" but actually *say* it. There is therefore from Troilus's perspective an unfinished speech act at the center of his epistemological doubt, a kind of skepticism remarkable for its persistence in the face of an extraordinary—but also "ordinary" in the sense of realized, consummated, human—love. It seems remarkable too that Troilus's skepticism should rearticulate itself in this particular context, standing flush stanza to stanza with Chaucer's own astonishment at his representation of love's "grete worthyness," at the place in the poem where the poet had finally freed himself sufficiently from his source to realize the "full imaginative grasp of this complex human condition," and had then immediately placed his text under "correccioun."<sup>21</sup>

To get at the roots of Troilus's skepticism, and to how I see that skepticism as closely imbricated with the language of service, we have to return to book 1 and

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Salter, "Troilus and Criseyde: A Reconsideration," rptd. in *English and International: Studies in the Literature, Art and Patronage of Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [1966] 1988), 215–30, at 228.

examine the poem's early uses of service vocabulary as they unfold. Recall that Chaucer begins by describing himself as writing from within a double bind of service—"For I, that God of Loves servantz serve" (1.15)—and that he immediately displaces the imagined reward for that service onto "any lover" except himself. He then solicits a prayer from the class of happy lovers on behalf of those less fortunate in love (1.22–31), but also on his own behalf, so that he will have "myght to shewe, in some manere, / Swich peyne and wo as Loves folk endure" (33–34). The direction of exemplarity in this passage is odd, and the asked-for prayer is not "the usual prayer on the writer's behalf from the audience for whose benefit he has laboured."<sup>22</sup> The suggestion is to think of oneself as example, to use one's experiential knowledge in its good and bad encounters with Love as a control against which to think of Troilus and others in his situation. The normal movement of exemplarity is in the opposite direction, as in hagiography, where we are asked first to contemplate a story or a group of stories and then to map those stories onto our own lives. Here, however, the imagined reward for those "in the cas / Of Troilus" is not the same earthly "gladnesse" in which the reader/fortunate lover finds himself, but rather that Love will provide solace to those unfortunate ones "in hevene" (31). The deployment of "in hevene" here would seem to prompt a move into the metaphysical, to close down the possibility of comfort for unhappy lovers in

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<sup>22</sup> Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity*, 16, discussing not this prologue but the prologue to Robert Mannyng's *Chronicle*.

*this* world. But as we have seen, the poem will later challenge the validity of such a move by refiguring “hevene bliss” as sexual bliss (3.704).

The petition continues:

And biddeth ek for hem that ben at ese,  
That God hem graunte ay good perseveraunce,  
And sende hem myght hire ladies so to plese  
For so hope I my sowle to avaunce,  
To prey for hem that Loves servauntz be  
And write hire wo, and lyve in charite,

And for to have of hem compassioun,  
As though I were hire owne brother dere. (1.43–51)

Chaucer now links his own soul’s advancement to his help of love’s servants. The reward he transferrred to other lovers in line 21 now comes back to him in metaphysical form. The writing of a love story is here made parallel with prayer, and with living in charity, and with having compassion, all of which are done in a spirit of fraternal solidarity. Yet the reward imagined for this work is the advancement of the writer’s soul. This brings into view another paradox at the heart of the idea of “servyse.”<sup>23</sup> If I advance my soul by serving others, then isn’t my “thank,” my reward, tainted by self-interest? How is this charity?

When Chaucer turns in the next line from the subjunctive, future-contemplative grammar of “For so hope I” and “As though I were” to the present, proximal, and auditory “*Now* herkneth with a good entencioun,” he does more than

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<sup>23</sup> It also poses a serious challenge to the distinction between material and immaterial labor and their concomitant material and immaterial rewards that some recent scholarship seems eager to impose on the later Middle Ages. See David Aers’s review of Kellie Robertson, *The Laborer’s Two Bodies*, *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 19 (2005): 226–35.

merely signal his transition into the narrative proper. He also signals his awareness of the potential for a skeptical response to his project—and warns against it: this “good entencioun” asks for a reader willing to credit what he hears, to believe what she sees, and to extend that same openness and credibility to Chaucer’s characters in their attempts to communicate with one another. It asks for a readerly intention that is attuned to context, that is not susceptible to the erasure of context described by Cavell as characteristic of philosophy’s drive toward the metaphysical.<sup>24</sup>

Four stanzas on, the poem next appeals to “servyce” in a context that foregrounds the importance of the larger socio-political scene in which these events take place. Calchas, the Trojan soothsayer and father of Criseyde, is described as stealing “ful pryvely” into the Greek camp, where, in recompense for his defection, the Greeks

Hym diden bothe worship and servyce  
In trust that he hath konnyng hem to rede  
In every peril which that is to drede. (1.82–84)

This sequence represents “servyce” as something done in advance (“in trust”) but with the foreknowledge, or at least assumption, of a reciprocal payoff in the form of Calchas’s knowledge of future events. As such it raises the specter of hypocrisy in acts of service, the possibility of false homage—idolatry—in that the circumstances tell us this is not the kind of service relationship characterized by freedom of action in choosing to serve, but one born instead of mutual expedience in dire straits, in a warzone, a state of exception. It also discloses the temporal dimension inherent in

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<sup>24</sup> “Counter-Philosophy and the Pawn of Voice,” 111.

acts of service, as again “in trust” projects the relationship into an expected future continuation, while at the same time ironically underscoring the Greeks’ sure-to-be-skeptical stance toward Calchas: they need him but certainly cannot, under the circumstances, *trust* him, and vice-versa.

The Trojan street responds to Calchas’s treason by condemning him “and al his kyn” to death by burning (1.85–91). This threatening language in turn prompts the abandoned Criseyde to beg Hector, and by extension the whole House of Priam, for protection. Just prior to her supplication, Criseyde is described as “aungelik,” “inmortal,” a “hevenyssh perfit creature” (102–4). Hector grants the asked-for protection as follows:

And al th’onour that men may don yow have,  
As ferforth as youre fader dwelled here,  
Ye shul have, and youre body shal men save,  
As fer as I may ought enquere or here. (1.120–23)

But the exact terms of Criseyde’s agreement with the House of Priam—and the full extent of her eventual exposure—are left undisclosed. Now, despite the fact that their city is under siege, the Trojans return to “hire olde usage”: their everyday modes of life, religious observances, and speechways.

It is in these conditions of the ordinary-under-pressure that the story moves into the sacred and exceptional space of the temple, and it is here that Troilus’s ordinary mode of engaging with the world will encounter a massive challenge in the form of Love personified.

And to the temple, in al hir beste wise,  
In general ther wente many a wight,  
To herknen of Palladions servyce (1.162–64)

By situating his initial engagement of Ovidian and courtly tropes of love-service (*servitium amoris*) within the specialized space and time of liturgical service, Chaucer's text encourages a productive slippage between the discourses of love and liturgy.<sup>25</sup> As Troilus strolls the aisles of the temple with his young knights in tow, smiling mockingly at those who sigh and feast their eyes on the "ladies of the town," he gives a speech (his first speaking lines of the poem) in which he maps out a subject position in relation to these would-be lovers that is deeply skeptical:

He wolde smyle and holden it folye,  
And seye hym thus, "God woot, she slepeth softe  
For love of the, whan thow turnest ful ofte!

I have herd told, pardieux, of youre lyvyng,  
Ye loveres, and youre lewed observaunces,  
And which a labour folk han in wynnynge  
Of love, and in the keypyng which doutances;  
And whan youre prey is lost, woo and penaunces.  
O veray foles, nyce and blynde be ye!  
Ther nys nat oon kan war by other be." (1.194–203)

This strange utterance nearly constitutes a skeptical proof of the doctrine "love is blind," which in turn becomes a proof of skepticism as an epistemological position. He begins with the counterexample of God's knowledge as having access to other minds: "God woot" (this is not the throwaway clause it appears to be), God knows *she* isn't pining with love for *you*. As if by contrast to God's knowledge, this is followed by three suggestions of the opacity facing ordinary human attempts to

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<sup>25</sup> On Ovid's dramatization and literalization of *servitium amoris* in *Heroides* 3 (Briseis to Achilles), a text that has clear resonances with *Troilus and Criseyde*, see Florence Verducci, *Ovid's Toyshop of the Heart: Epistulae Heroidum* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 87–121.

know other minds, or three skeptical subject positions vis-à-vis the pair of hypothetical lovers. Rearranging the order in which Troilus presents his arguments and beginning where he concludes, he suggests: (1) that the lover must doubt that any previous lover's experience of failure can ever apply to him ("nat oon kan war by other be"), and he will therefore proceed blindly into the "observaunces" of love; (2) that the lover will necessarily come to a position of doubt ("doutances") concerning the beloved's fidelity, leading to "woo and penaunces"; and (3) a third-party observer of this process (Troilus's position here) will doubt that any lover can ever escape from the tragic cycle represented by the first two points.

What is the object of Troilus's strong doubt? Does he doubt *somebody* or *something*? In either case, Troilus's doubt is answered through the violent and overpowering intervention of the God of Love, and the terms under which Troilus understands his new subjection to love (1.231) are precisely terms of *service*, as the next few hundred lines make explicit at the lexical level, up to and through the adapted Petrarchan lyric known as the "Canticus Troili."<sup>26</sup> Ultimately what is at stake here is Troilus's assent to the statement (put in his mouth) "I will serve" or "I will [to] serve"—statements which the poem will work to make parallel with speech acts like "I love," "I will love" and "I love *you*."

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<sup>26</sup> The sequence begins with *fredom, bynde, bonde* (235, 237, 255) and continues with nine instances of *serve, servant, and service* in lines 315–458.



Troilus's fierce resistance to love-service, his unspoken "I will not serve" (*non serviam*) can be placed within the literary history of the *non serviam* trope, a history that usually excludes the Middle Ages. It begins in St. Jerome's Vulgate translation of the prophet Jeremiah. The speaker is God. The addressee is Judah, the personified nation of Israel:

*Vulgate*, Jer. 2:20:

a saeculo confregisti iugum meum rupisti vincula mea  
et dixisti non serviam

*Wycliffite Bible (LV)*, Jer. 2:20:<sup>27</sup>

Fro the world thou hast broke my 3ok: thou hast brooke my boondis  
and seidist / I schal not serue

*Revised Standard Version*, Jer. 2:14–20:

Is Israel a slave? Is he a homeborn servant? Why then has he become a prey? The lions have roared against him, they have roared loudly. They have made his land a waste; his cities are in ruins, without inhabitant ... Have you not brought this upon yourself by forsaking the Lord your God, when he led you in the way? ... Know and see that it is evil and bitter to forsake the Lord your God; the fear of me is not in you, says the Lord God of hosts ... For long ago you broke your yoke and burst your bonds; and you said, "I will not serve."

The specific circumstances of address and reception in this passage make clear that the *non serviam* is not an utterance actually spoken or a posture actually taken up by the one who serves. It is rather put into that subject's mouth from a position of ultimate authority: it is spoken for him.

Thirteen centuries later, when Milton's Satan takes up a version of this trope in book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, he retains the original's sense of involuntariness—of

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<sup>27</sup> Conrad Lindberg, ed., *King Henry's Bible: MS Bodley 277: The Revised Version of the Wyclif Bible*, 4 vols. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1999), 3:230.

being spoken for—and registers too a second property of the *non serviam* that is characteristic of the service discourses discussed in previous chapters.

Grammatically, it is non-transactive. It elides its object. Here is what Satan, newly arrived in Hell, famously says:

The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.  
What matter where, if I be still the same,  
And what I should be, all but less than he  
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least  
We shall be free; th'Almighty hath not built  
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:  
Here we may reign secure, and in my choice  
To reign is worth ambition though in hell:  
Better to reign in hell, than serve in heav'n. (1.254–63)<sup>28</sup>

Notice that the last line puts the verb “serve” in a parallel construction with “reign,” an unambiguously intransitive verb which cannot take a direct object. “Serve” is thus forced to suppress its own transactive potential and deny a grammatical presence to the expected object of that service, God. Second, note that this is Satan’s retrospective explanation of his rebellious act, or rather his rationalizing reconstruction of his rebellion *as* an act. There is no indication in the text that he spoke or thought the words “I will not serve,” or *non serviam*, just prior to his expulsion from Heaven. By contrast, when James Joyce finally puts the English words “I will not serve” into the mouth of Stephen Dedalus near the close of *Portrait of the Artist*, Stephen does actually *speak* them, and he adds the object clause “that in which I no longer believe,” thus transforming the original utterance in two ways:

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<sup>28</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Scott Elledge, ed. (New York: Norton, 1993).

making it voluntary (Stephen's choice) and transactive (I will not serve *something*).<sup>29</sup> It is of course the latter version that has been taken up variously since Joyce as a modernist aesthetic manifesto and rallying cry of the political left.

To place Troilus's predicament in its own historical context, though, we need to ask how the serving subjects of the late Middle Ages described their own forms of service, and also how those forms were described for them by their social superiors. If, as Rosemary Horrox has suggested, "service has some claim to be considered the dominant ethic of the middle ages," how did these subjects express their willingness and/or their unwillingness to serve, and did they think of their capacity for service as restricted only to serving *somebody*, or could they also serve or refuse to serve some *thing*, idea, institution, or abstraction?<sup>30</sup> Before returning to Chaucer and the special problems posed by Troilus's love-service, therefore, I will give two contrastive examples of late medieval English service vocabulary from sources not yet seen in this study: one from an official parliamentary document, the other from the autobiography of Margery Kempe.

The opening sentences of the 1351 Statute of Laborers read as follows:

Against the malice of servants who were idle and *unwilling to serve* after the pestilence without taking outrageous wages it was recently ordained by our lord the king ... that such servants, both men and women, should be *obliged to serve* in return for the wages which were

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<sup>29</sup> *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking, 1964), 247. Earlier in the *Portrait*, in chapter 3, Joyce has a Jesuit priest put the *non serviam* in the mouth of Lucifer and explain that it was a *thought*, not spoken words, that resulted in his fall, 117.

<sup>30</sup> Horrox, "Service," in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1994), 61.

customary (in those places where they *ought to serve*) during the twentieth year of the present king's reign, etc.<sup>31</sup>

Legal documents such as this one do not and can not tell us anything about what “such servants” thought they were doing or what they represented *themselves* as doing during the period of their “unwillingness” to serve. Each of the italicized uses of the word “serve” (*servir* in the Anglo-Norman) is intransitive, without naming a “somebody” or “something” as the object of that service. Further, the combination of the verb phrases “unwilling to serve” (nient voillantz servire) and “obliged to serve” (tenuz de servir) emphasize what sounds to me like a conflictedness in the Parliamentary voice concerning the voluntariness or involuntariness of the idea of service—over its default position, so to speak—in the minds of those were on the receiving end of labor services at this particular historical moment. This is not purely a question, I think, of the legal status of the laboring person as either “free” or “bond”—by this time serfdom as a legal category is on its way out, and “service” is very much a site of economic negotiation.<sup>32</sup> Yet, if a person is labelled “unwilling to serve” under circumstances that are labelled as exceptional, here defined as the recent presence of pestilence and “outrageous wages,” then is he or she not also assumed to be “*willing* to serve” under ordinary, unexceptional circumstances?

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<sup>31</sup> Chris Given-Wilson, et al., eds., *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England: 1275–1504* (PROME), Edward III, 1351 February, sec. ii-233, col. b; available at <http://www.sd-editions.com/AnaServer?PROME+0+start.anv+id=TEIHEAD>; retrieved November 4, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> See Horrox, “Service”; P. J. P. Goldberg, “What was a servant?” in Anne Curry and Elizabeth Matthew, eds., *Concepts and Patterns of Service in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2000), 1–20. Essays in this volume by Chris Given-Wilson, Virginia Davis, and Jeremy Catto also provide valuable social-historical contexts related to agricultural, ecclesiastical, and political forms of service in late medieval England.

It is this particular late medieval form of “willingness to serve” that animates my next example, from the *Book of Margery Kempe*. In chapter 1 of her book, Margery tells us that as a newly married woman she was threatened by devils who ordered her to forsake her God and all the rest of christendom, including her husband, her parents, and her friends. So she did.<sup>33</sup> This original forsaking is then followed by a series of repetitions in which the roles of forsaker and forsaken are shifted, and in each case these reversals are bound up with the language of service. First, Christ himself appears to the sick Margery and sits at her bedside:

owyr mercyful Lord Crist Jhesu, evyr to be trostyde, worshypd be hys name, nevyr forsakyng hys servawnt in tyme of nede, aperyde to hys creatur whych had forsakyn hym in lyknesse of a man, most semly, most bewtyvows ... and seyde to hir thes wordys: “Dowtyr, why hast thou forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevyr the?” (224–32)

In this exchange, Margery casts herself as the servant who has forsaken her master, as the one who is unwilling to serve. After her recovery she vows to do better, and she tells us that “sche thowt sche was bowndyn to God and that sche wold ben his servawnt” (254–55). Nevertheless she still desires to maintain her pride and “pompows aray” (256), for which she requires money, so she decides to enter into business for herself: first as a brewer, then as a miller. And it is in her role as a young entrepreneur that Margery experiences—now from the master’s perspective—the comeuppance of her own earlier failure to serve. What happens is that Margery’s own servants, the men and women she employs to help her run these

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<sup>33</sup> Barry Windeatt, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2000), line 210. Hereafter cited by line numbers from this edition.

businesses, *withdraw their service* from her, they “forsake her service” because of visible signs that their service is of no avail: the head on the beer continually falls, and the horse will not draw the mill (275–310). She tells us that her servants, seeing these signs, were “aschamyd and wold not dwellyn wyth hir” (282); one servant in particular “forsoke hys servyse and wold no lengar abyden wyth the fornseyd creatur,” and “Anoon it was noysed abowt the town of N. that ther wold neyther man ne best don servyse to the seyde creatur” (309–12). It is not, then, that they are “unwilling to serve” in the Parliamentary sense; not that they demand “outrageous wages.” It is that they are unwilling to serve *her*, unwilling to serve Margery, a particular somebody. It is under these circumstances, when service is returned to its transactive roots, when service takes an object, that the serving subject faces an actual choice—not a choice that is circumscribed by the authoritarian already-thunk-ness that characterizes the *non serviam* of Jerome’s Judah or Milton’s Satan—but rather a choice characterized by freedom in response.<sup>34</sup>

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Picking up Chaucer’s narrative where I left it, in the temple of Palladion, Troilus has just articulated his skeptical position toward love’s “observaunces.” Now, as he raises an eyebrow (the skeptic’s gesture *par excellence*) as if in confirmation of his superiority over his friends, those “veray fooles,” he is answered by the violent intervention of sovereign authority:

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<sup>34</sup> Cavell, “Performative and Passionate Utterance,” 172.

And with that word he gan caste up the browe,  
Ascaunces, "Loo! is this naught wisely spoken?"  
At which the God of Love gan loken rowe  
Right for despit, and shop for to ben wroken.  
He kidde anon his bowe nas naught broken;  
For sodeynly he hitte hym atte fulle—  
And yet as proud a pekok kan he pulle. (TC 1.204–10)

The immediate result of this intervention is that Troilus "wax sodeynly moost subgit unto love" (1.231). What follows is an eight-stanza authorial intrusion (from 1.211 to 266) on the theme of "resistance is futile." The vocabulary used to describe Troilus's subjection, unsurprisingly, is that of captivity, of involuntary love-service:

. . . Love, which that so soone kan  
The fredom of youre hertes to hym thralle (235)

That Love is he that alle thing may bynde (238)

Refuseth nat to Love for to ben bonde (255).<sup>35</sup>

Love says to Troilus: Give up, give in, submit, *serve*. Love, as sovereign, wants the *non serviam* closed down as a possible response. The dialogue enabled by "passionate utterance"—which the poem will teach Troilus to recognize and to employ in his own use—is here constrained to the order of law, to the merely performative. Without the freedom to respond in kind to an invitation to love, to an "improvisation in the disorders of desire," Troilus is indeed bound to an inscrutable sovereign will. His is a very different state of "readiness" than that of Julian's

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<sup>35</sup> As with the authorial aside at 3.1310–37, this is a substantial addition to Boccaccio; cf. *Filostrato* 1.25–26. And as in that aside, where he puts his words "under correction," here Chaucer seems to undercut the work of "making metaphysical" that he began with this aside's opening apostrophe by referring to the whole passage as an "other thing collateral" (1.262).

servant, who “sterteth and runneth in gret hast to do his [lordes] will,” and whose lord “full tenderly beholdeth him,” despite his fall.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, this sovereign intervention has begun to do its work. Described as inwardly “repentyng” his former doubt, Troilus now walks away from the temple toward his palace, “Right with hire look thorough-shoten and thorough-darted” (318, 325). His public posture toward Love’s servants, however, is still one of haughty disdain:

[He] seyde, “Lord, so ye lyve in lest,  
Ye loveres! For the konnyngeste of yow,  
That serveth most ententiflich and best,  
Hym tit as often harm thereof as prow.  
Your hire is quyt ayeyn, ye, as God woot how!  
Nought wel for wel, but scorn for good servyse.  
In feith, youre ordre is ruled in good wise! (1.330–36)

The substance of this biting critique is that love-service entails an uncertainty about rewards. It is an uncertainty about the grammar of serve and deserve, to put it in the terms developed in my previous chapters. You can’t know what you are going to get paid, if anything, through your “hire.” But such a critique can have force only if set against an analogous model of service (labor for hire), in which one knows ahead of time how and whether one will be rewarded. In love, Troilus notes, there is no hourly wage, no fixed multiplier by which to reckon the payoff. It is a speculative activity. The reciprocal model is underscored by Troilus’s jibe that lovers receive “Nought wel for wel”—nothing like an equal exchange—but only “scorn” for their

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<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 273–275.



service. The introduction of “order” and “rule” in the last line of the stanza explicitly equates the rule of love with the special vocation of religious orders. “You lovers are like these monks and nuns and friars who follow strict observances,” Troilus seems to say, “but your rules are even stricter than theirs, and you have no guarantee that your actions will even be understood, much less rewarded.”

Troilus then dismisses his own servants and sits alone in his bedchamber, making a “mirror of his mind” in which to contemplate the image of Criseyde as he saw her in the temple. In visual terms, this moment in the poem depends on the visual counterpoint Chaucer establishes in the temple scene between the “relik” (1.153)—the image of Pallas around which the temple’s architectural features and sightlines would have been organized—and the image of the real material body of Criseyde at the back of the temple, “mirroring” as it were the image of Pallas at the front. So when we read at line 366 that Troilus “saugh al holly hire figure,” in his mind, the identification of Criseyde’s body with an object of religious devotion is made clear—just as the specter of idolatry hovers behind it. At this same moment, Troilus enters into a speculative arrangement with himself to try this “aventure,” to take this chance on love—a chance the poem expresses once again in terms of service:

It was to hym a right good aventure  
To love swich oon, and if he dede his cure  
To serven hir, yet myghte he falle in grace,  
Or ellis for oon of hire servantz pace. (1.368–71)

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In both their specific vocabulary and their inviting open-endedness, these lines mark an appropriate place to close this chapter and this dissertation. If I have succeeded in showing an aspect of service-language in Middle English that goes beyond both the expected tropes of courtly love and the earthbound scope of social history, then these words should not need any more glossing. “Aventure” should call to mind the Christological thrust of Langland’s rendering of Philippians 2—“God aunted hymself and toek Adames kynde”—discussed in chapter 1. “Love swich oon” and “serven hir” should both recall my insistent argument that service in Middle English is local and person-directed, even when the object of that service is God (this is the meaning of the Incarnation). “Myghte ... fall in grace” should bring to mind both the figure of Julian’s servant, fallen in the slade, and Langland’s Will, on his kness, recognizing the truth in Reason’s question, “Are you broken?” In each case, grace is understood as both preceding and succeeding the act of falling: it is not something “deserved” in recognition of having “served.” So also with Troilus. We all know how this story ends. That much is scripted. But in the middle part, so to speak—*nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*—nothing is ever guaranteed. Despite having overcome his initial skepticism through the intervention of divine Love, and despite having submitted to the force of Love’s insistence that he stop getting metaphysical and turn to face his human lover, Troilus remains at the mercy of his words’ capacity to communicate across the boundary of his skin. And despite the poet Chaucer’s astonishment that it can be done at all, he tries. Criseyde’s response, encapsulated in her words “it suffiseth,” is a recognition of the attempt for what it is: an *aventure*. But for Troilus and Criseyde, as perhaps for most linguistic creatures,

the promise of felicity hangs not on the final outcome of their promises, but on the fact that they can make promises at all.

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While at Duke, Jim was supported by a number of fellowships and grants, including the William Preston Few Dissertation Fellowship; Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Dissertation Fellowship; Julian Price Endowed Dissertation Fellowship; and a Graduate School Summer Research Grant. He has taught literature and first-year writing courses at Duke, and presented his research at conferences of the New Chaucer Society and the International Piers Plowman Society.

In 2001, Jim married Amy Ryce. They have two children.