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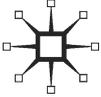
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*I dedicate this book to
my mother for her constant support and unconditional love.
I love you dearly.*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: GNOSTICISM AND LATE-MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

This study explores the question of whether and how elements and residues of what I call “the gnostic paradigm” appear in key English literary works of the late Middle Ages; it also tries to show the importance of such an exploration for understanding how these well-known literary expressions of Christianity are in part driven and complicated by these gnostic features. In certain ways this is an unexpected premise. Gnosticism was an ancient religion stressing the special status of the illuminated few and the basic corruption of the material world that was crushed by those early orthodox Fathers who, like its major antagonist Augustine,¹ supplanted its terms with a theology in which materiality is ultimately from God and a sense of a “universal” (literally, Catholic) church in which salvation was not necessarily the measure of special illumination but unknown divine grace after death.² By the later fourteenth century, Gnosticism and its influences seem to have dispersed almost completely, at least on the surface. Certainly the late-medieval church was vigorous in its efforts to teach orthodoxy to the laity.³ Yet a sense of simmering continuation, and outright reemergence, has figured in a number of studies of late-medieval literature.⁴ These studies have produced important results in how medievalists appreciate the religious outlook and the cultural interconnections of the period. What, we may ask, are these scholars responding to?

These scholars, I argue, are all responding to an underlying current in religious and literary history, in which many of the forms of thought and belief resemble, albeit in quite different circumstances and with different results and consequences, those of the ancient Gnostics. Yet to this point,

no study has been carried out examining the gnostic undercurrent with specific regard to medieval England, at least not in the comprehensive sense in which I approach the topic. To be clear, “Gnosticism” (with a capital G) is a broad term that refers to a historical phenomenon, a religious, generally dualistic movement that existed approximately between the first and fourth centuries, and perceived the material world as an evil imprisoning the purity of the soul, which could be revived through the regaining of knowledge. Formally, this phenomenon was abolished by the Orthodox Church as early as the fourth century. Nevertheless, some scholars claim that certain Gnostic elements remained a part of Christianity, some in forms that are judged “orthodox” and others “heretical.”⁵ For these scholars, whose assumptions I build on, the “orthodox” forms may have been renamed but their origin remains steadfastly clear which would serve as a direct threat to the existing canon. In the second to the fourth centuries, during the formation of the Catholic Church, annihilating such immediate threats to its stability was paramount; since Gnosticism was one of the most influential traditions at the time, it also became one of the forming church’s central threats. In the fourteenth century, Gnosticism may have no longer existed as the historical, religious movement, but I argue that its influences and residues are clear. The residue is significant as a mode of thinking that influences writing, including Christian writing, and this is one of the main points of my research. The Gnostic residue influences Christian thought and writing despite its exile or elimination from the formal religious doctrine and ideology.

Thus, the “heterodox,” though pushed to the margins, found its way back into the center via a potent residue that makes an appearance in other forms of heresy, in prevalent orthodox traditions like mysticism, and especially in high-medieval literature. The medieval audience was able to find many answers (both personal and global) in the complex literary works, which utilized this residue in their style and content. To be clear, I am not discussing a resurgence of the actual ancient movement; rather, I am delineating a resurgence of gnostic ideas that derive from the obsolete movement and that have undergone modifications influenced by time and place. This latter resurgence shall thus be referred to as “gnosticism” (with a lower case g).

Some of the specific gnostic tenets I have chosen to focus on include the gnostic view and understanding of Gnosis (i.e., knowledge or personal, experiential insight); the process and requirements of achieving said Gnosis—a process of what I shall identify as a “Passing” into

knowledge in a uniquely structured and thematized scene, from a state of ignorance to a regaining of knowledge via a required state of passivity; the notion of gnostic revelation that aims to provide a message for a select group of “good men,” an enlightened few; and the primarily dualistic nature of the world in which the physical realm serves as the root of all evil, which thus needs to be discarded, again emphasizing the collapse of the traditionally orthodox (i.e., the structure and understanding of faith, religion, its practice, and salvation) into the nonorthodox and vice versa. Moreover, I identify as a “gnostic paradigm” the process by which these features appear in the literary works. The intermingling of the concepts of the holy and the profane, the accepted and unaccepted, the natural and unnatural, the center and the margins, comes about in a series of seemingly “unnatural reversals” where the one is exchanged with the other, creating a sense of chaos, but ultimately culminating in a promise of salvation. The reversals show the instability of the previously conceived stable boundaries of dogmatic knowledge. Moreover, gnosticism’s “answer” to the search for this gnostic Truth/wisdom is not necessarily a comfortable or stable one, which is emphasized through the recurring poetic reversals and the tensions presented in the poems themselves. Ultimately, this is showcased by the failed attempts at Passing presented in the first and second chapters of this book. Nevertheless, once that knowledge is regained, the result is significant to an understanding of medieval literature and the presumed Christian influences that are nonetheless not orthodox despite their attempts to find and establish particular doxa in writing.

In this study, I analyze a representative selection of medieval English literary texts from the late fourteenth century in terms of these issues, showing how the texts adapt them through the use of a specifically chosen genre (the dream vision), the technique of subversion, and the overall function of art as “The possibility of making the invisible visible, [and] of giving presence to what can only be imagined,”⁶ to create what I call the “late-medieval gnostic moment.” The texts I have chosen are largely recognized for their overt and obvious religious nature and themes as well as their dream vision genre. These texts, including three poems from the *Pearl* manuscript (*Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*), selected books from John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, and *Piers Plowman*, are read with an eye to their underlying gnostic structure and motifs. Namely, I will analyze attitudes toward knowledge and the possibility of (re)gaining knowledge (i.e., *gnosis*) in these texts by looking specifically at what I term “Scenes of gnostic Passing.”

This term deserves further introduction. The notion of “passing,” which has been appropriated by theorists of various different fields, possesses a sense of “pretending,” of “deception” where the passer partakes in that which he is not (i.e., the dominant center) and thus, subverting the dominant ideological systems and forces. Such scenes point to a recurring literary moment, a key moment that presents the possibility of achieving gnosis through a unique process. First, such scenes take place in the liminal space presented by the dream vision genre where the passivity of the candidate serves as a prerequisite for beginning the process. Friedrich Nietzsche’s existential philosophy as well as his questioning of the value and objectivity of Truth seem to raise similarly gnostic concerns where “[Man is] deeply immersed in illusions and dream images; [his] eye glid[ing] only over the surface of things and see[ing] ‘forms’” of reality, man must awaken out of his ignorance “which shrouds the eyes and senses of man in a blinding fog, [and] therefore deceives him about the value of existence.”⁷ Thus, the dream vision genre seems quite appropriate since dream visions form a literary combination of sleeping dreams and waking visions. In other words, the structure of the dream vision enables the necessary state of repose which ironically may lead to a reawakening in the search for Truth.

Barbara Newman claims that dreams of this kind, “like waking visions, focus less on predicting the future than on achieving self-knowledge, entering vividly into past events, or manifesting eternal truths” (8). The structure of such visionary texts can usually be outlined “in four movements: first, the narrator describes an experience that suggested his initial psychological state; second, the narrator recounts a new experience detailing a changed state of consciousness during which he encountered other characters; third, the narrator describes an exchange, in this case as a dialogue between the narrator and these other characters, through which he gained knowledge; and finally, the narrator describes the aftermath of this exchange” (62–3)⁸. This “new” type of knowledge and the process of achieving it bring the relationship between orthodoxy and the seemingly obsolete Gnostic heresy into sharper relief, but also complicate its perceived rigidity. The word “heresy” itself comes from the Greek *hairetikos*, which translates into “able to choose.” In the process of the construction of orthodox Christianity, which may be analogous to Bourdieu’s “state formation,” as it signifies the formation of a central, canonical (here, religious) mainstream, the linguistic market becomes dominated by the official language which then becomes the legitimate language (Bourdieu

1999, 45). In the process, other discourses necessarily become marginalized and thus illegitimate, which then gives rise to a form of “writing between the lines.” Bourdieu “portrays everyday linguistic exchanges as situated encounters between agents endowed with socially structured sources and competencies, in such a way that every linguistic interaction, however personal and insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce” (2), which entails that while every utterance is held in tandem with the canonical rhetorics, it also harbors traces of other existent institutions.⁹

Such gnostic “utterances” would be appealing to intellectual and well-off circles, who either were educated or sought education beyond the limiting and limited knowledge portrayed as blind faith provided by the Church and its officials. For the same reason, such inquiries (much like in the past) along with the haunting similarities in doctrine became a living threat. By promoting the official language—that is, the use of the basic units of thought and discourse of the mainstream, religious canon—it would necessarily marginalize and devalue those who did not fall under the same category. The margins are then coerced into collaborating “in the destruction of their instruments of expression” (49). Yet this is when subversive writing emerges. The covert subversive strategy emerges in response to the existing dogmatic, institutional religious limitations. The pervasively Christian culture proclaimed their dominance over the people of the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the margins of belief managed to persevere and become influential through the subversion of the center. This required stealth and (to the extent that it was conscious at all) caution, a specific language that would “fall under the radar” and embody this relationship between the orthodox and heterodox.

Literature is never created in a void, which explains the various global influences especially in the texts under discussion, but it was necessary to adapt to the central culture as the texts were created as part of a predominantly Christian society by Christian poets. That said, there is a sense that the marginal influences are making an effort to replace, or at least impinge upon, the center. As a traditionally persecuted heresy, gnostic residues could not have appeared overtly. Leo Strauss describes this phenomenon in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* as “writing between the lines”: “That literature [literature of persecution] is addressed not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only. It has all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantage—that it reaches only the writer’s acquaintances” (25). This does

not make any direct comment on the poets and their personal beliefs, but this structure seems to correlate with the specific choice of genre—the dream vision, where the subversive tends to rise in, as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, “the fact that [while] literary or artistic production appears as disinterested, as a haven for gratuitous activity that is ostentatiously opposed to the mundane world of commodities and power, [it] does not mean that it is interest-free; on the contrary, it means only that it is able more easily to conceal its interests beneath the veil of aesthetic purity” (Bourdieu, 16). In other words, the orthodox Christian literature appears “disinterested” while actually possessing elements of gnostic “interest.” On a larger scale, the gnostic discourse keeps turning up in orthodox texts so that it would ideally disappear, but it ends up having the reversed effect. Steven Kruger in *The Spectral Jew* discusses a similar effect with regard to Jewishness in an otherwise medieval Christian world, claiming that “Jewishness is a spectral presence, strongly felt and yet just as strongly derealized” (xvii). That is, “Even at the moment of its disappearance, the specter is, if liminally, present—as that whose disappearance is necessary for the emergence of the new, Christian self” (111). It is possible to add to this spectrality of presence a form of gnostic residue.

Since the Middle Ages are commonly perceived as essentially Christian orthodox (a term that always requires both careful and capacious definitions)¹⁰, such an exploratory endeavor obviously raises questions about how these ideas made their way into seemingly orthodox texts. As I will show throughout the rest of this chapter, these tenets may have survived, on the one hand, either through the orthodox polemics against Gnosticism or, on the other, through heretically suspect writings that may have circulated around intellectual and clerical circles which then influenced the literature. Gnosticism in terms of the paradigm that I examine should not be posited against other forms of heresy but considered as an inherent part of their structure, taking into account that “heresy,” much like Gnosticism, is a fluid term. There are many types of heresy which may not be and were not considered completely unorthodox, rather simply held by the wrong people or people in politically vulnerable situations, as R. I. Moore claims in *The War on Heresy*. The majority of the most influential heresies from the fourth to the fifteenth century (and beyond) alluded in one way or another to the Gnostic, seemingly obsolete and “abstract” movement. Or as Moore puts it, “The use of contemporary names [‘Cathars,’ ‘Patarenes,’ and ‘*Publicani*’], for the first time in a formal ecumenical pronouncement here [Lateran III] and

in *Ad abolendam* implicitly described a contemporary phenomenon, not simply a revival of ancient error" (208).¹¹

Moreover, authors had the prerogative of falling under the radar of censorship by seeming to present the orthodox while resonating with the unorthodox. In the same manner, Marc Michael Epstein dismisses the possibility that certain imagery was merely derivative of the art of the dominant majority (Christian) and claims that when one culture adopts the images of another, it does not blindly reproduce it but rather imbues it with new meaning. In this sense, a kind of subversion is formed which serves as a coded message.¹² In this manner, I am establishing a literary scheme that was so deeply immersed in the aforementioned impinging margins that our acknowledgment of it becomes necessary for a better, more comprehensive reading of these texts. Finally, this heresy does not necessarily function as an alternative to religious dogma or as an affront to Catholic doctrine, but emerges as a dynamic force of inspirational creativity, which continually tests the "stable" boundaries of dogmatic knowledge.

What Is Gnosticism?

Gnosticism is a broad concept, referring to diverse, syncretistic religious movements and thus quite difficult to define. In this very difficulty lays the interchangeability of religious "orthodoxy" and "heresy" and the way in which they are defined in relation to one another and often by reference to other matters such as social, cultural and political identity. Nevertheless, the Congress of Messina in 1966 finally formulated a somewhat general definition. They decided that the term "Gnosis" should be understood as a type of "knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite,"¹³ while the broader term "Gnosticism" would refer to a historical phenomenon or, more specifically, to the second-century groups characterized by their practice and specific understanding of Gnosis. My reading will draw on their definition of gnosis and the process of attaining gnosis recalling the major tenets held by those second-century groups. To be more precise, Giovanni Filoramo describes the Gnostic process of attaining Gnosis as "a circularity that implies identity of substance between the subject of knowledge (the Gnostic), the object (the divine substance of their ontological ego) and the means by which the subject knows, Gnosis as a revelation in the form of a call from above effected by a Saviour figure or a particularly esoteric, divinely guaranteed tradition" (144). Moreover, it is one of the

major pre-Christian traditions that influenced the development of orthodox Christianity.¹⁴ Since religion at the time was much more diverse than generally thought, my reading will flesh out the various traditions vying for attention occupying the center, at times even the margins impinging on the center, of religious discourse.

In somewhat general terms, primarily based on Gnostic scholars' research, early Gnostic thought can be more or less divided into two major schools, the Persian and the Syrian-Egyptian.¹⁵ The Persian school consists of Mandaeanism and Manichaeism, movements often regarded as religions in their own right, while the Syrian-Egyptian school proves to be widely influenced by Platonism. This work will mostly draw upon the Nag Hammadi writings, representative of the Syrian-Egyptian form of Gnostic doctrine due to their recent discovery and rising popularity amid scholarly discussions, but will also deal with its Persian aspect as the Church drew much of its mandates from Augustine who, as I shall discuss later, was himself deeply influenced and affected by such a Gnostic form of heresy. In broad terms, these Gnostics "seem to agree on a common spiritual ancestor in Seth, the patriarch, Biblical son of Adam; and in identifying the most characteristic elements of the divine world and in defining the way in which the story of salvation is unfolded. Thus it has been conjectured that these writings belong to a common ideological world of a more or less unitary nature commonly called 'Sethian'" (Filoramo, 18).

However, the early Christian Gnostics were soon divided as well. They separated into two other major streams; the Sethians and the Valentinians. The Valentinians remained closer in thought and practice to the Christian orthodoxy, while the Sethians, more clearly dualistic, veered further away. Nevertheless, both were perceived by the early Catholic Church as "equally" heretical. "What distressed Irenaeus most was that the majority of Christians did not recognize the followers of Valentinus as heretics. Most could not tell the difference between Valentinian and orthodox teaching" (Pagels 1989, 32), again emphasizing the blurry line separating orthodoxy from heterodoxy. It was from this position that the heresies managed to make their later return to force. Much like Jacques Derrida's concept of the spectre, heresy is an ambivalent, paradoxical figure, which exists in "between presence and non-presence" (*Spectres de Marx*, 12); this spectre aims for articulation in very specific terms, as I will discuss in connection with the structure of dream visions and the process of gaining gnosis. In broader terms, it is when "the prior, [in this case,

heretic/Gnostic] self [is] conjured up so that self may be made to disappear” (Kruger 2005, 111) that it actually reappears.

As the sources show, the original Gnostic streams, the Sethians and the Valentinians, have had a significant impact on Western Christianity, not strictly as a heresy but also as a fairly profound source for certain orthodox beliefs. To an extent, both streams were dualistic in character tracing their roots to other systems in the East, like Zoroastrianism and Judaism, among other Oriental religions which attempted to resolve the theological, but in fact profoundly philosophical, problem of evil.¹⁶ Their dualistic nature, where the cosmos was seen to be dominated by opposing forces of light and darkness, dealt with the relation between the forces at work in the world, the relation between God and man, and the schism within man himself—the relation between body and soul. These relationships revolved around the notion of *gnosis* (i.e., knowledge, insight) that must be achieved by man through a reawakening of his “memory” that would then lead to salvation. In the Middle Ages, as Mary Carruthers asserts, “people reserved their awe for memory. Their greatest geniuses they describe as people of superior memories, they boast unashamedly of their prowess in that faculty, and they regard it as a mark of superior moral character as well as intellect...in their understanding of the matter, it was memory that made knowledge into useful experience” (1). Namely, memory was privileged as a function that led to experiential knowledge or in our terms, *gnosis*, for the structure of remembrance is one that brings forth an absence that is present. That is, the gnostic “memory” refers to a pre-birth, enlightened form of knowledge that needs to be regained while in the prison of the physical in order to achieve salvation. This notion will become clear in the third chapter on Gower, where the *Confessio* functions as an exercise in memory and reflection. *Gnosis* should not be perceived as any kind of rational knowledge since the Greek language makes a clear distinction between scientifically based knowledge and knowledge that comes from experience, which is *gnosis*. But it is more than that “for *gnosis* involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself. And to know oneself, they claimed, is to know human nature and human destiny” (Pagels 1989, xix). According to Theodotus, a Gnostic teacher of the Valentinian school, the Gnostic undergoes a process in which he advances “from faith and fear to knowledge...Having set free the spirit of bondage, which produces fear, and advanced by love to adoption, he now reverences from love, Him whom he feared before.”¹⁷

The Gnostic theory of knowledge—*gnosis*—is directly related, moreover, to Gnostic cosmogony, which holds that the physical, material world

is essentially the creation of an evil and/or foolish demiurge, which was created without the knowledge or consent of the Godhead. The Sethian and Valentinian demiurge is then the inferior outcome of the sin of Sophia. Sophia or, in other words, Wisdom plays a prominent role in the traditions discussed below, both traditional and heretical, occidental and oriental, emphasizing the centrality of female voices. Augustine, in his discussion of Proverbs 9:14–18, poses Lady Wisdom in contrast to a harlot whom he likens to the Manichees. Again, we may make a leap forward as a similar juxtaposition appears in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, in his depiction of Holy Church and Lady Meed. But just as the former relationship is far from simple, so is the one presented in the latter. In *Confessions* Book VII, xxi, Augustine again discusses the figure of Wisdom in reference to Proverbs 8:22, this time identifying her with the figure of the Logos, arguing for the affirmation of Christ's coeternity to God the Father. In these lines, it seems Augustine is interacting with an idea raised by the fourth-century heretical Arians, at a time in which their heresy was at its strongest, taking over the East and West of the Roman Empire, and who used the same reference to support their own claim with regard to Christ's status as "created," but it seems that Augustine interprets a state of in between, where Christ is both in the role of created and creator. It seems Augustine is debating this blurry line between knowledge and faith, trying to rationalize a Catholic tenet when reason does not seem to suffice. There is a realization here that pure faith entails an unknowing that is simply insufficient whereas knowledge, or rather the kind of salvific knowledge that is sought in this instance, is beyond faith and simple reason. Namely, knowledge brings to the foreground something that—orthodoxically speaking—was meant to be suppressed. This notion takes us back to the Gnostic Sophia, whose character becomes central in the literary works I will be discussing, specifically in the works of the *Pearl* poet, for Lady Wisdom embodies various characters whose message holds the key to salvation.

The outcome of Sophia's sin could not have been but doomed to failure for she dared an attempt at creation without the contribution or concession of her consort.

And when she saw (the consequences of) her desire, it changed into a form of a lion-faced serpent. And its eyes were like lightning fires which flash. She cast it away from her, outside that place, that no one of the immortal ones might see it, for she had created it in ignorance. And she surrounded it with a luminous cloud, and she placed a throne in the middle of the cloud

that no one might see it except the holy Spirit who is called the mother of the living. And she called his name Yaltabaoth [...] Now the archon who is weak has three names. The first name is Yaltabaoth, the second is Saklas, and the third is Samael. And he is impious in his arrogance which is in him. For he said, 'I am God and there is no other God beside me,' for he is ignorant of his strength, the place from which he had come . . . And having created [...] everything, he organized according to the model of the first aeons which had come into being, so that he might create them like the indestructible ones. Not because he had seen the indestructible ones, but the power in him, which he had taken from his mother, produced in him the likeness of the cosmos. And when he saw the creation which surrounds him, and the multitude of the angels around him which had come forth from him, he said to them, 'I am a jealous God, and there is no other God beside me'. But by announcing this he indicated to the angels who attended him that there exists another God. For if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?¹⁸

This led the Gnostics in the belief that the Old Testament God is but a faulty artificer, claiming sole sovereignty through lies and/or misapprehensions, which "the Gnostic, in the light of his revelations, is now in a position to uncover" (Filoramo, 82). Uncovering this knowledge would then lead to the possibility of salvation. The demiurge's new structure featuring a new hierarchy of demons is continuously at work in everyone's body. This cosmological hierarchy is based on the concentric spheres of gnostic belief, which are a part of what Bloomfield terms the "soul journey." "Although the question of origin is irrelevant to our purpose, Persia may have been the ultimate home of the Soul Journey. Reitzenstein suggests that a representation of the Soul Journey (which he calls the Soul Drama) is the basic concept of the Persian folk-religion which passed to the west through Babylon into various religions, picking up certain Chaldean beliefs on the way" (4). This soul journey, which portrays the ascension of the soul through the aforementioned spheres, may be juxtaposed to the physical process undertaken by the gnostic toward knowledge. The Christian orthodox took over this process and transformed it into the seven deadly sins which function in a similar manner. "The cardinal sins may be conceived as a heterodox or even pagan list taken over by Christianity and purged of its unsatisfactory elements" (9). However, Bloomfield continues in his note to this comment by claiming that "the Church was not completely successful in purging the seven cardinal sins of their astrological origin, for surprisingly enough, beginning in the

fourteenth century, the planets are linked to the sins more distinctly than ever before in Christian literature. In fact, the best examples come from this time . . . M. Gothein suggests it existed in the interval among the folk along with black magic and unreported in literature.”¹⁹ “The demonic,” Filoramo claims, “represents an active power, charged with negative energy. Over and above the cosmos, humanity has become the true place where the battle is fought, decisive for every individual, between the forces of good and evil” (92). The physical realm then becomes no more than a simulacrum of the true heavenly world and the body serves as a mere confinement for the soul, which needs to be set free through the regaining of knowledge that had been lost. And just like Christ who “only with passion and death had truly closed the cycle of his earthly actions, [death serves as] a passage, perhaps for the Gnostic not altogether threatening, but always necessary” (Filoramo, 133).

It was the Gnostics’ similitude with Christianity that put fear into the hearts of Christian officials, mainly between the second and fifth centuries, but then again between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries²⁰ for the gnostic influence did not completely disappear. It lingered in medieval Europe in different forms, one of which was the Cathars whom Hildegard of Bingen preached against.²¹ The Gnostic resistance came from early on but as Gnosticism evolved into various other manifestations along Europe, they faced much of the same reaction of fear and persecution. As Moore puts it, “Heresy did not disappear . . . it became the policy of the church” (19). The reaction against heresy became harsher as time moved on (from about 1140 onwards) because “chruchurchmen did not forget the threat which had been posed by the great heresies of antiquity [predominantly Gnosticism] and continued to agree on the necessity of denouncing them and guarding against their revival” (70).

Gnosticism vs. Heresy

Europe in the fourteenth century was inundated with attempts at explaining the source of evil in the world due to natural disasters, recurring socio-political upheavals and growing ecclesiastical corruption. But there was also the rising question of the place of man in an inexplicable universe. What had once been so clearly defined by the Great Chains of Being²² was no longer appropriate or satisfactory. The world was foreign and intimidating, but at the same time, marvelous and dismaying prompting doubt and questions on the personal level, and revolutions, on the social

one. *Piers Plowman*, for instance, presents such a picture that is quite similar to the one portrayed by Gower in *Vox Clamantis*, or even the picture painted by the *Pearl* poet in his vineyard parable. Gower, as Langland's and the *Pearl* poet's contemporary, presents a demonized vision of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt. The actions of the people are harshly judged due to their "monstrous" attempt to reverse the roles of supposedly preset concepts, resulting in great chaos and disorder. But it seems the chaos and disorder is prevalent as it is the result of spiritual ignorance manifesting itself through the pursuit of inconsequential materiality instead of Truth, much like is depicted in the works of the aforementioned, ultimately less than "traditional" poets.

In this manner, for all of the vigorous teaching of the elements of the orthodox faith, gnostic thought made a return to force. It provided answers that the orthodox canon seemed to skirt around. This intermingling of spiritual ideas and traditions was part of a growing culture and the viewing of events in human history as influencing cosmic changes and vice versa became quite possible. Jeffrey B. Russell puts it well in his article, "Medieval Witchcraft and Medieval Heresy,"

It is believable and natural that discontented individuals coming under the influence of heretical teachings could agree that this world was created by an evil God, and that God's enemy, Lucifer, is consequently good. They would accept with the greatest pleasure the idea that Lucifer would triumph at the end of the world and lead them with him into his kingdom. And they would then quite naturally decide that in order to obtain this reward they must worship him here on earth in the way he wishes.²³

However, as soon as the official Catholic Church established its grounds, anything that veered away from their proclaimed canon was placed under the very problematic and complex title of heresy.

The gnostics,²⁴ nevertheless, were highly influential both in the earlier centuries and again, in their later manifestations between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries, since they provided clear answers to the largely debated problem of evil and the overall anxiety of a gradually annihilating existence, which appealed to people's personal lives and day-to-day struggles since the Middle Ages are often characterized by a prevailing and pervading sense of dissatisfaction with the world, specifically from a religious point of view. It is also filled with millennial fears and apocalyptic scenarios,²⁵ which are conjured up by questions of existence, knowledge,

and the lack thereof. Apparently, the gnostics provided answers that were good enough to create fear in the hearts of the early Church's forming hierarchy and again much later, in the growing destabilization of dominant religious, social, and political forces. At the same time, however, many of these gnostics did not necessarily view themselves as "heretics" since many of their sayings were taken from the New Testament, and their writings used Christian terminology inspired by the Scriptures, all of which amounted to a confusing measure of credence. They were similar to the Catholic Church, and yet quite different since they perceived themselves as occupying a privileged place, possessing the secret teachings of Jesus, which are hidden from the "many," and which often led to their criticizing of common Christian beliefs.²⁶ The issue was even more complex due to the fact that up until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi scrolls, a collection of manuscripts containing religious and hermetic texts, among which are the so-called Gnostic gospels, published under the title *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, James Robinson, ed., 1988, all that scholars knew about these so-called heretics was taken from writings by their opponents. Following the discovery, the Gnostics could finally "speak for themselves"; "the efforts of the majority to destroy every trace of heretical 'blasphemy' proved so successful that, until the discoveries at Nag Hammadi, nearly all our information concerning alternative forms of early Christianity came from the massive orthodox attacks upon them. Although Gnosticism is perhaps the earliest – and most threatening – of the heresies, scholars had known only a handful of original Gnostic texts, none published before the nineteenth century" (Pagels 1989, xxiv). From this, unknown though these materials were until their rediscovery in 1945, we can at least trace the purest features of an outlook that, I argue, reemerged in the very end of the Middle Ages.

The Christian Gnostics of the early centuries did not initially move away from the church, rather the church, much as Moore claims, gradually pushed them out until heresy came to be equated with defilement and subsequently known as demonic.²⁷ Church officials also did not agree with the seeming equality of the Gnostics between men and women, again perhaps fearing for their position of supremacy.²⁸ In later centuries (eleventh to fifteenth), the insecurity of the church persisted as a growing number of female mystics²⁹ began writing and teaching as part of the contemplative tradition that occasionally bordered on the margins of the unacceptable.³⁰ But it was more than that since according to the Gnostics, those who had achieved gnosis were already independent of the church

and beyond its teaching and hierarchy since they had already attained more than the church aimed to provide—a basic type of knowledge hindered by and implemented within faith.³¹ Thus, if anyone could become like Christ and possess his knowledge what would become of the church? It would clearly lose ground. Pagels, who deals with the sociopolitical aspects of this religious movement,³² breaks it down to these simple terms: “Gnosis offers nothing less than a theological justification for refusing to obey the bishops and priests! The initiate now sees them as the ‘rulers and powers’ who rule on earth in the demiurge’s name. The Gnostic admits that the bishop, like the demiurge, exercises legitimate authority over most Christians—those who are uninitiated. But the bishop’s demands, warnings, and threats, like those of the demiurge himself, can no longer touch the one who has been ‘redeemed’” (*The Gnostic Gospels*, 38). In this sense, the Gnostic becomes marginalized, subversive to the legitimate authority and thus heretical, which would necessarily entail evil.

Nonetheless, late-medieval English society was generally devout and while the population wasn’t entirely Catholic, they were Christian in the sense that everyone (learned and ignorant) held a similar understanding of the world which was generally based on Christian principles,³³ especially since education in medieval England was much more diffused than previously thought.³⁴ If some resurgence or stubborn persistence of at least some of the Gnostic principles occurred, this would have occurred in complex and perhaps sometimes deliberately obscured ways. Poets then could plausibly deal with such controversial issues under the guise of fictionality since “like many artists [the Gnostics] search for interior self-knowledge as the key to understanding universal truths” (Pagels 1989, 134). At the same time, “the learned members of society were not insulated at birth from popular beliefs; their learning was only acquired later in life and coexisted with such beliefs. Conversely, uneducated people were not totally incapable of understanding the conclusions which the learned reached about matters of faith, even if they were not able to follow the arguments on which those conclusions were based [...] Medieval civilization was a unity and must be accepted in its often disconcerting totality” (Hamilton, 199). The church attempted to disengage itself from any other, possibly ruinous, influences, to de-centralize such issues, ironically, by continuously preaching and sermonizing against them, but the more they did so, the more central they became.

Realizing it would be impossible to battle intellectual freedom and the percolation of foreign (eastern) as well as domestic (western) influences,

Catholicism offered something different, accessible, and more appealing to all levels of society.³⁵ The Catholic Church, fittingly named, offered at the beginning a universal scheme of salvation, which later took on different forms albeit maintaining its universality. Their myth of creation and salvation, a more “straightforward”/orthodox, inclusive scheme than the one offered by the Gnostics, delineated that the creative force of the universe was made of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. According to this creed, the world is divided into a material, physical universe and a spiritual, intangible sphere that includes heaven and hell.³⁶ Man, who had been created perfect, fell to the temptation of Satan and sinned against God, and in order to restore man to his previous state, God the Son became incarnate in Jesus Christ, who was both man and divine. The Incarnation became possible “because Jesus’ mother, Mary, agreed to do God’s will,” unlike Sophia, the “mother” figure in Gnostic cosmogony. And “while still a virgin, [Mary] conceived Jesus through the agency of the Holy Spirit [...] Jesus [then] died because he was truly human, but he rose from the dead on the third day following because he was truly God” (Hamilton, 40, 41). The church presented itself as the natural follower and successor of Christ and His teachings and thus, the true believers of Christ must adhere to its teachings and beliefs. “At some unknown time in the future a number of portents would occur heralding the coming of the Antichrist. He would be the antithesis of Christ, a mortal man, subservient to the devil, claiming to be Christ returned to earth again and demanding to be paid divine honors. Many Christians, it was supposed, would accept his claim and apostatize, while those who refused to worship Antichrist would be persecuted. Then the present universe would be dissolved and God would create a new heaven and a new earth” (Hamilton, 94) for the “true” believers—those who accepted the Truth as it was taught by the church and piously performed their church-given duties. This scheme provides a clear, linear, causal development of the world, which directly follows the Old Testament, unlike the mythologically infused, elaborate scheme offered by the Gnostics. Conversely, the Gnostics believed that it was their unique type of knowledge, unavailable to the many that would be the source of eventual salvation.

Gnosticism in a Predominantly Catholic Medieval Society

Though a significantly dangerous enemy of the early Church, Gnostics seemingly completely disappeared by the fourth century. However,

many of its central ideas remained a part of other religious movements as well as within Christianity itself. The canonical Gospel of John is one such example. Its style and themes retain several prominent gnostic principles which shall be further discussed later in the chapter. Similarly, Augustine, one of the most influential figures in the development of Western Christianity as well as the one who defined many concepts for the medieval religious worldview, persisted, due to his Manichean background, in many ways of thought that seem clearly Gnostic.³⁷ At the same time, concepts as well as traditions migrated from one country to the next, most especially through the help of clerical envoys, enabling the circulation and influence of such patterns of thought on educated, literate societies, which were also usually the intended audiences of authors such as those I have incorporated into this work. It is possible that the superiority held within secret gnostic teachings may have appealed both to the elitist sensibilities of the writers themselves as well as to their noble and intellectual audience. Nevertheless, the fear of the stranger and of the strange on a personal level, and the fear of institutional instability on a social scale, proved to be the perfect tool for the canonical church. Though the heretical groups were very much dispersed and much less threatening than the Catholic church portrayed them, the church did not want a repeat of the past and used its power of unity over the heretics' disparity to dispel any such possibilities since they were aware of the heretical persuasive potential. Heresy, they believed, "like leprosy, was spread by the poisoned breath of its carrier, which infested the air and was thus enabled to attack the vitals of those who breathed it, but was also and more efficiently transmitted as a *virus* – that is, in seminal fluid" (Moore 1987, 63). This type of wide-ranging anxiety permeated Christian male culture in the form of the fear of witches and succubi.³⁸ But the quest for Truth is one that necessarily involves anxiety as it aims to articulate the inarticulable. While the majority of mystics, which I've established as a somewhat marginal orthodoxy, attempted to achieve this Truth in this precise manner, through a form of unknowing, the gnostics used the exact opposite function through which the body becomes exceedingly and hauntingly present.

Nevertheless, in a somewhat paradoxical manner, it seems like a rising need for the uncovering of dormant knowledge lay in the midst of medieval human life and culture, especially in the later Middle Ages, a period imbued with the uncertainty of the future.³⁹ The Church, which was afraid of such instability, transformed people's fear of the unknown into

the fear of evil, the fear of the “outsider,” which then took on the form of a specific figure—the devil; “There was even an attempt to attribute the thousand streams of gnosticism to a single source: the Devil. This was followed, almost as a natural corollary, by accusations of magic, witchcraft, incest and libertinism” (Filoramo, 3). As Bloomfield claims, the Church utilized these pre-Christian ideas by implementing them into the doctrine of the traditional Church; “the concept of the seven cardinal sins arose from a popular, *probably Gnostic*, variant of the Soul Drama, a particular type of Otherworld Journey; but, chiefly because its heretical associations were suppressed, its origin was soon forgotten. Later the sins became reunited with eschatology, but usually in connection with another aspect of the next world, hell” (emphasis added, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, 66). Thus, the connection between Christianity and gnosticism, a much deeper and inherent connection than at first assumed, is made clear.⁴⁰ But since “it is the winners who write history—their way, no wonder, then, that the viewpoint of the successful majority has dominated all traditional accounts of the origin of Christianity . . . But the discoveries at Nag Hammadi reopen fundamental questions. They suggest that Christianity might have developed in very different directions—or that Christianity as we know it might not have survived at all” (Pagels 1989, 142). Yet obviously it did. Nevertheless, the late-medieval surrounding heresies as well as their literary influences suggest the interest was there and occasionally was quite potent.

This outlook offers a new angle of view on the blaze of religious renewals that are visible in the later Middle Ages, especially as those touch the laity in the period, prominently the thoughtful and affluent ones. More specifically, this study shows how the literary works discussed may have possibly presented a religious reaction that was part of a growing movement that took its sources from the pre-Christian past and incorporated it into the problematic present. While the Lollards, a mid-later-fourteenth-century English heretical group, end up being pretty dour and bitter anti-clerical types, this specific form of the antiquated gnostic heresy provides another way which stirred that which could and could not be expressed, opening the question in a completely new manner. However, unlike the Lollards, the gnostics never quite reached the point of “dogma” and it never outright went after clerics. But like the Cathars, the medieval manifestation of gnosticism, this was a fairly anti-worldly but potent new dualism that may have appealed to the secular nobility, the educated “middle class,” and well-to-do laity since it rationalized the present and glorified

the individual. It also tended toward a kind of dismissal of clerical guidance, offering salvation strictly based on a type of predetermined knowledge that could be uncovered in anyone regardless of their deeds.

Other Forms of Heresy

Heresy, as fluid a term as it may be, developed in history alongside the mainstream, constantly changing to suit the “requirements” of the time. “The history of heresy can be seen to some extent, as the history of mainstream ideas, or at least a reflection of them, its image constructed and reconstructed according to the role it has played” (2), claims L. J. Sackville.⁴¹ And indeed, though the Greek Fathers battled the diverse heresies, the situation did not improve for the Latin Fathers, who continued to vehemently preach against any departures from the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, the impact of the heresies became more clearly pronounced when the likes of Tertullian found the heretical sect of the Montanists⁴² more appealing than the orthodox after previously repeatedly denouncing heresy. Augustine dealt with a similar issue as he “fell” into the clutches of the Manichees. Augustine initially converted to Manichaeism for the sake of gaining knowledge and wisdom, but also since he was disillusioned with the anti-intellectualism of the African Church. He finally converted to Christianity (after nine years in the Manichean fold), but even with his conversion, he still held onto the need for knowledge and secret wisdom. In his exegetical writings, there is a sense that what he did not fully receive among the Manicheans, he wished to accomplish through orthodoxy for he believed that “the text is figurative or enigmatic so that the reader has to work to get an acceptable meaning that is veiled or only hinted at in the text” (22).⁴³ The authors of the late middle ages, as I intend to show in this work, used a similar system that draws on Augustine who clearly drew on his own Gnostic past.⁴⁴

One of the major manifestations of medieval gnosticism, adhering to a form of the ancient religion, was the Cathars, as according to Bernard Hamilton, “the Cathars owed a good deal of their popularity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to the fact that they were able to give a straightforward answer to this problem [the origin of evil in a Christian society] in simple terms which everybody could understand” (191). The Cathars appeared in the West around the twelfth century in the areas of southern France and Lombardy, “although they may have been there much earlier. During the next sixty years they formed congregations throughout much

of Western Europe” (Hamilton, 174). “By the first half of the twelfth century there were wandering preachers of heresy who were able to reach many thousands of ordinary people and convert them to new ways of thinking... what is extraordinary is the way in which the preachers of such views were able to move around the country for so many years before they were stopped” (53) and since “the Cathars of the east were anxious to proselytise, the growing contacts between the Eastern Empire and western Europe, particularly those associated with trade, allowed the heresy to spread” (Costen, 59).⁴⁵ As such, they were “the most serious and widespread of all the heretical movements which challenged the Catholic Church in the twelfth century and challenged it most severely in the Languedoc. It became a movement with a coherent body of belief and with an organization which made it into a kind of ‘counter-Church’. Perhaps because it... grew from the elements which came together quite slowly in the first half of the twelfth century” (Costen, 52). While they used Christian terminology and based their faith on the New Testament, they were clearly Christian dualists who interpreted the Gospel accordingly. Their ideas were influenced by the Bulgarian Bogomils, who themselves had their roots in ancient Gnosticism.

In “The Book of John the Evangelist,” a Cathar text, fallen Satan takes on the role of the Old Testament God, creator of the world and of everything that is in it. The Son of God tells John, “foolish men say thus in their deceitfulness that my Father made bodies of clay: but by the Holy Ghost made he all the powers of the heavens, and holy ones were found having bodies of clay because of their transgression, and therefore were delivered unto death.”⁴⁶ Christ’s role is thus to teach “foolish” men of the truth, awaken them from their imposed devilish stupor, and salvage them from their dark existence—ideas that percolate into the canonical Gospel of John as well.

The Gospel was written in a style very similar to the Gnostic text, “The Trimorphic Protennoia” which provides a sense of secret revelation in which salvation is present and attainable for the initiate. His treatment of the concept of Logos again seems to draw on the Gnostic tradition in its similarity to the concept of Wisdom and the entire notion of Jesus as teacher imparting wisdom to the believers. This would result in a sense of estrangement as the initiates must face the hatred of the world “because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (John, 17:14). Once knowledge is imparted, salvation becomes possible and “that where I am, there ye may be also” (John, 14:3).

At the beginning of the twelfth century, the Cathar heresy spread to England when a group of Cathars made their way over from Flanders.⁴⁷ Another group of about 30 men and women called Publicans was also detected in England around 1165. William of Newburgh writes in his *History of the Kings of England*:

In those days there came to England certain erring folk of the sect commonly thought to be called Publicans. These seem to have originated in Gascony under an unknown founder, and they spread the poison of their infidelity in a great many regions; for in the broad lands of France, Spain, Italy, and Germany so many are said to be infested with this pestilence that, as the Psalmist of old complained, they seem to have multiplied beyond number.⁴⁸

While they only gained one documented convert, they spread far and wide, off the record. It is presumed they had some influence in the form of friendly relations with local monks and “with so many of the nobility at least sympathetic towards Catharism it was possible for the heresy to spread in the countryside to the peasantry” (Costen, 72). In the beginning of the thirteenth century there is again evidence of Catharism in England. Nevertheless, retribution was swift, indicating perhaps an underlying urgency of nipping a reemerging problem in the bud. Later in the century a significant amount of religious interchange was taking place between the Low Countries and England, manifesting in groups like the Beguines, who were mostly condemned as heretical for their Albigensian influences. By the thirteenth century, they generally tended to become mystics, who touched the edges of orthodoxy, a notion that continued into the fourteenth century. In northern Europe, the rulers along with the church seemed to deal with the issue of heresy quite successfully. In southern Europe, however, “the system broke down: most of the time heretics were not relayed to bishops, and rulers refused to aid the church in the suppression of heresy, being apparently content to preside over a society in which religious pluralism was encouraged,” until “dissent became part of the western tradition.” This resulted in the establishment of the Inquisition. While the Inquisition “did not function in England, heretics fared no more leniently there than elsewhere” (Hamilton, 176, 178). Nevertheless, the operations of the thirteenth-century Inquisition were not like the fifteenth century on.

Lollardy, an English reformist mid-late-fourteenth-century religious and political movement led by John Wycliffe, certainly needs to be

compared and considered as well since its influence on the literature of the period has been discussed far more frequently. Yet the differences from the gnostic way of thought are, if anything, more striking. Even though Lollardy⁴⁹ seems to possess some similar features, like their perspective on the necessity, or lack thereof, of the institution of the Church, the equality of women, which recalls gender relations of earlier gnostic groups, their use of “special” lingo to identify its members,⁵⁰ their perspective on Scripture,⁵¹ as well as their overall repudiation of transubstantiation, these by no means extend to their more central tracts or aspirations. The Lollards developed an entire academic theology which, paradoxically, aimed at becoming dogmatic. This notion is paradoxical due to their apparent sense of being an elite select group. The Gnostics, on the other hand, wished for no such thing. Not only were they not so completely and specifically against the institution of the Church, but spreading their teaching among the “many” would have probably sounded a bit too “Catholic,” dogmatic, and systematic for their elect tastes. Moreover, and more importantly, at the core of Lollardy there seems to be a different type of knowledge that is sought—by wishing to vernacularize the bible, they actually aimed at a more literal knowledge for the masses, whereas the Gnostics proposed the complete opposite.

No less influential on the period at hand was the gnostic Manichaeism founded by the Persian prophet Mani around the middle of the third century in Babylonia, and which “spread, in the course of the thousand years, after their first appearance, over large parts of Europe and Asia, extending from the Pacific to the Atlantic Oceans. Their main tenets, which were to exercise an astonishingly potent influence on human thought” (5), are based on the dualistic, gnostic notion that the universe is divided into two separate, independent principles: Light and Darkness, the soul and the body, respectively.⁵² Manichaeism spread into Europe in two waves: the first, between the third and seventh centuries, and the second, at the beginning of the Middle Ages, which up until the fourteenth century “swept over all southern and part of central Europe” (Obolensky, 8).

Augustine of Hippo found himself drawn to the Manichaean doctrine, including their broad questioning and understanding of concepts in their search for secret knowledge, and repeatedly and publicly condemned their appeal. Nevertheless, he dedicated Books III–V of his *Confessions* to his experiences in their fold. He admits to having been fascinated by their teachings, falling prey to his interest in the liberal arts, his attraction for astrology, and the commanding charisma of their teachers. In *Confessions*

XII.xvi.23, he beseeches God to enlighten him of His wisdom so that he would not be like them who refuse to heed the Truth and must suffer the blindness of their worldly ignorance. Silencing the ignorant in their false raucous, he claims, might prove impossible, but “latrent quantum volunt et obstrepant sibi” [let them bark and deafen themselves as much as they like] for they are apparently doomed to remain in the dark. In Book V, chapter 3, he recalls an encounter with a Manichaen Bishop named Faustus whom he found extremely eloquent and whom he admired for his modesty as Faustus could not provide him with the answers he was seeking. It was following this encounter that Augustine began searching elsewhere for those answers. And though he left their fold, becoming an adamant opposer of the sect, his later teachings retained Gnostic influences in what look like signs of anti-worldly detachment and fleshly impurity. In addition, Augustine himself claims he was often accused, along with other prominent church Fathers, of being Gnostic.⁵³

Another of the more prevalent heresies in fourteenth-century England surrounded the theory of a *clara visio*, espoused by Uthred of Boldon and condemned in 1368; “the vision of some aspect of divine truth granted to all between apparent and real death, carrying with it the fateful choice or rejection of God upon which depended the eternal salvation or shipwreck of the soul” (Knowles, 50). This theory debated the possibility of salvation for pagans (or anyone, for that matter) through natural virtue and God’s grace, and through the acquiring of knowledge. In this manner, anyone could be saved (or doomed) on the basis of innate merit and predestination.⁵⁴ In a similar fashion, William of Ockham, Robert Holcot, Thomas Buckingham, and Adam of Woodham were known as “Pelagians.” They placed great emphasis on God’s *potentia absoluta* which negates the necessity of charity, good deeds, and a virtuous lifestyle since they claim it is in God’s power to grant salvation to whomever He chooses for whatever reason. “In 1326, 51 articles from [Ockham’s] *Sentences* were condemned at Avignon; 2. God can accept a man without grace into eternal glory and can damn a man who has not sinned; 3. Charity is not necessary for divine acceptance; 4. God can remit sin without the sinner first needing grace” (Vitto, 38), all of which relate to a passive, clearly nonorthodox form of salvation, which, in turn, not only recalls, but also foregrounds and marks the gnostic residue.

Another form of heresy that influenced both the period as well as the authors discussed (especially, as I shall argue, Gower) is Hermeticism, an early revelatory tradition that found many of its influences in many

different traditions and which influenced various other traditions. Though it was difficult to pin down, much like Gnosticism, some of its texts were in circulation in the Middle Ages and were further popularized in Italy, forming a kind of revival in the mid-1400s. It was centered on astrology, alchemy, and magic and looked into the past for its answers.⁵⁵ Though of no particular known origins, “Hermeticism has fascinated so many people precisely because it has made it possible to produce many analogies and relationships to various traditions: to Platonism in its many varieties, to Stoicism, to Gnostic ideas, and even to certain Aristotelian doctrines. The Gnostic, the esoteric, the Platonist, or the deist has each been able to find something familiar in the writings. One just had to have a penchant for remote antiquity, for the idea of a Golden Age, in order for Hermeticism, with its aura of an ancient Egyptian revelation, to have enjoyed such outstanding success” (2).⁵⁶ The central elements of most Hermetic traditions revolved around similarly gnostic issues such as revelation, secrecy, and initiation as “it involves not only knowing the hieroglyphic code, the enigmatic protective shell of Hermetic wisdom, but also demonstrating that one is worthy of this knowledge” (Ebeling, xii). These elements are intertwined with the notion of memory and remembrance, as we shall also see in chapter 3 of this book, for “Hermetic knowledge came to be viewed as rescued primeval knowledge, the wisdom of Adam, that had in some way survived the Flood” (ix). As shown, some of the prominent ideas of these heresies, along with the manifestations of John Wycliffe’s Lollardy, may be traced to the gnostic forms of thought I have been discussing. Nevertheless, none of these heresies are quite like the gnostic form of thought I have uncovered in these works which pertains to the basic conception of structure—that of knowledge, its reception, and ultimately salvation.

A Collapse of East into West: Knowledge vs. Faith in Dream Vision Tradition

As has been previously stated, a variety of traditions influenced the development of Western culture and religion. Such foreign infiltrations were made possible since “many full commentaries . . . sprang up virtually fully formed in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries [and] are best explained by their compilers having been able to draw upon a stock of glosses and comments, developed and disseminated orally over a long time from one generation of masters to the next in monastery classrooms,

and from one monastery to another via traveling scholars... University activity heavily depended on oral forms, from the lecture itself, to the oral (and orational) nature of examinations, *disputations*, and *sermones*" (Carruthers, 159).⁵⁷ Oral tradition was still very influential and so was the reliance on memory. In this manner, many traditions, systems of knowledge, and seemingly obsolete ideas could migrate from one place to another. It is just that "medieval scholars simply did not share our distrust of memory's 'accuracy'" (Carruthers, 160). They revered memory and those who possessed great mental capacities as unique individuals who were capable of preserving and sharing knowledge. As late as the fourteenth century, oral tradition and the emphasis on memory as a locus of knowledge persevered to the extent that "books [could] stay physically on their shelves in Paris and yet move to the centers of England and Rome, if they have been transmitted by one who imitates the prophet Ezekiel and first consumes (memorizes) their contents" (161). Carruthers continues to assert that the medieval "character" or self was probably conceived as having been "constructed out of bits and pieces of great authors of the past." Saying this, however, did not "exclude a conception of individuality, for every person had domesticated and familiarized these *communes loci*, these pieces of the public memory" (180). In this sense, the profound centrality of memory becomes palpable. To be more precise, memory (whether personal or communal—the creation of a "self") is a prerequisite in the process of "reading" and "composition." This process is one of meditation in which the "reader" and/or "author" undergoes a process of internalization accomplished through meditation, which denotes "memory-training, storage, and [ultimately] retrieval" (163). This process recalls Bourdieu's *habitus*, which he defines as a "system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them" (53)⁵⁸—in other words, a process based on the encounter between a predisposed body, or a significant spectral residue, and social structures, or a mainstream religion. Accordingly, this type of meditation would lead to remembrance which would culminate in knowledge and revelation (i.e., gnosis), much like is depicted in the dream visions discussed in this work. This *meditatio* is fundamentally different from the mystical one as the attained result of the former is a concrete vision of knowledge, a *lectio*

taken to much deeper lengths, whereas the latter engulfs the individual in a cloud of unknowing.

Orthodox contemplatives pursued states of mind that are similar to those of the ancient gnostics but have, not surprisingly, key differences. According to the Gnostics, the “secret” to knowing God lies in the Gnostic’s knowledge of himself which is achieved through the wisdom of a perfect teacher. Gnosis, however, should not be confused with the spiritual perfection sought by the contemplatives and mystics of the period—like St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich, to name a few. The mystics perceived this state as a gift from God; an ability to “know” God through the opening of one’s mind and heart in prayer, followed by the acceptance of this gift of love. It is a state of “higher understanding” that goes beyond the words of Scripture, entailing a deeper understanding of the written word to the extent of attaining communion with God.⁵⁹ However, this knowledge of God is in some respects fundamentally different from the knowledge of the self required by the Gnostics. In *Confessions*, Augustine describes the ecstatic state of meditation as “the very soul grew silent to herself and by not thinking of self mounted beyond self” (IX, x, 25 trans. Sheed, p. 200). In other words, the process of attaining knowledge of God necessitates a life of asceticism, namely, a renunciation of the self, whereas for the Gnostics, it is through the agency of man that God shows His power,⁶⁰ placing man and the self at the center. For the mystics, it is the “knowledge” of God that ultimately leads to knowledge of the self, whereas the Gnostics emphasize knowledge of the self as the portal leading to knowledge of God. The distinction here is crucial as both traditions seem to aspire to a similar goal—revelation. Both gnosticism and this particular view of mysticism⁶¹ claim to seek an explanation for an unreadable world but while the former wishes to arouse and articulate a dormant knowledge, the latter shies away from it through the incapacity of its articulation.

In other words, though there are similarities and their sources at times converge, there are clear-cut differences between the mystics and the gnostics. The “traditional” mystics acquire their divine vision through an absence of images and an obliteration of the self (i.e., they are not iconoclastic so they place less emphasis on the material than Catholicism). And while the mystics do not necessarily require a mediator in their process of contemplation, the gnostic requires the help of the mediator to awaken him from his worldly induced stupor in order to reunite with himself and

vicariously with God. This mediator in all literary works discussed takes the form of a powerful, knowledgeable woman. Bloomfield recalls a passage from a letter by Professor A. D. Nock where he stated that what he calls a "Soul Journey" actually attests to an "Iranian concept that the soul after death is met by a supernatural being impersonating its good or evil deeds and respectively appearing as a fair young maiden or an old hag" (*The Seven Deadly Sins*, 6). This tradition, depicting the guide of the initiate as a woman, ultimately goes back to the Gnostic Sophia.

Moreover, for the mystic the process of ascension as well as the final vision and union with God lead to an external revelation that ironically makes its presence known through its absence. That is, by forgetting the material state, by forgetting the self, revelation may be achieved. For the gnostic, it is an internal achievement culminating in the ultimate discarding of the body. The process entails foregrounding a form of knowledge that was consciously absent into conscious presence (i.e., a remembrance of the self), which would then lead to salvation. In this manner, the dream vision, as the locus of said knowledge via its liminality, enables the deconstructive structure of centralizing the margins in the sense that it seeks to reveal a heretofore hidden Truth. The Gnostic is in constant search for this elusive self; he is

the Stranger *par excellence*, the 'alien' propelled to exist in a cosmos that is strange to him, to live a life that does not belong to him, because it is rooted in illusion. His is an anxious search for gnosis, for a knowledge that will save him; this will be revealed to him as a call from above, a cry that will arouse him from his existence of sleep and shadows to remind him of his true origins [usually in the form of a messenger or wise teacher], which know nothing of becoming and of death, and to show him the road to salvation. (Filoramo, 13)

This process as depicted entails a state of repose that would ironically lead to an awakening followed by a re-encounter with the other within. The Platonic roots are thus clearly visible⁶² and so is the departure from traditional orthodoxy.

Here it is possible to take a leap into the later fourteenth century for the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (c. 1390) takes these two concepts of knowledge of the self and God and blends them together in a paradoxical attempt to attain some kind of revelatory knowledge through apophatic meditation. This obliteration of the self is crucial to the mystical experience in order to enter the darkness beyond the mind. The mystic

is in search for that which was lost, namely the loss of God in traditional terms. His journey is one displaced from tradition on the path of knowledge structured around the loss of traditional faith. De Certeau claims this separate division (between traditional faith and knowledge) started around the thirteenth century with Meister Eckhart and the Beguines but really formed itself as a distinct category between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries. He attributed the dark night images in many mystical texts not only to the personal sense of spiritual loss but also to the social and global absence of religious faith. To him, the mystical experience was an action, a process of getting lost in what had already been lost due to the opacity of the world. The author of the *Cloud* asserts that this ascension, toward divine unity, is enabled through the power of love, drawing on the Dionysian tradition, which clearly pervades the literary texts studied here. "This transcendent power of love, however, is by no means unique to the Dionysian tradition, because it plays a principal role not only in Augustine, but also in Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, and the Victorines, Hugh and Richard."⁶³ And while Pseudo-Dionysius⁶⁴ did not name the darkness above the mind that becomes one with God, nor the process of ascension, it does seem to draw heavily on early Gnostic traditions, which vicariously affected the writings of the aforementioned figures and thus the orthodox, "legitimate" center. The identity of the convert is thereby haunted by his former self, which means it is building on a previous entity that refuses to disappear and thus remains in the background as very influential residue.

The choice of literary texts under discussion comes into play at this point. Not only are they celebrated for their apparent Christian orthodoxy but they are also known for their specific choice of genre, the dream vision, which necessarily resembles the mystical revelation. In these literary texts, the dream vision becomes the locus of knowledge, the place of Truth in which that which was absent becomes hauntingly present. As Derrida claims, "Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (*Specters of Marx*, 37). It is through the adamant attempt of the center (Christian/Catholic orthodoxy) to decentralize the heresies that they paradoxically become central. This genre seems most appropriate for the purpose of the literary texts since "dream vision is a sub-genre of the visionary narrative through which authors typically explore interior, spiritual experiences by articulating an irrational dream world within the context of a dreamer's rational waking world" (62).⁶⁵ However, unlike the mystical revelation, dreams could presumably be

had by anyone but this is precisely why Macrobius⁶⁶ warns against falling for false dreams. The dream “veils a truth in ambiguous metaphors and cries out for interpretation. In a *visio* or prophetic dream the subject clearly perceives future events, while in the sublime *oraculum* some figure of authority, such as a parent, priest, or god, proffers advice and revelations from beyond” (Newman, 8).⁶⁷ In other words, the dream vision may appear to be similar to the mystical revelation in the sense that both entail a visionary experience that “was valued because it could lead the soul into deeper contrition, purer devotion, more perfect knowledge, and greater intimacy with God” (Newman, 14). But this practice of visualization began to spread among the laity, something that Newman calls “visionary scripts” appeared as well. These scripted endeavors are seemingly counterintuitive in the mystical sense since instead of “forgetting,” this exercise seems to place emphasis on a process of remembering (much like the gnostic revelation entails and the medieval emphasis on memory allows), guiding the subject on a journey into the self by literalizing the instructions. But this ritualization and democratization of the visionary experience would become orthodoxly problematic since it opened the practice to much possible deviation and a step away from faith and into the realm of knowledge, which orthodoxly would be translated into evil and heresy.

Gnosticism vs. Christianity

Many modern historians and theologians have debated the connection between Gnosticism and Christianity. Their interest in the topic resurfaced with the 1945 discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts. Karen L. King writes that scholars of the history of religion have reconceptualized Gnosticism as:

[N]o longer the product of heretical tendencies in Christianity [but] as pre-Christian, Oriental religion that influenced Christianity in its most formative period of development. By framing their historical reconstruction in terms of typological and chronological models of hierarchical development, these scholars put into question the secondary and derivative character of Gnostic thought, challenged the chronological priority and purity of Christianity, and openly reconfigured the relationship of Gnosticism and Christianity to their cultural environment, enlarging the scope to include a wide range of literature, especially Iranian and Mandaean materials. (107)⁶⁸

Many such historians have explored this underground tradition, represented mainly by, for example, the Cathars, Manicheans, Bogomils, and Hermetics, and its relationship with and its effects upon orthodox Christianity. They have examined the traditional scriptures alongside the “Gnostic Gospels,”⁶⁹ in an attempt to explain, trace, and clarify the wide array of beliefs in the medieval period, which eventually reached and influenced England by way of Christian and non-Christian texts and literature. The existence of evil as well as its manifestation and translation into heresy, being an inherent part of both Christianity and gnosticism, gave rise to many debates among scholars in the field. The question of evil in the world, the “evolution” of the character of the devil and its religious, cultural, and historical implications, serves as another point of comparison between the two traditions.⁷⁰ As these traditions and the tenets that define them begin to fluctuate and blur, so do the streams they represent. In other words, even though orthodox Christianity and gnosticism⁷¹ seem opposed to each other, both in concept and method, they actually draw on similar sources which can be established through their similar concerns—the source of evil in the world, the dualistic nature of the world and man, and eventual salvation.

However, this “simplistic” binary is anything but that. In England specifically, the process of conversion, from approximately 597 all the way to the Norman invasion in 1066, was long and hard due in part to the fact that the Britons kept pulling away from Christianity. Still dealing with much internal turmoil, it was only toward the end of the seventh century that it had become mostly Christian with an organized, hierarchical, institutionalized church. Throughout this period, Christian Europe continued to struggle with a myriad of unorthodox, deep-seated cultural traditions and modes of thought, some of which were Gnostic in origin. Early Christian Gnostics were quite surprised to find themselves cast out of the church after having been declared heretics.⁷²

In the church’s attempt to “settle the differences,” they either incorporated some of these pagan traditions into their own rituals, as Morton Bloomfield claims in *The Seven Deadly Sins*, or banished, eliminated, and persecuted such heretical remnants. But as previously shown, it would have been nearly impossible to completely eliminate such persistent and influential residue which can be seen through the concrete fact that there were prevalent movements in the West as late as the eleventh century onward, which interpreted already solidified Catholic tenets in different manners and thus caused a renewed stir among the orthodox. Moreover,

since “the medieval west was not sealed off from all contacts with other religious and philosophical systems” (Hamilton, 2), such ideas were in constant migration from the East to influence the West, even in the periods of perceived lull. “Indeed, no proper understanding of medieval literature is possible without a good knowledge of the Christian categories of thought and beliefs. Yet medieval man was also the heir of late classical antiquity and of barbarian cultures, and their categories of thought, their literary genres, their points of view, were also part of this heritage. He was well aware of a secular tradition which had not been completely transformed by Christianity” (Bloomfield, 85–6).⁷³ However, it is also important to reiterate that between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as the major heresies have all but seemingly dispersed, the orthodox continued to conjure fear through the creation of false beliefs and the spread of pointless persecution.

Much like the Cathars in southern France, other heresies developed up north, closer to home and less obviously “heretical” than the rest. Given the fact that the core of orthodoxy was riddled with heterodox ambiguities, some heresies were becoming extremely difficult to detect. It seems like much of the dispute between the Catholics and these “heretics” derived from questions of interpretation. As stated above, some of the so-called heretics were so close in thought to the Catholics that it was difficult for the most devout of Church followers to distinguish between their teaching and the church’s. Moreover, the gnostic sects used and referred to similar texts, the only difference laid in their interpretation of it.

If we go back to the earliest known sources of Christian tradition – the sayings of Jesus (although scholars disagree on the question of *which* sayings are genuinely authentic), we can see how both gnostic and orthodox forms of Christianity could emerge as variant interpretations of the teaching and significance of Christ...to the impoverishment of Christian tradition, Gnosticism, which offered alternatives to what became the main thrust of Christian orthodoxy, was forced outside...[Surviving] currents resurfaced throughout the Middle Ages in various forms of heresy. (Pagels 1989,1 48–50)

While the gnostics offered different readings of the written Word, the Catholics refused to accept any other interpretation than the one they decided upon and adhered to since they perceived themselves as the sole successors of Christ and the upholders of His truth; “the Catholic church in the Middle Ages claimed to hold and teach the faith which it had

received from the apostles. By this was meant not only the facts about Christ's life and teachings but also the way in which the apostles had interpreted their significance [...] The faith was therefore conceived as being a living tradition of belief, preserved by a community united in religious practice, which was capable of receiving fresh insights into the meaning of Christ's revelation" (Hamilton, 37). But this was clearly not the case. If anything, it was quite the other way around; the "heretics" were the ones more capable of receiving fresh insights "as people who *chose* a belief that the representatives of orthodox Christian communities defined as heterodox and therefore untenable by a true Christian" (Peters, 1).

This "freedom of thought and medieval individuality" did not come without a price. For if we closely examine these ideas, the reason behind the overwhelming triumph of orthodoxy becomes apparent. While the Catholic Church offered a clearer, more inclusive system of belief and salvation, the gnostics remained obscure, exclusive, limited to a predetermined number of initiates who were privy to knowledge that was hidden from the eyes of the many. The Catholic Church at the time, seeking expansion and mass conversion, rejected any forms of elitism, unlike the apparent path chosen by the gnostics. In order to be thus inclusive, its leaders created a simple, easy-to-follow framework that ultimately served as a valuable unifying tool. The gnostics, on the other hand, "confronted with those in the churches whom they considered ignorant, arrogant, or self-interested, refused to agree that the whole community of believers, without further qualification, constituted 'the church'. Dividing from the majority... they intended to discriminate between the mass of believers and those who truly had gnosis, between what they called the imitation, or the counterfeit, and the true church" (Filoramo, 104–5, 106–7). Each of the systems held adamantly to its own, but since it was clearly easier to belong to the Catholic Church, which was not only more welcoming but also in a way, free of free thinking, a system in which anyone might join as long as they followed their simply organized system, people naturally chose the one over the other.

But it was not only the exclusivity of the gnostics and the complexity of their teachings that made them unreachable. "Much of Gnostic teaching on spiritual discipline remained, on principle, unwritten. For anyone can read what is written down—even those who are not 'mature'. Gnostic teachers usually reserved their secret instruction, sharing it only verbally, to ensure each candidate's suitability to receive it" (Filoramo,

140). The way to gain gnosis wasn't written down—it was up to the suitable candidate to reach it through self-seeking, introspection, and in any other self-reflecting way. “In this respect, it was no match for the highly effective system of organization of the catholic church, which expressed a unified religious perspective based on the New Testament canon, offered a creed requiring the initiate to confess only the simplest essentials of faith, and celebrated rituals as simple and profound as baptism and the Eucharist” (Filoramo, 140–1). In other words, gnosticism presented itself as exclusive, meant for an elect few who were capable of grasping the secret teaching, capable of (re)gaining gnosis because the ability was supposedly “already there,” while the catholic church offered something inclusive.

At the same time, they offered something tangible, a faith in something the human mind could grasp and understand with the use of common sense and logic, while the gnostics presented something out of reach—beyond human logic, secret, invisible—like their figure of Christ. If Christ were to be considered a mere spiritual entity like most gnostics believed, his teachings, his words, would mean nothing to a logical-thinking man. However, emphasizing Christ's humanity and suffering, as the Catholic Church in fact did, would have twice the impact on believers, who would thus be able to relate. “Orthodox tradition implicitly affirms bodily experience as the central fact of human life. What one does physically—one eats and drinks, engages in sexual life or avoids it, saves one's life or gives it up—all are vital elements in one's *religious* development. But those Gnostics who regarded the essential part of every person as the ‘inner spirit’ dismissed such physical experience, pleasurable or painful, as a distraction from spiritual reality – indeed, as an illusion [reminiscent of Plato's allegory of the cave]. No wonder, then, that far more people identified with the orthodox portrait than with the ‘bodiless spirit’ of Gnostic tradition” (Pagels 1989, 101) for man wants the truth in a limited manner. “He is indifferent to pure knowledge, which has no consequences; he is even hostile to possibly damaging and destructive truths” (Nietzsche).

Moreover, another point of friction between the Gnostics and Catholics emerges in the form of the belief in the required intervention of a celestial mediator, but unlike the orthodox perspective, “the Gnostic Saviour does not come to reconcile humankind with God, but to reunite the Gnostic with himself. He does not come to pardon a sin that the Gnostic cannot have committed, but to rectify a situation of ignorance and deficiency

and to re-establish the original plenitude. The Gnostic Saviour comes to save himself" (Filoramo, 106). Karen Sullivan depicts this dichotomy in a slightly different manner by attempting to define the figure of the heretic in the Middle Ages as somehow "blinded to the truth because of their love of themselves and their own powers of invention" whereas the "Catholics recognize that truth lies in the other rather than in the self, in tradition rather than in innovation, and in antiquity rather than in modernity" (3). In this sense, though gnosticism lacks material presence, it is present in concept. In this analysis I intend to show that truth indeed lies in the self and it is revealed through knowledge of the self in a process of remembrance. And like Giordano Bruno who "has made the gnostic ascent, has had the Hermetic experience, and so has become divine, with the Powers within him" (Yates, 239), so is the ultimate goal of the literary texts under discussion.

In this examination, therefore, I will show that the Christian framework of late English medieval literary works contains and holds in tension heretical elements of the ancient Gnostic tradition drawn along the lines of duality and the processes of gnosis, or the attainment of certain, salvific knowledge. Both traditions, the orthodox Christian one and the heretical gnostic one, are inherently dualistic but their treatment of knowledge greatly differs. By tracing the movement of knowledge, or the structural passing from ignorance to a state of gnosis in my chosen literary works, I highlight the way in which such texts, usually celebrated for their orthodox expression of Christian spirituality, in fact depend for their artistic singularity on a distinctly late medieval representation of gnostic modes of thought and structures. And again, I am not suggesting that the authors of literary works were necessarily attempting to portray such heretical elements; rather, I propose that they were responding to an inherent structure at the very basis of their creed. Through the use of artistic innovation they then create a pluralistic, "deviant" interpretation in an otherwise restrictive society. Sullivan claims that "when the heretic is imagined theologically or historically as a person who believes a deviant type of doctrine, he is indeed absent from medieval literature, yet when he is imagined characterologically, as a deviant type of person, he can be found throughout literary texts of the period" (11). This is the way in which the specter makes a return to force in an orthodox society that wished to eliminate it.

The field of medieval studies maintains a strict reading of the dominance of Catholic/Christian religion because of the influence of the

Church on daily life; yet, literature is often subversive as has been noted before, and even the most apparently Christian literature is riddled with questions and traces of other belief systems. This is precisely seen in the fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing*, a work of Christian mysticism belonging to the contemplative tradition, where a young student is counseled to seek God through a process of intense contemplation motivated by love instead of knowledge and intellect: “For whi He may wel be loved, bot not/thought. By love may He be getyn and holden; bot bi thought neither” (l. 457–8). This process of contemplation aims to achieve a type of secret knowledge that is reminiscent of the gnostic one. The narrator beseeches the potential initiate “whatsoever thou be that this book schalt have in possession . . . neither thou rede it, ne / write it, ne speke it, ne yit suffre it be red, wretyn, or spokyn, of any or to any, bot / yif it be of soche one or to soche one that hath (bi thi supposing) in a trewe wille and / by an hole entent, purposed him to be a parfite folower of Criste” (l. 9, 12–14). This knowledge is to be imparted solely to those “perfect followers of Christ” or, in other words, those who have the ability to possess the truth. The negative formula in which this instructional text is written recalls Pseudo-Dionysius’s *via negativa* which on the one hand (i.e., the traditional sense) may emphasize that knowledge of God is unattainable and thus the mystical revelation is engulfed in a cloud of unknowing, but at the same time, it may entail that the sought knowledge, which “may bi grace be bigonnen here, bot it schal ever laste with / outen eende in the blis of heven” (l. 227–8) can only be attained or rather regained by the few who are so inclined. The latter also recalls the structure discussed in the literary texts below for the *via negativa* possess a sense of reversal where the absence of knowledge is pertinent to its eventual articulation, which again does not seem to be the case in the text of *The Cloud*. This ultimate moment of ecstasy is brought about by placing all thoughts and desires, all that is earthly along with knowledge of the self behind a cloud of forgetting: “in this werk it/schal be casten down and keverid with a cloude of forgetyng . . . so that nought worche in thi witte and in thi wile, bot only God” (l. 460–1, 1470–1).⁷⁴ Though the structure of the *Cloud* recalls the literary works I’ve chosen to discuss, the structure of ascension, knowledge, revelation, and salvation in this work comes in direct conflict with the Gnostic’s search for gnosis. The inability to articulate, the state of unknowing appropriates the structure of faith rather than knowledge. For the Gnostic, it is a reversed process that seems to lead to a similar result—a dispersing of the cloud of forgetfulness through knowledge

(instead of “with a sharp dart of longing love” (l. 464)) and tapping into the self (as Sullivan notes), which would then lead to a union with God. It is in Hugh of St. Victor where we see a more direct connection to the early Gnostic tradition. In his work, “Hugh once again shows himself as a true disciple of Augustine and of Gregory the Great in his emphasis on the dynamic identity of introversion . . . As he puts in *The World’s Vanity*: ‘To ascend to God is to enter into oneself, and not only to enter the self, but in an ineffable way to pass through oneself into the interior depths’” (McGinn, 381).⁷⁵ That said, he qualifies his theory by emphasizing “that real contemplation was to come only in heaven at the same time that he admitted that humans could already begin to possess the divine presence here below through forms of imperfect contemplation” (387). Richard, his student and successor, proposes in his influential work *Benjamin Minor* to teach a way to prepare the mind and body for contemplation. The preparation as well as the didactic aspect seem similar to the gnostic one. Once tranquility of mind and body is achieved, visions of light and transfiguration begin to appear. Richard uses an image of the mountain of self-knowledge, claiming that “to attain full self-knowledge is to reach the top of the mountain. Very few ascend to the peak, however, for the path is ‘a steep way, a secret way, unknown to many’. The only guide to the summit is truth” (Zinn, 199).⁷⁶ A perhaps more simplified version of Richard’s spirituality and yet closer still to the gnostic tradition lies in Walter Hilton’s *The Scale of Perfection* and his treatises. Hilton’s teaching provides practical guidance for the faithful in order to achieve spiritual purity and union with God. In doing so, he creates a dichotomy between “a good Night” and “an evil Day,” claiming one “must abide awhile in the night, for he cannot suddenly come from that one light to that other . . . But this is a good night and a light darkness, for it is a stopping out of the false love of this world, and it is an approaching of the true day” (II.ii.5). The dichotomy of good and evil, light and dark directly parallels the scheme of elements in gnostic thought and seem to maintain a similar reversal system to the one explored in this book. Literature, by way of subversion, complicates these dichotomies even further. As Bloomfield argues, “the commonest objects and animals embrace a wide variety of meanings, often contradictory. The meaning could be interpreted only in context, if at all, and even then multiple interpretations would frequently be possible” (*The Seven Deadly Sins*, 88). Augustine himself recognized the possibility that one thing may have multiple meanings that were even opposing. Nevertheless, the contemplative state requires an

absence of images (i.e., a fundamental “forgetfulness” of this world) that would ultimately lead to an external, communal, transcendental truth,⁷⁷ whereas the Gnostics in their search for gnosis are looking to regain a personal, internal truth through the fact of individual remembrance.

Late-Medieval English Literature

“Because the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were a period of intense social, political, and cultural development, thinkers of the age continually had to accommodate new evidence into the paradigm. . . . poets were very sensitive to these accommodations, and so poetry did come to subvert and criticize” (Lynch, 15).⁷⁸ Nevertheless, though poets like Chaucer took much liberty in their writings, they did not veer too far off intellectual and cultural tradition of the time.⁷⁹ “There is no evidence to suggest that any literary writer from this period was ever prosecuted for heresy on account of his writings [but quite] on the contrary, the regularity with which literary authors depict the sins of the Catholic clergy, to the point of anticlerical diatribe, testifies to the freedom from ecclesiastical censure under which they wrote” (Sullivan, 11). This seems to be the case since “if one wishes to produce discourse successfully within a particular field, one must observe the forms and formalities of that field” (Bourdieu 1999, 20). Namely, censorship became a kind of self-enforced entity rather than a political or religious form of suppression. But communication always entails that there are no “innocent words.” Each word has “associated values and prejudices” since they are inherently connected to sociopolitical, religious, economic, and cultural struggles of the time (39–40). It is then possible to examine the literary works at hand from a less than traditional point of view. And while I do not necessarily make claims of intentional references and representations, a close examination of the formal and thematic structure of the texts will reveal an underlying, perhaps spontaneous connecting thread to these seemingly bygone traditions I have discussed above.

Many literary scholars, such as those who follow D. W. Robertson and Bernard Huppé,⁸⁰ have developed Christian readings of the different literary texts of the period in question. According to these scholars, such texts were believed to possess strong Christian, specifically Augustinian, currents and were to be read as allegories. However, by taking into account the historical context of the medieval (as well as the preceding) period, the ecclesiastical preoccupation with heresy, its representations

and manifestations, one cannot ignore the possibility of interpreting those medieval tales in a different manner. As Sullivan states in *Truth and the Heretic*, “while medieval literary authors, no less than their didactic peers, typically present themselves as teaching a lesson, they aim to disguise the bitter medicine of their teaching with the sweet honey of pleasure, calling upon classical, Celtic, and Germanic traditions, with their pagan origins, or upon courtly and chivalric customs, with their similarly non-Christian roots, to enrich and beautify their texts for this purpose. Cobbled together from different sources, their works are multiple, scattered, contradictory, with what they say often in conflict with what they show, to the point where they encourage their readers to interpret them in different ways” (12). By tracing many Christian influences to “the first and most dangerous heresy among the early Christians” (Filoramo, 2) and attuning ourselves specifically to the gnostic residue appearing in the literary works as they are expressed formally, stylistically, and thematically, we can gain greater insight into the orthodox Christian and gnostic binaries which shape these texts thematically on the periphery of context, but also form the subject of their art.

While I will not be specifically discussing the historical existence of Gnosticism or Gnostic figures in late-medieval England, I will discuss the textual representation of gnostically inclined undertones in English literary works of the period through a narratological and structural examination. My analysis will focus on the following texts: *Pearl*; *Cleanness*; *Patience*; “The Prologue” from Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, as well as selected fragments from Book 1, Book 4, Book 6, Book 7, and Book 8; and *Piers Plowman*. I have chosen this representative selection of English texts from the period, over other perhaps more canonical texts, for their overt and apparently obvious thematic engagement with orthodox religious modes of thought, as well as their unique take on the structure of dream vision narratives. Part of the reason these texts have become representative of their age in the first place was their apparent orthodox status as celebrated works of late-medieval Christian spirituality. Moreover, as dream vision narratives, they seek a form of knowledge that cannot be known on the conscious level, but which brings that knowledge to the foreground. In this manner, this specific choice of genre is akin to the map of deconstructive understanding of center and margins where gnosticism (as the margins) can be made the center. As I argue, each of the texts under consideration introduces us to a type of knowledge, waiting to be unveiled by an implied Gnostic reader. Such a “reader” is not a

theoretical figment of a teleological reader-response theory but, I suggest, a literary condition of the text's didactic coherence and rhetorical structure. The sort of Gnostic "reader" which as I will argue emerges from the demands of these structures is one who, to borrow the words of Filoramo, pursues an "anxious search for gnosis, for a knowledge that will save him; this will be revealed to him as a call from above, a cry that will arouse him from his existence of sleep and shadows to remind him of his true origins, which know nothing of becoming and of death, and to show him the road to salvation" (13). However, seeking out the secrets, or rather the secret knowledge itself is not the point. The fact that such knowledge or textual "truth" exists, and by thus places the initiate in a position of superiority over the uninitiated, becomes central.

In this reading of these texts, we see how knowing and unknowing become central to a discussion of faith and knowledge. In this world of shadows, through the guidance of a knowledgeable tutor, the true Gnostic initiate emerges. His is an individual type of salvation since this "trapped" knowledge cannot be taught; it must have first existed in order to be revealed. Once regained, through the faculty of remembrance, his knowledge is ultimate, godlike, and superior. The attainment of gnosis finally reflects on the traditional dualistic division between man's body and soul, which is inextricably implicated with the dichotomy between the metaphysical forces of good and evil. While orthodox Christianity emphasizes the ultimate and complete triumph of good over evil, the Gnostics clearly differentiate between the two, thereby acknowledging the discrete power of each within creation. Through the identification and close analysis of what I term scenes of "Passing" in the texts under consideration, I intend to point out a systematic appearance of gnostic residues in what are notably religious, dream vision literary texts from the period. As I will show, the thematic passing into knowledge is moreover enacted on the structural rhetorical level of the texts in the shift between metaphorical tenors and vehicles, or between active and passive modes of poetic expression. Furthermore, each of the works I have dealt with in the order that they appear follows a gnostic scheme of "development" that seems to parallel the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Pseudo-Denys' theology is based on three dimensions: the sensible, the intelligible, and the divine. These levels, reasserted by the mystics of the medieval period, recall the Valentinian categorization of people respectively: the *hylikoi*—those too absorbed in matter and beyond salvation; the *psychikoi*—those not fully Gnostic but capable of salvation through

knowledge, and who represent the majority of Christians; and the pneumatikoi—the spiritually elect, those in possession of perfect knowledge. Accordingly, the first stage represented by the first chapter, where the dreamer finds himself much too absorbed in materiality, is one doomed to failure. The second stage, as seen in chapter 2, puts the dreamer on the right path, still not fully knowledgeable but capable of salvation through a relentless search for Truth. In the third and final stage, portrayed by chapter 3, the dreamer begins in a place resembling that of the first dreamer. However, this final dreamer moves beyond the sin of “forgetting” by remembering, and reawakening into a “new” spiritual Truth and salvific knowledge. It is the purpose of this study to explore the scope and implications of these parallels.

The Methodology

The method embedded in this study is a hybrid one that is predominantly deconstructive as it approaches the material from the margins and places it at the center of the discussion. Stephen Russell debates the use of what he defines as deconstruction on dream vision narratives:

While deconstruction as a clearly recognizable anti-rhetoric is a product of eighteenth and nineteenth century thinking, deconstruction as a basic social impulse has existed and must exist in every culture insofar as and as soon as that culture is articulated. Far from being a tool of literary criticism, another new way to get at a text, deconstruction is the necessary obverse of any culture-as-system, the ubiquitous urge to untangle, untie, unravel, and demythologize any intellectual system that comes to be replaced by its semantic formulations, any system whose primitive communal sense becomes—literally—‘lost in transmission . . . This can happen because (to risk circularity) the content prescribed is, finally, that contents are functions of form: dream visions are about the obstructive nature of language and its troublous relationship to the world’. (141–2)

The structure of the dream vision as previously discussed makes it possible to articulate that which could not have been articulated. “Recalling the issue of Aeneas’ possible landfall at Carthage, we can see that the knowledge of the carbuncle separates the ignorant from the learned, but this distinction is finally meaningless, for the ignorant may read with the same *faith* as the learned have and therefore find the same truth verified . . . but the ‘knowledge of the carbuncle’ can only illumine the surface, the text,

not the author" (Russell, 88–9, 93–4). In other words, this is the reason knowledge surpasses faith in gnostic doctrine so that only the truly chosen few would have their hidden "truth verified." Such a text is called by Augustine a text of "intransitive meaning," a special text and/or setting that would enable bringing forth the absence that is present.

The process of (re)gaining gnosis is a gradual process. "Many Gnostics, like many artists, search for interior self-knowledge as the key to understanding universal truths" (Pagels 1989, 134). This, I believe, is the internal process at work within the chosen literary texts. I intend to identify this developmental progression and examine the way such a character engages "in [this] solitary, difficult process, as [he/she] struggles against internal resistance. They [the gnostics] characterized this resistance to gnosis as the desire to sleep or to be drunk—that is, to remain unconscious" (Pagels 1989, 126). The moment of "gnostic Passing" materializes in a moment of in between; in between physical wakefulness and sleep, activity and passivity, "reality" and the dream vision, East and West, and ultimately in between ignorance and knowledge, binaries that are dependent on each other for their meaning and very existence. This scene becomes the portal, where the opportunity of (re)gaining gnosis finally presents itself. In the "dream," they fight for knowledge in a deep, internal struggle that not many manage to overcome. According to Russell, there is a codependent relationship between the dreamer and the dream; the dream valorizes the dreamer since it presents him with a unique truth but the dreamer also valorizes the dream as the man responsible for it must be a great man (Russell, 8–9). Indeed, the dreamer must be a great man in potential, a chosen individual, in order to be able to partake in such an experience to begin with. For, much like in the theory of the "*clara visio*," it is up to the "seeker" to accept the vision presented or not. Accepting the vision would entail eternal salvation and the discovery of Truth while a rejection would simply toss the immature initiate back into his world of shadowy illusions. As I will further explore in this work, another way of remaining "unconscious," oblivious to one's own true nature, may also be portrayed through the literary use of the seven deadly sins. The sins, which play a prominent role in late-medieval literature and especially as discussed in the third chapter on Gower, depict both a literal as well as metaphorical loss of "consciousness." While gluttony and sloth, which present the states of drunkenness and sleep, respectively, are cause of a literal loss of consciousness, wrath, envy, lust, greed, and pride may be perceived as metaphorical ways of losing "consciousness"; a

person may be brought to the end of his wits, losing sight of himself, when blinded with lust, rage or greed, but the self-absorption of boastful pride and self righteous envy can lead one in the same direction. In the *Gospel of Thomas*,

Jesus said, 'I took my place in the midst of the world, and I appeared to them in flesh. I found all of them *intoxicated*; I found none of them thirsty. And my soul became afflicted for the sons of men, because they are blind in their hearts and do not have sight; for empty they came into the world, and empty too they seek to leave the world. But for the moment they are intoxicated. When they shake off their wine, then they will repent' [...] He said to them, 'You too, look for a place for yourself within *repose*, lest you become a corpse and be eaten'. (emphasis added, Sayings, 28, 60)

People are already full of misguided "knowledge" and none of them are "thirsty" for the "truth." It is a different kind of repose that Jesus expects to find them in, a state of passivity—a contrary state to that of their current intoxication, which is a state denoting an erroneous activity masquerading as passivity.

Jesus said, "Blessed is he who came into being before he came into being. If you become my disciples and listen to my words, these stones will minister to you" (*Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 19). Each of the chosen literary texts possesses a highly instructional structure, which highlights the sense of hearing perhaps over any of the other senses. It seems there is an underlying importance to this specific choice of structure, which resembles not only the ecclesiastical sermons, but also the preferred mode of teaching of the Gnostics. Most of these teachings remain a mystery precisely due to the fact that the knowledge was meant to be secret, revealed only to an elect few who would be privy to the teachings only through hearing. Thus, not many texts are extant and among those found at Nag Hammadi, the style fluctuates between elaborate mythologies and deeply concealed metaphors and allegories. Hearing is emphasized as being a passive sense, allowing a masterful teacher to lead and direct the elect to the regaining of gnosis. This type of hearing entails a re-becoming, reaching inside for insight that goes beyond the boundaries of this world, which would potentially transform the hearer into the teacher. The expectant result of hearing a sermon in church would on the other hand be a repetitive, obliterating learning of what already exists, followed by actions that according to Jesus in *The Gospel of Thomas* are actually more

harmful than helpful; “Jesus said to them, ‘If you fast, you will give rise to sin for yourselves; and if you pray, you will be condemned; and if you give alms, you will do harm to your spirits’” (Saying 14). The former type of hearing would then lead to seeing and eventually to salvific realization, while the latter would lead to blindness and damnation. This path toward knowledge thus necessitates a state of repose, as stated before, and as will be shown within the literary works themselves.

By beginning with an examination of the three poems from the *Pearl* manuscript (as is done in chapter 2), I will be laying the foundation of a gnostically poetic scale in which the identification of the Scenes of “Passing” as well as its gnostic elements will eventually point to a thematic and structural lack, an unsuccessful vision that remains inarticulable. Chapter 3 will provide an in-depth examination of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. Its placement in the middle reflects literal uncertainty as well as a metaphorical passing from one stage to the next on the path to perfect knowledge though again culminating in an essentially unsuccessful Passing. Chapter 4 will then lead toward some kind of poetic closure by dealing with Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*. In it, the project will come full circle by depicting a “successful gnostic Passing” from a state of absence to presence and ultimately from ignorance to knowledge.

Investigating the existence of gnostic traces in these literary works will lead, I believe, to a reevaluation of late-medieval English literature but will also show the way in which these texts foreground elements of gnosticism that may not have been obvious up to this point. And indeed, in this sense, the very structure of the literary works seems to require a specifically gnostic reading. My current project, therefore, seeks to shed light on a gnostic dimension that was there all along, but not recognized or, therefore, fully appreciated.

CHAPTER 2

PEARL'S PATIENCE AND PURITY: GNOSTICISM IN THE PEARL POET'S OEUVRE

In this chapter I will discuss three poems out of the *Pearl* manuscript: *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness*. I chose to discuss these three in particular¹ for their similar characteristics in theme and style as all three seem outwardly religious and inherently orthodox. *Patience* and *Cleanness*, as I will approach them, both serve as kinds of supplementary guides to the reading of *Pearl*, since they serve to strengthen *Pearl*'s points, rather than offer something completely new; namely, the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher via dream vision, parables, and biblical exempla in an attempt to revive a knowledge that is ultimately not regained due to the persistent ignorance of the potential listener. This reading, which will showcase the unmistakable similarities between the three poems, will also emphasize the generally accepted view that all three poems were written by the same person,² who may have been directly associated with the court of Richard II.³ Though his identity remains unknown, information regarding his knowledge as well as his possible sources and influences may be garnered from the poems themselves. Their themes reveal an educated man, well versed in Latin and French writings with exceptional familiarity of the art of learning. At the same time, they reveal a knowledgeable courtly vocabulary as well as a literary knowledge of materials, both secular and ecclesiastical.⁴

I situate these poems at the beginning of my argument to set up a scale of development in a scheme of circularity, at the center of which lies the possibility of knowledgeable enlightenment.⁵ All three *Pearl* poems present a possibility for illumination that is bypassed by its narrators or main (human) characters, who are imprisoned by both materiality and

conventionality. In this sense, the characters' seemingly inferior status (ontologically but also and, more importantly, epistemologically) due to their foolish nature and existence is intentional since their ultimate illumination depends upon it. This dependence, I believe, would also reinforce my claim that such a conclusion would in fact support a specifically gnostic reading. My reading will draw on what I have identified as a distinct form of late-medieval gnosticism that intriguingly resembles the ancient tradition and seems to fit itself to the needs of the given society. The broader historical reason for such a reemergence may be the new kinds of lay readers who may have sought new forms of spirituality that do not depend on the "material church" to insure salvation, but instead seek forms of spiritual growth available simply by virtue of one's outlook—the transcendence of the mind. After all, in a gnostic world, anyone can be illuminated, even a little girl.

Pearl

From the moment of its modern publication, by Richard Morris in 1864 as part of the Early English Text Society series *Pearl* garnered diversified critical readings and interpretations. In initial modern awareness of the poem, *Pearl* was accepted as an elegiac poem depicting a father's loss of his precious daughter, whom he equates with an unblemished pearl.⁶ Yet this reading—which pursued the "literal" meaning of the poem and focused on the narrator/Dreamer—was soon overrun by scholars who argued for an allegorical reading which focused on the symbolism of the Pearl Maiden, claiming the poem's intricacies and complexities, and its own internal construction required a more elaborate analysis that would resolve the instability of the literal level through the figurative.⁷ There were others still who interpreted the poem as a *consolatio* reminiscent of Boethius' *Consolation*. In the mid-twentieth century, this conflict was somewhat "resolved" through a myriad of interpretations that sought to create a kind of synthesis between the two approaches. Some of those interpretations from the 1960s on read the "jeweler's" relationship toward his "jewel" as the relationship between the body and the soul; others—especially more recently as gender studies have emerged in medieval scholarship—have considered the gender identities and implications of the speakers in the poem, all the way to the extreme of seeing an incestuous relationship between a father and his infant daughter,⁸ an approach that seems to draw on the late-medieval erotic/courtly dream vision tradition. From the

1980s on, a number of inquiries have sought to combine approaches and discuss the analyses that once seemed irreconcilable—seeking ways to link the “allegorical” and “literal.” At the same time, a recent return to the literal through the contemporaneous historical background⁹ has contributed to the already extant wide range of fields of meaning. There has been an attempt to combine all readings by claiming a kind of forward progression in the Dreamer’s understanding and knowledge.

My reading takes these most recent views one step further by focusing on the implications of the relationship between the Dreamer and the Pearl Maiden in its structure and style. To be more specific, my approach in this and the following sections seeks to flesh out the unique relationship between the two parties involved in the poem, which takes note of literal, narratological features as well as transcendental aspects, while focusing on a crucial moment, the possible moment of Passing, as part of the dream vision narrative, which reverses traditional roles. In this poem, the referred to roles are between father and daughter as perceived by both church and society. The moment I shall be examining emphasizes what could be considered in fourteenth-century religious outlook a heretical turning point where the daughter becomes a possessor of other-worldly knowledge and the intended guide of the ignorant, disadvantaged father.

In my view, it is important to approach *Pearl* as a dream vision, a popular genre in late-medieval literature. In this type of vision, which “is a self-conscious anomaly, an unaccountable and ‘impossible’ experience, unlike the apocalypse and the somatic dream, [and which] exists in the space between the literary categories of apocalypse and narrative dream” (Russell 1988, 21), the Dreamer is meant to undergo a life-changing experience that would then lead to some kind of revelation.¹⁰ In other words, “without knowing it, [the dreamer] comes to a task which is not merely recovery of his pearl, but a recovery of his proper ‘I’, his own self with which he may speak, and which will be worthy of the pearl” (Roper, 164). Nearly all the critics would agree that the center of the poem is the debate between the father and suddenly articulate and mature daughter, whose probing instructions seem designed to bring the father to a new understanding of life and death, as well as the rewards and limitations of both—to open up for him a “new heaven and new earth” as a matter of insight not apocalyptic end of time. In this sense, “*Pearl* is a deconstruction of the discourse of eschatology: a sophisticated presentation of a human discourse the purpose of which is to demonstrate the complete inefficacy of that discourse” (Russell 1988, 160). Such a vision—in the “religious”

rather than the erotic or social modes of such visions also found in medieval writing—is meant to open up a new reality for the Dreamer in which he would be able to “see” matters that had been hidden from his eyes up to that point. In other words, it is a moment of possible liberation, of possible revelation, and perhaps ultimately, a moment of possible salvation.

In the case of *Pearl*, the dream vision serves as a perfect elucidation of the illusory sense encompassing the material world. It is a state of in-between, which serves to emphasize the dichotomy, the dualistic nature of the world, and which enables the two spheres to “meet.” When he falls asleep, the Dreamer sets out on the path of “waking up,” in terms closely matching what I have called throughout this study a gnostic sense. In the final moment of transition/Passing, he is in a perfect, receptive state, capable of unearthing the Truth or rather, his true self. However, in order to do that, he must completely discard the bodily, the material, lay in complete repose, in a state of acceptance and allow his guide to lead him down the path of Truth. Many Gnostic texts usually introduce this figure of teacher and guide in female form, symbolically standing for the figure of Sophia (i.e., Wisdom).¹¹

As discussed in the previous chapter, the early Gnostic tradition takes on a somewhat modified form in the late-medieval period which draws on the ancient tradition but at the same time incorporates contemporary concepts like the Victorines’ form of mysticism. According to Bernard McGinn, “the twelfth-century masters were avid for new forms of knowledge and were not afraid to break with tradition in exploring them. Hugh of St. Victor was a good spokesman for the age when he said: ‘Learn everything; you will see later that nothing is superfluous. Meagre knowledge (*scientia*) is no fun’” (369). Nevertheless, the absence of a powerful feminine figure in the Victorine tradition remains glaringly obvious, only to be picked up by the likes of Boethius’s Lady Philosophy, Alan of Lille’s *Natura*, and now the *Pearl* poet’s Pearl Maiden. But it is more than that since in such stories of the soul, the soul is often considered female due to the fact that “the word *psyche* is feminine in gender in Greek”¹² as well as in Latin (*anima*). In *Pearl*, it is the Pearl Maiden who captures this dual role of soul and guide. In her infinite wisdom, she must lure the ignorant Jeweler out of his imposed stupor of selfish, prideful material existence and into the light of inner Truth. However, by the end of the poem, it becomes clear that either the Dreamer is not yet ready to (re)gain the knowledge necessary for his passage into the spiritual realm, or the knowledge wasn’t there to begin with, thus excluding

him completely from this scheme of salvation.¹³ This “lack of readiness” is showcased in the poem when the Dreamer attempts to cross the river and, by doing so, contaminates the heavenly sphere with his physicality as the vision immediately crumbles.¹⁴ Sandra Pierson Prior argues that the Dreamer remains essentially unchanged, which indeed seems to be the case since ultimately this is not a successful Passing. And it is not solely due to the fact that he is still among the living whereas the Maiden had already “crossed over,” which would make this into an ontological problem, but rather the passing in question is an epistemological one, a metaphorical one that does not necessarily entail an ontological transmutation. The Gnostics believed in the possibility of earthly salvation, or in other words, salvation through knowledge in a more immediate framework, unlike the orthodox salvation through Christ’s sacrifice that will manifest in the afterlife.¹⁵ Indeed, death for the Gnostics is an anticipated release but not a prerequisite for salvation.

The poem begins with a heartfelt lament for the loss of a precious pearl “oute of oryent” (l. 3). In other words, before we are introduced to the Dreamer, we get a glimpse of the actual protagonist of the poem—a priceless pearl, unmatched by any other in its beauty. On the literal level, this line may simply mean an acknowledgment of the endless beauty and preciousness of oriental pearls, perhaps in comparison with British ones.¹⁶ On a metaphorical level, this reference may hold a deeper, more subtle meaning, alluding to the East in comparison with the West. Catherine Clément presents the notion of a structural moment that originates in the East and serves a similar purpose to the dream vision. The structure of the syncope, she claims, can be identified in the “focus on the gap, the lack, to a tiny interval from which the subject emerges” (x).¹⁷ It is in the liminality created by the dream vision, as I shall discuss it, that the subject of the Dreamer attempts to (re)emerge, where the attempt to gain the knowledge of the true self materializes. Clément also identifies that moment as the “renouncing subject”: “once the Indian reaches a state of dumbfoundedness, or delirium, to the encounter with a ‘magical animal’ that responds to prayers” (xi). In this manner, the syncope “allows Clément to renew ties between India and Europe” (xi). In other words, it is in this encounter that the “renouncing subject” gains dominance over his existence and vicariously, the central West. The reemergence from the dream vision (in case of a successful Passing) is a rebirth following a symbolic yet necessary death.

Moreover, throughout the Middle Ages Eastern traditions permeated the West. They influenced both society and culture, but perhaps

to the greatest extent, it influenced the shaping of Western religion. As described in the Introduction, diverse Eastern religions and modes of thought influenced the formation of Christianity itself, but more specifically relevant to this work, it delineates an affinity in thought with gnostic traditions, most of which had Eastern origins. Intriguingly, this specific reference brings to mind a seventh-century Syriac Gnostic poem titled “The Song of the Pearl”¹⁸ which appears in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*. The poem, which was probably a later addition to the *Acts*, survived in a Syriac manuscript from the seventh century and in a Greek text from the eleventh century. The *Acts of Thomas* in its entirety, and the poem in particular, was revered by the Manicheans, as attested by Augustine himself,¹⁹ and several of its notions also gained popularity among other orthodox thinkers. Nevertheless, though many orthodox ideas were based on traditional parables, and specifically, the parable of the “pearl of great price” from Matthew 13:45,²⁰ they were not quite similar to the Gnostic poem, and not quite as reminiscent of the Middle English *Pearl*. The Gnostic poem’s symbolism and creative liberty, its particular emphasis of the soul journey, and finally, its spiritual message of personal, intuitive reawakening and enlightenment help flesh out the many inexplicable anomalies of *Pearl*.

One of the Gnostic poem’s alternative titles is “The Hymn of the Soul,” which suggests an analogy between the pearl and the soul, an analogy often put to use by readers of the *Pearl* poet’s *Pearl*, as well as by orthodox thinkers of the time. Such similarities and others legitimize my use of this Gnostic poem as a point of reference throughout my analysis of *Pearl*. In the Gnostic poem, the East stands for “the land of light and origin, [and it is juxtaposed with] Egypt, which stands traditionally for the body, for material things, for darkness and error.”²¹ By extension, we may read a similar dichotomy, between materiality and spirituality, between Eastern wisdom and Western ignorance in *Pearl* as well. The prince in “The Song of the Pearl” laments,

I forgot that I was a King’s son,
 And became a slave to their king.
 I forgot all concerning the Pearl
 For which my Parents had sent me (stanza VII, l. 61–64)

Both protagonists are on a quest, yet their initial purpose and intent differs. In the beginning, whereas the Jeweler is on a physical quest, seeking

out his lost pearl/daughter, the prince sets out on a spiritual quest. Along the way, however, he loses sight of his destination and “[sinks] down into a deep sleep” (l. 66). At this point, both Dreamers seem immersed within the physical and impervious to spiritual attempts. However, it is within the subsequent spiritual message that the poems seem to diverge, where the *Pearl* poet exercises his creativity, offering an elaborate dream vision that endows both characters and poem with significant depth, and presents the opportunity for diversified interpretations.

If we examine the setting of *Pearl*, it begins in the material world, emphasized by the poignant image of the grave plot in which the Dreamer believes his Pearl lies. Katherine Terrell discusses the image of the corpse in relation to the image of the body and the bodily as it appears in the poem.²² However, as the poem later shows, in order for the spiritual to be truly accepted and embraced the body must be discarded: “Her were a forser for þe, in faye, / If þou were a gentyll jueler” (l. 261–2). The Pearl Maiden warns against the thought that a pearl could ever possibly be captured in “a cofer” and had he been redeemed of his ignorance, he would have known that. She then uses the adjective “gentyll” which can be interpreted as either “of noble character” with possibly religious connotations, or the very opposite, a “Pagan or heathen.”²³ The two meanings converge since the message is clear; if he were any of the two, his unfortunate state would have come to an end, followed by a release of his own eternal pearl. By the end of the poem, however, the situation remains the same; “Queen I se3 my frely, I wolde be þere, / By3onde þe water þa3 ho were walte” (l. 1155–6) but he cannot join her since he hasn’t been redeemed nor has he moved beyond the materiality of the vision. Thus, “when I schulde start in þe strem astraye, / Out of þat caste I wat3 bycalt” (l. 1162–3).

Moreover, from the dualistic standpoint delineated above, the corpse is insignificant to the knowledgeable, spiritual Pearl, but of all too great significance to the earth-bound Dreamer who cannot escape his reality. Terrell asserts that the Dreamer perceives death as sullying the purity of the Pearl, but much of the poem suggests that death provides a sense of purification; “Pointing out the spiritual truth that the Dreamer earlier overlooked in his depiction of her as a seed, the Maiden argues that death is merely the necessary prerequisite for entrance into eternity” (441). Death is indeed a pivotal moment for most Gnostics through which ultimate unity with the pleromatic Godhead becomes possible and I believe it is in this spirit that the Pearl Maiden’s words are said, at least covertly, rather than in the traditional sense of physical death leading to salvation

and the afterlife. Furthermore, the Maiden seems to imply an immediate salvation through her words of wisdom, highlighted by the fleeting image of New Jerusalem, but none of her efforts seem to be enough—the vision remains out of reach. The Dreamer refuses to truly listen to her, being too self-involved and immersed in his earthly ignorance to capture her revelatory message. A residual, indeed a reawakened version of the dualism that characterized earlier Christian debate, seems unavoidable in this poem.

In the beginning stanzas, when we are introduced to the self-pitying, grieving man, mourning the loss of his young daughter, the reader may identify with his plight to some extent. The Dreamer seems to feel lost and estranged, alienated from his surroundings, a Jeweler without his jewel, a father without his daughter, a body without spirit. The Valentinians divided human beings into three classes: the spiritual people (*pneumatikoi*)—true gnostic initiates; ordinary people with body and soul (*psychikoi*); and the rest of humankind who are merely matter (*hylikoi*). At this point in the poem, the Jeweler seems to belong to the secondary class, an ordinary man with the potential of becoming enlightened.²⁴ His description appears similar to the protagonist of a song from Mandaean Liturgy whose theme of alienation runs through most gnostic traditions as previously mentioned, but also recalls the passage from the canonical Gospel of John cited in the Introduction:

By my strength and light I suffer through
this misery. By illumination and praise.

I remain a stranger in their world.

I stand among the wicked like a child without a father.

Like a fatherless child, an untended fruit (emphasis added, l. 11–15)

The Dreamer in this poem feels just as lost as the Dreamer in *Pearl*, like “a stranger in *their* world” (emphasis added). He doesn’t believe himself a part of this world; he is a stranger, lost and misplaced. Just like a child without a father, without a guiding hand to teach him and lead him in the right direction in this world of wicked ignorance, he is an “untended fruit,” possibly ripe and ready for the picking, but if left “untended” it will simply wither away. Unlike the protagonist of the Mandaean song, there is a reversal in *Pearl*, where the Dreamer is a childless father, a supposed Jeweler without his creation, the jewel. In another place in the poem, he is described as a “no kynde jueler” (l. 276). The word “kynde”

originates in the Old English “cynd” which can be translated as “natural.” The jeweler is depicted here as “no kind jueler,” that is, unnatural, in discordance with the ordinary course of nature,²⁵ which is exactly what takes place. The Jeweler is an artificer, clearly not the creator of this “natural” Pearl. Accordingly, the following role reversal seems appropriate since he is also the exact opposite of what he is depicted to be; he may be taken for an ignorant “child” who needs to be taught a lesson by a wise mentor, by the person who ironically turns out to be his very own infant daughter. This daughter no longer holds the place her “father” intended for her. She has now been “Corounde [...] quene in blysse to brede” (l. 415) and in a position of superiority over him who thinks himself her creator.

But this position of “creator” is just as problematic since while the Jeweler basks in self-importance through unremitting pride and foolish arrogance, believing to be the sole owner and creator of the pearl he longs for, he is neither of those things, and is rapidly rebuked by the voice of wisdom. Indeed, at closer inspection, we may note an uncanny resemblance in the behavior of the Dreamer to that of the ignorant demiurge of Gnostic cosmogony; the rogue creation of Sophia exclaims in the *Apocryphon of John*, “I am God and there is no other God beside me” (NHL, 67), which is explained by the book’s commentator as an exclamation borne of ignorance. Both these figures are clearly too absorbed in the physical to recognize “the place from which [they] had come” (NHL, 67). Nevertheless, in the Mandaean song, the speaker is knowledgeable and thus quite different from our Dreamer, as he admits, “Life heard my cry and sent an angel. / A kindly light being who was prepared for me” (l. 21–2).²⁶ The *Pearl* poet also introduces a “light being,” or rather an “enlightened being,” in an appropriate setting, in a place of in between where the spiritual takes a step back from the material and creates a clear-cut divide. In other words, the way *Pearl* is set up lets us believe that perhaps there is some hope for the Dreamer yet.

The moment I have identified as “Passing” is the Dreamer’s literal crossing into the dreamscape. He falls asleep²⁷ and when he “wakes up,” “I ne wyste in this worlde quere that hit wace” (l. 65). He is disoriented and feels even further out of his element than before, as he finds himself “Towarde a foreste I bere the face” (l. 67). The entire dream vision tradition relies on such “secret natural spots” for their visions. In a way, such a spot seems to allow for a kind of spiritual “otherness,” a gateway for the transcendent experience its character is meant to undertake. It is also

perhaps interesting to note that heretics of the past, due to their precarious position in society, usually sought to hide in marginal places as well as spots of in between. They would waver between exposed and concealed places, would usually step out at dusk, and would keep vigil from windows and doorways.²⁸ They would lurk in dark shadows and practice physical secrecy to match their verbal and moral concealment. The Dreamer finds himself in such a disconcerting setting, which explains his initial reaction to the sight of his supposedly lost pearl. When he at first catches sight of her, he is immediately gladdened—a “normative” reaction of a grieving father at the sight of his lost daughter. However, this reaction is immediately counteracted by a more calculated one; he begins to fear her image and grows suspicious as his gaze moves around the room:

More then me lyste my drede aros;
 I stod ful styлле and dorste not calle.
 Wyth yyen open and mouth ful clos
 I stod as hende as hawk in halle (l. 181–4)

He is likened to a hawk, gazing at this newly appeared threat with sharply focused eyes and unwavering attention. He realizes there is something suspect about this vision and much like an inquisitor on the hunt for a heretic, so does the Dreamer prepare himself for an interrogation. When he finishes his long perusal of her external appearance, he immediately goes into questioning mode. As he questions her whereabouts, the loss of her body, the Maiden gently reproaches him, saying ““Sir, ye haf your tale mysetente / To say your perle is al awaye”” (l. 257–8).

The Dreamer is full of questions and wonderings, which have the tendency to become repetitive and at times, they border on childishness. He takes an active role in the conversation, trying to push for his version of the “truth,” but when his attempts are rebuffed, he becomes increasingly adamant. These structural designs create a self-centered, redundant scheme, in which his physicality and by extension his grasp of reality stand at the center, but they quickly lose focus due to the circular and seemingly endless repetition of misguided ideas. In other words, the dialogue and rhyme complement the roundness and circularity of the *Pearl* through a sense of contrast—the Pearl’s purity, wisdom, and spirituality are juxtaposed with the Dreamer’s uncleanness, ignorance, and physicality. Much like a vicious circle, the Dreamer seems too caught up by materiality to be able to hear the truth and be saved.

In the beginning, it is as though he never truly listens. His knowledge or lack thereof is quite limited. Virtually ignoring the Maiden's earlier reproach, he rejoices and claims,

To be excused I make requeste;
 I trawed my perle don out of dawes.
 Now haf I fonde hyt, I schal ma feste
 And wony wyth hyt in schyr wod-schawes
 And love my Lorde and al His lawes
 That has me broght thys blysse ner (l. 281–6)

He clearly misunderstood her earlier message and now her attempt at conveying it in different terms commences. The following stanzas elaborate the Pearl-Maiden's attempt at teaching through the use of parables, metaphors, and allusions. These multiple attempts to communicate resemble the believers, followers, and heretics who would often speak in parables and usually, the things they didn't say, which they kept hidden from the many, were thus left open for interpretation and led to their eventual condemnation in the eyes of their persecutors.²⁹ Namely, their attempts at rhetorical hiding ended up giving them away. Hiding, acting, and speaking in secrecy raised fear in the hearts of the uninitiated, of the unknowledgeable. Only those privy to these secrets could produce any kind of "meaningful" substance, whereas for the others, it raised fear and anxiety. But they were not the only ones using this "hidden" style, albeit in a completely different manner. A. C. Spearing, who analyzes the *Cloud of Unknowing* via a discussion of *Pearl*,³⁰ identifies a lack in language at describing heavenly, transcendental images. In another study of the poem,³¹ Spearing calls this a movement away from the self and into an "unknowing" but as I show, it is quite the opposite and more reminiscent of the gnostic poetic structure where the movement is into the self and toward a state of knowing, in an attempt to disperse the cloud of unknowing. But again, only for the initiated. For the rest, facing the unknown would have been too much to bear. It seems the *Pearl* poet identified a similar lack in language since the majority of the Maiden's message is made up of negative forms of speech, metaphors, and parables, but by attempting to articulate, the purpose becomes one of piercing the metaphorical "Cloud of Unknowing." This style draws in part on the apophatic tradition often allied with mysticism also called *via negativa*.³² In this sense the heretics seem to find common ground with the contemplatives which manifests in their speech

barriers and secretive conduct, as both share a common goal of transcending the barrier of language but diverge in their way of achieving it. And thus, the literary text in general, and the dream vision in particular, utilizing its creative sphere, provides compensatory ways of describing things language cannot otherwise sustain.

At this point, the Maiden's tone changes from gentle reproach to heated reprimand as he keeps shifting from one position to the other; "Wy borde ye men? so madde ye be! / Thre wordes has thou spoken at ene; / Unavysed, for sothe, wern alle thre" (l. 290–2). She wonders why he speaks so foolishly as though she expects more from him and then proceeds to reiterate his three mistakes:

Thou says thou trawes me in this dene
 Bycawse thou may wyth yven me se.
 Another—thou says in this countree
 Thyself schal won wyth me ryght here.
 The thrydde—to passe thys water fre (l. 295–9)

He firmly believes in the Maiden's physical existence because he sees her with his eyes. But he is actually encumbered by this illusory vision and is thus unable to allow his less active sense—the sense of hearing—to accept the Maiden's message. His sight clouds his other senses.³³ However, the specific word choice here is interesting. The poem uses "trawes" to refer to his belief in her physical existence. This root is usually used to describe someone who holds a religious belief, who is steadfast in his devotion and divinely directed faith.^{34,35} Juxtaposed with the tone of the passage, this reference may be taken ironically, as a clever wordplay with which the Maiden is actually reproaching his orthodox point of view—his misreading of the situation. Then she continues by questioning his statement that he shall dwell with her. She appears to have changed her mind about his state of readiness. Now she is simply skeptical. She emphasizes her point by naming his third mistake regarding his crossing of the water and joining her in the spiritual realm. He is not yet ready to cross over as he quite clearly demonstrates. He "that loves nothynk bot ye hit syye" (l. 308) couldn't possibly cross over nor could he gain knowledge from her message since he "setten Hys wordes ful westernays" (l. 307). His interpretation is completely askew, falling on the same institutionally borne ontological misunderstandings.

The poem reaches a plateau when the Maiden declares the Jeweler's behavior arrogant and prideful. She claims,

And that is a poynt o sorquydryye
 That uche god mon may evel byseme -
 To leve no tale be true to trye
 Bot that hys one skyl may dem (l. 309–12)

Or in other words, to have the audacity to believe that no tale/story is to be taken for the truth if it cannot be judged by one's own natural understanding and reason, as feeble or lacking as it may be, is utter presumptuousness.³⁶ And it is, in this way, this narrowness of perception that a "good" man, with the potential for enlightenment, may fall into evil.³⁷ She continues her tirade by yet again admonishing his presumptuousness, "Thou says thou schal won in this bayly. / Me thynk thee burde fyrst aske leve—/ And yet of graunt thou myghtes fayle" (l. 315–17). His wish to cross over is unrealistic at the moment. She tells him "Thy corse in clot mot calder keve" (l. 320), or in other words, he must become like her. At the beginning of the poem, her image, from the Jeweler's point of view, is depicted in similar terms, her body dead and buried, "hir color so clad in clot" (l. 22). However, just like she is not meant to be read merely as the Jeweler's literal lost daughter, neither is he. I believe this line attempts to cover its metaphorical sense via its literality. On the literal level, he would obviously need to die in order to cross over. Traditionally, this would also be the only way to gain salvation. Metaphorically, however, physical death would not be completely necessary. By discarding his physicality through the gaining of gnosis, through a reawakening of dormant knowledge and vicariously a reemergence of his true self, it would lead to immediate salvation.

After being reproached, he appears to accept her words to some extent, seemingly reshifted his position to a potential initiate. He placates her by becoming meek and mild, seemingly acknowledging his erroneous ways. Nevertheless, once she continues her speech and reveals her status as the queen of heaven, he immediately bristles with indignant anger. He is both annoyed and surprised at this revelation, finding it difficult to accept in the face of his own earthly knowledge and sociopolitical expectations; "Art thou the quene of hevenes blew / That al thys worlde schal do honour?" (l. 423–4), he sarcastically inquires.

We leven on Marye that grace of grewe,
 That ber a barne of vyrgyn flour.
 The croune fro hyr, quo moght remwe
 Bot ho hir passed in sum favour? (l. 425–8)

His tone seems to have reverted back to the accusatory, interrogatory style of before. His words ring with an eerie calmness of he who is onto something, on the verge of discovery, unwilling to raise the suspicion of his prey, as he asks conversationally, gently goading, “who might usurp the Virgin’s crown, but someone who surpasses her in some manner?” (my translation of lines 427–8). These lines seem to echo the sentiment expressed in line 276 when the Jeweler is depicted as “unnatural.” Much like the ignorant Demiurge, the Jeweler, reflecting his own uncertainties, believes the Maiden to be like him, a mere usurper. However, this is not the case, as her subsequent rhetoric of earthly logic combined with transcendental wisdom demonstrates.

The Maiden does not fall for his trick. She assimilates his wording and uses it in a triple-stanzaic, repetitive speech of praise in honor of the “quen of cortaysye.” The circularity and repetition of her argument seem to create a sense of redundancy, much like before, this time defusing the situation and then leading to a natural changing of the subject. The Jeweler seems to “forget” his earlier annoyance, veering away from the blasphemous usurpation, and instead refocuses on her age. What causes him to linger on this topic is yet again his earth-bound perspective. In earthly terms, she couldn’t have possibly done or achieved enough in her short lifetime to warrant the status she claims she had been given. In his orthodox terms, a pious Christian must face adversity, pray, give penance, go to church, suffer, and sacrifice for his ultimate salvation, whereas she “cowthes never God nauther plese ne pray / Ne never nawther Pater ne Crede” (l. 484–5). He simply cannot comprehend how she could rise to such a status without undergoing what he believed every Christian should. In this sense, her position and knowledge are inexplicable. For him, salvation lies in work and active belief. It is something to be taught and followed blindly. For her, there is predestination. She was chosen to regain this role as her knowledge is innate. Her scheme of salvation is one that requires no more than salvatory knowledge. Her lesson at this point seems to recall Uthred’s theory of the “clara visio” according to which anyone can be saved based on a certain natural virtue, or knowledge as the case may be here.

Her following reference is one that deals with a notably orthodox Christian source that harbors gnostic residues and has been discussed as such. She refers to the vineyard parable (l. 497–500) which is taken from Matthew 20:1–16. The various changes to the biblical source have been discussed by scholars, with regard to its symbolic and literal, political,

sociopolitical, and socioeconomic dimensions.³⁸ However, if we examine the specific message in accordance with our ongoing paradigm and reference to the Gnostic poem “The Song of the Pearl,” one of the seemingly most significant differences lies in the lines immediately following the parable. Whereas Matthew ends on a general note—“for many be called, but few chosen”—the *Pearl* poet continues with something of an explanation. He provides a clearer conclusion to an otherwise whole-encompassing statement. The imagery in *Pearl* emphasizes poverty—“þus pore men her part ay pykez, / þagh thay com late and lyttel wore” (l. 573–4)—which in this specific context may be understood as spiritual poverty; again, a seemingly quite orthodox approach. Yet, if the Jeweler represents the worldly church and the ignorance of orthodox tradition, the Pearl-Maiden finds it necessary to explain the parable to him in terms he would understand, perhaps in keeping the audience in mind.³⁹ From his perspective, those late-comers, those coming from a lowly spiritual position, having “worked” but one hour that day, do not deserve to be counted among the chosen, among the saved. However, the Pearl-Maiden makes it crystal clear that it is exactly those “late-comers” who deserve to be first, again, elaborating on the traditional passage from Matthew. And she continues, “And thagh her sweng with lyttel atsykez, / The merci of God is much the more” (l. 575–6). Though their labor doesn’t have much “momentum,” or in other words, while they haven’t done much active work, the mercy of God is still the greater. Thus, what this passage seems to suggest is that active work is redundant. There is a sense of predestination here as well, emphasizing the key sentence that claims that while many are called; only few are chosen and it is a viable possibility in the here and now.

The Maiden is trying to rouse the Dreamer from his “imposed stupor.” He simply cannot see beyond the physical, material, logical world which hinders his enlightenment and vicariously, his salvation. Plain logic entails that those who work more hours deserve a higher pay, but by refusing to look beyond his own selfish, prideful sense of self-worth, he neglects to see the Truth, which is just out of his reach. There is a thick, uncrossable barrier between the Pearl-Maiden and himself that goes beyond the literal barrier of “life” and “death.” The river is but a “physical” manifestation of his spiritual state—a manifestation he could actually grasp with the use of sight—an active sense. However, it is not just a physical barrier that is keeping the two apart. It is also an epistemological barrier. Pearl, paradoxically, possesses a privileged place in relation to the

Jeweler. She is the knowledgeable one, imparting her knowledge to him who should have supposedly been her creator, her tutor. This reversal introduces us to an anachronistically “new” generation of thinking, in which the image of the creator is captured by a foolish, prideful character who could not possibly play the role of legitimate artificer. Only in this sense can the roles reverse and the child becomes “father of man.”

At the end of the Maiden’s message, she brings up another parable taken from Matthew 13:45–6. This parable, in lines 730–5, of the “pearl of great price” yet again echoes the Gnostic poem when the Maiden advises the Jeweler, “forsake the worlde wode / And porchace thy perle maskelles” (l. 743–4). The “purchasing,” however, cannot be done unless a full remembrance of the self occurs. In the Gnostic poem, once the prince accepts the pearl’s wisdom and is reminded of his true self, he bedecks himself in the Robe of Glory and becomes one with Him who had sent it. The Jeweler, on the other hand, does not seem ready to undertake a similar path. He acknowledges his mistakes by realizing his lack of readiness to enter the realm of the Pearl, though it is still on a strictly earthly basis. He knows the vision spoke the truth and that it was precious to him, but for the moment, it was a mere vision, as far away from him as the other side of the uncrossable river. When he inquires “Breve me, bryght, quat kyn ostriys / Beres the perle so maskelles?” (l. 755–6) he seems to finally acknowledge he does not represent the sole creator and marvels at this revelation. The Maiden’s response is interesting as well since she claims He who made her chose her even though their union may seem inappropriate; “Me ches to Hys make, althagh unmete / Sumtyme semed that assemble” (l. 759–60). The question is, inappropriate to whom?

In the end of “The Song of the Pearl,” the prince becomes a “self”—the “First”—an individual, whereas by the end of *Pearl*, while the Jeweler, on a basic, human level, realizes his mistakes, he is still generic, universal, appropriately Catholic for he proceeds down the same erroneous path as before, going back to the church and its rituals. He never becomes a self, unique, a chosen one despite the Maiden’s relentless efforts. Thus, when the Dreamer awakens and takes communion he is on some level rejecting the vision’s beatific insight and at the same time reverting to the traditional, orthodox way of becoming “one” with God, hence remaining, for all intents and purposes, a follower rather than a “true believer.” Gnostically speaking, this would entail a failure for no epistemological passing has ultimately taken place. The Jeweler remains on the level of the psychikoi, falling back unto “safe,” familiar activity by ironically

awakening into a continuous state of slumber. In other words, the attempt to articulate that which has been lost, to fill the absence in language and existence through rhetorical and poetical devices, has fallen short. De Man explains, however, that there are textual occasions in which linguistic forces “tie themselves into a knot which arrests the process of understanding.”⁴⁰ The poet then leaves the portal ajar for the next stage in this revelatory process in his intermediary *Patience*.

Patience

In *Patience*, the *Pearl* poet takes another step forward, again breaking traditional boundaries—here, in the relationship between God and humanity—while maintaining a didactic structure, reminiscent of *Pearl*. The similar instructional, circular style provides continuity as well as a sense of rigid formality, but at the same time, this seemingly “established” framework allows much room for creativity and versatility. *Patience* seems to take the already established structure depicted in *Pearl* and adds another dimension to it, later taken up by *Cleanness* as well; he sets up a theme, and then provides a seemingly appropriate biblical exemplum that would help elucidate his stated theme. However, the biblical exempla chosen for both *Patience* and *Cleanness* do not provide a direct lesson; rather, they attempt to teach through negation. Like the *via negativa*, the poems attempt to reach some kind of revelation that escapes language and in order to do that, they wind up discussing the reemergence of knowledge and the rejuvenation of life somewhat paradoxically through the depiction of death and ruin. This unique structure, which utilizes a kind of paralleling system based on the mixing of opposites, seems to place *Patience* in the middle, as though it is meant to be read as a kind of detailed interval between *Pearl* and *Cleanness*—two of the major poems in the manuscript. Since all three poems have similar style and structure, beginning with a general statement set in a frame narrative, followed by detailed instruction, *Patience*'s concise formulation and use of elements influenced by both *Pearl* and *Cleanness*, and vice versa, seem to place it perfectly in between—as an “afterward” of *Pearl* and a “preface” to *Cleanness*. Moreover, the complex relationship between the Jeweler and the Pearl Maiden in *Pearl* is revisited in this poem, in the relationship between Jonah and the figure of God. The personification of God, as I will discuss later, is a tricky concept that might border on the blasphemous, but the dexterity of the writing manages to elude any

such accusations through the elaborate system of reversals implemented in *Pearl* and apparently cemented here, specifically in the Passing scene that occurs in the belly of the beast, in which case the poet's expansive knowledge base comes into play.⁴¹

In the frame narrative, where the poet introduces the main theme of the poem, he also introduces the poem's first and main character, Patience. He then enumerates and personifies the eight virtues contained within the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew: "Dame Pouert, Dame Pitee, Dame Penauce þe Þrydde, / Dame Mekenesse, Dame Mercy, and miry Clannesse, / And Þenne Dame Pes, and Pacyence put in Þerafter" (l. 31–3). The poet explains that the listener must heed these Ladies' knowledgeable advices and imitate what they preach.⁴² The lover in this case is the intended initiate, awaiting the message of Truth from the beloved with the prospect of being reborn as an enlightened man.⁴³ The setup of the poem seems to indicate that the most precious relationship is the one between man and this personified Dame or Dames since "these ladies" possess the didactic message and it is they who trigger the entire discourse of this poem and the next,⁴⁴ much like the Pearl-Maiden in *Pearl*. Patience is both a theme and the protagonist, maker and designator since "by quest of her quoyntyse enquylen on mede" (l. 39), as well as the concluding line of the poem. In *Pearl*, it is clear that the Pearl-Maiden is there to instruct the ignorant Jeweler and to enlighten the listener, and in both poems, it is through the knowledge of these wise female figures, fashioned I believe after the Gnostic Sophia—maker and designator of gnostic cosmogony, that eventual reward in the form of knowledge and salvation is to be attained. The female voice possesses a privileged place, in between this world and the next, the body and the soul, activity and passivity, and finally epistemologically superior yet capable of "Passing" from one level to another.

Patience, Passivity, and Prophecy

The poem emphasizes time and again that the importance of *Patience* lies in passivity. However, such an emphasis may be hazardous as taken to the extreme, patience may converge with sloth. Thus, a clear differentiation becomes mandatory. As is the case with regard to *Pearl*, in *Patience* there is a difference between being wrongly intoxicated, being immersed in the worldly, or existing in blind passivity through redundant activity as certain orthodox rituals seem to entail, and lying in repose, a kind

of meditative state which is open and receptive.⁴⁵ *Patience* is the place within repose that enables the hearer to become receptive of the revelatory message, veer away from the state of misguided intoxication, and (re)gain gnosis. Like the dream vision in *Pearl*, the poem itself provides the place of knowledge, where a certain scene presents the opportunity for enlightenment or rather for the exchange of knowledge. In it, the narrator, speaking in the first person, is meant to take on the role of Jonah and eventually cross the "mote" (l. 268) and reawaken.⁴⁶

But why did the poet choose the story of Jonah, a tale seemingly of insubordination, which is only emphasized in the poem itself, but also a tale of impatience, the exact opposite of the clearly intended theme? Scholars have debated this issue and attempted to explain the poem's specific choices—the Old Testament story of Jonah and his prophecy, Jonah's relationship with an anthropomorphized God, and the underlining problems of such characteristics.⁴⁷ The arguments range from describing God as full of wrath and vengeance to suggesting God's anthropomorphism actually imbues his character with mystery of the unknown indicating rather "the inadequacy of human perception and its system of signs" (Clopper, 7–8). I would like to suggest further that this seemingly problematic, sometimes subversive, relationship is deliberate since the entire poem is infused with contradictory juxtapositions and reversals, aiding our overall understanding of the poem through negation. By collapsing opposing binaries into one another, the poem is rhetorically and poetically foregrounding the absence with the presence of its seeming counterpart. This stylistic measure was also used in *Pearl* in order to fill in the blanks where language could not sustain the intended image or thought. In turn, this both suggests a spontaneous reemergence of gnosticism and, intriguingly, echoes so close that one might suspect a lineage in intellectual history.

G. R. S. Mead writes in *Gnostic John the Baptizer* that "attempts have been made by scholars to show that 'the sign of the prophet Jonah' (Q—Mt. 12:19f. = Lk. 11:29f.) was perhaps originally connected with John . . . It is further of interest to note that Jonah in Hebrew means Dove, and that among the Mandæans there was a class of the perfect called Doves. Compare also the Greek *Physiologus* (xli.): 'The Dove . . . which is John the Baptist.' The names Jonah and John could easily be brought into close connection, and indeed Jonah is sometimes found as a shortened form of Joḥanan" (18). These possible references⁴⁸ and play on names highlight the contradictory nature of Jonah's character from the very beginning. The connection that Mead draws between John and Jonah, a

key figure of traditional Christian belief, and a character whose Hebrew name translates into the name of a key group in the Mandaean tradition, fleshes out Jonah's contradictory nature and establishes the underlining system of problematic reversals.

In the beginning lines, the narrator presents the story of Jonah as an instructional endeavor aiming to teach the reader through his storytelling ability. "Goddes glam to hym glod⁴⁹ þat hym vnglad made" (l. 63). God, he begins, wishes to pass His loud spoken message to Jonah but that makes Jonah "vnglad." At this point, in the very beginning, Jonah is clearly not ready to hear the message. The poet's play on the sound of glam/glod/glad attracts our attention to the intricate relationship, which also manifests later in the poem, between sound and hearing; the passing of a message; the joyfulness (or lack thereof) of receiving said message; and finally, the relationship between the characters themselves. There is clearly a message to be heard, a passage of understanding that must be crossed, and finally, some kind of redemption that at the moment is met with resistance. However, later on, this same resistance, as we may gather from this seemingly inconsequential line, will be figuratively transformed—from a state of being "vnglad" to being "glad." This line sets up two major themes of the poem: the one, by referring to the passage of the message, the poem foreshadows the later episode within the belly of the whale; and second, the negative play on the word "glad" foreshadows the poem's reversal scheme in which nothing is quite as it at first seems. This line is then emphasized by the following one, "with a roghlych rurd rowned in his ere" (l. 64), or in other words, with a roughly *loud* voice God *whispered* secretly in his ear. The message is clearly for his ears alone and it is the oxymoronic structure of this line that yet again points to the uniqueness and significance of the message. Though the message is held in secret, those in the right state of mind will hear it loud and clear.

Following the message, Jonah is astounded, literally shocked into stillness by what he has heard. His immediate reaction is to become angry because much like the Jeweler in *Pearl*, he follows his very basic, human logic. He still doesn't have the ability to see beyond his reason. So he begins to contemplate the message with seeming complete disregard to the enormity of the situation. He doesn't seem to acknowledge that he'd received the message from God or any other type of divine entity. His easy dismissal imbues our reading of the scene, and especially of Jonah's character with doubt. Jonah's monologue in lines 77–84 is full of bitterness and resentment and yet his human reaction doesn't fail to touch a

chord. When he thinks to himself "I wyl me sum oþer waye þat He ne wayte after; / I schal tee into Tarce and tary þere a whyle, / And lyztly when I am lest He letes me alone" (l. 86–8), a knowledgeable reader would inevitably chuckle at the absurdity of such thoughts, at his innocence and complete lack of awareness since God "know(s) my sitting down and my rising up; / [He] understand(s) my thought afar off" (Psalm 139:1–2), and also, "'The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart'" (1 Samuel 16:7). Nonetheless, the reader identifies with Jonah to some extent in his attempt to escape since he feels for the man who believes "þe Fader þat hym formed were fale of his hele" (l. 92).

Though Jonah childishly grumbles about his fate, the words chosen to depict this almost pathetic scene take on a different meaning since they are imbued with the gravity of the scene to which it alludes—the crucifixion; "In His glowande glorye, and gloumbes ful lyttel, / Þaȝ I be nummen in Nunniue and naked dispoyled, / On rode rwly torent with rybaudes mony" (l. 94–6). Jonah's words then become offensive, almost blasphemous in nature since he is forced into a position he is not yet ready to take. His thoughts continue to be blasphemous when he believes "he wende wel þat þat Wyȝ þat al þe world planted / Hade no maȝt in þat mere no man for to greue" (l. 111–12). He is impudent and infantile. One minute he acknowledges the voice he hears as that of the creator of this world, and in the next, completely denounces his godly power and knowledge,⁵⁰ claiming He cannot cause any harm or injury to any man in the place⁵¹ he plans to go to. Jonah is clearly in need of God's guidance and thus God "becomes a father to the childish Jonah" (Spearing 1970, 90) just like the Pearl Maiden becomes teacher to the childless father.

Jonah's role in the poem repeatedly shifts from one position to the next; throughout the poem, he is both the misguided orthodox and the knowledgeable messenger. He is constantly described as and clearly meant to be associated with Christ, or as Andrew puts it, "the poet presents Jonah not simply as a type, nor simply as a subfulfillment of Christ, but as both in turn" (Andrew 1973, 231). But at the same time, if we take Jonah out of the typological debate, in the Old Testament, Jonah is a key figure in and of itself. As a prophet he plays a significant role and must adhere to God's message which he fails to do either way. On the one hand, when Jonah fears his mission/of hearing the message it makes him all the more human as he is aware of the probabilities of physical pain and punishment that await him. At the same time, in a reverse typology, it makes him Christ-like according

to Catholic tradition that tended to emphasize Christ's humanity. This position is presented as a rational, human perspective that rings with irony and deprecation precisely because of the aforementioned reversals. Later, when Jonah is literally expelled from the whale, creating a twisted kind of "resurrection," the irony-imbued scene might allude to the Wycliffite/Lollard assertion that denies transubstantiation and, by proximity, the problematic concept of the physicality of Christ⁵²—an idea that goes back to the Gnostics who also repudiated the notion of imprisoning Christ's divinity in materiality.⁵³ A. C. Spearing and Charles Moorman discuss Jonah as antithetical to Christ, unlike the biblical figure often regarded as a type of Christ. But while this may be true to some extent, it fails to explain the moments in which Jonah truly emerges, or at least attempts to emerge, as a new/different type of Christ. Such contradictions also seem to play an inherent role within the seemingly clear-cut relationship between Jonah and God. But their relationship is anything but that. The personification of the character of God pulls him down from his ontological pedestal and into the earthly realm. In this way, he becomes like the Pearl Maiden, a humanly tinged representation that the mortal mind can comprehend. He thus becomes an accessible messenger of the divine Truth passing on the words of Lady Patience and establishing a somewhat fleeting connection between the earthly and the heavenly, the material and the spiritual—a line that can ultimately be crossed via gnosis.

Jonah's first encounter with other characters is less than pleasant since it seems everyone is aware of his misdeeds. And it is in these scenes that we glimpse into the poet's own sense of creativity for in these moments he veers away from the traditional biblical version of the story. Some have claimed he may have been somewhat inspired by a poem titled "Carmen de Iona Propheta" formerly attributed to Tertullian. On the ship, the sailors who encounter Jonah bewail their misfortune of having him on board with them—a man who has clearly grieved his god and is now endangering their lives as well—the lives of innocents. In this instance, the inherent problem of Jonah's character arises. The previous allusion to the crucifixion and vicariously to Christ is twisted in this scene of complete disregard to other human life. Nevertheless, eventually and after some less than gentle prodding from the sailors, Jonah indeed sacrifices himself, just like Christ. However, before he reprises his intended role as teacher/initiate, he undergoes a Scene of Passing, just like the Jeweler in *Pearl*.

Jonah, who is at first described as self-absorbed and arrogant, blasphemous, and suspicious, is somewhat compelled to change his ways. His

inner ignorance manifests in his outward appearance as “Jonas þe Jwe, jowked in derne” (l. 182) in a very unsavory manner: “Slypped vpon a sloumbe-selepe, and sloberande he routes” (l. 186). At this point, he is asleep both literally and figuratively. It is not the sleep of the righteous or any kind of preparatory state of repose required before a gnostic type of revelation, but rather an incapacitating type of sleep induced by worldly ignorance and carnality, which would also account for the very unflattering, albeit acutely human, depiction the poem’s hero receives. The literal wake-up call—“Þe freke hym frunt with his fot and bede hym ferk vp”—is soon followed by a figurative one.

A wylde walterande whal, as Wyrde þen schaped,
 Pat watz beten fro þe abyne, bi þat bot flotte,
 And watz war of þat wyʒe þat þe water soʒte,
 And swyftely swenged hym to swepe, and his swolʒo pened;
 Þe folk ʒet haldande his fete, þe fysch hym tyd hentes;
 Withouten towche of any tothe he tult in his þrote.
 [...]

 As lyttel wonder hit watz, ʒif he wo dreʒed,
 For nade þe hyʒe Heuen-Kyng, þurʒ His honed myʒt,
 Warded þis wrech man in warlowes guttez,
 What lede moʒt bi leue of any kynde,
 Pat any lyf myʒt be lent so longe hym withinne? (l. 247–60)

The whale serves as a vessel, a tool in the hands of God,⁵⁴ much like the setting of the dream vision in *Pearl*.⁵⁵ Like the message-baring eagle in the Gnostic “Song of the Pearl,” they are means to an end that is momentarily out of reach.

This poem’s emphasis on the location of the reception of the message lends another dimension to the already-established system of reversals, which will culminate in *Cleanness*. The word “warlowes” can be translated as the “devil”; “a monstrous creature”; or “a sinner,” which would directly fit into the orthodox scheme, but conversely, it may also denote “one who is in possession of occult knowledge,”⁵⁶ again hinting at the ongoing underlining esoteric theme. This wordplay continues in the following lines:

How fro þe bot into þe blober watz with a best lachched,
 And þrwe in at hit þrote withouten þret more,
 As mote in at a *munster dor*, so mukel wern his chawlez.

He glydes in by þe giles þurȝ glaym ande glette,
 Relande in by a rop, a rode þat hym þoȝt,
 Ay hele ouer hed hourlande aboute,
 Til he blunt in a blok as brod as a halle (emphasis added, l. 266–72)

As mentioned above, the whale and its belly are traditionally associated with the devil and hell, the “belly of Sheol” or Hades,⁵⁷ but the passage through its mouth is here depicted as a “mote in at a munster dor” (l. 268). The Medieval English Dictionary (MED) translates “munster” as a church’s door. The traditionally holy is yet again juxtaposed with the traditionally unholy. The passage through the church’s door, beyond the threshold of the traditional, seems to be mandatory in order to reach the “warlowes guttez” and vicariously, the message of Truth. It is both a literal and symbolic passing from ignorance to knowledge, beyond the flimsy framework of the material (i.e., the physical structure of the church) and into the depths of the soul (here portrayed by the whale’s belly, “the stomach of memory”). The belly of the fish is described as slimy and filthy, another traditional association with the devil and hell, as filth was considered heretical—an external manifestation of internal sin.⁵⁸ However, just like the whale’s belly is not exactly as it seems, this traditional perspective must not be taken at face value either. Understanding filth, and contingently, the whale and its belly as “evil” would perpetuate the misguided belief that focuses on the external, the tangible, and the literal, whereas the entrance into the belly of the beast signifies a movement inwards, toward redemption from within; like the encounter with the lost Pearl, it is an encounter with the transcendental in a place of in between.

Once Jonah hears the message, he reprises his Christ-like role, which then alludes to two traditionally significant events; if the belly retains its symbolic implication as “hell,” then Jonah, like Christ in the “Harrowing of Hell” from the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, emerges triumphant and unscathed; in a different yet not so separate connotation, the belly yet again serves as a Passing stage for Jonah, reminiscent of Christ’s Passion and Resurrection. Having risen from the “dead,” there is a sense of symbolic closure of this seemingly gnostic cycle:

With þat he hitte to a hyrne and helde hym þerinne,
 Per no defoule of no fylþe watz fest hym abute;
 Per he sete also sounde, saf for merk one,
 As in þe bulk of þe bote þer he byfore sleped.

So in a bouel of þat best he bidez on lyue,
 Pre dayes and þre nyȝt(l.2 89–94)

In this passage, a different type of repose is presented, which when juxtaposed with the earlier one in the sailors' boat, the contradictory states become clear; in the boat, he was practically ridiculed by the poem's narrator, as he was nowhere ready for the reception of the message. At the time, he was too deeply immersed in his own physicality. But in this scene, the contrast materializes. He is no longer mocked by the narrator; rather, the words in which he is described are laced with some kind of realization and acceptance. He is alone in this encompassing darkness, which under traditional circumstances would present the most inappropriate, sinful place of all, and yet he is safe and sound. It becomes a place for deep meditation,⁵⁹ in tune with the internal—a place of remembrance.

Then after spending three days and three nights in this abyss, Jonah emerges from the belly of the fish, like Christ resurrected, figuratively, and gnostically reborn. He realizes that “Ðe abyne byndes þe body þat I byde inne” (l. 318), in an enlightened acknowledgment of his physical state prior to gnosis. His body was entrapped by the abyss of ignorance manifested by the whale's belly, but “Ðenne [he] *remembered*” (emphasis added, l. 326). And before being allowed to leave, Jonah vows “to do Ðe sacrafyse when I schal saue worþe, / And offer Ðe for my *hele* a ful hol gyfte, / And halde *goud* þat Ðou me hetes: haf here my trauthe” (emphasis added, l. 334–6). In other words, Jonah promises his sacrifice once he is deemed worthy, offering this gift in exchange for his salvation.⁶⁰ He ends by reiterating that he has achieved some kind of “goodness” or “knowledge”⁶¹ which was heaped upon him by God's grace. The passage seems to have been complete and the message heard. However, when he comes out of the whale's belly, his clothes remain “sluchched” (l. 341). As I have mentioned before, from an orthodox perspective this would indicate that he remains defiled by sin, but that seems to be the case either way. The line between the literal and the figurative, the traditional and the unorthodox is blurred when it deliberately becomes a part of the reversal scheme. Namely, while Jonah has been literally expelled from the abyss, he is also figuratively expelled. He himself is waste at this point and resurrection in the traditional, physical sense becomes somewhat redundant. Thus, while he should no longer be encumbered by materiality, he is still unable to don the robe of glory—“Hit may wel be þat mester were his mantyle to wasche” (l. 342). Something is still missing for the

transformation to be complete. At this point, he is much like the Jeweler in *Pearl*, seemingly on the path to salvation and yet, not quite there.

After preaching in “Nuniue” and receiving the expected reaction, Jonah relapses into his previous state, conveniently forgetting the message he received in the whale’s belly and the mercy he himself was shown. Like the Jeweler who cannot understand the divine message in the Vineyard Parable, Jonah here completely disregards his own lesson for the sake of his pride and self-importance. From his point of view, the Ninevites deserve the promised destruction because if the prophecy is not fulfilled it thus “me les makez” (l. 428). He yet again refuses to listen when the “soun of oure Souerayn þen swey in his ere” (l. 429), shutting himself from the truth, seemingly reverting into the “safety” of traditional ignorance as “He bowed vnder his lyttel boþe, his bak to þe sunne, / And þer he *swowed and slept sadly* al nyȝt” (emphasis added, l. 441–2). As though the scene of the whale had never occurred, he swoons⁶² into an unconscious feint and sleeps steadfastly.

When he wakes, he exclaims in foolish confidence, “Iwysse, a worþloker won to welde I neuer keped” (l. 464). On the literal level he believes he has found the best place to dwell, but the word “won” can be also translated into “church” or the “Earth” itself.⁶³ This wordplay, I believe, is significant in the sense that it shows Jonah’s mistaken understanding by metaphorically seeking refuge in the earthly institute of the church, which he believes will keep him safe, but proves, much like the woodbine, weak and insubstantial. At the same time, there is a play on the ongoing reversal of mistaken identity in creation started in *Pearl* by the unnatural Jeweler. Jonah foolishly believes he couldn’t have had created a worthier place for himself and at the same time transgresses by placing himself in the role of creator. These false beliefs are immediately thwarted as his “sanctuary” proves futile. He then again falls into a symbolic sleep—“quen hit neȝed to naȝt nappe hym bihoued; / He slydez on a sloumbe-slep sloghe vnder leues, / While God wayned a worme þat wrot vpe þe rote” (l. 465–7). The way in which God chooses to put a dent into Jonah’s carefully crafted plan—the worm—rings with ridicule and disappointment, recalling the misplaced confidence Jonah places in the woodbine and his own actions.

God is often humanized in the poem and treated with human characteristics. Jonah himself uses “Lede,” “Man,” “Renk,” and “Wyȝe” in his appeals to God. To some extent, this use aims to place both characters on semiequal grounds, to show that Jonah can and should identify

himself with God, which he does. But there is still an ontological and epistemological separation between the two, much like in the relationship between the Jeweler and the Pearl Maiden. God's knowledge clearly places him on a different level. When God inquires, "Why art þou so waymot, wyȝe, for so lyttel?" (l. 492) the metaphorical intention is clear; that which for Jonah's ignorant position meant life and death/creation and ruin—the "wodbynde" and the "worme"—is obviously quite insignificant in God's terms. He then proceeds to show Jonah who the true creator is through his words: "If I wolde help *My hondewerk*, haf þou no wonder" (emphasis added, l. 496). He is trying to reason with Jonah in human terms, again by lowering himself to his level and juxtaposing his character with Jonah; "Þou art waxen so wroth for þy wodbynde, / And trauayledez neuer to tent hit þe tyme of an howre, / Bot at a wap hit here wax and away at anoþer [...] / Þenne wyte not Me for þe werk, þat I hit wolde help" (l. 497–501).

The poem ends with an instructional note, a message of continuance masked by the supposed moral of the tale. Jonah and/or the reader⁶⁴ is referred to as a "godman" (l. 524), a reference that recalls the secret language of heretics when the necessity of confidentiality required the use of such "code words."⁶⁵ The words denote that some kind of connection has been established and that a certain level of understanding has been attained, which might possibly entail a broader lesson as discussed by Pierson Prior, where Jonah as well as the poem's audience should "stop concentrating on the distant apocalypse and instead to bring God's Kingdom into the present—and thus paradoxically to go one step beyond apocalypse," (Prior 1996, 337) since bringing this world to an end is essentially unnecessary. Salvation can be gained within the framework of this world, in its present carnality through the gaining of gnosis. However, since we are only privy to one side of this missing dialogue, we cannot ascertain the ultimate passing of the listener. In the following line, God/the narrator advises "Be preue and be pacient in payne and in joye" (l. 525). The word "preue" may be interpreted as a play on the words "preve" and "prive" where the listener is advised to be a worthy confidant or a counselor in secret for every occasion, in pain and in joy, again reasserting the seemingly established connection.

He then ends with a leading reference to the poem I shall discuss in the next part, *Cleanness*, utilizing a clothing metaphor, which recalls the soggy clothes of Jonah after the expulsion from the whale; "For he þat is to rakel to renden his cloþez / Mot efte sitte with more vnsounde to

sewe hem togeder” (l. 526–7). Namely, he who tears a hole in his clothes, or in other words is sinful, will find himself more deeply troubled when he attempts to sew them back together. That is, carnal sin seems to beget further sin. However, these lines may also be interpreted as he who is quick to remove his clothes, disengage himself from the physical⁶⁶ in a manner that is traditionally sinful (i.e., tearing a hole in one’s clothes), might have to endure misfortune in his attempt to reconcile the two, much as the poem has attempted to show, for ultimately “paciencie is a nobel poynt, Pa₃ hit displese ofte” (l. 531). Though it seems to be somewhat of a digression from the poem’s main topic, it does provide a smooth segue to the next poem.

Cleanness

Cleanness seems to pick up where *Patience* leaves off by continuing in the same thematic line started by the two other poems discussed in this chapter—the reversal of cleanness vs. filth and vicariously the discussion of the body and the soul. Quite unlike past scholarship that claimed a lack of unity in this seemingly problematic oddity, this poem does indeed present a certain form of unity. Those claiming the poem lacked unity argued over the fact that the poem’s first two exempla deal with the issue of sexual transgression while the third exemplum—Belshazzar’s feast—discusses the profane use of holy vessels, seemingly in discordance with the prior issues. Later in the 1970s and more recent critics have argued in defense of some kind of thematic and structural unity within the poem, tied together by the exempla via its style and structure. These critics took to reading the poem either as a highly structured, skillfully produced sermon with an agenda regarding the orthodox perspective of sexuality and physical impurity or as a complex moral lesson presenting the possibility of some kind of (forced) sacrifice and eventual salvation.⁶⁷ I tend to agree that the poem does possess structural as well as thematic unity but that it is tied together by another link—a reversal scheme that portrays the necessity of sacrifice as a sign of rebirth in death, but also the possibility of immediate salvation through knowledge and insight. The theme of cleanness vs. filth was first mentioned in *Pearl* with regard to soul and purity (i.e., the spotless pearl), and then reformulated in *Patience* with regard to Jonah and the whale. In that instance, as discussed in the previous section, physical filth should not be taken to infer spiritual filth since the poem itself problematizes that position by showcasing

a supposedly spiritually enlightened Jonah in a physically filthy state. *Cleanness* is informed by that instance and elaborates on it through the use of three exempla placed within a frame narrative based on the parable of the Wedding Feast from Matthew (22:1–14). All three exempla are stories of destruction reminiscent of the apocalypse, yet all three present an immediate opportunity for salvation for the “chosen few.” For those characters, these moments are all major Scenes of Passing, leading to one specifically hopeful scene at the end of the poem—with the possibility of the vicarious and perhaps imminent passing of the narrator.

The poem begins from the point where *Pearl* left off—the celebration of the Eucharist. The same tone of reproach and disappointment, along with a reversal of the external and internal, marking the ending lines of *Pearl* return with a vengeance at the beginning of *Cleanness*:

If þay in clannes be clos þay cleche gret mede;
 Bot if þay conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont,
 As be honest vtwyth and inwith alle fylþez,
 Þen ar þay synful hemself and sulped altogeder
 Boþe God and His gere, & hym to greme cachen (l. 12–16)

The narrator of this poem seems to be as lost as the one in *Pearl*, having missed the enlightening truth offered in the two previous poems, and faced with a final attempt in the longest of the three texts. This structure signals the centrifugal structure of the poems, their correlation and the seemingly preconceived, underlying reference to a similar thematic core—the pearl of wisdom. Furthermore, *Cleanness* begins and ends with a feast. The two scenes may seem disparate but they are actually two sides of the same coin; the beginning scene depicts a traditional outlook on the treatment of a poorly dressed, physically unclean guest⁶⁸ while the ending scene portrays a reversed version of the holy mass, a “black mass” as discussed by Kelly and Irwin,⁶⁹ which parodies the traditional concept, showcasing the absurdity of people’s reactions and their lack of understanding. This scheme of reversals started in *Pearl* seems to reach a peak in *Cleanness*. The foul wedding guest is depicted much the same as Jonah once he was expelled from the beast (l. 119–62). He is foul but obviously possesses the potential of attaining gnosis since otherwise his presence at the feast could not be explained. His presence, in a way, serves as a materialization of the gnostic potential of his character. However, he is clearly unready to receive the message and reside among those clean of spirit, again referred to as

“god men”⁷⁰—“De gome watz vngarnyst with *god men* to dele” (emphasis added, l. 137). It would seem that becoming a part of this elect society would entail having attained insight, and vicariously, divine sight.⁷¹

At the end of the scene depicting the punishment the lord gives the underdressed guest, he claims, “Depe in my doungeoun þer doel euer dwellez, / Greuing and gretynge and gryspyng harde / Of teþe tenfully togeder, to teche hym be quoynt” (l. 158–60), again taking us back to the scene in *Patience* where Jonah crosses into the belly of the whale. In the belly, a place of filth, often regarded as vile and despicable and thus traditionally spiritually impure, he receives the opportunity to gain gnosis. Here, that opportunity presents itself again; it is in the dungeon that the guest is to receive his education in the hopes of attaining his richly garments. The poet ends the parable with “fele arn to called” (l. 162), a version of the biblical “For many are called,” but omits the rest of the quote, “but few are chosen.” This I believe indicates an emphasis through omission. This omission speaks louder than words; the chosen few should realize the message through what remains unsaid, through the hidden, for it cannot be expressed at this moment, similar in a way to the message of *The Cloud of Unknowing* yet one that ultimately aims for articulation, quite unlike the mystical vision. Those who are “in the know” will simply know as they are both predisposed to the knowledge and privy to the message.

Nevertheless, the narrator seems to position himself in the middle of the poem’s reversal scheme as he is constantly in a state of in between—between knowledge and ignorance. Like the other narrators from the two previous poems, he struggles to receive gnosis then fails, but throughout the poems, the respective narrator serves as a prime candidate for the possibility of eventual reception and salvation. He seems torn as he describes God’s actions and motivations in very human terms and more specifically, in terms that resonate with the gnostic view of the Old Testament Demiurge:⁷²

Bot neuer 3et in no boke breued I herde
 Pat euer He wreke so wyþerly on werk þat He made,
 Ne venged for no vilte of vice ne synne,
 Ne so hastyfly watz hot for hatel of His wylle,
 Ne neuer so sodenly so3t vnsoundely to weng,
 As for fylþe of þe flesch þat *foles* han vsed;
 For, as I fynde, þer He for3et alle His fre þewez,
 And wex wod to þe wrache for wrath at His hert (emphasis added,
 l. 197–204)

He claims to have never heard reported in any book that God had ever taken such vengeance on his own creation. In the next three lines he continues to emphasize the cruelty, the hostility, the fierce vengeance with which God wreaked havoc on humanity, and all for the sin of filth of the flesh. Much like in the Wedding Feast parable, this is a sin committed by fools or rather attributed to fools—a sin of ignorance. This is followed by a depiction of God's motivation in human terms, in a manner that unifies divergent gnostic perspectives⁷³ with traditional ones. He ends by conclusively saying that from what he has found in the following exemplum, God seems to forget his abundant courtesy and virtue as he becomes furious with their base vileness. This linking of the traditional with the apocryphal is reinforced when he prefaces the first exemplum on Noah's flood with the fall of the angels, followed by the fall of man and finally with the story of the fallen angels mingling with human females and begetting unnatural offspring. Both the fall of the angels and the story of the creation of giants appear in the apocryphal *Book of Enoch*. The poem seems to repeatedly make use of liturgical writings and patristic texts alongside popular pseudepigrapha, indicating a vast reserve of historical influences.⁷⁴

The narrator begins by saying that “þose lykkest to þe lede (Adam), þat lyued next after; / Forþy so semly to see syþen wern none” (l. 261–2). But since “Ðer watz no law to hem layd bot loke to *kynde*. . . founden þay fylþe in fleschlych dedez, / And controeued *again kynde* contrare werkez” (l. 263, 265–6). The poem creates a wordplay on the word “kynde,” showcasing the reversal of meanings begun in the Wedding Feast and originating in *Pearl*. Like the “unnatural” Jeweler in *Pearl*, the physical world as well as its creator is but a mirage that needs to be overcome. The poem emphasizes this notion through seemingly attributing the Original Sin to Adam and Eve's fleshly deeds⁷⁵ rather than to the actual eating of the apple and the consequent gaining of knowledge, thus detracting from the gravity of the traditional view of the Original Sin. In other words, the encumbrance of the flesh and, by approximation, the sins of the flesh overshadows true spirituality and knowledge. The poem then proceeds to link these deeds with the creation of “contrare werkez,” leading to the story of Giants that appears in the apocrypha. Thus, he creates a mixture of the traditional with the unorthodox via a gnostically inclined justification of God's wrath—over Adam and Eve's loss of gnosis through their immersion in the physical. Moving away from Truth, knowledge,

and their innate insight, the “lykkest to þe lede” no longer looked to the true creation but rather devised their own contrary “werkez” that were against nature (much like the work of the demiurge) and thus unnatural. The narrator continues his wordplay when he provides God’s thoughts on man’s misbehavior; “Me forþynkez ful much þat euer I mon made, / Bot I schal delyuer and do away þat *doten* on þis molde, / And fleme out of þe folde al þat *flesch* werez” (emphasis added, l. 285–7). He creates a second parallel between sins of the flesh and foolishness, reiterating his earlier find.

The first exemplum the narrator goes into elaborates on the scheme already established in the beginning of the poem. It signifies that Noah, a “god man” (l. 341), is in possession of true “cleanliness” as he gains knowledge and is saved, whereas the rest of the world, immersed in the sin of ignorance, is literally immersed in water to cleanse their literal sin of physical uncleanness. Thus, their punishment fits the crime (l. 350–5).

For when they had polluted themselves and had entered into the flesh, the father of the flesh, the water, avenged himself. For when he had found that Noah was pious (and) worthy—and it is the father of the flesh who holds the angels in subjection. And he (Noah) preached piety for one hundred and twenty years. And no one listened to him. And he made a wooden ark, and whom he had found entered it. And the flood took place. And thus Noah was saved with his sons. For if indeed the ark had not been meant for man to enter, then the water of the flood would not have come. In this way he intended (and) planned to save the gods and the angels, and the powers, the greatness of all of these, and the <nourishment> and the way of life. . . . For the first defilement of the creation found strength. And it begot every work: many works of wrath, anger, envy, malice, hatred, slander, contempt and war, lying and evil counsels, sorrows and pleasures, basenesses and defilements, falsehoods and diseases, evil judgments that they decree according to their desires. Yet you are sleeping, dreaming dreams. Wake up and return, taste and eat the true food! Hand out the word and the water of life! (*The Concept of Our Great Power*)

This segment from the Gnostic text *The Concept of Our Great Power*⁷⁶ reiterates the significance of the Wedding Feast parable; that the chosen few who heed the message of Truth are the ones who survive the deluge, both physically and spiritually, and Noah is clearly aware as he says “Al is wroȝt at Ði worde, as Þou me wyt lantez” (l. 348). Namely,

it is the hearing of the message that causes a reawakening within Noah; everything is done according to His *word* that leads Noah down the path of (re)gaining his wisdom/knowledge. In *Cleanness*, we are exposed to the other side of the scene as the narrator describes the people crying for mercy and salvation from the Creator but it all amounts to confusion since his mercy has passed and their prayers are left unanswered. In other words, prayers in general, the active form of traditional belief, and more specifically, the prayers of the uninitiated seem somewhat suspect since they ultimately prove completely futile. The scene of the actual drowning is imbued with a sense of sorrow mingled with pity and sympathy, but the sympathy seems to be for all those missing out on salvation because of their imposed blindness/drunkenness/sleep and not for their imminent destruction.

Love, the narrator says, has also taken its leave from the world by this point. This is again a throwback to the sentence omitted from the Prologue, providing emphasis through omission, that many are invited but few are chosen. For in order to belong to “His comlych courte” (l. 546), one must be “as þe beryl bornyst . . . [or] as margerye-perle” (l. 554, 556).⁷⁷ The narrator then says that those who are unable or unwilling to hear the message, those of “vnsounde hert” who have allowed “Þe venym and þe vylanye and þe vycios fylþe [to] bysulpez” their soul will “ne see with sy3t of his y3en” (l. 574–6) the Saueour. Man, he continues, must “sauyour” in himself that

þa₃ þou a sotte lyuie,
 Pa₃ þou bere þyselþ babel, byþenk þe sumtyme
 Wheþer He þat stykked vche a stare in vche steppe y₃e-
 3if Hymself be bore blynde hit is a brod wonder (l. 581–4)

The poem again makes a play on words by using “sauyour” to denote knowledge⁷⁸ but at the same time it can be understood as a reference to God, the Savior. The admonition here is for the “godman” to know himself and in himself to know God since those who deprecate this knowledge have been known to misunderstand God—Him who gave sight to people’s eyes and hearing to people’s ears, entailing there is indeed a way to “know” God. Had God been born blind or deaf (l. 584–6), like the demiurge, it would have been a great wonder,⁷⁹ the narrator continues. The narrator is seemingly trying to explain in human terms the fact that the true God is beyond the physical and the only way to experience and

to know Him is through the truth that lies in one's own self. The ordeal of the flood ends when the dove comes to rest on the ark, holding an olive branch in its beak. The appearance of the dove, much like the appearance of the eagle in "The Song of the Pearl," signifies their safety in a message of salvation. Moreover, in this scene, it seems as though *Patience's* Jonah revisits in the form of the knowledgeable messenger, bringing some kind of closure to his storyline, as Jonah means dove in Hebrew.

The poet then moves onto the second exemplum, starting with Abraham, "þe godmon" (l. 677), creating a parallel between his character and Noah's. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is introduced through God's speech in response to their so-called sins. Several Gnostic traditions, most especially the Sethians, perceived the people of Sodom and Gomorrah as the knowledgeable descendants of Seth. In the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, it is written that

there came forth from that place the great power of the great light Plesithea, the mother of the angels, the mother of the lights, the glorious mother, the virgin with the four breasts, bringing the fruit from Gomorrah, as spring, and Sodom, which is the fruit of the spring of Gomorrah which is in her. She came forth through the great Seth [...] Some say that Sodom is the place of pasture of the great Seth, which is Gomorrah. But others (say) that the great Seth took his plant out of Gomorrah and planted it in the second place, to which he gave the name 'Sodom'. This is the race which came forth through Edokla. For she gave birth through the word, to Truth and Justice, the origin of the seed of the eternal life, which is with those who will persevere, because of the knowledge of their emanation. This is the great, incorruptible race which has come forth through three worlds to the world. And the flood came as an example, for the consummation of the aeon. But it will be sent into the world because of this race. A conflagration will come upon the earth. And grace will be with those who belong to the race, through the prophets and the guardians who guard the life of the race. Because of this race, famines will occur, and plagues. But these things will happen because of the great, incorruptible race. Because of this race, temptations will come, a falsehood of false prophets. Then the great Seth saw the activity of the devil, and his many guises, and his schemes, which will come upon his (Seth's) incorruptible, immovable race, and the persecutions of his powers and his angels, and their error, that they acted against themselves.⁸⁰

This excerpt claims that the devil's works will bring much adversity and disaster upon the world but the blame will be laid upon Seth's

incorruptible race. The foolishness of the followers will simply perpetuate the error, making them unable to see that they were ultimately acting against themselves. God claims that “The grete soun of Sodamas synkkez in Myn erez,” creating a pun on the word “soun” (l. 689), which may be both understood as “son” and “sound.” It is both the Great Son of Sodom (i.e., Seth) and the sound of their Truth that is sinking into His ears, again relating to the necessity of aural enlightenment that should then lead to visual revelation. God’s character here is yet again anthropomorphized as he repeatedly falls somewhere between knowledge and ignorance, seemingly assimilating the narrator’s changing perceptions.⁸¹

However, God’s true knowledge is immediately reasserted when he claims,

I compast hem a kynde crafte and kende hit hem derne,
 And amed hit in Myn ordenaunce oddely dere,
 And dy₃t drwry þerinne, doole alþer-sweettest,
 And þe play of paramorez I portrayed Myseluen,
 And made þerto a maner myriest of oþer:
 When two true togeder had ty₃ed hemseluen,
 Bytwene a male & his make such merþe schulde conne,
 Welny₃e pure paradys mo₃t preue no better;
 Ellez þay mo₃t honestly ayþer oþer welde,
 At a styлле stollen steuen, vnstereð wyth sy₃t,
 Luf-lowe hem bytwene lasched so hote
 Dat alle þe meschefeð on mold mo₃t hit not sleke (l. 697–708)

I devised for them a natural way and taught it to them secretly,
 And regarded it in My judgment particularly dear,
 And created love within it, sharing as sweetest of all,
 And the play of sexual/spiritual love I fashioned Myself,
 And in accordance made a distinct race⁸² spiritually delightful:
 When two who are true had tied themselves together,
 Between a male and his mate salvation will be made possible,
 That even paradise might prove no better;
 So long as they fittingly possess each other,
 At a hidden, secret meeting, with none to look on,
 The flame of love between them blazed so hot
 That all the afflictions of the world could not quench it (my translation)

In this profoundly significant soliloquy there is a mingling of the traditional and the unorthodox since God’s definition here of love holds

a sense of enlightenment in secrecy. True spiritual enlightenment and knowledge are masked by carnal love just as the incorruptible race's blessedness is masked by its traditional culpability. This race serves as the focus of these lines—cherished in the eyes of God and instructed by His message, placing them as an example to be followed. The message goes beyond the physical, emphasizing its lack of importance in the face of true spiritual delight and salvation. But it is more than that since these lines emphatically and quite unusually praise erotic relations. This notion falls right into the gnostic scheme since just like there is no original sin to speak of, the Valentinians actually held a positive view of sexuality.⁸³ In the following lines, Abraham is bartering with God over the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, arguing over God's motivation that seems to be led by a somewhat rash judgment. This scene borders on the ridiculous as Abraham presents God with an assortment of scenarios in which not all people are guilty; "What if fyue faylen of fyfty þe noumbre, / And þe remnaunt be reken, how restes þy wyll?" (l. 737–8). He questions God's motivation, much in the way the Jeweler questioned the Pearl Maiden, and similarly, God here too humanizes himself in order to appeal to this very human line of questioning, led by human intellect and understanding.

Soon after, the poem shifts to Lot and his household. The poem describes Lot standing alone in the doorway of his lodge,⁸⁴ seemingly keeping vigil, waiting for something to occur. Two angels, sent into Sodom by God to spread "His sonde" (l. 781), soon appear disguised as "swete men . . . Bolde burnez wer þay boþe with berdles chynnez, / Ryol rollande fax to raw sylk lyke" (l. 788–90). The emphasis upon their outer description as possessing fair boyish beauty seems to suggest a twist on the traditional culpability of the Sodomites, foreshadowing the people's demand for the angels' company and somewhat making light of it. Lot urges them to reside with him for the night and it is his courtesy and hospitality that convinces them to stay. Lot's wife, who is suspicious of the angels and disrespectfully refers to them as "vnsauere hyne" (l. 822), directly defies both her husband's and the angels' request for unsalted food. As Francis Ingledew notes, "When Lot's wife seasons a meal with salt . . . she simulates a spiritual state proper to sacrifice" (255).⁸⁵ In other words, she follows traditional practice,⁸⁶ despite being told otherwise, and is soon harshly punished for it.

After the meal, the town's people, who have found out about the newcomers/the spies, arrive at Lot's house and demand they be brought to them;

'If þou louyez þy lyf, Loth, in þyse wones,
 3ete vus out þose 3ong men þat 3ore-whyle here entred,
 Pat we may lere hym of lof, as oure lyst biddez
 As is þe asyfe of Sodomas to seggez þat passen' (l. 841–4)

In these lines, the people tell Lot to bring the men out so they can teach them about love, as their desire bids them to do. In the literal sense their intent is clear, but as it has already been established that the Sodomites' culpability is to be questioned and even made light of, these lines should also be read to mean that they simply wish to teach the uneducated about their ways; the poet uses the noun "lyst" that may be taken for a word-play on the meaning of lust as carnal desire, or "list" as the faculty of hearing.⁸⁷ Thus, the possibility of initiation, of hearing the message and Passing, both literally and figuratively, becomes apparent. Here, Lot's character, who presented himself in the beginning as a true candidate for initiation, seems to waver between knowledge and ignorance, much like several other characters and structures in the three poems. In his ignorance, Lot ironically believes the courteous thing to do to safeguard his guests from harm is to try to prostitute his daughters. The town's people's answer is indignant and angry as they loudly reproach, "'Wost þou not wel þat þou wonez here a wy₃e strange, / An outcomlyng, a carle?"' (l. 875–6). They make known that Lot is yet a stranger in their land (not one of them), who knows not their customs and dares pass judgment when he is so obviously lacking himself. At this point, Lot is much like the "resurrected" Jonah whose reasoning falters as he himself does in the face of the possibility of fully Passing.

In the subsequent scene, we are told that the place was a paradise on earth, fit for the elect before its vengeful destruction; "He sende toward Sodomas þe sy₃t of his y₃en, / Þat euer hade ben an erde of erþe þe swettest, / As aparaunt to paradys, þat plantted þe Dry₃tyn;" (l. 1005–7). But then, it was necessarily destroyed, as it is depicted in the Gnostic Gospels—"Þis watz a uengaunce violent þat voyded þise places" (l. 1013). The result of this destruction, however, is portrayed by a list of reversals to the natural order. But since everything seems already reversed, this simply reinforces the overall sense, that whatever seems natural is unnatural and vice versa, much like in the other two companion pieces. The poet gives a description of the bitter apples of the Dead Sea (l. 1043–8), bringing to mind the apple (and tree) of the Garden of Eden, which is also a throwback to the first exemplum where the apple—the sign of

knowledge for the Gnostics and the symbol of sin for the orthodox—took a backseat to the seemingly less meaningful physical act of love.

Maintaining the same reversed structure, the following segment that depicts the apples as turning into “wyndowande askes” (l. 1043) when touched is on the one hand a backhanded remark regarding the significance of the apple in orthodox tradition, but perhaps also a linguistic pun on the idea of Ash Wednesday—“ashes as a symbol of penance” (MED *asshe*, def. 4), or the Ash Wednesday Supper. Yates claims that “the curious title of *Cena de le ceneri*, which Bruno gives to the work describing the Supper in which he expounded his philosophy to knights and pedants . . . it is best to regard it as a kind of magical and allusive picture, as Bruno himself suggests in the dedication to the French ambassador” (254). In other words, the apples may look appetizing but are ashen within, a reversed reinforcement of the lesson the poem has been trying to teach in which external appearance can misguide and thus outward cleanness does not necessarily denote internal purity or vice versa. At the same time, the linguistic pun provides another dimension where the “ashes” aren’t necessarily a symbol of sin and corruption but rather a sign of penance, repentance, and allusive knowledge with the possibility of salvation. These reversals continue as the Dead Sea is then likened to the Virgin Birth in its unnatural creation. This juxtaposition should be again scrutinized since it immediately follows the seemingly unseemly juxtaposition with the sinful scene of the Original Sin. Under these terms, the outcome of the destruction is a uniquely good thing; just like Noah’s flood results in salvation and regeneration through death and destruction, the same occurs here.

In the passage between exempla, the narrator provides commentary where he posits earthly love alongside spiritual love and enlightenment, alluding to *Le Roman de la Rose*:

And if He louyes clene layk þat is oure Lorde ryche,
 And to be couþe in His courte þou coueytes þenne,
 To se þat Semly in sete and His swete face,
 Clerrer counseyl, counseyl con I non, bot þat þou clene worþe.
 For Clopyngnel in þe compas of his clene Rose,
 Þer he expounez a speche to hym þat spede wolde
 Of a lady to be loued [...]
 If þou wyl dele drwrye wyth Dry₃tyn þenne,
 And lelly louy þy Lorde and His leef worþe,
 Þenne confourme þe to Kryst, and þe clene make
 Þat euer is polyced als playn as þe perle seluen (l. 1053–9, 1065–8)

In these lines he speaks of romantic, earthly love and juxtaposes it with a loving relationship toward God. He takes the concept of divine love and debases it by directly linking it with carnality—humanizing it just as he humanizes his god. However, in order to move beyond this intermediary state, one must make himself clean, rid himself of ignorance, and model himself after Christ and the Pearl of Great Price. And as examined in the first part of this chapter, this reference to the pearl has greater significance as it stands for the ultimately true communion with God and salvation. And just like the pearl survives untarnished “in myre” so should the true initiate who disregards materiality “whyle þou on molde lyuyes” (l. 1114). Christ, who serves as teacher and model, embodies cleanness on both the literal level—He heals those who come to him suffering of physical ailments⁸⁸—and on the symbolic level—He heals their spiritual ailments through his teaching; “He heled hem wyth hynde speche of þat þay ask after” (l. 1098). Thus, cleanness, much like patience, serves as a form of passage with the symbolic role and aim of knowledge.

Belshazzar's feast, as the final exemplum and closing lesson of the poem, seems to also close the circle begun with the wedding feast, albeit in a twisted, somewhat perverse manner. It is a “black mass”⁸⁹ for all intents and purposes, a reversed version of the holy mass in which true faith and false law intermingle and reverse; “He fylsened þe faithful in þe falce lawe / To forfare þe falce in þe faythe trew” (l. 1167–8). Nebuchadnezzar, who will also be discussed in chapter 4 on Gower, is contrasted here with both Solomon and Belshazzar. He is a character of in between—between the initiated Solomon, who

Wyth alle þe coyntyse þat he cowþe clene to wyrke,
 Deused he þe vesselment, þe vestures clene;
 Wyth sly₃t of his ciencias, his Souerayn to loue,
 Be hous and þe anournementes he hy₃tled togedere (l. 1287–90)

And Belshazzar, who “in pryde and olipraunce his empire he haldes, / In lust and in lecherye and loþelych werkkes” (l. 1349–50). Nebuchadnezzar, on the other hand, may have “bet doun þe bur₃ and brend hit in askez” (l. 1292) but he is knowledgeable enough to heed Daniel's advice and humble his arrogant ways. Belshazzar begins, like the Jeweler, as very invested in the material and he treats the holy vessels much in the same way. Though the focus here seems to shift away from the motif of clothing, the topic of external and internal filth continues to serve as a central

theme in the paradoxical discussion of the defilement of the holy vessels. By imbuing the vessels with any type of significance (even if in traditional terms it represents defilement), he is paradoxically imbuing them with meaning. Gnostically, the vessels are just that, empty, redundant, material vessels, much like the clothes. In this sense, by treating the holy vessels the way he does, Belshazzar, without consciously realizing it, is actually emptying them of their earthly signification, thus contributing on the one hand to the framework of the reversed Mass, as well as to the overall reversal scheme of the poems. On the surface, he is simply intoxicated by worldly goods and the vessels simply represent a part of that for him. But he doesn't stop there. Just like his feast (l. 1397–419) becomes the complete opposite of a holy feast, so does the message he seeks to spread; “Hit is not innoghe to þe *nice* al *no3ty* þink vse / Bot if alle þe worlde *wyt* his *wykke*d dedes” (emphasis added, l. 1359–360). Instead of spreading a message of wisdom, he seeks to spread foolishness, which is equated with evil/unclean deeds and thus it and he become twice as dangerous.⁹⁰

During the feast he is described as fully intoxicated, practically on the verge of unconsciousness:

Sof aste þay we3ed to him wyne hit warmed his hert
 Andb reyþed vppe into his brayn and blemyst his mynde,
 And al waykned his wyt, and welne3e he foles;
 For he waytez on wyde, his wenches he byholdes,
 And his bolde baronage aboute bi þe wo3es.
 Penne a dotage ful depe drof to his hert,
 And a caytif counsail he ca3t bi hymselfen (l. 1420–6)

The wine they kept bringing him rushed into his brain and impaired his mind, enfeebled his understanding to such an extent that he nearly became a fool. The word “nearly” is key in this sentence since it indicates there is some hope yet. In the following sentence, this notion is reinforced as we are told he is gazing about the room, watching his peers “bi þe wo3es.” Akin to Lot and several other central figures depicted in the trilogy of poems discussed, Belshazzar wavers between symbolic sleep and wakefulness; “Wo3es” can be translated both literally and metaphorically. It is either “an upright enclosing structure” (*MED*, wough(1), def. 1), or something “wrong, perverse, sinful” (*MED*, wough(2), defs. 1, 2). Even in his intoxicated state he cannot help but notice the fault of his surroundings. But then a deep foolishness strikes his heart and he makes an unfortunate decision for he again falls imprisoned by his folly.

The narrator then continues that

Hit watz not wonte in þat wone to wast no serges,
 Bot in temple of þe trauþe trwly to stoned
 Bifore þe *sancta sanctorum*, þer soþefast Dryȝtyn
 Expounded His speche spiritually to special prophetes (l. 1489–92)

It was not customary in that place (i.e., church or this world) to spend
 time on such searches (for they seemed frivolous)
 Except for those who stand in the temple of divine truth (transcendent
 knowledge)
 Before the *sancta sanctorum*, where the true God
 Expounded His speech spiritually to special prophets (my translation)

As the previous messages were clearly not enough, God delivers one more message that rattles Belshazzar from his imposed stupor. No one, however, possesses the knowledge necessary to understand the message and so Belshazzar begins searching for “segges þur₃out / Dat wer wyse of wycheecrafte, and warla₃es oþer / Dat con dele wyth demerlayk and deuine letters” (l. 1559–61). Namely, he is looking for someone in possession of supernatural power and occult knowledge, who will be able to decipher the message for him. Even though he is still in a state of intoxication, he realizes he requires someone else’s guidance for his soul’s salvation. He thus mistakenly groups together practices that were traditionally perceived as demonic and categorized as heresy, with true divine revelation. However, all who answered the call were as ignorant as he at this point. The only one who can help is Daniel since he is in possession of true gnosis; “þou hatz in þy hert holy *connyng*, / Of *sapiencie* þi sawle ful, soþes to schawe . . . And þou unhyles vch hidde þat Heuen-Kyng myntes” (emphasis added, l. 1625–6, 8).

Lynn Staley, who claims that John of Gaunt might have commissioned the *Pearl* poet for *Cleanness* and *Patience*, reinforces her argument through showcasing the obvious influences of John of Gaunt’s infamous library on the poet’s writings. One of the books assumed to have been in his possession and thus possibly to have fallen into the hands of the *Pearl* poet is *Sompniale Danielis*—*The Dreams of Daniel*—attributing yet another clearly Eastern influence to his writings. Daniel relates the story of Nebuchadnezzar in an attempt to teach Belshazzar the same lesson he had taught his father. His father, before hearing the sound of the “Souerayn . . . in his eres” (l. 1670) thought he had “insyȝt” but was sorely mistaken for in his insurmountable pride he declared “I am god of þe

grounde, to gye as me lykes / As He þat hy₃e is in heuen” (l. 1663–4). Like *Pearl*'s Jeweler, he was an unnatural creator. But “Denne He wayned hym his wyt, þat hade wo soffered, / Ðat he com to knowlach and kened hymselfuen” (l. 1701–2); God's message finally penetrated his senses and restored his awareness so that he regained knowledge and knew himself. But that is not the case for Belshazzar, who refuses to allow himself to hear the truth and thus remains encumbered by ignorance, clothed in matter, and vicariously, defiled by sin. The narrator, on the other hand, who seemed somewhat knowledgeable throughout concludes the poem in a few lines that repeat the overall theme of cleanness as a source of delight to God. I believe he intentionally omits the alternative of filth for he assumes, and perhaps secretly wishes, that the lesson has been learned. Nevertheless, the overall sense of understanding remains mostly inconclusive and riddled with uncertainty.

CHAPTER 3

THE TRUTH ABOUT PIERS PLOWMAN

Most recent scholarly discussions of *Piers Plowman* assume W. W. Skeat's classifications of its versions—and thus its author's constant revisions.¹ Skeat argued that only three of the extant versions of the poem are to be considered authorial—and he gave them their permanent labels as the A, B, and C texts—although some scholars (and even editors) considered another version of the poem, the Z text, a possible predecessor to the A text.² In this chapter I will mainly focus on the B text, as probably the most complete or at least “finished” of the three, but the fact of the author's ongoing revisions points to a search for some clear understanding or enlightenment that seems never to have ended for the author.

Although all three (or four) versions of the poems are almost unanimously attributed to William Langland, much remains uncertain about this individual's life.³ John Bowers suggested at one point that Langland may have been a member of “that sizable group of unbeneficed clerks who formed the radical fringe of contemporary society, sharing in a common discourse of homiletic invective against church corruption and governmental failures. The poorly shod Will is portrayed ‘y-robed in russet’ (B.8.1) traveling about the countryside, a crazed dissident showing no respect to his superiors” (10–11).⁴ More scholars have claimed that the author was creating a persona, although the degree to which this figure departs from the historical author remains a complex controversy.⁵

The level of the poet's academic theological learning is elusive as well. As George Kane asserts, “Langland was not writing as a professional theologian but as a highly intelligent and tolerable well informed poet making poetry for his own comfort out of the thought and feeling of his time” (88).⁶ However, this too is highly debated. Whatever the historical reality of the author's identity and background, within a short time, the

poem garnered various responses (in the form of adaptations in the “*Piers Plowman* tradition” or in the form of carefully annotated scholarly copies) that range from the religiously traditional to the heretical. On the whole, in modern scholarship, the poem has been chiefly viewed as part theological allegory, part social and ecclesiastical satire, dealing with the narrator’s quest for spiritual Truth on the backdrop of a medieval Catholic mindset faced with turmoil. The character of Piers, the humble plowman, serves as the narrator’s and dreamer’s guide to that sought-after Truth. Along this journey, riddled with dream visions, the narrator attempts to learn about the allegorical characters of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. He finally receives a vision of the Crucifixion, followed by one of the arrival of Antichrist to the contemporary world of Westminster and London, which many critics claim embodies a social message about the corruption of the world and a longing for some kind of general reform.⁷ My take on the poem, however, centers on a more personal pilgrimage, an individual’s path to revelation through an internal quest for gnosis.

Critics like Nicholas Watson assume that “an ideal treatment of Langland’s salvation theology would cover the whole poem in all versions, focusing especially on the second vision’s proclamation of a pardon to all society.”⁸ Watson discusses the poem in terms of offering hope and spiritual redemption to all Christians, of all estates, specifically emphasizing the plight of the poor. This notion has also been taken one step further by Donaldson’s claim that “Langland was acquainted with the doctrine of Uthred de Boldon . . . [this doctrine] appears to be specifically restated in the C-text; [but] while [George] Russell believes that ‘there is no sign of its use in B,’ it seems to me that the citation from St. Paul is only explicable in the B-text as an acknowledgment on Langland’s part that he subscribes to a doctrine concerning the righteous heathen as liberal as Uthred’s” (Donaldson, 72).⁹ Others like Bloomfield¹⁰ have focused on an older tradition concerning the subject of Christian perfection and eschatology, claiming that through the attainment of this “perfection” a kind of social and personal salvation may be gained. In other words, “Piers is sought to save Holy Church, not primarily to save Will. And it is this which makes the poem basically an apocalyptic, not a mystical poem” (Bloomfield 1962, 163). Claiming the cause to be a social one may indeed be true, ultimately, but the poem’s dream visions and internal progress seem too personal for that to be the main goal, much as in Gower’s case, which returns us to the centrality of the generic choice. The dream vision personalizes the journey, the pilgrimage, the quest for

knowledge and perfection, ironically by portraying the lead character as Everyman. On this quest, “part of the problem of Will is actually to find an authority, and his quest is not only for perfection but for someone who can lead him to perfection, until finally he realizes that only Piers himself can” (Bloomfield 1962, 170), or rather, as I show, as only Will himself can.

One branch of the critical argument about the reformist nature of the poem considered Langland a Wycliffe supporter and the poem a political tool of reformatory propaganda. Much has already been done on the subject and, thus, I do not intend to engage this topic directly. Nevertheless, it is imperative to consider this tradition, though nowadays somewhat dismissed, as a point of reference to the emergence of the gnostic residue, as a kind of “parallel” to the emergence of Lollardy: interesting to intellectuals as a new way to be “pure” without depending on clerics via a personal quest for perfection and salvation,¹¹ but also as a similarly influential margin that impinges upon the center. That said, one must keep in mind that though Lollardy and the gnostic paradigm share some common perspectives, they are quite different.¹² Lollard appropriation of the poem was mostly induced by internal evidence such as the verse’s notorious obscurity, its structure and thematic choice of controversial material. It appears though that it would have been easy for Lollards to identify with the text as it seemed to present some kind of “ideological allegiance” to their agenda that was appropriate.¹³ This tradition became more prevalent with Robert Crowley’s 1550 edition of *Piers*, which emphasized Lollard ideological similarities in the marginal glosses and passus summaries, and even omitted so-called Catholic elements from the text (some references to purgatory, transubstantiation, and praise of monasticism).¹⁴ However, that is not to say that Langland, or the poem, is to be so conclusively categorized since many of the concerns of the Lollards were simply the main intellectual issues circulating at the time.¹⁵

Indeed, there is a crisis of faith in the late-medieval period and some critics have argued that *Piers Plowman* depicts an “inward journey” on the backdrop of said crisis in an attempt to find answers through penitential and redemptive suffering.¹⁶ However, while these scholars have emphasized the poem’s place within orthodox tradition and materials, the true emphasis and focus in the poem is not just faith but the search for a certain knowledge that is independent of and surpasses faith. And for that small number of “good men” or perhaps even for the individual alone, grasping or rather regaining that knowledge becomes central and

crucial. The question of audience yet again rises in connection to this inward journey where the poem presents a possibility for enlightenment and salvation beyond and away from the church. John Burrow claims that since the poem was written in the vernacular, it was possibly intended for prosperous lay audiences as well.¹⁷ But Bloomfield's earlier point remains significant: given the poem's macaronic structure and density of complex allusions and ideas, "it is hard to think of a large, popular audience for the work, in spite of John Balls' reference to *Piers* in his famous letter of 1381. The poem is too difficult and too allusive to have been enjoyed by the common people or by restless, uprooted clerics. The references to *Piers* and the poems influenced by it all argue for a medium-sized, literate, thoughtful audience" (Bloomfield 1962, 42). The poem's possible lay audience then pulls it off its clerical pedestal and into the realm of spiritual secularity, but "it must be remembered that the advocates of secular literature in the Middle Ages were on the defensive. The pagan worldliness of much of it clashed with Christian otherworldliness, and those who loved the ancient poets were hard put to defend their poetry. The only way out, as the accessus and glosses to many a classical and pagan work show, was to argue strongly for the *utilitas* of such literature, and *utilitas* meant finding a moral meaning" (Bloomfield 1962, 91) for whatever that morality actually meant or was structured upon. The unique structure and topical ambivalence makes it possible to take the discussion in such heterodox directions. In an essay on the authorial aspect of *Piers Plowman*, George Kane observes the religious risks that the poem takes, adding that heresy is "'the outlet of a society with no outlets'. In such a situation Langland's outlet was his poem" (86), like many other poets of the period. Langland's use of the macaronic structure emphasizes this idea as a way of "hiding in plain sight."

For a bigger perspective on the role of heresy and subversion, we may turn to the thought of Pierre Bourdieu on the nature of "revolutionary" language. Bourdieu argues that "Condillac's theory, which saw language as a *method*, made it possible to identify revolutionary language with revolutionary thought" (Bourdieu 1999, 47). By the same token, having a normalized, standardized language also leads to a kind of conformity of thought which is enforced through symbolic power and finally gives way to actual political power. Those in power are then in charge of identifying and defining legitimate language, repressing those at a social or religious, as the case may be, disadvantage—usually lay people—and thus marginalizing them. Perhaps in an attempt to centralize the margins, to

focus on those at a “disadvantage” yet still in possession of some form of power (i.e., literacy, artistry, and/or monetary wealth), Langland used the macaronic structure, among other enigmatic elements like, the poem’s cryptic allusions, its riddles and parables, and its overall allegory that keeps eluding interpretation, much as Gower uses his marginalia and overall structure, to single out the “chosen few” who will truly be able to understand. But how would one go about attaining such understanding?

A fourteenth-century tradition in circulation was the idealization of the plowman figure as a hard-working, pious symbol of spiritual Truth.¹⁸ As a plowman, he could understand the plight of the peasants and personalize the poem’s vision. And indeed, there is an attempt to coax the narrator, with Piers’ guidance, toward a personal revelation but the attempt ultimately falls short, for Piers, though a “mere” plowman, is on a level far exceeding that of Will’s with no true Passing in sight. At the same time, another issue that complicates the poem’s understanding and contributes to its ongoing reversal scheme is the other side to this image of the plowman, formed mainly by events like the Black Death and the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381.¹⁹ For most critics, it is clear that the poem deals with the Peasants’ Revolt. The revolt, which had a great impact on English society, began as a local rebellion that quickly grew and spread. There were several proximate causes to the revolt, like the poll tax, but it is also plausible to trace the Rising all the way back to the Black Death and its consequent labor shortage. In the years 1348–9, R. B. Dobson accounts in his book: “there was a general mortality among men throughout the whole world [...] In the same year there was a great plague among sheep everywhere in the kingdom.”²⁰ The situation only worsened as the demand for labor increased, and so did the laborers’ request for monetary compensation, which led to the interference of the king who ordered that “reapers and other labourers should not receive more than they used to take, under a penalty defined by statute [...] In the following winter there was such a shortage of servants that [...] all things were left with no one to care for them. Thus necessaries became so dear”²¹ that prices started to rise. Eventually, the state of things became unbearable for the famished peasants causing “the commons of southern England [to rise] in two groups, one in Essex and the other in Kent [...] Fifty thousand of the commons gathered.”²²

John Gower portrays the peasants as lazy, proud, and bestial in his *Vox Clamantis*, much like they are seemingly portrayed in *Pearl*’s vineyard parable. And even Langland himself adds in the Prologue and Passus 6 that

it is only a matter of time before the unsavable turn away from the true path and return to their slothful, indulgent ways. However, Piers is different. Langland goes as far as to equate him with Christ when he claims, “*Petrus id est Christus*” (B.15.212).²³ In this poem, he is the teacher figure, the knowledgeable messenger revealed to the potential initiate. Langland seems to follow in the steps of the *Pearl* poet by designating Piers a role similar to the Pearl Maiden, Dame Patience, and Dame Cleanness. But Piers is also but a messenger of a higher entity—he is the emissary of the feminine Truth and her salvific message. The rest of the array of characters are similarly part of the poem’s grand scheme under the guidance of Truth, Holy Church, and vicariously Piers. This chapter has been placed in the middle, in between the writings of the *Pearl* poet and those of John Gower in order to reflect both the literal and metaphorical uncertainty the text seems to exude. In its similar structure of reversed concepts and the thematic search for spiritual knowledge, it serves as a logical continuation to the previous chapter. However, while it does present a more specifically formulated attempt at Passing, its inconclusive obscurity and disarray place the poem in a stage of in between, as a precursor for the closing of the circle and an ultimately successful Passing.²⁴

Some critics have claimed that Langland intended to speak for the peasant cause, by placing the discourse of the revolt within a traditional religious context that speaks of spiritual salvation in which Piers the plowman embodies the spirit of Christ. Others have maintained that he may have written the C-text version specifically in order to disassociate himself from such rumors and accusations. However, the very creation of the C text and its seemingly desperate attempt to discount so-called heretical tendencies, as well as the countless contradictions and incongruities within the B text raise many questions.²⁵ Institutionalized and traditional religion is constantly subverted and criticized all the while a different type of salvific scheme is emphasized. Salvation seems to be close at hand for the attentive listener in the poem’s repeated (eight times, in this specific version) attempts at passing the message. Will, the dreamer, is however quite reluctant as were all the previous narrators I have discussed. Both *Piers* and Gower’s *Confessio* seem to depict a kind of gnostic pilgrimage toward knowledge culminating in a possible scene of successful Passing. In *Piers*, the separate attempts at teaching the narrator the Truth, Will’s eight visions (in the B text), excluding the dream within a dream sequences (there are two in B), are all such Passing attempts.²⁶ The number eight plays a significant role in gnosticism for the Ogdoad

(translated from Greek as the “eightfold”) represents the eighth sphere or the eight spheres (depending on gnostic tradition), the Pleroma and supposed complete ascension and oneness with the Godhead (i.e., the attainment of gnosis). Combined with Bloomfield’s reading of the poem as an apocalyptic scenario, as well as other critics’ reading of an “inward journey,” this would entail a memorial process beyond the worldly and into the self that is supposed to culminate in the complete passage into knowledge and the regaining of gnosis; however, that doesn’t entirely happen. It does happen, on the other hand, in Gower’s *Confessio*, which is structured in much the same way, and where the emphasis on the number eight becomes truly prominent, as will be discussed in chapter 4.

In this study, I identify several thematic and structural elements that add up to what I have called the gnostic paradigm in the dream visions of this period. One of these is the continual and unsettling mixture of the traditional with the unorthodox. From the very beginning, Langland reverses the traditional meaning of good and evil by intermingling the two in his complex allegory about Piers the Plowman. Jeffrey Russell claims that “it is believable and natural that discontented individuals coming under the influence of heretical teachings could agree that this world was created by an evil God, and that God’s enemy, Lucifer, is consequently good” (Russell 1974, 188), thus pushing us closer to Langland and *Piers Plowman* by presenting the possibility for a gnostic reading in which the peasants—Piers’ followers—as “discontented individuals” should heed the message of the poem and rise against political and ecclesiastical authority.²⁷ One of the main quests in the poem that intertwines with the quest for Truth is the one for Dowel. This recalls a scene in *Cleanness* where the wedding guest is ironically sent “Depe in my dounoun þer doel euer dwellez” (l. 158) in order to heed the message and be able to rejoin the feast. Much like the reversal of traditional notions in that poem, I believe Piers creates a similar pun on the word “Dowel” that directly relates to Russell’s claim. The quest for Dowel then becomes the quest for the devil, or rather the knowledge that the figure of the devil through the serpent represents. Thus, this historically and socially imbued archetypal character becomes gnostic here in the sense that this quest is intended to lead Will to his personal salvation through the acquirement of this specific type of knowledge. Such a reading would then entail a deeper look into the three quests Will embarks on, seeking the three figures—Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. Moreover, as stated in the Introduction, these three seem to parallel the Valentinian

categorization of people respectively: the *hylikoi*—those too deeply influenced by matter; the *psychikoi*; the “called”—those who follow the soul and are capable of salvation through *gnosis*; and the *pneumatikoi*—the spiritual, the “elect,” those in possession of perfect knowledge. Yet again, much as in the works of the *Pearl* poet, the dreamer remains in the second category, for though there is hope in the end, the Passing does not ultimately occur.

Langland’s *Piers Plowman* places Truth at the center of the work and he links it directly with all that is good, including Holy Church, and Christ. This Truth may be similar to some forms of Christian mysticism, but the type of knowledge depicted in the poem seeks articulation instead of obscurity and the path of regaining it takes place through a rigorous endeavor of internal self-discovery. The figure of Piers, who is presented as the emissary of this Truth and the leading guide to attaining it, is revealed as Christ-like by the end of the poem, a transition that the attentive listener and initiate should be able to undergo himself. *Piers* begins with a description of the world as seen through the eyes of the speaker/dreamer. This description uses the form of the traditional Great Chain of Being, but on a grander, metaphysical scale:

A[c] as I biheeld into the eest an heigh to the sonne,
 I seigh a tour on a toft trieliche ymaked,
 A deep dale byneth, a dongeon therinne,
 With depe diches and derke and dredfulle of sighte.
 A fair feeld ful of folk fond I ther bitwene—
 Of alle manere of men, the meene and the riche,
 Werchyng and wandryng as the world asketh (B.Prol.13–19)

If we accept the traditional way of thinking, the tower would then be read as a metaphor for Heaven, the dale, as Hell, and the field, as Earth. However, as we soon discover, none of the descriptions is concrete or clear, and the fact that these spheres constantly clash and intermingle is soon revealed. “The mooste meschief on molde is mountynge up faste” (B.Prol.67) begins the narrator, preparing the grounds for what is to unravel. He then emphasizes, ““The mooste partie of this people that passeth on this erthe, / Have thei worship in this world, thei wilne no better; / Of oother hevne than here holde thei no tale”” (B.1.7–9). Namely, most people on earth, if they have belief in this world, both in the physical material things they possess as well as in the earthly church, they wish for nothing more. Of any other heaven they know not to tell.

This quotation emphasizes a critique of the church as an establishment as well as of its blind followers who are currently no more than *hylikoi*. Such a critique fleshes out humanity's folly as they wallow in ignorance and intoxication while the church as an establishment takes on the role of a false usurper (of knowledge), much like the gnostic demiurge, perpetuating folly. The poem is overcome by such critiques and it seems that every such occasion serves as an indication of a sought-after supplement that is obviously not communal, or at least not in the same sweeping sense of the church.

As the beginning indicates, the situation on Middle Earth is one of confusion and disorder. The short allegory at the end of the Prologue serves, I believe, as an indication of how to read the poem in its entirety.²⁸ The rats, in this mini-allegory, are debating their situation and claiming, "Mighte we with any wit his wille withstonde, / We myghte be lordes olofte and lyven at oure ese" (B.Prol.156–7). The people are depicted here as rats trying to follow human reason in order to gain earthly status and goods. Even though many scholars take this as topical political satire on the Good Parliament, nonetheless it has a deeper thematic meaning that the gnostic paradigm clarifies. This fable mocks human ignorance for seeking something inconsequential and ridicules the way they wish to go about it. The poem first presents "A raton of renoun, moost renable of tonge" (B.Prol.158) who is big on words and bravado but quite empty on inspection since his "plan" to hang a bell on the cat's neck proves completely futile. Not only is no one willing to take on the dangerous task but the plan also proves the shallowness of their thinking. Immediately thereafter, however, we are introduced to the figure of a leader who might be able to teach them about Truth. This knowledgeable leader—"A mous that muche good kouthe" (B.Prol.182)—comes from among themselves, intending to show that each of them can eventually be saved and become like him, but in order to do so they must be wise. He tries to tell them that no matter what they do, their situation on earth will remain practically the same and thus a material change will not be the answer. Since their current state doesn't matter, they must look beyond it; "Forthi ech a wis wight I warne—wite wel his owene!" (B.Prol.208). He warns them that in order for each man to be able to apprehend spiritual insight he must first know himself and that can only occur via the message of this poem. He does not dare interpret the message himself but rather allows the true initiate to uncover it on his own and thus become "Devyne" (B.Prol.210).

As stated before, the rest of the characters in the poem can be loosely divided into two groups, those belonging to the earthly realm and those possessing the Truth, in a way, a highly artificial division reminiscent of the one between orthodoxy and heresy, body and soul, good and evil. However, even this division is not always so clear-cut in the poem. These reversals provide a deeper layer where nothing is quite as it seems and thus should be carefully scrutinized. The characters migrate from one side to the other and back, showcasing the instability and confusion of the narrator himself. Holy Church is one such character. A central character from the very beginning, she brings forth the notion of Truth and reveals that, “‘The tour upon the toft’, quod she, ‘Truthe is therinne, / And wolde that ye wroughte as his word techeth’” (B.1.12–3). From this point on it is clear that this Truth should be revered and sought, and followed unquestionably. However, it is not the truth held by the orthodox church or achieved through orthodox means, since there is a clear difference between the figure of Holy Church and the earthly church. The poem makes it quite clear that the existing clergy does not rank very highly in its unique scheme of salvation:

I fond there freres, alle the foure ordres,
 Prechynge the peple for profit of hem-seluen
 [...]
 Ther preched a pardoner as he a preest were:
 Broughte forth a bulle with bisshopes seles,
 And seide that hymself myghte assoillen hem alle
 [...]
 Were the bisshop yblessed and worth bothe his eris,
 His seel sholde nocht be sent to deceyve the peple.
 As it is nocht by the bisshop that the boy precheth—
 For the parishe preest and the pardoner parten the silver (B.Prol.58–9,
 68–70, 78–81)

The narrator goes on to elaborate upon all the wrongdoings of the clergy, starting with friars, pardoners, and bishops, and ending with the pope himself. After such an introduction the emphasis upon the word “Holy” in the character’s name becomes glaringly important. It cannot be a reference to the earthly church for as previously depicted, the earthly church is full of wrongdoings and sin. When Will asks “‘Teche me to no tresor, but tel me this ilke / How I may save my soule” (B.1.83–4), Holy Church answers “‘Whan alle tresors arn tried,’ quod she, ‘-Treuthe is the beste”

(B.1.85) and the one who realizes this “is a god by the Gospel, agrounde and olofte, / And ylik to Oure Lord, by Seint Lukes wordes” (B.1.90–1). In other words, he is not only good²⁹ and knowledgeable but he becomes godlike both on earth and beyond. He should not imitate Christ, but rather become like Christ and consequently be saved. This idea is again emphasized at the end of the poem when Piers embodies the figure of Christ, creating a circular structure. And it is up to the learned person to teach the Truth to the ignorant since there is much confusion between the two—“For Cristen and uncristen cleymeth it echone” (B.1.93).

The only way to regain this Truth, this insight, is as shown in the previous poems, through repose and passivity. This point is emphasized in the rats’ fable where the narrator implores the people to remain passive and seek Truth through other means. He ends the fable by declaring that “Al this I seigh slepyng, and sevene sythes more” (B.Prol.231). He may not attempt an interpretation, but he will provide the message in his subsequent seven visions (eight including the first). Apropos the number seven, much like in Gower’s *Confessio*, this poem seems to give the Seven Deadly Sins a privileged place, which is seemingly quite “orthodox.” Throughout the three beginning passūs, there is a repetitive mentioning, whether covert or overt, of the sins and the plot seems to almost revolve around them. Their thematic importance peaks in Passus V where the irony with which the sins are discussed shifts the focus from the traditional use of the sins and into the realm of adverse confusion. As the personified sins begin to confess and repent, the entire “sacramental” process becomes practically blasphemous. Moreover, Morton Bloomfield claims that “the seven cardinal sins are the remnant of some Gnostic Soul Journey which existed probably in Egypt or Syria in the early Christian centuries.”³⁰

As mentioned before, *Piers Plowman* depicts one such Soul Journey³¹ in which the soul goes through eight spheres (i.e., visions or “steps,” literally “passus”) before it reunites with the Godhead (i.e., attains the Truth, or gnosis). This soul drama seems to draw on the earlier versions of the Gnostic tradition, but the ideas remain the same, albeit fitted to the historical and cultural circumstances (i.e., the astrological spheres of the Soul Journey have been transformed and refitted into the scheme of the seven deadly sins). Bloomfield reasserts that “the seven cardinal sins remained in the orthodox theology of the Church, as a remnant of all this Gnostic and Hellenistic speculation, unknown to the faithful” (Bloomfield 1967, 36) due to their heretical source and association. This confusion blended with a sense of acknowledgment is constantly mixed within this so-called

inconsistent poem via the various and repeated reversals. The orthodox finds itself frequently juxtaposed with the unorthodox, and is continuously questioned as the poem seems to provide an alternative. Each time the dreamer falls asleep as part of the requirement of both dream vision and gnostic reawakening, this sense of ironic reversal rises to the surface. Bloomfield exemplifies this by stating that “Piers is working to reform the Church and redeem the remnant while the character who is visualizing him is sleeping through Mass” (Bloomfield 1962, 128). Traditionally speaking, this would be the epitome of ironic blasphemy, a blunt and vulgar denigration of the Church and its rituals, but it seems to fall right in line with the rest of the poem and its increasing criticism. On the one hand, it reinforces its critique of the ignorant traditional Church that calls for such rituals, while at the same time it stresses the importance of passivity, ironically preparing Will for his imminent passage by figuratively closing the door on tradition. Toward the end of her speech, Holy Church continues to emphasize, “Lereth it th[u]s lewed men, for letted it knoweth—/ That Treuthe is tresor the trieste on erthe” (B.1.136–7). She reproaches the dreamer and those ignorant like him for not knowing enough and admonishes them to learn from those already learned that Truth is the only treasure on earth. Truth here is equated with knowledge. Traditionally, knowledge should fall second to faith, but that does not seem to be the case, quite the contrary. Knowledge, Holy Church claims, should be sought and attained for that is the truest treasure in an otherwise treacherous earth.

In the second passus, we are introduced to Lady Meed, who plays the allegorical role of earthly intoxication, symbolic of those who refuse to heed the truth due to their worldly induced stupor. Stephen Russell asserts that “in the *Visio* what seems to be the villainous figure of Lady Meed, [is expelled but Piers finally discovers] that, without her, humanity is denied access to the holy ‘meed’ of salvation” (Russell 1988, 140), again reinforcing the necessity of repose as a form of intoxication in order to overcome the disease/sin of forgetfulness and pass into knowledge, but also reinforcing the reversal scheme, where instead of relinquishing Lady Meed for the sake of pure, unencumbered Christian spirituality, her “participation” is not only required but seemingly essential. Nevertheless, when Holy Church introduces her we automatically assume she belongs to the other side, the side of ignorance since Holy Church’s entire speech is full of reproach and disappointment. But we soon discover that the two are siblings, which complicates things further, especially since Holy

Church's tone is full of petty envy possibly stemming from a case of sibling rivalry:

“In the Popes paleis she is pryvee as myselve,
 But soothnesse wolde nought so – for she is a bastard,
 [...]
 I oughte ben hyere than [heo]—I kam of a bettere.
 My fader the grete God is and ground of alle graces” (B.2.23–4, 28–9)

Nevertheless, upon careful reading, the difference between the two becomes quite clear as it follows the same structure set up before. Holy Church's tone and intentions take on human form. She uses human reason in order to appeal to the dreamer's sense, just like the *Pearl* poet's Maiden and his figure of God; unlike Meed's false truth, she possesses True insight and though Meed is the one more largely accepted and practiced, it is her who ought to be higher, intended for the chosen, since her father, the one who created her, is the great God. But there is also realization that not all can possibly accept her, for while “many are called, few are chosen.” Meed, however, inconclusively belongs to neither side, at least not in the mind of the dreamer. She represents and reflects the dreamer's own wavering in the sense that on the one hand, she clearly causes men “to sitten and soupen til sleep hem assaille, [...] / Til Sleuthe and sleep sliken hise sydes” (B.2.97, 99). In other words, she causes a state of such intoxication that once they are immersed in it, “wanhope to awaken hym so with no wil to amende, / For he leveth be lost – this is his laste ende” (B.2.100–1). When he becomes so lost in despair that he cannot be awakened, his salvation is also denied. But at the same time, we are told that there is

That oon [Meed] God of his grace graunteth in his blisse
 To tho that wel werchen while thei ben here.
 [...]
 Swiche manere men, my lord, shul have this firste mede
 Of God at a gret nede, whan thei gon hennes (B.3.232–3, 244–5)

This confusion persists in the seemingly reversed wedding feast thrown for Meed and Falseness. The king begins:

“And thei to have and to holde, and hire heires after,
 A dwellynge with the devel, and dampned be for evere,
 With alle the appurtaunces of Purgatorie into the pyne of helle-

Yeldynge for this thyng at one yeres ende
 Hire soules to Sathan, to suffre with hym peynes,
 And with hym to wonye with wo while God is in hevене.”
 In witnesse of which thyng Wrong was the firste,
 And Piers the Pardoner of Paulynes doctrine,
 Bette the Bedel of Bokynghamshire,
 Reynald the Reve of Rutland Sokene,
 Munde the Millere—and many mo othere.
 “In the date of the devel this dede I assele
 By sighte of Sire Symonie and Cyvyles leeve” (B.2.102–14)

The ironic take on this sacrament recalls Belashzzar’s “Black Mass” in *Cleanness*. Here too, the wedding ceremony is transformed into a perverse version of a holy union made in Hell in the presence of the Devil and his followers, including prominent figures of ecclesiastical representation. This ceremony, like Meed’s character and several of the poem’s other characters, represents the current state of earthly matters and institutionalized divinity, which vicariously represents the dreamer’s lack of understanding and state of in between where confusion rather than knowledge reigns.

In the following passus, the king sends Conscience to bring Reason to court. On their way, they encounter Warren Wysdom and Witty but Conscience advises him against stopping and conversing with the two, claiming,

Ther are wiles in hire wordes, and with Mede thei dweneth—
 Ther as wrathe and wranglynge is, ther wyne thei silver;
 As there is love and leautee, thei wol nocht come there
 Thei ne gyveth nocht of God one goose wyng:
 For thei wolde do moore for a dozeyne chiknes
 Than for the love of Oure Lorde or alle hise leeve seintes!
 Forthi, Reson, lat hem ride, tho riche by hemselfe—
 For Conscience knoweth hem nocht, ne Crist, as I trowe (B.4.34–41)

Wisdom is treated here as the malicious party by both Conscience, who constantly wavers from side to side (especially at the end), and Reason, who is simply not knowledgeable enough to know better. This instance may be viewed in two ways; Conscience may either be in the wrong, possibly partaking in an activity specifically dealt with in Gower’s *Confessio* as part of the sin of pride—Presumption as his words are rash and judgmental and his tone rings with jealousy. At the same time, the name Warren and the inflection of Wit may also reflect a somewhat belittling

tone intended by the narrator with regard to these characters. As such, Warren Wysdom may be portraying a type of transmitted doctrine, a kind of taught dogma³² that goes hand in hand with human reason and is later contrasted with “Kynde wit,” a natural, innate type of knowledge.

Only as late as the fifth passus, after fully exploring the theme of the Seven Deadly Sins and their prominent place, are we introduced to Piers, the leader of the people on this pilgrimage to salvation. From the very beginning he is likened to Christ in the section retelling the “Harrowing of Hell,” “an event closely associated with the issue of the virtuous pagan since, strictly speaking, those He harrowed were pagans” (98).³³ The sorrow of the captured Jews rubs off onto Jesus and for a time, “the sonne for sorwe therof lees sight” (B.5.492), ironically at a time when light shines the brightest as it is the mealtime of saints. In this scene, before he is supposed to release the forefathers from their captivity, he seems to take on a role very similar to the *Pearl’s* Jeweler. They are both consumed by grief to the point that it might be conflated with the sin of pride. The figure of the son comes off as human in this sense, an earthly leader (“a conqueror,” as he is referred to later in the poem) who may fall into sin and can only repent and regain paradise through the knowledge of true divinity and the light of God. He is not the one who releases the forefathers, but rather it is the light of God—“the light that lepe out of Thee” (B.5.495)—that blinds Lucifer, paradoxically the “light bringer” himself, which eventually releases the captured.

Piers then, it seems, doesn’t escape scrutiny either. As part of the growing confusion, we cannot ignore the fact that the name Piers is often given to other characters whose “title” is less than flattering. The uncertainty surrounding Piers’ character is but a part of the ongoing scheme where nothing is quite as it seems; where only a select few could possibly attempt to decipher the “hidden” message. Ironically, by “blurring” the meaning, such reversals push the “truth” to the surface in a manner reminiscent of the *via negativa*. The first appearance of the name is attributed to a pardoner who is synonymous in the poem with lies and greed, while the second, a priest (B.5.312), refers to a title no less unflattering. Nevertheless, our suspicions are soon alleviated with the first account of *Piers Plowman’s* character given by a fellow plowman who has had the chance to be in his company. He recalls,

I knowe hym as kyndely as clerc doth hise bokes.
Conscience and Kynde Wit kened me to his place

And diden me suren hym si[ththen] to serven hym for evere,
 Bothe to sowe and to sette the while I swynke myghte.
 I have ben his folwere al this fourty wynter—
 Bothe ysowen his seed and suwed hise beestes,
 Withinne and withouten waited his profit,
 Idyke[d] and id[o]lve, ido that he hoteth.
 Som tyme I sowe and som tyme I thresshe,
 In taillours craft and tynkeris craft, what Truthe kan devyse,
 I weve and I wynde and do what Truthe hoteth (B.5.538–48)

This plowman's knowledge of Piers is based on good authority for Conscience and Innate Wit have taught him. They assured him that the right path would be to serve him forever and he has been his follower for 40 winters, "sowing his seeds"—teaching and spreading his Truth. Piers is immediately identified with Truth and the speaker has obviously dedicated himself to its path. Piers indeed plays the role of deliverer, leading his followers down the path he has chosen. In this apocalyptic scenario, no earthly roles are really changed, as the king and knights remain in their rightful place. The king is righteous and the knight who "By Seint Poul!' quod Perkyn, 'Ye profre yow so faire'" (B.6.24). Thus, the point here is not to dwell on redundant, earthly states that cannot and probably will not change, but to rouse the people from their spiritually imposed stupor and prepare them for much grander things. Piers then presents a little test—"I have an half acre to erie by the heighe weye; / Hadde I cryed this half acre and sowen it after, / I wolde wende with yow and the wey teche" (B.6.4–6). This practice is almost like a secret initiation, a right of passage that will enable Piers to distinguish the initiates from the rest. With that done, he will be able to join their cause and lead them on the path of knowledge which will hopefully allow them to regain insight and ultimately salvation.

When "wastours"—ignorantly idle folk—refuse to do Piers' bidding, his wrath is as harsh and his punishment as swift as the one delivered by God in both *Patience* and *Cleanness*. Piers exclaims that while "The kirke shal have my caroyne, and kepe my bones" (B.6.91), "He shal have my soule that best hath deserved it" (B.6.87), "and alle that holpen hym to erylve, to sette or to sowe, / or any [man]er mestier that myghte Piers availe—/ Pardon with Piers Plowman Truthe hath ygraunted" (B.7.6–8). And so the path to salvation is sketched out. He who shall successfully undergo the pilgrimage presented and reawaken from his imposed stupor will leave the physical behind and be able to reach salvation along with Piers, courtesy of Truth.

The narrator then continues, “As under his secret seel Truthe sente hem a lettre, / [And bad hem] buggen boldly what hem best liked (B.7.23–4). Truth sends his message secretly sealed³⁴ so that only the true can access it and bids them bravely establish among themselves what they think best. It is important to note that the pardon presented by “Holy Church” and Piers is not the ecclesiastical, institutionally given one, but rather a personal one, dependent solely upon the self, as fitting a dream vision: “Et qui bona egerunt ibunt in vitam eternam; / Qui vero mala, in ignem eternum” (B.7.110). This notion is reinforced by the end of passus 7 when the dreamer awakens and realizes that his dream may possess a kind of secret insight that needs to be unveiled and understood, just like the prophetic messages of Daniel and Joseph. His subsequent realization that “Dowel yow helpe” (B.7.194) also takes us back to the beginning and the ongoing wordplay between “dowel” and “doel,” reminding us of the reversed structure and possibly warning us that the Passing has yet to take place.

This theme continues in the next passus when the dreamer sets out to seek Dowel. He encounters two friars who have already been established as problematic figures and asks them for Dowel’s whereabouts:

‘Dooth me to witene;
 For [ye] be men of this moolde that moost wide walken,
 And knowen contrees and courtes and many kynnes places—
 Bothe princes paleises and povere mennes cotes,
 And Dowel and Do-yvele, wher thei dwelle bothe’ (B.8.13–17)

Will reasons that since they are both men of this world, they are perhaps too familiar with it, at least according to prior knowledge, and thus they would know where Dowel and Do-yvele dwell. Here, the wordplay previously only suggested at comes full circle by literally piling the two together. The friars, however, prove to be knowledgeable teachers, envoys of Truth whose message he should observe. But Will is a hard customer and he questions the friars smartly, claiming that “Sevene sithes, seith the Book, synneth the rightfulle, / ‘And whoso synneth,’ I seide, [certes] dooth yvele, as me thynketh, / And Dowel and Do-yvele mowe noght dwelle togideres” (B.8.22–4). According to his interpretation of the biblical source, being sinful automatically entails doing evil. This interpretation seems to draw on the traditional Augustinian view of evil as an absence of good; “The nature is the substance itself which is capable both of good and of evil. It is capable of goodness by participation of

the good by which it was made. It receives evil not by a participation of evil, but by privation of good, that is, not when it is mixed with a nature which is an evil something, because no nature inasmuch as it is a nature is evil, but when it falls away from the nature which is the supreme and unchanging Good, because it was made not of that nature but of nothing.”³⁵ Will, however, does not provide the entire biblical line, omitting an important part: “for the righteous falls seven times and *rises again*” (emphasis added).³⁶ His reasoning, which is quite simple and straightforward, ignores the possibility of repentance and salvation, which leads him to claim that the two whom the friars previously contended dwelled together (Dowel and Do-yvele), can no longer be placed under the same category/roof. In other words, in his view, there is no salvation for the unrighteous, where the heretic is doomed and beyond salvation.³⁷

It seems that just like the vineyard parable in *Pearl*, comprehension is simply beyond his grasp. He cannot comprehend that the concepts of earthly work and material sin are not part of this specific salvation scheme. He then concludes, “Ergo he nys noght alwey at hoom amonges yow freres: / He is outhewhile elliswhere to wisse the peple” (B.8.24–6). His conclusion finally reveals the source of his frustration. His tone is full of dejection, seemingly referring to himself when he says that the evil doer is thus not welcome among the friars and as a result goes off to spread his erroneous knowledge (that of his own wrongdoings or to simply sully the name of the just friars) amid the people. But just like the character of the friars is inconclusive in this tale, so is Will’s speech, emphasized through the friars’ parable about the man at sea. Indeed, the righteous man may sin seven times—a reference to the seven sins which at this point seem to completely converge with the poem’s seven visions as attempts of attaining Truth. These are presented as the dreamer’s seven chances to learn, repent, and be saved on the eighth attempt. If those chances expire, however, all hope is not necessarily lost. While Will’s words ring with a mild tone of desperation concerning his own fate, they do possess a semblance of understanding for his “conclusion” is misplaced. “Nys” may be translated as foolish or ignorant³⁸ and thus the claim that a fool cannot feel at home among these friars would be correct. But Will depicts himself as a “clerc” in line 20 to serve as counterpart to the sinfully foolish who then go and spread their false knowledge to the people. Unlike them, Will reveals a few lines down; he is not yet knowledgeable enough to heed the lesson; “I have no kynde knowyng,’ quod I, ‘to conceyve alle thi wordes, / As if I may lyve and loke, I shal go lerne better;” (B.8.58–9). In other

words, he has yet to tap into his innate knowledge to comprehend their words, but there is hope yet since he is more than willing at this point to go further into the self and (re)learn.

He then encounters Thought who claims, “[Ye wise], suffreth the unwise with yow to libbe, / And with glad wille dooth hem good, for so God yow hoteth (B.8.94–5). He is already including the dreamer in this new scheme of salvation even though he has yet to attain the Truth. The knowledgeable, he says, must suffer living among the ignorant and doing them good for that is what God commanded. This line does not only refer to these people’s spiritual sufferance at being entrapped in their physical existence, alienated by this world of encumbering materiality and intoxicated wrongdoings, much like the one depicted in “The Hymn of the Pearl,” but also possibly, their physical suffering in their attempt to uphold their “goodness” in the face of evil ignorance—a possible acknowledgment of the hardships suffered by heretics at the time of writing, but not necessarily restricted to the Lollards, as well as to the hardships suffered by the peasants which then led to the 1381 revolt. This sense of empathy might be reinforced by Langland’s seeming abundant enthusiasm when his dreamer exclaims in excitement, “Alle þe sciences vnder sonne and alle þe sotile crrefetes I wolde I knew and kouþe kyndely in myn herte!” (B.15.48, 49), revealing a sense of pleasure and delight in the possession of knowledge and intelligence.³⁹

Toward the end of passus 8, Will reiterates his earlier statement that he has yet to learn the message,

As yet savoreth me nought thi seying, so me Crist helpe!
 For more kynde knowyng I coveite to lerne—
 How Dowel, Dobet and Dobest doon among the peple.
 ‘But Wit konne wisse thee.’ quod Thoght, ‘where tho thre dwelle;
 Ellis [n]oot I noon that kan, that now is alyve.’
 Thoght and I thus thre daies we yeden
 Disputyng upon Dowel day after oother—(B.8.110–16)

The paradox in line 111 serves to emphasize the type of knowledge sought in this instance. He wishes to be taught more natural knowledge, a kind of knowledge that is supposed to already be in his possession.⁴⁰ Thought claims that Wit is the only one who knows the Truth about the location of these three figures and he is the only one who can teach it to him. He then spends three days, much like Jonah in the belly of the beast, before he moves on, a tad more knowledgeable and yet still lost.

We are then introduced to Wit, who tries to interpret Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest for Will. He claims,

Sire Dowel dwelleth, . . . nocht a day hennes
 In a castel that Kynde made of foure kynnes thynges.
 Of erthe and eyr is it maad, medled togideres,
 With wynd and with water wittily enjoyed.
 Kynde hath closed therinne craftily withalle
 A lemman that he loveth lik to hymselfe.
 Animas heh atte(B.9.1-7)

Dowel dwells in a castle that the creator made of four related things: earth, air, wind, and water. Within this castle, he enclosed a beloved, a wife who was like himself and whose name is Anima (i.e., soul). But since Anima had suitors who wanted to lure her away from God, he placed Dowel as her guard, Dobet, Dowel's daughter, as her damsel and above the others, Dobest, a bishop to instruct them. And still above all is "the Constable of that castel [who] / Is a wis knyght withalie – Sire Inwit he hatte, / And hath fyve faire sones by his firste wyve" (B.9.17-19). A few lines down, the allegory is explained. The three figures dwell in the castle created by God, named "Caro" (B.9.49), literally the body, whose mistress is the soul. This story recalls the form of Valentinian Gnosticism that was set up at the beginning of the poem; first, through the metaphorical structure that is reminiscent of Gnostic cosmogony and second, through the notion that there is something beyond the soul, which is the spirit, and in order to achieve that perfect state, one must protect the soul against the corruption of the body and guide it back to God. The way to do so would be to adhere to the knowledge of a knight named Inwit, who literally stands for the spirit and spiritual understanding. Or in other words, a kind of "inner wit"—a parallel to the poem's Kynde Wit.

Furthermore, the reversal scheme established in the previous sections makes itself known here as well. The word "hatte" which is several times repeated may be taken for a play on the meaning "to hate or despise."⁴¹ In this sense, the body, made by the creator, is in contradiction to the soul as he enclosed it "craftily" (l. 5) in materiality and is thus at the mercy of human reason and the five senses. The duality here seems to be emphasized, not only between body and soul, but, on the macro-level as well, between this world and its evil creator and the Pleroma and the true God. The body becomes synonymous with the demiurge's evil creation and the soul, with God and knowledge. The only way to redeem the soul and

reunite it with the true Kynde—the pleromatic Godhead—would be via this offered soul pilgrimage toward knowledge and spiritual enlightenment, through the *passus* (literally, steps) of the poem. Wit then continues to stress that fools “that drynke shal fordo that God deere boughte” (B.9.65). In other words, those intoxicated by the world are the ones who bring true destruction since they clearly “fauten Inwit, [and thus] I fynde that Holy Chirche / Sholde fynden hem” (l. 67–8) and teach them the Truth.

Will is then introduced to Wit’s wife, Dame Studie, who is angry with her husband for attempting to impart knowledge to someone who is clearly neither right nor ready. In this sense, she is more insightful than he is. And though her speech takes on a very human note—a wife being displeased with her husband’s actions—her caution seems to be justly warranted:

‘Wel artow wis,’ quod she to Wit, ‘any wisdomes to telle
 To flatereres or to fooles that frenetike ben of wittes!’—
 And blamed hym and banned hym and bad hym be stille—
 With swiche wise wordes to wissen any sottes!
 And seide, ‘Nolite mittere, man, margery perles
 Among hogges that han hawes at wille.
 Thei doon but dryvele theron—draf were hem levere
 Than al the precious perree that in paradis wexeth’ (B.10.5–12)

“You are so sure of yourself that you provide wisdom to flatterers or fools whose mind is delirious,” she exclaims in disappointment as though he has breached a kind of secret agreement that compromised their existence. And again she repeats rhetorically—“to try and teach any fool such wise words!” This repetition aims to emphasize her incredulity at her husband’s actions but also to highlight her utter disbelief that the dreamer and his like could possibly be ready to hear their message, for human reason seems to reign along with the stupor caused by materiality. She then uses part of the biblical quote from Matthew,⁴² repeating: “do not cast precious pearls among swine that have unconstrained will. They do nothing but speak foolishly and slobber—delivering moral filth rather than receive the precious pearl formed in paradise.” She is upset and rightly so because few are those who are actually ready to accept this glorious pearl, this type of salvific knowledge.

Dame Studie takes us back to another Maid previously discussed in the long line of wise women: the Pearl Maiden, who is as spotless and precious

as the message described here. When the dreamer devotes himself to her and he is received in her trust, she gives him a password and sends him to Clergie and his wife, Scripture, both of whom she knows very well; “I sette hym to scole, / And that I grete wel his wif, for I wroot hire [the bible], / And sette hire to Sapience and to the Sauter glosed” (B.10.170–2). She taught them both, translated the bible with Wisdom and provided commentary to the Book of Psalms. She taught Plato to write and Aristotle to argue. In other words, Wisdom, it seems precedes Clergie, faith and all the rest, and it is through her perspective that one must see the world for she is the catalyst of all Western thought. She immediately cautions though:

As Theologie hath tened me ten score tymes:
 The moore I muse therinne, the myst[lok]er it semeth,
 And the depper I devyne, the derker me it thynketh.
 It is no science, forsothe, for to sotile inne.
 [If that love nere, that lith therinne, a ful lethi thyng it were];
 As for it let best by love, I love it the bettre,
 For there that love is ledere, ne lakked nevere grace.
 Loke thow love lelly, if thee liketh Dowel,
 For Dobet and Dobest ben of loves k[e]nn[yng] (B.10.182–90)

As Theology has vexed me many times:
 The more I muse on it, the more obscure it seems,
 And the deeper I reflect, the darker I think it is.
 It is no science, to tell the truth, to engage in.
 [If love wasn't near, it would be an empty thing];
 For it is made best by love, I love it the better,
 For there that love is leader, and never lacked grace.
 Look for that love truthfully, if you like Dowel,
 For Dobet and Dobest are taught by that love (my translation)

This paragraph emphasizes the difficulty of interpreting and understanding Theology. She claims that it is a fickle character since anyone can interpret it differently and so one must be careful which path to take. She herself has been known to find it vague and problematic since it is definitely not science with one conclusive answer. Then she claims that love plays a central role in this study for without it, Theology would be empty. These lines bring to mind the contemplative tradition, and more specifically the Victorine tradition,⁴³ where love is emphasized on one's path to ecstasy.

It is important that in this instance, love is equated with Truth, which again equals knowledge and individual interpretation and salvation,

creating a circular structure that takes us back to the beginning, to the dreamer and his inner self. While it may seem like she is contradicting herself or perhaps retracting her grand statements of before, in actuality, she is reinforcing her previous assertions by providing a warning; one must not take Theology at face value or as institutionally instructed, and seek the answer within the self where this love should exist. Only then would the message become clear.

Now in possession of some secret tokens, Will leaves Dame Studie and goes to meet with Clergie. And like a true initiate⁴⁴ he “grette the *goode* man as the *goode* wif [him] taughte” (emphasis added, B.10.221). But as is to be expected, this “awakening” doesn’t last long. Will ignorantly exclaims, “Forthi lyve we forth with lithere men—I leve fewe ben goode—” (B.10.435). Like the previous narrators in the texts, Will wavers between knowledge and ignorance. Following his earlier enlightenment, this is a very clear relapse. He reverts to his old ways and beliefs, encumbered by ignorance, foolishly claiming “Wercheth ye werkes as ye sen ywrite, lest ye worthe nought therinne!” (B.10.410). Namely, if you do not do as you are told and blindly follow traditional agenda, you are doomed since according to his experience,

Lewed men and of litel knowyng,
 Selden falle thei so foule and so fer in synne
 As clerkes of Holy Kirke that kepen Cristes tresor—
 The which is mannes soule to save, as God seith in the Gospel
 (B.10.469–72)

He mentions Noah’s flood, claiming that Noah, his family, and the beasts were the only ones saved. And so he logically wonders what happened to the carpenters who built the ark. Realizing they were doomed, he foolishly deduces that it is better to be ignorant as it is both safer and easier. For those, he says ironically, “clerkes of Holy Kirke” who wish to save man’s soul end up doomed as well. However, the irony here is actually directed toward him since he is so far gone into error that he no longer sees the Truth and his own salvation is at stake. Scripture becomes angry and scorns him for his irreverence and she tries to teach him a lesson saying, “Multi multa sciunt et se ipsos nesciunt” [many people know many things and they don’t know themselves] (B.11.3). This line invokes the vineyard parable from Matthew (20:4) where the case is practically the same. Just as the workers misunderstand the householder’s reasoning, so does Will. Again, the emphasis is on the lack of knowledge of the self

that should precede any other kind of knowledge. This scene parallels the one in *Pearl*, where the Pearl Maiden reproaches the wayward jeweler with the use of the vineyard parable, which he misinterprets just the same. Though Will weeps with sorrow at his pitiful state, he yet again falls asleep in the hopes that this repose might introduce a change.

We expect this next vision to follow in the footsteps of the previous ones and be saturated with the message of Truth, yet our expectations are thwarted when the vision itself simply seems to confirm Scripture's reproach. Will demonstrates with the use of some helpful characters, how mistaken he truly is:

A merveillous metels mette me thanne.
 For I was ravysshed right there—for Fortune me fette
 And into the lond of longynge and love she me broughte,
 And in a mirour that highte Middelerte she made me to biholde.
 Sithen she seide to me, -Here myghtow se wondres (B.11.6–10)

The language of the beginning of the vision invokes a reversed contemplation since instead of appearing in relation to the knowledgeable Scripture and Studie, and vicariously, Truth, the symbolic language is used to refer to a false vision provided by earthly Fortune. Will is enraptured by this vision as he sinks deeper into the stupor of oblivion and at the moment, he wholeheartedly believes that this is "the land of longing and love." The wonders Fortune is referring to are material and thus worthless but to the lost and ignorant man, they seem like paradise. Some orthodox traditions clearly support the tack here. Richard of St. Victor in *Benjamin Minor* attempts to teach the way to a contemplative vision, using language such as longing and love in the higher stages toward ecstasy. But the poem, I believe, through its ironic treatment of this structure, in this specific case, is perhaps trying to demonstrate that contemplation may ultimately not be the answer, that there should be something more.

After a brief yet significant interval into earthly existence, the dreamer paradoxically awakens into his previous dream, to his encounter with Scripture, where she tells him:

If lewed men it knewe,
 The lasse, as I leve, lovyen thei wolde
 The bileve o[f Oure] Lord that lettred men techeth.
 This was hir teme and hir text—I took ful good hede:
 'Multi to a mangerie and to the mete were sompned;

And whan the peple was plener comen, the porter unpynned the yate
 And plukked in Pauci pryveliche and leet the remenaunt go rome.⁷
 Al for tene of hir text trembled myn herte,
 And in a weer gan I wexe, and with myself to dispute
 Wheither I were chose or noght chose; (B.11.108–17)

In other words, if unlearned men were to be taught this Truth, their blind faith would no longer be blind and their belief would wane. Teaching this message to the ignorant, traditional follower would not only prove futile but possibly destructive since it is not meant for everyone, which is why the poem reiterates Matthew 22:14: “many are called but few are chosen.” The initiate must be prepared to regain gnosis otherwise the passage would not succeed, as the previous poems have demonstrated. When Will hears these words, his heart trembles in fear and in this state of doubt, he begins arguing with himself whether he is one of the chosen or not. At this point, that remains to be seen. At the end of Scripture’s sermon, she concludes “That we sholde be lowe and loveliche of speche, / And appa-
 raille us noght over proudly—for pilgrymes are we alle” (B.11.239–40). She reminds Will to be humble and loving in speech and apparel for we are all pilgrims in this world. This is a lesson previously discussed in relation to both *Patience* and *Cleanness* where I have argued that external appearance should not matter as it sometimes represents the exact opposite of the internal state.

This notion is reinforced by the last line which signifies that physically all men are strangers in this world, alienated from it and by it. This is a fundamentally gnostic idea—a central part of the “gnostic paradigm” that I treat in this research—in which said pilgrims are in a state of slumber pending the message that would awaken them and set them on an epistemological pilgrimage of self-discovery and salvation, as exemplified by this very poem.⁴⁵ In his subsequent conversation with Reason, he yet again showcases his ignorance by thinking that lack of reason is the problem in the world and so he rebukes Reason for not spreading his wit around. Reason, which was already established as lacking, jumps on the defense by saying:

Er thow lakke my lif, loke if thow be to preise.
 For is no creature under Crist can formen hymselfen,
 And if a man myghte make hymself good,
 Ech a lif wolde be laklees—leeve thow non other.
 Ne thow shalt fynde but fewe fayne for to here
 Of here defautes foule bifore hem reherced (B.11.386–91)

In other words, before you criticize me, look into yourself and see whether you are praiseworthy. For there is no creature on earth that can create or instruct⁴⁶ itself, and if a man might make himself wholly good, each life would be spotless. But you will not find many who are willing to hear of their faults or acknowledge them. And so, as encumbered by materiality as they are, “for man was maad of swich a matere he may nocht wel asterte” (B.11.400), there is need for guidance, a Christ figure like Piers to lead them down the right path.

He then wakes from his dream and feels sorrow for not having learned more, realizing he is still very much in the dark. The character he encounters named “Ymaginatif” tells him a short fable about “a dronken daffe [who] in a dyk falle, / Lat hym ligge, loke nocht on hym til hym liste aryse. / For though Reson rebuked hym thanne, reccheth he nevere” (B.11.425–7). When the drunken fool falls into a ditch, let him lie there until he wisely arises, says Imaginative. The word “liste” can be interpreted as both “wisely”⁴⁷ and as “listen.” If the drunken fool were to be still and listen, and allow the message to permeate, he would then arise wisely all on his own. This idea is emphasized in the following line where “reccheth” means “to heed.”⁴⁸ Imaginative is trying to make Will listen by using examples driven by human reason. He gives Aristotle, Socrates, and Solomon as examples of wise, pagan men who according to the logic of the overall poem should have been saved, not only due to their individual wisdom but also because God “gaf hem wittes / To wissen us wyes therwith” (B.12.270–1). And even though traditional Scripture doesn’t mention their salvation, “God is so good [...] / that God for his grace gyve hir soules reste” (B.12.270, 273). These statements serve as a backhanded acknowledgment of the power of knowledge and wisdom over faith and institutional religion. At the same time, the repeated references to both classical and Eastern sources may again indicate something about the author’s own influences and knowledge base.

The quest for Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest is coming close to its end, but Will seems no nearer to understanding since each of the characters he encounters interprets them differently. On the way, Will meets “Haukyn the Actif Man,” (B.13.272) who is a wayfarer and an advocate of *Vita Activa* (in opposition to *Vita Contemplativa*). This character seems to symbolize both the faithful church goers and the working class but he is not viewed kindly. This alone should signify a problem for those traditional believers, active followers of the faith should be revered and imitated. Conscience, however, much as before, is quite judgmental as he gazes

upon Haukyn's apparel seeming to channel the critical gaze of the nobility of the time, the possible intended audience of the poem. Haukyn is far from spotless, but he is depicted as a working man, indeed an "active man" who is trying to make a living by any means possible, and as paradoxical as it may be, he is at least honest about his dishonest ways. The reversal scheme takes full effect when suddenly Conscience and Patience have a change of heart, realizing that the external doesn't necessarily entail the internal and take Haukyn "under their wing." Haukyn recalls how he would commit a sin then be shriven by the church, repeatedly shifting between traditional sin and salvation. But then he realizes that is not the answer. Active worship is not the answer for "kouthe I nevere, by Crist! kepen it clene an houre, / That I ne soiled it with sighte or som ydel speche, / Or thorough werk or thorough word, or wille of myn herte" (B.14.14).

On that note, Will awakens, confused and disoriented since he is still in search of the elusive Dowel. He is somewhat upset though since he realizes that it would be "longe / Er [he] koude kyndely knowe what was Dowel" (B.15.2). He still has a way to go before being able to tap into that innate knowledge. What makes things worse is the fact "that folk helden me a fool; and in that folie I raved, / Til reson hadde ruthe on me and rokked me aslepe" (B.15.10–11). People ironically think him a fool due to his strange and erratic behavior. He no longer seems to respect authority or act in conformity and their suspicions are translated into rebuke and exile. He truly becomes a stranger in this world and the possibility of salvation introduces itself yet again in the form of induced sleep and repose. In his fifth vision, a wise entity appears in front of him in a manner that seems magical and reveals to him where he is headed, where he has come from and the nature of his being (B.15.12–14). This entity, more so than the rest, befuddles Will for he cannot grasp its appearance or its apparent knowledge. Still imprisoned by his material existence, he depends upon his active senses to lead him to his answers. And so, he "conjured hym at the laste, / If he were Cristes creature" (B.15.14–15). Just like the character's appearance seems like an act of sorcery to him, the poet puns on the word "conjured," which means both "to beseech" and "to invoke a spirit."⁴⁹ On the literal level, he is simply asking for her identity, to satisfy human curiosity, but on a closer inspection, he is entering into what would traditionally be a suspect situation.⁵⁰ Gnostically, he has reached a key moment, a moment that could define the rest of his pilgrimage. This scene parallels the encounter between the Pearl Maiden and the jeweler,

where the jeweler, much like Will, is at first skeptical and suspicious but potentially receptive. Anima, who was introduced before as the mistress of the corporeal castle, makes a second debut here as a masculine figure. This gender ambiguity is a central issue in Valentinian theology specifically but also in gnostic discourse in general, where the Godhead incorporates both masculine and feminine characteristics.⁵¹ In this scene, Anima provides a list of names by which he is known:

The whiles I quykne the cors,' quod he, 'called am I **Anima** [soul];
 And whan I wilne and wolde, **Animus** [will] ich hatte;
 And for that I kan and knowe, called am I **Mens** [intellect];
 And whan I make mone to God, **Memoria** [memory] is my name;
 And whan I deme domes and do as truthe techeth,
 Thanne is **Racio** my righte name—'reson' on Englissh;
 And whan I feele that folk telleth, my firste name is **Sensus** [sense]—
 And that is wit and wisdom, the welle of alle craftes;
 And whan I chalange or chalange noght, chepe or refuse,
 Thanne am I **Conseience** ycalled, Goddes clerk and his notarie;
 And whan I love leelly Oure Lord and alle othere,
 Thanne is 'lele **Love**' my name, and in Latyn Amor;
 And whan I flee fro the flessch and forsake the careyne,
 Thanne am I spirit spechelees—and **Spiritus** thanne ich hatte
 (B.15.23–36)

This character represents and embodies all previous teachers by anthropomorphizing the soul. The poem displays the soul's many names and titles on this earth, all of which culminate in its central role of harboring the message of truth in its ultimate manifestation which is the silent spirit, beyond language, human reason, and earth.

In the next passus, Anima continues its sermon-like speech, bringing up an image of the tree of charity, which God planted in man and is meant to be tended by Piers. In this allusion to the tree of the Garden of Eden, the good tree ("trie tree") is the tree of God's mercy and grace, whose "leves ben lele wordes, the lawe of Holy Chirche; / The blosmes beth buxom speche and benigne lokynge" (B.16.6–7). And it is "thorough God and thorough goode men" (l. 8) that its fruit is able to grow. "It groweth in a gardyn, [...] / Amyddes mannes body [...] / Under Piers the Plowman to piken it and to weden it" (B.16.13–4, 17). The knowledge of the tree that was planted in humanity is to be tended by Piers in the hopes of reawakening what has been lying dormant in the soul as Memoria and

thus enable the regaining of paradise and salvation. The fruit is fragile however since “the world is a wikked wynd to hem that willen truthe” (B.16.27) and “the flessch is a fel wynd” (l. 31), a treacherous and destructive vessel. The allusion to the tree and its significant symbolism makes another appearance in the passus portraying the Harrowing of Hell.⁵² In passus 18, we are told that “as Adam and alle thourgh a tree deyden / Adam and alle thourgh a tree shal turne to lyve” (B.18.359–60). This line cements the mixture of opposites. It is the tree that introduced death to man, but at the same time, it is the tree that brought him back to life.

When Will awakens again, he seeks Piers and encounters Abraham (Faith). In his encounter, Abraham describes the Trinity in a strange manner; he claims Adam is symbolic of the Father, while Eve represents the Son, and their offspring is the Holy Ghost.⁵³ In this typology Adam and Eve receive the same privileged place outside of the traditional relationship of subordination. There doesn't seem to be a differentiation or discrimination based on gender much like in Gnostic societies. The same goes for their offspring, Cain, Abel, and Seth, whose relationship and role in orthodox exegesis is problematic to say the least. Abraham then says that all three “in hevене and here oon singuler name” (B.16.208), which as depicted by the poem is Truth. The dreamer is privy to another vision, which according to him is not lawful for man to utter; “Audi vi archana verba que non licet homini loqui” (B.18.396). In this vision, he discovers something that was only hinted at before, that Christ's “mercy shal be shewed to manye of my bretheren” (B.18.394), whether baptized or unbaptized. This is a problematic idea according to orthodox theology but a sensible one based on the poem's premise. These pieces of visionary revelation are all parts of the ultimate Truth, and since Piers who embodies Christ has the power to give pardons, or in other words, to pass forth his own knowledge to the receptive initiate so each person can become like Christ, that is precisely what he does.

In passus 19 he offers to the people the seeds he had sown, the message he has to proffer, who by eating them or rather heeding it may regain gnosis. In this scene all the previous symbols and images (i.e., the tree, the Trinity, and the unspeakable vision) converge and unite. But this seeming harmony cannot stand in the face of such adversity and it immediately crumbles when the main reversal scheme recurs:

And Piers bern worth ybroke, and thei that ben in Unitee
Shulle come out, and Conscience; and youre [caples two],

Confession and Contricion, and youre carte the Bileeve
 Shal be coloured so queyntely and covered under oure sophistrie,
 That Conscience shal noght knowe by Contricion
 Ne by Confession who is Cristene or hethene; (B.19.346–51)

Piers may have restored what had been broken, but things are far from orderly since Conscience and Unity, along with their horses, Confession, and Contrition are so cleverly disguised that Conscience himself is not able to tell a Christian from a heathen. There is also another shift in the tone that lends the rest of the poem an ominous note. More specifically, the use of astrology to prophesy the future, the extensive use of Latin, and the specific choice of words used in the text and their cadence seem to signify some sort of incantation. “Arabic astrologers,” Sophie Page remarks, “interpreted the appearance of planets on the same degrees of longitude as the signs and causes of great historical events, notably those linked to religion, prophecy and political upheaval. The conjunctions of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars were thought to be particularly significant.”⁵⁴ Langland draws on those ideas and uses their ominous, apocalyptic connotations to prophesy the future:⁵⁵

Thorough flodes and thorough foule wedres, fruytes shul faille—
 And so seith Saturne and sent yow to warne:
 Whan ye se the [mo]ne amys and two monkes heddes,
 And a mayde have the maistrie, and multiplie by eighte,
 Thanne shal deeth withdrawe and derthe be justice,
 And Dawe the Dykere deye for hunger—(B.6.324–9)

At the end of this apocalyptic vision, which seems to begin at the end of this poem, death will cease and then there will be justice since the fools will die of hunger. Like the black mass at the end of *Cleanness*, these reversals signify the end of the world as it is traditionally known.

By the time we reach the last two *passūs*, the subtlety of the allegory seems to waver as everything comes loose in the grand battle between the two sides—a final standoff between good and evil, the body and soul, orthodoxy and heterodoxy where instead of harmony, the result is further confusion. Piers appears to have become “And right lik in alle lymes to Oure Lord Jesu” (B.19.8) and his role among the people follows suit. However, this is not a position that can be gained by anyone since even “for alle these precieuse presents Oure Lord Prynce Jesus / Was neither kyng ne conquerour til he [comsede] wexe / In the manere of a man, and

that by muchel sleighte” (B.19.96–8). In other words, even Jesus himself did not become king and conqueror till he came to grow into a man of much wisdom. The vision ends in a growing raucous where the sides become interchangeable and it is unclear who belongs where. The Deadly Sins revisit in the form of fighters, and the sense of irony continues to escalate when the losing side of Conscience cries, “Allas! [...] ‘wolde Crist of his grace / That Coveitise were Cristene, that is so kene to fighte, / And boold and bidynge the while his bagge lasteth!’” (B.20.140–2). In this final confusion, the fate of the dreamer as well as that of Piers himself remain unclear, though it does seem that change is on the way. In other words, “In his final failure is the failure of mankind and society, and yet in this very failure is hope. The miseries of the world are the strongest evidence of a coming renewal” (Bloomfield, 153).⁵⁶

Indeed, the miseries of the world represented in the fifth passus by a personified procession of the Seven Deadly Sins reshift our focus to the topic at hand; the sense of alienation experienced by discontented individuals seeking knowledge in times of turmoil. In this ironic procession, each of the deadly sins describes its sin and repents, taking another sacrament—that of confession—and turning it about. The repentance of the Deadly Sins is an impossible paradox that creates this sense of irony and further problematizes the separation of the traditional from the unorthodox that the poem wishes to present, at least on the surface. Moreover, on the historical level, as discussed, the poem also deals with The Peasants’ Revolt, and though it seems to possess some extreme and perhaps potentially revolutionary features that is not completely the case, for the poem seems to draw back once real violence has occurred.⁵⁷ This narratological uncertainty manifests in ideas such as the presentation of the King and his monarchy as one of just leadership, which appears strange and out of place. But the king’s character is just as fickle as the rest. He plays on both sides; when he is on the side of “good” (i.e., Truth and knowledge), he is the earthly representative of the heavenly King, when he switches sides he becomes the avaricious, materialistic king of historical times. For example, in the scene following the Sins’ pageant, the king is the one who puts Meed, Falseness, and Flattery “behind bars,” but since Lady Meed has already been established as an important knowledgeable figure, albeit somewhat fickle herself, the king’s position is further problematized. Langland’s critique, mingled with his praise, then springs out of this cleverly structured scheme, by his positioning and

repositioning of characters in constantly changing roles. A similar scheme through the unique emphasis on the Deadly Sins continues in Gower's *Confessio Amantis* as love seems to be at the center of both works. While the love in *Piers Plowman* did not really culminate in the ultimate attainment of Truth, it does seem to occur in the subsequent work, where the passage into knowledge fulfills its promised agenda.

CHAPTER 4

GOWER'S BOWER OF BLISS: A SUCCESSFUL PASSING INTO HERMETIC GNOSIS

Like the structure of *Piers Plowman*, the use of glossing and marginalia in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is a central feature of the work as both styles affect the content's use of knowledge and nonknowledge. Though different in execution, both seem to share a similar goal. In *Piers Plowman* the macaronic structure is a form of hiding in plain sight, using a mixture of languages when the vernacular simply does not seem to suffice. In Gower, a similar thing takes place where the historical residue impinges upon the dominating center by literally taking over the margins and crowding the text¹; not very different from the (in)visibility of gnosticism in the text(s). But it is more than that since, much like in the other texts discussed, *Confessio Amantis* emphasizes the role of the female guide² in this process of Passing along with the importance of passivity in an exercise of storytelling of ethical parables set in dream vision tradition. It not only draws on the classics in both structure and theme, but also depends upon Boethius' consolation style. At the same time, it has been considered a kind of dream vision, albeit somewhat different from the ones formerly discussed, but above all, a confession, much as the very title indicates.³ On the surface, the scheme seems fairly simple for it presents numerous tales inspired by different traditions on the backdrop of the seven deadly sins with an emphasis on some mode of love, or more particularly, lust. However, like *Piers Plowman*, it is far from simple. Both poems deal with their respective topics by also taking into account the sociopolitical world, its degradation, and potential reformation. Most scholars assert that Gower's *Confessio* is an attempt to reconcile the sociopolitical turmoil of the time through the telling of classical tales which

should serve to regenerate the common good as well as the individual person.⁴ Moreover, Gower aims to achieve a semblance of order as the work in its entirety seems to treat “not courtly love but love of order, and the peace which comes when discord is halted and right relations restored” (Yeager, “Pax Poetica”, 107). However, as Clogan cautions, we should not place “too much significance on the political and social views since the *Confessio* is essentially concerned with the divine perspective in human affairs” (221). In the following discussion, I would like to take these assertions further and claim that the scope of the *Confessio* is not necessarily socially oriented but rather a specifically individual endeavor for salvation in a kind of mystical progress of the soul. In this manner, social change may become possible through personal and individual reflection, which may be attained through a reawakening of the self via the regaining of dormant knowledge (i.e., gnosis). Namely, the work depicts a kind of soul-drama, a soul pilgrimage that seems to stage a war against the world and the worldly forged by the very man of the world—Amans, a lover. But this lover doesn’t seem to belong, for he is in exile from his true self which he wishes to regain; a lover without love, if you will, a subject without the self. Love—Venus and her chaplain, Genius—play here the role Truth played in *Piers*. In other words, the purpose of Genius, Love’s messenger, is to instruct Amans in his lost art and save him. Much has been debated about the seemingly contradictory nature of Genius, as both a priest of Venus, commissioned to instruct Amans about love, and an orthodox priest who must teach virtue. While some scholars have attributed this duality to Gower’s inconsistency, others did not really provide an answer. This chapter aims to show that not only is the *Confessio* consistent but the duality of Genius serves as part of the reversal scheme of the entire work. A similar duality lies in the split between Amans and “Gower.” Unlike the previous narrators encountered in the other poems, these two “characters,”⁵ which for all intents and purposes serve as two sides of the same coin, end up converging, ultimately leading to a successful Passing.

The path to revelation, however, is not an easy one for Amans since like the previous narrators he is difficult to awaken. The means with which Genius attempts his mission is through storytelling. Storytelling and this mode of confession seem to force the individual into a state of self-reflection. Through the personal experience of the knowledge that the tales aim to impart and a self-reassessment, the penitent is meant to recall his true self and be saved. In other words, a successful Passing into knowledge,

a rebirth, the regaining of gnosis, and the immediate result of salvation through knowledge of the self is made possible via memory, self-reflection, and its experience since “Gnosis is not primarily rational knowledge, [rather it is] knowing through observation or experience” (Pagels 1989, xviii–xix). Carruthers claims that the writers themselves provide texture to their composition (their individual memorial process) as they weave communal ideas into their works of memory and imagination (11–13).

This work was previously believed to have been published in three recensions.⁶ Pearsall, however, argues that “it is doubtful [such evidence], even if it were exhaustively recovered, would ever provide support for an elaborate theory of authorial revision, [since] the processes of manuscript production are too complex, piecemeal and random, too much governed by constraints of a technical and commercial nature, to allow a clear view of detailed aspects of an author’s revising activity” (Pearsall 2004, 94). Nevertheless, he agrees with Macaulay’s choice of Fairfax 3 as his copy-text, which serves as the basis for most modern editions of the work. As mentioned, the work uses and alludes to numerous sources which also signifies Gower’s own extensive knowledge base. Alastair Minnis claims that the *Confessio* was fully aware of the available literary traditions and their potential, which helped create such a succinct work.⁷ That Gower was well educated is quite clear, but it seems his work was also aimed at a more educated audience since just like *Piers*, it is filled with Latin marginalia⁸ that are exceedingly important to the issues raised within the poem and their understanding.⁹

The *Confessio* is divided into eight books: seven books that deal with the seven deadly sins, with special focus on the last sin—lechery, and one seemingly digressive book about good kingship. As I will show in this chapter, the digressive book (Book 7) actually follows a very strict and logical line of thought begun in the Prologue that highlights certain issues only covertly discussed in the rest of the books. Book 7 showcases the true extent of Gower’s knowledge and education and it serves as an important stepping stone for the slowly reawakening initiate. It is the Passing scene that culminates in the final revelation and consequent salvation depicted in Book 8. This entire process is enabled through the guiding hand, or the Gnostic savior, that comes in the form of a wise woman, much as in the previous works—Venus, the powerful pagan Goddess of Love and Amans’ intended patron. But from the very beginning, this notion is inverted since Amans is, simply put, an unsuccessful lover, just like *Pearl*’s jeweler proves to be an unsuccessful father/creator.

On this note, Derek Pearsall discusses Gower's narrative form claiming that "despite the fiction of the lover's confession, [Gower] is not providing instruction in the art of love, but using love as the bait for instruction in the art of living."¹⁰ While that may be true at the literal level, at the allegorical level it seems Gower is using love as the subject matter of his instruction on remembering. But remembering what exactly? Love, or rather the message of love, represents an eschatological end as it becomes synonymous with Truth or gnosis, as the case may be, and memory and reflection through the art of storytelling become the means to achieving that end. Nevertheless, it cannot be achieved on one's own, especially due to the obvious ineptness of the initiate, and thus, Venus sends her priest, Genius, to guide Amans in his confession in the hopes that he redeems himself. In Filoramo's *History of Gnosticism*, he contends that "the Gnostic Saviour does not come to reconcile humankind with God, but to reunite the Gnostic with himself. He does not come to pardon a sin that the Gnostic cannot have committed, but to rectify a situation of ignorance and deficiency and to re-establish the original plenitude. The Gnostic Saviour comes to save himself" (106). Namely, each initiate embodies the savior to the extent that once knowledge is redeemed, the situation is rectified and he becomes one with God.

Gower is obviously unhappy with the current situation in his world, or as Peck suggests, Gower perceives the current social division as the result of narcissism and selfishness (or as I shall claim, forgetful drunkenness and ignorance), which the poem, I believe, aims to treat and rectify. As Steele Nowlin puts it, "that project is to repair the discord of human history manifested as late-fourteenth-century England's particular cultural and historical moment, using a memorial process through which narratives of the past are redistributed through a poetics of the 'middel weie' in order to educate readers on how to use knowledge to improve themselves and their society (Pro. 17)" (217).¹¹ This notion manifests itself in the repeated appearance of Nebuchadnezzar; his prophetic visions should be taken for a symbolic framework that envelops the poem's overall message. Like the rat parable at the beginning of *Piers Plowman*, these visions are meant to be read as keys to the understanding of the poem in its entirety. And again, just like in *Piers*, not only is his commentary directed at the spiritual state of humanity but his interest lies in the sociopolitical world as well. Amans, a type of "Everyman" character, literally and phonetically "a man," is set on this spiritual journey into himself to uncover the Truth of his and vicariously, the world's wrongdoings in order to set things right.

Nevertheless, the message is neither communal nor universal as the process is strictly personal. But as salvation is achieved at the individual level, it can and should sweep others as well. It seems the poem is putting the blame on forgetfulness claiming it to be the worst sin of all. Forgetfulness, I believe, serves as the real framework of the poem with all the other "conventional" sins grouped together under its roof. Thus, the only remedy for such a sin would be its opposite—remembering—the "eighth virtue to the eighth sin," so to speak. And that seems to be precisely the exercise the poem partakes in. In this chapter, as my choices will reveal, I am examining one possibility out of many other possible paths that have been previously explored. And due to the poem's immense proportions, it would prove impossible to take it wholly under consideration in this current examination, and so I have only chosen certain excerpts from the Prologue and Books 1, 4, 6, 7, and 8 to include in this analysis. I believe these key segments possess a broad enough scope to highlight a recurring theme that could then be generalized and discussed in relation to the entire work. More specifically, the general Prologue provides the basic premise for the entire work, both literally and thematically as it sets the stage for the following stories. Book 1 deals with the sin of Pride and focuses on the senses—the passive sense of hearing and its more active counterpart, seeing, which follow the pattern set in the previous chapters where passively "hearing" may entail a revelatory, salvific "seeing." Book 4 deals with the sin of Sloth, which represents the problem of the world since ignorant intoxication and lethargy have taken over. It also helps flesh out the difference between sinful stupor and essential repose. Book 6 deals with a similar matter as it focuses on the sin of Gluttony. And while Book 7 may seem like a digression, its education of a King is quite revealing. This book serves as the moment of Passing, where the King becomes interchangeable with the initiated individual, on the threshold of knowledge and enlightenment, culminating in Book 8 with the topic of lechery. The final book provides closure for the ongoing play between "lust" and "lore."

The narrator begins by saying that since books of old have remained in relevance and as we are instructed by what has been written in them, it is time to write something new, relevant to his time but based upon those stories of the past.¹²

Forthi good is that we also
 In oure tyme among ous hier
 Do wryte of newe som matiere,

Essampled of these olde wyse,
 So that it myhte in such a wyse,
 Whan we ben dede and elleswhere,
 Beleve to the worldes eere
 In tyme comende after this.
 Bot for men sein, and soth it is,
 That who that al of wisdom writ
 It dulleth ofte a mannes wit
 To him that schal it aldai rede,
 For thilke cause, if that ye rede,
 I wolde go the middel weie
 And wryte a bok betwen the tweie
 Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore,
 That of the lasse or of the more
 Som man mai lyke of that I wryte (Prol. 4–21)¹³

He cleverly puns on the word “wyse” by using it to mean both “old wisdom/wise men” as well as “in this manner.” In other words, in this manner, his own wisdom will become the old wisdom of the future, which will continue to instruct “the worldes eere” or more precisely, those with an ear to his writings, even beyond his existence. But then he presents a difficulty since as he rightly claims not all would find this wisdom to their liking. He then overcomes the problem by embedding it in a humorous framework, making light of it, claiming that for those who might find it dull, he chooses to “go the middle weie”—between lust and carnal pleasure and wisdom and spirituality. In this manner, his poem would fit every audience but truly appeal to those few who can move beyond the physical layers and achieve the sought for gnosis.

Gower himself¹⁴ seems to waver between a position of superiority and inferiority, in between laity and nobility specifically due to his position in relation to knowledge. He presents himself as a “burel clerk” (Prol.52), paradoxically a clerk with little learning or conversely an educated layman.¹⁵ This privileged position, it seems, endows him with the ability to gaze upon the world through those books/men of past wisdom and offer his take on matters.¹⁶ He exclaims that no one knows what shall befall this world at the rate things are going:

For now upon this tyde
 Men se the world on every syde
 In sondry wyse so diversed,

That it wel nyh stant al reversed,
As for to speke of tyme ago (Prol. 27–31)

The world is in such disarray precisely because each man sees it in such different and diverse ways that everything has become reversed. The poem will utilize this system, much like the previous poems have done, in order to indicate exactly how adverse contemporaneous understanding, or lack thereof, truly is. Gower will do so by juxtaposing tales of time past with the present. Through his writing he aims to teach, instruct, but at the same time, he is himself in the process of learning as he states in the prior lines. In this sense, he embodies both Genius and Amans, the “middle weie” between complete knowledge and utter ignorance, between lore and lust. And while some may simply draw enjoyment of this poem’s lusty tales, its wisdom belongs to those “wys man that it underfongeth” (Prol. 67–8), and understanding entails “remembrance / The fortune of this worldes chance, / The which no man in his persone / Mai knowe, bot the god alone” (Prol. 69–72).

He puns on the word “god” as meaning both “good” and “God.” In other words, the fortune of this world no man may know but the “good,” who earns this right.¹⁷ At the same time, such secrets of the universe cannot be known by any other than God. Thus, in this manner, the “good”—the true believers—are paralleled with God and they become interchangeable. This idea is reinforced in the next lines:

The hevene wot what is to done,
Bot we that duelle under the mone
Stonde in this world upon a weer,
And namely bot the pouer
Of hem that ben the worldes guides—
With good consail on alle sides—
Be kept upriht in such a wyse,
That hate breke noght th’assise
Of love, whiche is al the chief
To kepe a regne out of meschief (Prol. 141–50)

Only the heavens hold the key as men on earth are in a constant state of error, unstable, and in doubt and only have wise men to guide them through the thicket. And it is through their guidance that the court of love will be able to uphold the state of the world and keep it out of mischief’s way. The court of love is presented as “th’assise” that translates

into the apocalyptic court of God.¹⁸ Here love is already equated with heavenly Truth and it is this message that Amans is meant to heed for “Although a man be wys himselfe, / Yit is the wisdom more of tuelve” (Prol. 157–8). I believe the wisdom of the twelve refers to Christ’s disciples, who are again brought up in the following lines praising the ecclesiastical message of olden days:

Lo, thus was Petres barge stiered
 Of hem that thilke tyme were,
 And thus cam ferst to mannes ere
 The feith of Crist and alle goode
 Thurgh hem that thanne weren goode
 And sobre and chaste and large and wyse.
 Bot now men sein is otherwise,
 Simon the cause hath undertake (Prol. 234–41)

In those days it seems the message of the church that first came to men’s ears was the right one as it spread through word of mouth among those who were good. The word “good” is repeated twice to restress the previous notion where the good believers are the knowledgeable initiates (possibly heretics) and the juxtaposition between all that is good and these good believers, who in this case seem to be the disciples themselves. They are depicted as sober, which is exceedingly significant since the entire poem emphasizes the issue of rising from and above the world’s imposed drunkenness; chaste, which again is highlighted through inversion by the poem’s recurring theme of lust and decadence, and specifically reinforced by the eighth book’s topic on incest, which etymologically translates as “un-chaste”; and they are generous and wise. But now things are otherwise since Simon has taken the helm. The reference here is probably to “simony” which refers to buying and selling spirituality as a material commodity. The name is taken from Simon Magus whose doctrine was the first system to come into conflict with early orthodoxy and whose teachings were often misrepresented as having influenced certain systems inaccurately bundled under the general title of Gnosticism, but still known as such.

However, due in part to the literal proximity of this reference to the one with regard to Peter, it is possible to imagine that these two become somewhat interchangeable. Since the disciples make an appearance as well, it would be prudent to note that the first of Christ’s disciples, Simon, was named Peter by Jesus, again reinforcing the now established

scheme of symbolic reversals. Traditionally, it was Saint Peter who overthrew Simon Magus but in this verse, it is the other way around, which may relate to Gower's satirical take on the Church and its growing corruption. And yet, that is not the case either for in a way, Simon and Peter are one and the same. He does much of the same thing when he speaks of Lollardy and other heresies:

And so to speke upon this branche,
 Which proude Envie hath mad to springe,
 Of Scisme, causeth for to bringe
 This newe secte of Lollardie,
 And also many an heresie
 Among the clerkes in hemselve.
 It were betre dike and delve
 And stonde upon the ryhte feith,
 Than knowe al that the Bible seith
 And erre as somme clerkes do (Prol. 346–55)

In these nine lines, Gower both condemns and praises Lollardy as well as different heresies. On the one hand he claims they're in the wrong due to the schism they've created, but in the same breath he says it is better to know the "ryhte feith" all on your own than be like the clergy who know the Bible by heart and yet have gone astray. In Peck's edition "it were betre dike and delve" (l. 352) is translated as "it is better to ditch and dig" or in other words, "work as a plowman." Like in previous cases, here too, Gower seems to play with his audience's expectations and puns on these words. On the backdrop of historical events like The Peasants' Revolt, this would make sense for in this line it seems it is better to be a plowman, in God's eyes, perhaps, than a learned man of the clergy. However, using *Vox Clamantis* as reference, it would be difficult to claim that Gower is an avid enthusiast of the revolt or of the peasants' cause, considering his quite conservative social views and values.¹⁹ Accordingly, this historically fitting pun could logically be translated as "it would be better to dig into and closely examine²⁰ / the right faith / than know all the Bible says." In other words, the right faith is the one within and not the one presented by the orthodox ecclesiasts from without. Gower again places himself in the equation when referring to "somme clerkes" for he is a "burel clerk" (l. 52) himself and thus admittedly prone to mistake, but a mistake he seems to wish to rectify. In this sense, his position in the middle way as discussed above is established.

At the same time, Gower proves he is very much immersed in the historical events of his time, discussing the troubling aspects of major proceedings like the Great Schism, the Bad Parliament of 1377, the Peasants' Revolt and Lollardy, but the remedy seems to be the same for all—remembrance “for trowthe mot stonde ate laste” (Prol. 369). He then reiterates a notion repeated in the preceding parts where not all may know the right way and find salvation “For ther ben somme in special / In whom that alle vertu duelleth” (Prol. 432–3) and these are the ones endowed with Truth, who God “Hath cleped to perfeccioun / In the manere as Aaron was” (l. 436–7). Simon, “which the foldes gate / Hath lete, and goth in othergate” (l. 439–40), makes a second appearance in these lines as the one who made a wrong turn while the others who were called to perfection followed the right path, like Aaron.²¹ Simon Magus was thought to be an alias for Paul in the Pseudo-Clementines apocrypha²² as the writings occasionally blended the characters' sayings. This literature was attributed to the so-called heresy of the Ebionites.²³ I proceed with caution here since while such reference may possibly exceed Gower's albeit extensive knowledge base, the relevance is noteworthy as it follows a line set by other such previously provocative hints. In this legendary romance, Simon Peter was an Ebionite who was in grave conflict with Simon the sorcerer, whom they believed was Paul. In logical continuation of Gower's earlier reference to Simon Magus, we would assume that this next reference is again to the same character. However, it is not as “straightforward” as before since if indeed Simon Magus is the one intended then the allusion to Hebrews becomes problematic for in Gower's time, the book of Hebrews was believed to have been written by St. Paul.

Under such circumstances, Aaron would not be the revered character he so clearly is since according to Ebionitic doctrine, Aaron holds an inferior place to Moses which would then come in contradiction with what is being said. Thus, the earlier established scheme of reversals continues to apply and invert the reader's preconceptions along with traditional expectations. Gower finally admits that it is beyond him “For therof have I nocht to done” (l. 483) since “I here and wol nocht understonde” (l. 482). He admits it is not his mission to judge since that is the role of “The hyhe God” (l. 485) or “He that made ferst the mone” (l. 484). At this point, embodying Amans, he is unsure of his place in the world and though he hears, there is still no understanding. Nevertheless, he is aware that salvation is scarce and limited “for every man hise oghne werkes /

Schal bere" (l. 491–2). Thus, the life of the unchosen bears no mark on the salvation of "the goode" (l. 490). Namely, salvation, as established up to this point, is individual and imminent—dependent upon one's personal awakening.

The state of disorder the poem is attempting to convey comes both on the literal as well as the metaphorical level. Both levels seem to form a direct link with the previously discussed literary works: the reversal scheme at the structural level, and the parables and dream visions at the thematic level. Nebuchadnezzar's visions, as mentioned before, serve as index to the reading of the poem. His first vision of the statue made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay sets up the problem of the world, but also of Amans himself. A thing divided cannot withstand and thus division truly becomes the source of evil. This notion works both on the microcosm and the macrocosm as like in *Piers Plowman*, they seem co-dependent since a man "is as a world in his partie, / And whan this litel world mistorneth, / The grete world al overtorneth" (Prol. 956–8). If man is divided within himself, fragmented "Of cold, of hot, of moist, of drye" (Prol. 977), ripped asunder in between the body, soul, and spirit, then he can no longer be "a man." Similarly, the very cosmos can no longer function as it should as "The sonne and mone eclipsen bothe . . . / [and] The purest eir for senne alofte" (Prol. 919, 921).

This idea manifests in Nebuchadnezzar's second vision where he is punished for forgetting his true self, or rather allowing himself to become divided and unsure by literally becoming a beast, no longer a man. This depicts the state of humanity at large, of society, at least according to the events Gower recounts since "every man wel knowe, / Division aboven alle / Is thing which makth the world to falle" (Prol. 970–2). The only remedy is to look back at history and recall the greatness that was once possessed. Gower imposes this cure on the microcosm as well since it is memory (i.e., a man's own personal history) that might heal the rifts, remind man of his once possessed greatness, and bring redemption.

For the contraire of his astat
 Stant evermor in such debat,
 Til that o part be overcome,
 Ther may no final pes be nome (Prol. 979–82)

In other words, unless man is able to repress one of those parts within himself that stand in debate, namely the body in face of the soul and spirit,

he will never be able to regain peace or paradise as the case may be. And it is “thurgh lacke of love / Where as the lond divided is” (Prol. 892–3), which is also the reason for the war raging inside Amans himself. That is, while it may seem that “The fieble hath wonne the victoire”(l. 1001) since the material has so clearly overcome most of humanity, the poem introduces another possibility; Amans thus becomes the hope of humanity, the lover that needs to relearn how to love or rather what love is, and indeed he is the first successful initiate in a long line of gnostic potential. Nevertheless, he definitely has his work cut out for him.

In his introduction of Amans, Gower first advises “that every man ensample take / Of wisdom which him is betake” (l. 79–80). The salvific knowledge may be innate but in order to escape the intoxication of materiality one needs a guiding hand and it seems at this point that Gower is willing to undertake that role himself. He used his own knowledge and learning “to teche it forth” (l. 82) through this poem and specifically Book 7, and Genius is going to do much of the same thing in Amans’ case. The plot begins in a similar manner to the previously discussed works, following the tradition of the medieval dream vision; the lover is wandering into the woods sometime in the month of May seeking repose in order to commence his speech/prayer/complaint. This scene is obviously different, however, since he does not actually go to sleep, but based on the Prologue and the poem’s general premise he is not nearly awake either. The awakening here will thus eventually be more than merely literal and doubtfully true, but rather spiritual and genuine. In the beginning, however, he is so deeply immersed in himself that he throws his body “to grounde I was withoute breth / And evere I wisshide after deth” (l. 119–20). When he throws himself on the ground in a huff, he is acting like a spoiled child, much like the prideful jeweler in *Pearl*. The fact of the matter is that they are both spoiled, ruined by physicality, and pushed further away from Truth, but Amans ultimately succeeds in drawing back. He is as lost as the jeweler and both receive guidance from suitable mentors.

Sophia makes an appearance here as Venus, the Goddess of love. When she reveals herself in answer to Amans’ pitiful cries, she asks “‘What art thou, sone?’” (l.154). She is not too happy with his state but is willing to give him a try. The question, however, signifies her disrespect as though she can already anticipate his answer and indeed, he says, “‘A caitif that lith hie: / What wolde ye, my ladi diere? / Schal I ben hol or elles dye?’” (l.161–3). He admits that he is a prisoner, a captive, and a slave that

lies on the ground to which he is inevitably bound unable to rise and be a man. But his tone is already different from the one used by *Pearl's* jeweler since he inquires quite knowledgeably whether he shall be whole or else die. Being whole entails reuniting with one's true self and gaining salvation. However, Venus is quite dubious since she knows "'Ther is manye of yow / Faitours, and so may be that thow / Art riht such on'" (1.173–5). He acknowledges that at the moment his "world stod on an other whiel" (1.178) and the wheel of Fortune is indeed fickle and full of deceit. Venus then leaves and gives the stage to her emissary, "an agent of memory who can compile and relate afresh the stories and materials of history,"²⁴ and thus appeal to Amans' human sense and capacity of understanding. Again, Amans' astuteness emerges when he claims in front of Genius that he is perturbed over his forgetfulness and the fact that "now my wittes ben so blinde, / That I ne can miselven teche" (1.228–9). Genius then seems to play the part of the intermediary very well, claiming he is not completely knowledgeable either, for he is not Venus. He knows his way around Venus' realm which is love "Thogh I ne conne bot a lyte / Of othre things that ben wise" (1.264–5). Nevertheless, he will become informed as the journey progresses since it is a passing into the self. In other words, the final revelation will be dual, of both Amans and Genius, who appears to be a piece of Amans' own fragmented being.

The first few tales deal with the senses, or more specifically, the two seemingly most important senses—sight and hearing. All of the tales deal with the active, purposeful use of these senses when they should be used in prudence and passivity. Moreover, it seems Gower repeatedly wishes to address the unknown, answer the unanswerable throughout Book 1, and he does so by skirting around the issue (in a manner similar to the very use of marginalia) in the *via negativa*.²⁵ Both "The Tale of Acteon" and "The Tale of Medusa" circle around the notion of glimpsing at the forbidden.²⁶ Since sight is the more active of the two, both examples showcase what one is not supposed to do. The heroes who cannot contain their material passions and who are thus clearly unready for any such forbidden sights actively pursue with their gaze that which is unspeakable and they are rightly punished for it, much like *Pearl's* jeweler. Hearing, on the other hand, is the first step toward gnosis, but repose and passivity is mandatory. In the "Tale of Aspidis," the serpent is wise and clever enough to refrain himself from hearing any false messages. Fittingly,²⁷ the serpent knows the Truth and is aware of the consequences of heeding such words of "enchantment" (1.477) and thus lies calmly in his knowledge.

The tale of the “Sirens” is an opposite example of the same idea, where the human hero, though wise and hardy, falls into the trap of worldly desires. He allows himself to heed their hypnotizing and alluring call whereas the serpent cleverly withstands it. The lesson Genius teaches is to “take kepe / And wisly cowthest warde and kepe / Thin yhe and ere” (1.535–7). That is, if Amans learns to wisely guard his senses from potentially harmful words and embrace the secrets of his own being “Than haddest thou the gates stoke / Fro such sotie as comth to winne / Thin hertes wit, which is withinne” (1.538–40). Again the confusion of Amans shines through Gower’s pun on the word “stoke” that could mean both “to pierce” and “to lock.” Certain messages may pierce his physical gates and further taint his existence with foolishness, while others will cause the gates to forever restrain such folly from encumbering his soul’s wit more than the body already has. Such false truths mainly fall under the title of hypocrisy where Genius introduces a similar lesson to the one explored in *Cleanness*. Things are not necessarily as they seem for hypocrisy turns the world upside down. What is on the inside doesn’t necessarily entail the outside and vice versa. The external shouldn’t matter as long as the internal is in the realm of Truth since one “Which spekth of Peter and of John / And thenketh Judas in his herte” (1.656–7) also partakes in all the proper orthodox practices but only for appearance’s sake. Proving one’s active duty to the Church does not entail the salvation of an otherwise corrupt spirit. Innate knowledge, on the other hand, proves to do the opposite. But doing it on one’s own is not the answer either.

Nebuchadnezzar makes another appearance here with a depiction of his punishment, much like in *Cleanness*. It is through this punishment that he learns to mend his ways for he realizes he is no more than a beast if and when he is asleep. In other words, when immersed in worldly wealth and goods, he forgets himself. When he becomes willing to disengage himself from the physical and heed the message of Truth, only then does he regain his soul and become “human.” While Belshazzar was given as a somewhat adverse example, Amans demonstrates here he is both capable and willing to learn from those mistakes by following Genius in this exploratory endeavor. When one relies solely on the external and puts all his trust on his own misguided “witt / He stant, til he falle in the pitt / So ferr that he mai nocht arise” (1.1907–9). This might be interpreted as a kind of self-love, exemplified by the “Tale of Narcissus,” which when closely analyzed directly relates to all seven sins, especially the first, Pride, and the last, Lust, which in this case is singled out as incest,²⁸ contributing to the circular

structure of the poem. According to Gnostic cosmogony, Sophia herself indulged in such self-love which brought about the error of the flawed Demiurge. Thus, the initiate must open himself to the possibility of self-reflection by deferring to a wiser figure that will advise and show the way.

This specifically occurs in "The Tale of Florent," "The Tale of the Three Questions," and the "Tale of Alcestis" (1.1917–80). In all three tales, women prove to "ben the myhtieste [since] / The king and the vinour also / Of wommen comen bothe tuo;" (1.1874–6). Unlike the traditional notion that woman is the source of the Fall and thus of sin and death, here they are portrayed as the begetters of all levels of humanity. In the "Tale of Alcestis" it is her love and sacrifice that heals her husband, the ruler of the people. This may be read as a kind of inverted Christian allegory in which Alcestis, in a paradoxical reversal, takes on the role of Christ. Zorobabel concludes his tale by reiterating the idea with which he began—that the strongest of "erthli thinges, / The wyn, the wommen, or the kinges," (1.1953–4) is actually Truth. In this manner, he juxtaposes woman with Truth and yet again highlights her role as messenger and deliverer, befitting the overall scheme of the entire poem where Venus is the instigator and Patroness. In the "Tale of the Three Questions," Peronelle is the wise daughter of a knight who is challenged by the king. When he finds himself at a loss, he eventually turns to his daughter who is the only one to whom he "dorste telle a privé" (1.3157). She serves as his confidante but it is more than that since she obviously has more insight than he and she is there to teach both her father and later, the king—ironically, two male figures who for all intents and purposes should be viewed as her superiors. This reversal of relationships fits in with the rest of the list of reversals expounded in the Prologue and in the beginning of this book. It also falls in line with the paradoxical reversal setup in *Pearl*, where the young maiden serves as the knowledgeable teacher to the ignorant father figure. It is through her wisdom that he manages to escape death and rise above his sociopolitical estate.

This tale whose source remains inconclusively identified seems to have been drawn from a number of different sources. James Bratcher has pointed out similarities between the tale and Child's ballad, "King John and the Bishop," and in a later note, he added another possible source taken from Italian folklore, "The Clever Peasant Girl." Such tales about witty women have existed in traditional folklore in the Middle East and India with variations on the riddles.²⁹ One such possible source is a tale of the Uygur people of central Asia and China named, "The Effendi and the

Riddles.”³⁰ Like Child’s ballad, this story lacks the clever girl but the basic premise of a ruler who thinks himself wisest of all encountering a worthy rival in a simple man remains. Moreover, the questions themselves in this near eastern tale hold the same lesson that Gower’s story wishes to convey, humility. The first question in the tale is “where is the center of the world?” The effendi who wishes to bring the ruler down a notch answers: “right under the left hind foot of my donkey.” Just like the earth doesn’t need to be tended by man in Gower’s tale, the Padishah’s question is just as irrelevant and the answer is fitting. In other words, both questions attempt to emphasize man’s insignificance in the larger scheme of things. The second and third questions follow the same line of thought. The second question places man against the stars in the sky and the third takes us back to the Padishah’s own pride with the final result being that his pride indeed has the highest price since he loses a fortune to the wise commoner. This basic premise found many different versions in folktales across the world, another of which is a Sufi³¹ wisdom tale of Persian origin called “The Tale of the Three Questions,” with different characters but a similar moral. Gower may have had access to such material since as he proves elsewhere, he was very much aware of Arab alchemists and their traditions.³² What seems to specifically appeal to him though is the figure of the wise woman taking the reigns and instructing the otherwise ignorant men.

Book 4 deals with the sin of sloth and the tales Gower uses showcase the type of idleness that should be avoided. Interestingly, most tales have a magical aspect or touch upon some kind of forbidden knowledge or practice. But it is not the practice itself that is warned against rather the warning is against becoming idle when it comes to achieving the sought for knowledge. Such a reference appears in lines 234–43, where he mentions the legend of Robert Grosseteste. “Many apocryphal stories of magic grew up around the reputations of Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon and their experiments”³³ but this tale’s source is unknown. The legend recalls how Grosseteste labored for seven years to create a talking head of brass and in one moment of sloth, he missed out on his success. This legend doesn’t only seem to allude to the seven deadly sins but it also emphasizes the notion of sin in idleness. In other words, this man who sought knowledge beyond “kynde” missed out on his reward due to a moment of accidental stupor. The play between the natural and the unnatural doesn’t stop there as natural and unnatural creation is a constant throughout the book. Two of the key stories in this book—Pygmalion and Anaxarete—revolve around the unnatural notion of turning stone into flesh and flesh

into stone respectively. A similar unnatural switch occurs in the "Tale of Iphis," where a female transforms into male. All three stories denote the imprisoning nature of the flesh and the inadequate/limited capacity of human understanding. They also symbolize the absurdity of being so involved in the material/physical and in this sense, to reinforce the moral of the "Tale of Narcissus" from Book 1 since self-love is an indulgence that initially brought about the evil of the physical world.

Moreover, the tales highlight the theme of unnatural reversals that culminate in blissful outcomes. In other words, nothing is quite as it seems. While *Pearl's* jeweler could not have possibly been a successful "creator" (he was depicted as an "unkynde" jeweler) due to his epistemological lack and his strong material affinity, the case may be different for Amans, pending his awakening. Magic, sorcery, secret knowledge, and unnatural creation are all bound together in this deeply reflective self-exploration on the margin of sinful self-love with the plausible result of salvation. Idleness comes in another form—forgetfulness, which has already been established as the worst sin of all. In the "Tale of Demophon and Phyllis" (l. 731–886) Demophon loses himself in the worldly and when he forgets to return to Phyllis, forgets his love, and promises to her, he also symbolically forgets himself, just like Nebuchadnezzar. And it is through Phyllis' suicide along with her transformation into a tree that is meant to reawaken him and bring him back into himself. Her suicide releases her from the imprisonment of the carnal but at the same time symbolically awakens him from his intoxication. The image of the tree invokes both trees of paradise; in a seemingly paradoxical manner, her death becomes a symbol of life but also of knowledge as it signifies Demophon's lacking knowledge of himself.

Around the middle of Book 4, through the "Tale of Nauplius and Ulysses," Genius digresses on the topic of labor speaking in metaphors of plowing and sowing that recall *Pearl's* vineyard parable as well as *Piers Plowman*. Laboring seems to be a necessity but it is not manual labor that is important, rather writing and teaching is at stake. Just like in *Piers*, it is the seeds of knowledge "that the labour forth it broghte" (4.2375). The recuperation of history, be it social or personal, must be cultivated as the land but that cannot be done if the teaching disappears. In order to regain paradise, one must heed "the perfection" of God's wisdom:

Of every wisdom the parfit
The hye God of His spirit

Gaf to the men in erthe hiere
 Upon the forme and the matiere
 Of that he wolde make hem wise.
 And thus cam in the ferste apprise
 Of bokes and of alle goode
 Thurgh hem that whilom understode
 The lore which to hem was give,
 Wherof these othre, that now live,
 Ben every day to lerne newe (4.2363–73)

Of every wisdom, the perfection
 The high God of his spirit
 Gave to men on earth
 Upon the form and the matter
 Of that he would make them wise.
 And thus came in the first teaching
 Of books and of all good
 Through them that formerly understood
 The lore which to them was given,
 Out of which these others, that now live,
 Exist every day to learn anew (my translation)

The need to relearn what has been lost is crucial since it seems history hangs on the balance. In order to regain paradise and that perfect state, one must “labor” to move beyond the reasonable and accept the teaching provided by those who “formerly understood” and thus reaffirm their knowledge. At this point, Amans is still in denial, in between wakefulness and sleep. In his current state, he is in constant disarray; “nou I lawhe and nou I wepe, / And nou I lese and nou I winne, / And nou I ende and nou beginner” (4.2898–900). In that brief moment of repose, immersed in his dream vision, he was full of joy and uninhibited, but once he wakes he returns to his previous state—lost and full of sorrow. Nevertheless, he is already a step beyond his “predecessors”—the previous narrators discussed—since unlike them he is willing and ready to learn and be educated:

Bem yw ille
 I wolde have leie and slepe stille,
 To meten evere of such a swevene,
 For thanne I hadde a slepi hevene (4.2913–16)

Genius then concludes that he “Of swevenes for to take kepe, / For ofte time a man aslepe / Mai se what after schal betide” (4.3125–7). He stresses the idea that these visions that come in his sleep are noteworthy as they might reveal significant information and hence, Amans should take careful heed. Sleep plays an important role for it serves as the vehicle for such visions. However, when Genius depicts the house of the god of sleep, the picture he paints is not very welcoming, rather it recalls portrayals of hell in its grave darkness and deafening silence:

Under an hell ther is a cave,
 Which of the sonne mai nocht have,
 So that no man mai knowe ariht
 The point between the dai and nyht.
 Ther is no fyr, ther is no sparke,
 Ther is no dore which mai charke,
 Wherof an yhe scholde unschette,
 So that inward ther is no lette (4.2991–8)

The first two lines create a wordplay where the words “hell” and “sonne” may be interpreted in two ways; the first possibility entails that the god’s house lies under a hill, in a cave where the sun doesn’t shine. The second, more telling possibility creates an inversion where the hill and its cave become a hell where the Son does not enter causing a state of confusion typical for those floating in limbo—in “the point between the dai and nyht” (l. 2994). This seemingly hellish place serves as the Passing stage between ignorance and knowledge where the initiate faces no obstacle that might hinder his achievement of gnosis. This “cave” is like the belly of the beast in *Patience* and the dungeon where the wedding guest is sent to in *Cleanness*, a place that defies tradition through its redefinition of accepted values.

The sin of forgetfulness continues to take center stage in Book 6 that deals with the sin of gluttony. Gluttony is portrayed as a facet of ignorance which is divided into two other categories: drunkenness and delicacy. Unlike the other sins discussed, Gower does not address five categories of this sin but rather focuses on two “and of no mo” (6.14). The five categories of each sin allude to the five senses. In his choice to change the scheme with regard to gluttony, he places emphasis on the two senses that have already been established as most significant—sight and hearing. These are the most easily affected of the five and thus require greater

observance since when neglected one may find himself “falling” into the sins described, the first of which is drunkenness:

Which berth the cuppe felaschipe
 [...]
 He can make of a wisman nyce,
 And of a fool, that him schal seme
 That he can al the lawe deme,
 And given every juggement
 Which longeth to the firmament
 Bothe of the sterre and of the mone;
 And thus he makth a gret clerk sone
 Of him that is a lewed man (6.16, 18–25)

In these lines Gower emphasizes to the contrary through constant reversals as in the rest of the poem. In actuality, drunkenness only provides a sense of false truth and knowledge. It reinforces the unfortunate condition of slavery since it perpetuates man’s ignorance in this cycle of endless materiality. Ironically, the “lewed man” who thinks himself “a gret clerk” simply pushes himself further away from true enlightenment.

“He [that] drinkth the wyn” (l. 71), “The wyn drynkth him and bint him faste” (l. 72). The narrator introduces another important pun on the word “drynkth.” He who drinks the wine, drains the cup, gets intoxicated and loses sight of himself, the wine ends up draining him of knowledge, wisdom and vicariously salvation. It maintains his state of captivity by binding him fast to his earthly existence. Amans then explains:

Bot I a drauchte have of that welle,
 In which mi deth is and mi lif,
 Mi joie is torned into strif,
 That sobre schal I nevere worthe,
 Bot as a drunke man forworthe;
 So that in londe where I fare
 The lust is lore of mi welfare,
 As he that mai no bote finde.
 Bot this me thenkth a wonder kinde,
 As I am drunke of that I drinke,
 So am I ek for falte of drinke;
 Of which I finde no reles.
 Bot if I myhte natheles
 Of such a drinke as I coveite,

So as me liste, have o receite,
 I scholde assobre and fare wel.
 Bot so Fortune upon hire whiel
 On hih me deigneth noght to sette,
 Foreveremore I finde a lette. (6.276–94)

If I take a sip of that well,
 In which my death is and my life,
 My joy is turned to strife,
 That I shall never exist sober,
 But as a drunk man from now on;
 So that in land where I fare
 The lust is lore of my welfare,
 As him that may no salvation/relief find.
 But this I think is an extraordinary thing,
 As I am drunk of what I drink,
 So am I too for lack of drink;
 Of which I find no release.
 But if I might nonetheless
 Of such a drink as I covet,
 So as I lust/list for, have one draught,
 I should become sober and fare well.
 But so Fortune upon her wheel
 On high considers me unworthy to seat,
 Forever more I find a hindrance (my translation)

Amans realizes that the well of knowledge, or love as may be the case here, is the source of his life and death and due to the complex state of his being, it is also the source of his joy turned into sorrow. He realizes that once he had tasted the Truth there is no going back but since he is still in a position of in between,³⁴ he is crucially and cruelly indecisive. This passage with its puns and reversals showcases the delicate boundary between gnostic repose and its gateway to salvific revelation, on the one hand, and material drunkenness and worldly sleep, on the other. Since he is still unsure of his position in relation to the world of Fortune as well as to the hidden world beyond, he expresses it through his “lust” which is equated with the “lore of [his] welfare.” In other words, Gower puns on the word “lore” which plays on the idea of spiritual loss and thus fits in with the scheme of the seven deadly sins and the specific use of the word “lust,” with the orthodox outcome of no salvation. On the other hand, the word “lore” as it has been used throughout the poem up to now may

also be interpreted as the gaining of knowledge, and while he may no longer find relief, he will be finding salvation. What he finds unnaturally natural though is the fact that whether he is drunk or not, he finds himself in a similar state. Either way, there is neither relief nor salvation for him till he accomplishes his task, drinks from the cup of Truth he has been lusting for and hearing of and crosses over. Again, the pun on “liste” indicates the methodology of this type of salvation.

The second category of Gluttony is delicacy, which translates into wantonness and indulgence, and in his lesson, Genius warns Amans against falling astray once true love is attained. Amans claims he would never relapse if his beloved were his, but admits to having occasionally fallen on his path to Truth, yet again emphasizing the need for Gower’s changed scheme of the two instead of five categories. Amans then goes on to list three degrees by which he has been “feeding his fantasy”:

O fiedinge is of that I se,
 Another is of that I here,
 The thridde, as I schal tellen here,
 It groweth of min oghne thought (6.746–9)

These are “the primary avenues of intellection that Genius, as confessor, is attempting to exorcize.”³⁵ In order to transcendentalize the carnal experience and transform the active reception of the senses into a passive form of spiritual revelation, Amans must move beyond this stage and accept Genius’ lessons through this exercise of self-reflection, which he seems to be doing. In the “Tale of Dives and Lazarus” (6.975–1150) Genius’ moral is that one can have wealth and pleasure on earth without it becoming gluttonous or sinful in the orthodox sense as long as he caters to the spirit as well; “he that is a governour / Of worldes good, if he be wys” (6.1128–9) will be saved. In other words, this idea, not entirely orthodox, reiterates the notion that what corrupts the spirit is not sinful deeds or lack of faith but the loss of the true self, the loss of gnosis, which can certainly be remedied, as is shown in the case of Amans. And while submerging oneself into the intoxication of worldly goods is clearly not the best idea, it does not necessarily hinder the possibility of salvation. Going back to the beginning of the Prologue, the problem at the core of humanity is as the Latin marginal gloss attributed to Bernardus explains: *Plures plura sciunt et seipsos nesciunt* [“Many know many things and are ignorant of themselves”]. Genius reuses the gloss with his own version of

"A man hath knowleching / Save of himself of alle thing" (6.1567–68), a point also raised in *Piers*. The search should thus be turned to such innate knowledge that would then establish a renewed connection with the self and vicariously with God, culminating in imminent salvation. Nevertheless, even while Genius' tales still "sounen in myn ere," Amans regresses into the chaos of "worldes chance" (6.1791).

Following Amans' request for a break, Book 7 is somewhat of a digression from the confessional structure. This book doesn't only offer a twist on the confession but also on the scheme of the seven sins. Instead of presenting the seventh sin—Lust—it digresses into a lengthy lesson on good kingship. Since Amans asks to be taught some kind of wisdom, Genius takes a more active role and tells Amans of Aristotle's "fare / Of Alisandre" (7.4–5). Also, this shift away from the traditional (seven deadly sins) structure makes light of the final sin by reinforcing the overall sense of mockery toward the notion of sins of the flesh. Similarly, it would hardly be prudent to dwell on the sin of lust as Genius is Venus' chaplain. The book, I believe, signifies the final stage before enlightenment since the notion of "Kingship" represents a form of individual maturity and self-reflection that is more powerful than the confessional. In this book the individual and the state become two sides of the same coin where communal gain may be possibly attained via personal redemption and salvation.³⁶ It is an opportunity to bring into the discourse the vast range of sources that influenced the poem's composition in specific relation to "secret knowledge" under the guise of a mirror for princes. In the section on "Authors of Astronomy," Hermes who made an appearance once before, receives a second, more important reference:

Ek was another: bot Hermes
 Above alle othre in this science
 He hadde a gret experience;
 Thurgh him was many a sterre assised,
 Whos bokes yit ben auctorized (7.1476–80)

Genius ends his list of famous authors of astronomy with Hermes, to whom he attributes the longest description and most influential role. He claims he was above all others when it came to this science and his books have been regarded as trustworthy.³⁷ This, I believe, is a reference to the Hermetic tradition and to "Hermes [who] left his own country and traveled all over the world...; and tried to teach men to revere and worship

one God alone, . . . the *demiurgus* and *genetor* [begetter] of all things; . . . and [who] lived a very wise and pious life, occupied in intellectual contemplation . . . , and giving no heed to the gross things of the material world . . . ; and that having returned to his own country, he wrote at the time many books of mystical theology and philosophy."³⁸ The *Secreta Secretorum*³⁹ on the whole, which was a popular, widely read text at the time, was itself influenced by Hermetic texts, specifically *The Discourse of the Eighth and the Ninth*. Like Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, this text is presented in the form of a dialogue between the figure of a teacher (father) and his disciple (son), where the initiator instructs the initiate on some point of hidden wisdom.⁴⁰

Like other Hermetic texts, its concerns are practical in nature, and it culminates in an experience of spiritual rebirth, which the texts themselves refer to as "gnosis," through the enlightenment of the mind where the initiate becomes one with the essence of God: "Seeing within myself an immaterial vision that came from the mercy of God, I went out of myself into an immortal body, and now I am not what I was before" (*Corpus Hermeticum* XIII.3)⁴¹—a clearly gnostically influenced idea. "When it came to beliefs, it is likely that the Hermeticists and Gnostics were close spiritual relatives. The two schools had a great deal in common, their principal difference being that the Hermeticists looked to the archetypal figure of Hermes as the embodiment of salvific teaching and initiation, while the Gnostics revered the more recent savior figure known as Jesus in a similar manner. Both groups were singularly devoted to gnosis, which they understood to be the experience of liberating interior knowledge; both looked upon embodiment as a limitation that led to unconsciousness, from which only gnosis can liberate the human spirit."⁴² Though the writings of the *Corpus Hermeticum* were mainly lost to the Latin west, they survived in eastern Byzantine libraries, and since "the writings are all anonymous: their mythic author is considered to be Hermes himself. The reasoning behind this pseudonymous approach is simple. Hermes is Wisdom, and thus anything written through the inspiration of true wisdom is in actuality written by Hermes" (Hoeller, 24). But who is Hermes, or rather the figure to which the writings of the *Corpus* are attributed? Hermes Trismegistus may be a combination of "the Greek Hermes [and the] ancient [Egyptian] Wisdom God Thoth. This god was worshiped in his principal cult location, Chmun, known also as the "City of the Eight," called Greek Hermopolis" (Hoeller, 23). In Gower's own eight books, he

proffers his own wisdom on the path to the Pleroma. He concludes Book 7 with the “Tale of Tobias and Sara”⁴³ and the issue of Chastity, ironically leading toward the next topic of discussion—Lechery. In this tale, Sara is practically protected by the demon “Asmodeus,” who is considered one of the seven princes of Hell, in charge of lust. Six of her husbands die on their wedding night because they have an obvious lack. It is only the lucky seventh husband, Tobias, “who that wolde taken hiede [and . . .] / wel the sothe hieere” (7.5354, 5356). In this apocryphal tale, it is because Tobias heeds the Truth that he is able to survive this carnal experience and escape the clutches of the demon unscathed.

Amans then returns our, as well as Gower's focus to the issue at hand—his confession brought on by “loves peine” (7.5414). Amans says he is still restless. He wonders if something that “Touchende of love, as we begonned” (7.5423) may have been “overronne / Or oght forgete or left behinde” (7.5424–5). Genius admits there is one more thing they have yet to discuss “for thou schalt be wel avised / Unto thi schrifte as it belongeth” (7.5434–5), at the end of which “the person who will finally be won over . . . is not the lady, but Amans himself” (Simpson 2005, 217). Following the “Tale of Apollonius,” Genius concludes,

For as of this which thou art inne,
 Be that thou seist it is a sinne,
 And sinne mai no pris deserve;
 Withoute pris and who schal serve,
 I not what profit myhte availe.
 Thus folweth it, if thou travaile
 Wher thou no profit hast ne pris,
 Thou art toward thiself unwis (8.2087–94)

For as of this which you are in,
 Be that you say it is a sin,
 And sin may no prize deserve;
 Without a prize and someone who will deserve it,
 I do not know what profit might be worthy.
 Thus follow it, if thou work
 Where thou no profit have nor prize,
 Thou art toward thyself unwise (my translation)

He claims Amans is well aware that he is not yet in the required state of mind, or in other words, he is still lacking and thus deserves no reward.

If there is no prize at the end nor someone to deserve it, Genius is unsure where to go from there and tells Amans to seek that prize because if he doesn't he is unwise toward himself. Namely, if he doesn't heed the message and gain hold of this coveted reward, he is being both unwise and lacking in the necessary knowledge of himself.

Love, he then says, "is blind and can nought knowe / Wher that he goth, til he be falle" (8.2104–5), embodying love in Amans' character. Much like love, Amans is blind to his true self and requires "good conseil that he be lad" (8.2107) in order to ironically fall into knowledge. I believe the word "falle" plays on the Original, orthodox fall into sin since it reiterates the lesson of Book 8, but at the same time, indicates that one has to fall into himself in order to find that which has been sought. The soul is thus at the center of man's kingdom and "If he misreule that kingdom, / He lest himself" (8.2114–5), for he who doesn't know himself intimately, has nothing else, and pearls of wisdom are then no more than empty shells; "For what man that in special / Hath nought himself, he hath nought elles, / No mor the perles than the schelles" (8.2118–20). Genius' subsequent words hold a semblance of warning mingled with prophetic revelation; "And thus, my sone, I wolde sein, / As I seide er, that thou aryse, / Er that thou falle in such a wise" (8.2126–8). He correctly surmises that Amans will rise before he would experience this fall, again punning on the word "wise," playing on the meaning of falling into such knowledge. His rise in the end, both literal (the rise of his body) and metaphorical (the rise of his spirit) will be complemented by his "fall" into the knowledge of himself. It is "Hierafterward" (8.2144) that we shall see whether Genius' instruction has been effective, "For I can do to thee no more / Bot teche thee the rihte weie" (8.2146–7).

The moment of truth has come and the poem has finally reached full circle as Amans is again confronted with the choice "if thou wolt live or deie" (8.2148)—in other words, the choice between salvific knowledge and dooming ignorance. Amans however is not as optimistic and his first reaction is to childishly and narcissistically bemoan his heavy plight, again in repetition of the beginning:

The resoun of my wit it overpasseth,
 Of that Nature techeth me the weie
 To love, and yit no certein sche compasseth
 Hou I schal spede, and thus between the tweie
 I stonde, and not if I schal live or deie (8.2231–5)

He directly responds to Genius' earlier petition; he cannot comprehend why Nature decided to teach him the way to love, or in other words, to make him perceptive of the notion that something is indeed lacking in him and yet refrains from revealing to him whether he shall succeed in this quest or not. Mainly, he is insecure, standing in an unsure place of in between, without the knowledge of how to move either way. He realizes he can't go back but isn't yet sure on how to move forward. Venus then appears in answer to his plea and repeats her question from the Prologue, but this time she is half scornful; "Sche axeth me what is mi name" (8.2320). To her surprise, he replies, "John Gower" (l. 2321). This moment indicates a new beginning since Amans has certainly progressed from "A caitif that lith hie" (1.161). His identity has been reacknowledged but the Truth still needs to be regained.

When Venus admonishes him to see himself for what he has truly become, he swoons and "fell to ground" (8.2449), for a moment seemingly reverting to his pathetically ignorant self. When all the great elderly men of antiquity appear in a procession in front of Venus and Gower and plead for him, Venus decides to take pity. This scene recalls the one at the end of *Pearl* where the Jeweler is gazing at the vision of New Jerusalem and the procession of people entering the city. Here, however, Amans is ready to cross the river and instead of having the vision crumble when he jumps in, he successfully makes his way over. Amans rises from the earth

And forth withal sche tok me tho
 A wonder mirour for to holde,
 In which sche bad me to beholde
 And taken hiede of that I syhe;
 Wherinne anon myn hertes yhe
 I caste (8.2820–5)

Venus hands Amans a mirror to behold his true visage. At first the vision takes him by surprise as it is not pleasant, but it is his true self, which he sees quite clearly, unlike the distorted vision seen by Narcissus.⁴⁴ Thus, when the lesson is over and the dialogue transforms into a monologue, this literary device showcases the main difference between this character and the ones discussed before. The monologue, a personalized narrative, serves as the literary mirror of self-awareness that symbolizes the inner quest Amans has undertaken, and it is this introspection that eventually

leads to an epiphanic moment of revelation that culminates in the passing of the spirit into knowledge, a spiritual salvation, and poetic closure. At the same time, this is also the moment when Amans “graduates” from a “psychikoi” to a “pneumatikoi.” When Amans “stod amasid for a while, / And [then] in myself y gan to smyle” (8.2957–8), this smile holds the secrets of the universe, or as Peck puts it, “the smile is the final clue to his release” (Peck 1980, xxix).

CONCLUSION

KNOWING THE CHRISTIAN MIDDLE AGES: A GNOSTIC JOURNEY INTO THE SELF

In this book, I have explored the question of whether and how elements and residues of a gnostic paradigm appear in English literary works of the late Middle Ages. Gnosticism was an ancient religion that emphasized the possibility of salvation for a knowledgeable few through the regaining of gnosis, but although it was mostly obliterated by the early Church, I have uncovered a reemergence, a persistent residue of a similar form of thought in several literary, contemporaneous works, albeit in different circumstances and with different results. For this purpose I have analyzed the *Pearl* poet's works: *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness*, Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and Gower's *Confessio Amantis* in terms of their attitudes toward knowledge specifically through the use of dream vision genre, and by identifying a recurring literary moment which I termed "Scenes of gnostic Passing" where the character may or may not pass from ignorance to knowledge via a remembrance of the true self.

Through the literary works, chosen for reasons iterated in the Introduction, I have sketched out a gnostic scheme of development that constantly impinges upon the central Christian orthodoxy and endows the works, in this "regaining" of the true self, with a fittingly gnostic circular structure in such a manner that complements the poetic structure within the literary texts themselves. In this scale of development, the *Pearl* poet chapter introduces three failed attempts at Passing for an otherwise potential initiate. The *Pearl* poet's narrators prove to be potential initiates but they do not possess the requirements necessary for a complete passage. All three attempt to pass with the help of a knowledgeable female guide but all three prove too attached to their material existence,

to orthodox practices and thus finally, to their fallacious ignorance stemming from forgetfulness. The subsequent chapter on *Piers Plowman* showcased a moment of literary uncertainty matched by the period's historical uncertainty, where confusion rather than knowledge reigns. It brings Will's search for "real" Truth to the surface and to the center of discussion. Much like his counterparts in the *Pearl* poet's works, *Piers Plowman's* narrator is presented as a Dreamer with an agenda. Like his "predecessors," he is confronted and guided by a knowledgeable savior figure (i.e., Piers) led by a wise female. Though all attempts at having Will pass into knowledge prove futile in the end, there does seem to be some hope since the reversed structure of the poem, where nothing is quite as it seems, opens the possibility for a Passing if and when the Dreamer enters the right state of mind. In other words, as established in the Introduction, part of the grammar of this type of gnosticism requires passivity in the process of regaining one's memory of past knowledge. Materiality has caused man to fall into ignorance and forget what he once knew and it is only through a specialized form of repose that the true initiate is able to regain that elusive knowledge. And indeed, it is the "purpose" of these dream visions to reawaken this latent knowledge, ironically via sleep, and ultimately articulate that which has been lost in a particularly gnostic scheme.

The analysis comes full circle in the final chapter on Gower's *Confessio Amantis* where a successful instance of Passing is depicted and which provides a kind of poetic closure since if "the Gnostic Saviour comes to save himself" (Filoramo, 106), then both narrator and the character of Amans have clearly succeeded. In this chapter, through the elaboration and focus on the seven deadly sins, which had been established as partly originating in gnostic ideas, Amans achieves gnosis. In the process, a new sin is "introduced"—forgetfulness, which appears to be the cause of all that is wrong with the world. As a divine virtue to this deadly sin, remembrance of the true self, of gnosis, emerges as a necessary requirement for enlightenment and vicariously, salvation. In this sense, the structure of mystical revelation comes into question as well. However, as shown throughout the analysis, though many of their sources converge (along with various other heresies of the time), and though the ultimate goal may indeed be similar, the very structure of the sought vision as well as the structure of the revelation is fundamentally different.

The style of Pseudo-Dionysius, the *via negativa*, seems to function in the poems discussed in this work as well. But, while the mystics wish

to attain a state of forgetfulness emphasized through “unknowing” and blind faith,¹ the gnostics seek a state of knowing through remembrance and articulation. For the gnostics, forgetfulness is the worst sin of all. Their use of the *via negativa* works as part of a reversal scheme that aims to depict the way in which faith is clearly not enough for salvation through an ironized perspective of the traditional confusion between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, east and west. Ultimately, gnosis enables salvation and it is the unique structure of the previously discussed literary works that enables the attainment of it.

It should be clear that all these works are situated in a wide range of intellectual and spiritual traditions, and could certainly be—and certainly often enough have been—read and understood as participants in traditional and mainstream orthodox belief and society. In this study, however, I have endeavored to show that another residue and paradigm is visible as well: that of a persistent and perhaps regularly recurring set of views that is sometimes more, sometimes less, visible, which in these poems, I believe, remains particularly clear. Thus, this and further study become particularly significant and introduce the possibility of a more pervasive phenomenon than ever before conceived.

NOTES

1 Introduction: Gnosticism and Late-Medieval Literature

1. Augustine's own deep struggle with gnosticism and its Manichean manifestation will be discussed below.
2. This too will later be qualified in a discussion on the different streams of orthodoxy as well as the different forms of growing heresies.
3. See W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1963); Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Schools: Roman Britain to Renaissance England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
4. For instance, Hans Bayer on Arthurian legends in German and French literature, "Antifeudalismus im Geiste der Gnosis. Der Tristanroman des Thomas de Bretagne und das Haus Anjou-Plantagenet," in *Gesellschaftsgeschichte. Festschrift für Karl Bosl zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Ferdinand Seibt (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1988), 55–70; "Die Gnosis Philos von Alexandrien im Spiegel der hochmittelalterlichen Literatur," *Euphorion: Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte* 86.3 (1992): 249–83; Sofia Kantor on Spanish romance literature, "Ideología y módulo formal en la psicomaquia y en el debate: reflexiones al margen de Carnal y Quaresma," in *Actes del VII Congrés de l'Associació Hispànica de Literatura medieval: Castelló de la Plana, 22–26 de setembre de 1997, 3 vols.*, ed. Santiago Fortuno Llorens and Tomás Martínez Romero (Castellon de la Plana: Universitat Jaume, 1999), 273–82; Rudolf Palgen on Italian poetry, the quest for wisdom and the use of astrology, "Il paradiso platonico," in *Letteratura e Critica. Studi in Onore di Natalino Sapegno, 1*, ed. Walter Binni, et al. (Rome: Bulzoni, 1975), 197–211; Erwin Panofsky on the cultural and historical link between ancient cultures of the East and medieval civilization, "Satürn ve Melankoli. 'Melancholia Generosa': Floransa Yeni-Platonculuğunda Melankoli'nin ve Satürn'ün Yüceltilmesi ve Modern Deha Kavramının Doğuşu," *Cogito* 51 (2007): 192–211; Claire Taylor, "The letter of Héribert of Périgord as a source for dualist heresy in the society of early eleventh-century Aquitaine," *Journal of Medieval History* 26.4 (2000): 313–49, and Karen Sullivan on French writings, *Truth and the Heretic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Monica Nasif on the figure of Merlin and medieval demonology, "La historia del mago

- Merlín desde la perspectiva demonológica de la Baja Edad Media,” *Letras: Revista de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Pontificia Universidad Católica Santa María de los Buenos Aires* 48–49 (2004): 117–24; Gwendolyn Morgan on the Gnostic connection between modern fiction and medieval morality plays, “Gnosticism, the Middle Ages, and the search for responsibility: immortals in popular fiction,” in *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Leslie J. Workman*, ed. Richard Utz and Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 317–27; and so on.
5. Both of these notions will be developed later in this chapter in the discussion on Gnosticism vs. Christianity and the development of Other Forms of Heresy.
 6. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 124.
 7. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense.” Oregon State University, accessed February 16, 2013, http://oregon-state.edu/instruct/ph1201/modules/Philosophers/Nietzsche/Truth_and_Lie_in_an_Extra-Moral_Sense.htm.
 8. William F. Hoddap, “The Real and Surreal in Medieval Dream Vision: The Case of James I’s Kingis Quair,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 42.1 (2009): 55–76.
 9. “An institution is not necessarily a particular organization but is any relatively durable set of social relations which *endows* individuals with power, status and resources of various kinds” (Bourdieu, 8).
 10. This common assumption, for example, has been scrutinized, raising questions about its prevalence and arguing for a more folkloric view of medieval culture and society. See C. S. Lewis, “Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages,” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 41; Jacques Le Goff, *La civilisation de l’Occident médiéval* (Paris: Arthaud, 1964), 18–19.
 11. Moore, *The War on Heresy*, Harvard University Press, 2012.
 12. Marc Michael Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1997). Also see similar claim in Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 58–9.
 13. Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 143.
 14. Jeffrey Russell, in *Satan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) discusses the origins of Christianity by referring to one of the central questions at the basis of the religion, which Gnosticism had attempted to answer—the problem of evil in the world. When the Catholic Church of the period began to assemble and formalize, “the most significant opposition to the emerging consensus among the fathers was Gnosticism, one of the most important movements in the history of Western religion” (51–2).
 15. Which classify the range of beliefs—from “extreme dualism” to a more “mediated dualism,” approaching monism. The Nag Hammadi library consists of Syrian-Egyptian scripture.

16. Also see Morton Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1967), 2–5.
17. From Theodotus, *Excerpta ex Theodoto*. W. Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 222–33.
18. From *The Apocryphon of John*, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, trans. Frederik Wisse (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 67–8. The demiurge in these lines claims to be a “jealous God.” On the one hand, emphasizing the idea that there is another entity to be jealous of, but at the same time, indicating a kind of inferiority, a wariness of losing his position. This sentiment may be juxtaposed with the dichotomy between body and soul.
19. Bloomfield, *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1970).
20. As R. I. Moore explains, “Neither the theory nor the practice of persecution was the invention of the twelfth century. On the contrary the danger, or at least the fear, of schism had attended the church since its infancy” (11).
21. See Beverly M. Kienzle, “*Operatrix in vinea Domini*: Hildegard’s Preaching and Polemics against the Cathars,” *Heresis* 26–27 (1996): 43–56.
22. See Ken Wilber, “The Great Chain of Being,” *JHP* 33.3 (1993): 52–65.
23. Jeffrey B. Russell, “Medieval Witchcraft and Medieval Heresy,” in *On the Margin of the Visible*, ed. Edward A. Tiryakian (John Wiley and Sons, 1974), 188.
24. A term loosely used to indicate groups connected to or influenced by Gnostic ideas, especially in later centuries.
25. One such example is Innocent III’s papal bull titled, *De Contemptu Mundi sive de Miseria Conditionis Humanae libri III* (*On the Contempt of the World or on the Misery of the Human Condition, in three books*). This work was a “plaint over the sinfulness and woes of this present life. It proceeds upon the basis of Augustine’s theory of total depravity. The misery of man is described from the helplessness of infancy to the decrepitude of age and the sufferings of the future estate” (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 5, 80).
26. See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), xv–xix.
27. See Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). On a similar discussion of figures in exile, “spectral presence[s], strongly felt and yet just as strongly derealized” (xvii) see Steven Kruger, *The Spectral Jew* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), and Lisa Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
28. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the relationship between the genders begins to strain as “images taken from friendship, marriage and family grow more common and more complex . . . supplementing but not replacing older images of ruler and follower, and these images reflect a need, felt especially by males, for a view of authority that balance discipline with love” (Bynum, 8).

29. Two of the most well-known mystics in literary studies today are Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.
30. Michel de Certeau defines in *The Mystic Fable* the “various strains of mystics...[as having] a different treatment of the Christian tradition...the place formerly occupied by heresy vis-à-vis a religious orthodoxy would henceforth be that of a religious orthodoxy as opposed to a *political* one. A prophetic faith organized itself into a minority within the secularized state” (14, 20).
31. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 25.
32. Also see Moore on his discussions of the sociopolitical elements of heresy.
33. Hamilton, *Religion in the Medieval West*, 87.
34. Orme argues that medieval, freestanding schools were open to the public and that they taught many diverse subjects, from theology and morality to grammar and the arts. He further claims that these schools actually served as the basis of the modern English schooling system and structure.
35. It offered social fluidity through the use of money and literacy, which in turn cultivated the process of rationality and intellectualism. See Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).
36. Hamilton, *Religion in the Medieval West*, 40.
37. See Johannes van Oort, “The Young Augustine’s Knowledge of Manichaeism: an Analysis of the *Confessions* and some Other Relevant Texts,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 62 (2008): 441–66.
38. By disembodiment the demons, the orthodox negated the possibility of salvation for heretics like the Cathars, claiming that the demon spirit was simply reincarnated in a cycle of sin which ended up in the body of the Cathar and could thus never repent. See Elliott, *Fallen Bodies* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).
39. A notion that resonates in every period but somewhat amplified in the Middle Ages due to the growing corruption of the church, the onslaught of diseases and natural disasters.
40. This connection in its more subtle forms will be further explored later in the chapter.
41. L. J. Sackville, *Heresy and Heretics in the Thirteenth Century* (Boydell and Brewer, 2011).
42. This sect was generally very similar to orthodox Christianity but held several tenets that were clearly drawn from Gnosticism, like the fact that its followers identified themselves as the “spiritual people” whereas the uninitiated were called *psychici*, “the carnal people.”
43. Roland J. Teske, trans., *Saint Augustine on Genesis: Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees and on the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book* (Catholic University of America Press, 2001).
44. “Ideas that were Gnostic or Marcionite or crudely Zoroastrian were swept up into this all-embracing epithet [=Manichaeism]” (17), in Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee: A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

45. Michael Costen, *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade* (Manchester University Press, 1997).
46. From "Book of John the Evangelist," in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, ed. M. R. James (Oxford University Press, 1924).
47. Hamilton, *Religion in the Medieval West*, 175.
48. Walter Leggett Wakefield and Austin Patterson Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, vol. 40 (Columbia University Press, 1991), 245–47. Also see Malcolm Barber, *The Cathars: Dualist Heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages* (Longman, 2000).
49. See Steven Justice's chapter on "Lollardy," in *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
50. See Anne Hudson, "A Lollard Sect Vocabulary?" in *So many people longages and tonges: Philological Essays in Scots and Mediaeval English Presented to Angus McIntosh*, ed. M. Benskin and M. L. Samuels (Edinburgh: Authors, 1981), 2 1.
51. "In describing the truth of Holy Scripture, John Wycliffe argues that God's text is contained only in a sort of short-hand form in books, language, and other human artifacts 'which are the memorial clues and traces of pre-existing truth' . . . Wycliffe attributes it to Augustine, but we find it earlier than that, for the idea that language, as a *sign* of something else, is always at a remove from reality is one of the cornerstones of ancient rhetoric" (Carruthers, 9–10).
52. Dmitri Obolensky, *The Bogomils: A Study in Balkan Neo-Manichaeism* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).
53. See, for instance, Matthew A. Schumacher, trans. *Saint Augustine: Against Julian* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1957).
54. See M. E. Marcett, *Uthred de Boldon, Friar William Jordan and Piers Plowman* (Literary Licensing, 2011); David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England: The End of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 1955); Cindy L. Vitto, *The Virtuous Pagan in Middle English Literature* (Amer Philosophical Society, 1989).
55. Yates writes, "The classical humanist recovered the literature and the monuments of classical antiquity with a sense of return to the pure gold of a civilization better and higher than his own. The religious reformer returned to the study of the Scriptures and the early Fathers with a sense of recovery of the pure gold of the Gospel, buried under later degenerations" (1).
56. Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (Cornell University Press, 2007).
57. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).
58. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford University Press, 1990).
59. See Richard Newhauser, "Religious writing: hagiography, *pastoralia*, devotional and contemplative works," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100–1500*, ed. Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 37–57.

60. Theodotus, *Excerpta ex Theodoto*.
61. De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* (Chicago, TX: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).
62. He who knows and has virtue, which is based in knowledge (wisdom) “will be a reality among shadows.” From “Meno,” *Plato’s Dialogues*, vol.2, trans. Benjamin Jowett (London: Oxford University Press, 1892), 1–65.
63. From the “Introduction,” in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Patrick J. Gallacher (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997).
64. “The great Christian apologist [Pseudo-Dionysius] who is believed to have been contemporary with St. Paul really belonged to nearly the same period as the misdated *prisci theologi*, and came within the range of gnostic ways of thinking” (Yates, 118).
65. William F. Hoddap. “The Real and Surreal in Medieval Dream Vision: The Case of James I’s Kingis Quair,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 42.1 (2009): 55–76.
66. Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (Columbia University Press, 1990).
67. Barbara Newman, “What Did It Mean to Say ‘I Saw’? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture,” *Speculum* 80.1 (2005): 1–43.
68. Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Harvard University Press, 2005). See also Maurice Bouisson, “Gnosticism and Its Survivals in Christianity,” in *On the Margin of the Visible: Sociology, The Esoteric, and the Occult*, ed. Edward A. Tiryakian (New York: Wiley, 1974), and Ioan Petru Culianu in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* about “The existence of an underground Gnostic tradition within Christianity [...] from the Middle Ages to the present” (574).
69. So called by Elaine Pagels in her book by the same title.
70. See Augustine’s references to evil as representative of traditional Christianity and Jeffrey Russell’s volumes on the concept of the Devil.
71. This opposition mainly regards dualistic streams of Gnosticism, like the Sethians. The Valentinians were at times so close in thought to orthodoxy that even those within the Church had difficulty to discern them.
72. Anything that somehow fell beyond the Church’s declared canon was considered heretical for “the Church comes to define and deal with heresy as a danger to Truth. The beliefs and practices of an incompletely Christianized population are not in themselves the subject of Church anxiety...It is only when evangelical Christian movements, drawing their authority from an independent reading of the gospels, begin to attract converts and to create a space for a religion of instability that the Church recognizes a danger” (Asad, 355–6). Also see Edward Peters, *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980).
73. Bloomfield, “Symbolism in Medieval Literature,” in *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1970).

74. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Patrick J. Gallacher (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997).
75. Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism* (London: SCM Press, 1995).
76. See Grover A. Zinn Jr., "Personification allegory and visions of light in Richard of St. Victor's teaching on contemplation," *UTQ* 46.3 (1977): 190–214.
77. This recalls a problem in Augustine who at one point finds that memory presents access to real "forms" (*Confessions*, Book 12), but later in *On the Trinity* doesn't want memory to actually hold "real things."
78. Kathryn Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).
79. See Alastair Minnis, *Fallible Authors* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).
80. See D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962); Bernard Huppé and Robertson, *Fruyt and Chaf* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963); Huppé, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Albany: State University of New York, 1964).

2 Pearl's Patience and Purity: Gnosticism in the Pearl Poet's Oeuvre

1. I did not include a discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* due to its different structure and thematic engagements. Nonetheless, the supernatural interest of SGGK alone may testify to the poet's interest in exploring the margins and boundaries of orthodox belief, if indeed it is the same poet who composed all four works.
2. See A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge University Press, 1970); Tony Davenport, "Jewels and jewellers in *Pearl*," *Review of English Studies* 59.241 (2008): 508–20; Donna Crawford, "The architectonics of *Cleanness*," *Studies in Philology* 90.1 (1993): 29–45; Sandra Pierson Prior, "*Patience*—beyond Apocalypse," *Modern Philology* 83.4 (1986): 337–48; Edward Condren, *The Numerical Universe of the Gawain-Pearl Poet* (University Press of Florida, 2002).
3. See, for instance, Rosalynn Voaden, "Out of the mouths of babes: Authority in *Pearl* and in Narratives of the Child King Richard," in *Youth in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeremy J. P. Goldberg, and Riddy Felicity (York: York Medieval Press, 2004).
4. See J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (eds.) "Introduction," in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, revised by Norman Davis (Oxford University Press, 1967).
5. Or as J. A. Burrow puts it in *Ricardian Poetry* (Taylor and Francis, 1971), "the 'endless round' of *Pearl*[where] E ndlessness... means eternity" (66).
6. Richard Morris, reprinted as "On the Pearl, an Excerpt," in *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. John Conley (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970).
7. See, for instance, John M. Hill, "Middle English poets and the word: Notes toward an appraisal of linguistic consciousness," *Criticism* 16 (1974):

- 153–69; Louis Blenker, “The theological structure of *Pearl*,” *Traditio* 24 (1968): 43–75; and Gregory Roper, “*Pearl*, penitence, and the recovery of the self,” *The Chaucer Review* 28.2 (1993): 164–86.
8. See P. M. Kean, “*Pearl*”: *An Interpretation* (Routledge and Kegan Paul PLC, 1967); Ian Bishop, *Pearl in Its Setting: A Critical Study of the Structure and Meaning of the Middle English Poem* (Blackwell, 1969); A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge University Press, 1976); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* (University of California Press, 1982); Sandra Pierson Prior, *The Pearl Poet Revisited* (Twayne Publishers, 1994); and Jane Gilbert, “Gender and sexual transgression,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathon Gibson (DS Brewer, 1997).
 9. See Lynn Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (Penn State University Press, 2006).
 10. For more on dream visions in medieval English, see Gwenfair Adams, *Visions in Late Medieval England: Lay Spirituality and Sacred Glimpses of the Hidden Worlds of Faith* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Robert Easting, *Visions of the Other World in Middle English* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997); Steven Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Kathryn Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988); Peter Dinzelsbacher, *Vision and Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1981); A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Paul Piehler, *The Visionary Landscape: A Study in Medieval Allegory* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971).
 11. For more on the centrality of female voices, see Bynum’s *Jesus as Mother*, where her study focuses on the “metaphorical uses of *mother, nurse, womb, breast, and feed* [which] leads into an exploration of concepts of leadership” (7). Moreover, she claims that the role of Jesus as Mother is found in a number of fourteenth-century texts and especially in Julian of Norwich’s *Shewings*: to all of these sources “mothering means not only loving and feeding; “it also means creating and saving” (*Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 97). “Theologians drew on the long standing analogy ‘spirit is to flesh as male is to female,’ familiar in exegesis from patristic days” (98). Then the spirit and vicariously the female figure is wise and nurturing, in charge of awakening the body/the male from his physically induced stupor.
 12. Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer (eds.) *The Gnostic Bible* (Shambhala, 2003), 15–16, 116.
 13. Her knowledge surpasses his simple faith, an emphasis that leads us to the Gnostic notion of knowledge serving as ultimate Truth, spirituality, and salvation. In Gnosticism, knowledge is superior to and independent of faith.
 14. “According to the *Gospel of Thomas*, the kingdom of God symbolizes a state of transformed consciousness. One enters that kingdom when one attains self-knowledge. The *Gospel of Thomas* teaches that when one

comes to know oneself, at the deepest level, one simultaneously comes to know God as the source of one's being" (Pagels 1995, 71).

15. *The Gnostic Bible*, 1–19.
16. See W. H. Schofield, "Symbolism, allegory and autobiography in the Pearl," *PMLA* 24.4 (1909): 585–675.
17. Catherine Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
18. Also known as "The Hymn of the Pearl" and "The Hymn of the Robe of Glory."
19. See Harold W. Attridge, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6 (Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing, 1992), 531.
20. See Stephen Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
21. *The Gnostic Bible*, 387.
22. Katherine Terrell, "Rethinking the 'Corse in clot': Cleanness, filth and bodily decay in *Pearl*," *Studies in Philology* 105 (2008): 429–47.
23. MED, defs. 1, 2, 4.
24. Louis Blenker notes that the poem presents three stages that are analogous to the three stages of contemplation (cogitation, meditation, contemplation) which are reminiscent of the Valentinian stages.
25. kīnd(e) (adj.), def. 1, *The Electronic Middle English Dictionary*, chief ed. Frances McSparran.
26. "Songs from the Mandaean Liturgy," *The Gnostic Bible*, p. 562.
27. Cf. Clément's *Syncope*.
28. Sullivan, *Truth and the Heretic* (The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 17–114.
29. Cf. Sullivan.
30. Spearing, "Language and its limits: The cloud of unknowing and Pearl," in *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, ed. Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden, and Roger Ellis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005).
31. Spearing, *The Gawain Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 96–170. Also see Louis Blenker, "The theological structure of *Pearl*," *Traditio* 24 (1968): 43–75.
32. This tradition begins with Pseudo-Dionysius whose *De Coelesti Hierarchia* was very influential on the Victorines. Also see for instance, John Murphy, "Meister Eckhart and the Via Negativa: Epistemology and Mystical Language," *New Blackfriars* 77.908 (1996): 458–472.
33. In the mystical vision the senses are limitations to the revelatory message whereas for the gnostics the senses, specifically hearing, serve as portals to the message of truth.
34. MED, Trouen (v.), def. 4.
35. Interestingly, the attention to "kinds of belief" is a feature of other works in this period as well, like *Piers Plowman*.
36. Not to say that it puts notions like reincarnation and miracles in a precarious position from an orthodox point of view.

37. This reference to “good men” recalls the specific reference to heretics and their followers. Sullivan claims that at times, this reference would signal one’s belonging to the sect to other members.
38. See John M. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (D. S. Brewer, 2001); John Watkins, “‘Sengeley in synglure’: *Pearl* and Late Medieval Individualism,” *Chaucer Yearbook* 2 (1995): 117–36; D. W. Robertson, “The heresy of the *Pearl*,” *MLN* 65.3 (1950): 152–5; Ann Wood, “The *Pearl*-dreamer and the ‘Hyne’ in the vineyard parable,” *Philological Quarterly* 52 (1973): 9–19.
39. Russell, on the other hand, takes the poem into the realm of humanity, claiming for the poem’s dependence upon human language and reason which would then entail a much different, noneschatological message; where the poem aims to achieve a reasonable communion with God, through simple faith and trust, which seems to recall the traditional mystical acceptance of the divine message.
40. De Man, “Shelley Disfigured,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom, et al. (New York: Continuum, 1979), 44.
41. See introduction to this chapter.
42. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron claim in their notes to the poem that the reference to “Þyse ladyes” (l. 30) may possibly be an allusion to *Le Roman de la Rose*, “where the lover is advised to conform to the manners of his mistress if he wishes to please her” (186, note to line 30).
43. A relationship based on the courtly love tradition, which moves it away from strict theology, put into practice in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*.
44. The appearance of Dame Cleanness at the beginning of this poem foreshadows her relevance in this trilogy of poems, which will further be discussed in the following section.
45. The *Gospel of Thomas*, saying 60.
46. Bloomfield, in *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse*, claims that “Patience or humility [as] the first step towards perfection” (140) since it “leads to true knowledge of oneself, which in turn enables human beings to discover God in themselves” (141).
47. Charles Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet* (New York: Twayne, 1968); A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge University Press, 1970); Malcolm Andrew, “Jonah and Christ in *Patience*,” *Modern Philology* 70.3 (1973): 230–3; F. N. M. Diekstra, “Jonah and *Patience*: The psychology of a prophet,” *English Studies* 55 (1974): 205–17; W. A. Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain-Poet* (London: Athlone, 1978); Sandra Pierson Prior, “*Patience*—beyond Apocalypse,” *Modern Philology* 83.4 (1986): 337–48; Malcolm Andrew, “The realizing imagination in late medieval English literature,” *English Studies* 2 (1995): 113–28; Lawrence M. Clopper, “The God of the *Gawain-Poet*,” *Modern Philology* 94.1 (1996): 1–18.
48. On Judaism in Christian texts also see Catherine Cox, *The Judaic Other in Dante, the Gawain Poet and Chaucer* (University Press of Florida, 2005) and Lawrence Besserman, *Biblical Exegesis, Typology and the Imagination of Chaucer*, ed. Hugh T. Keenan (New York: AMS Press, 1992).

49. MED, glīden (v.), def. 5.
50. MED, might (n.): 1. (a) supernatural power of God, a god, a devil; 3. knowledge.
51. MED, mēre (n.(3)): (a) the land along the boundary, borderland.
52. “That the sacrament of bread induces all men but a few to idolatry, for they ween that Christ’s body, that never shall out of heaven, by virtue of the priest’s word should be essentially enclosed in a little bread, that they show to the people” (Fourth Conclusion from “The Lollards’ Twelve Conclusions”).
53. “The Saviour’s physical body or that of his substitute is, from the Gnostic point of view, a decoy, a trap set for the Archons” (Filoramo, 126).
54. “The entirely orthodox idea of Mary as the flesh of Christ was suggested by William Durandu’s commentary on the mass and by the prayers of Francis of Assisi, Suso and others, who spoke of Mary as the tabernacle, the vessel, the container, the robe, the clothing of Christ” (Bynum 1992, 101).
55. Mary Carruthers claims in *The Book of Memory* that “‘The stomach of memory’ as a metaphoric model had a long run” (166). Hugo de Folieto maintained that those who “devour and digest the holy books are not ignorant because their memory does not let go of the rules for life whose meaning it can grasp” (in Carruthers, 167).
56. MED, war-lou (n.): 1. (b), (c); 2. (b); 3.
57. The Middle English *Bestiary* states that the whale stands for the devil. “Indeed, the jaws of a sea monster were used to represent hell’s mouth in the performances of the mystery cycles and appear with the same significance in the ‘doom’ paintings on church walls” (Andrew 1973, 232). Also see Henry Ansgar Kelly, “The Metamorphoses of the Eden Serpent during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” *Viator* 2.2 (1972): 301–28.
58. An idea that will be discussed more fully in the next chapter on *Cleanness*. For references on filth as heresy, see R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe* (Blackwell, 1987) and Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Penn Press, 1998).
59. In order to reiterate the significance of this gnostic residue, it is important to mention that in the mystical vision of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, meditation is perceived as an impediment to contemplation, unlike the case here.
60. MED, hēle (n.(1)): 3. (a).
61. MED, gōd (n.(2)): 1. (a); 4. (a).
62. See reference to Clément’s *Syncope* on p. 67 as another moment of passing; “a swoon of meaning” (x).
63. MED, wōn(e) (n.(2)): 1. (a); 3.; 5.
64. It is unclear whether God’s speech ends in line 523 or continues to line 527. Either way, the overall message of the poem seems to equally apply both to Jonah and the reader/listener.
65. The Lollards called each other “true men,” as part of a unique rhetoric and vocabulary, which Anne Hudson termed “Lollard Sect Vocabulary.”

66. Cf. Lady Philosophy's tattered robes.
67. See A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); David C. Fowler, "Cruxes in 'Cleanness,'" *Modern Philology* 70.4 (1973): 331–6; T. D. Kelly and J. T. Irwin, "The Meaning of *Cleanness*: Parable as effective sign," *Mediaeval Studies* 35 (1973): 232–60; Edward Wilson, *The Gawain-Poet* (Liedien: Brill, 1976), 72–112; Charlotte C. Morse, *The Patterns of Judgment in the Queste and Cleanness* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978); Doris E. Kittendorf, "*Cleanness* and the fourteenth-century *Artes Praedicandi*," *Michigan Academician* II.3 (1979): 319–30; Earl G. Schreiber, "The Structures of *Cleanness*," in *The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century*, eds. Bernard S. Levy and Paul E. Szarmach (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1981); Sandra Pierson Prior, *The Pearl Poet Revisited* (New York: Macmillan International, 1994); Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (eds.) *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (University of Exeter Press, 1996); J. K. Lecklider, *Cleanness: Structure and Meaning* (Woodbridge, UK: DS Brewer, 1997); and Amity Reading, "'The Ende of Alle Kynez Flesch': Ritual Sacrifice and Feasting in *Cleanness*," *Exemplaria* 21.3 (2009): 275–96.
68. Physical filth was also traditionally related to sexual impurity; homosexuality, bestiality, and any "unnatural" sexual conduct. Jews, lepers and heretics were grouped under the same category. See Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*.
69. pp.2 48–9.
70. See chapter I—part 1, n. 18.
71. Sight is repeatedly mentioned as an important part of the feast and gathering. Monica Brzezinski Potkay discusses the visual aspect of faith, claiming that a clean soul wouldn't seek divinity via materiality, at least as far as the poem seems to claim. "Those guests who do not gain admission to the feast are described in terms of what they see, and those images clearly keep them from the banquet" (184). But it is not the images themselves that keep them from the divine, it is the fact that they are seeking a material vision that keeps them away. ("*Cleanness* on the Question of images," *Viator* 26 (1995): 181–94.) Potkay even goes as far as to say that the poem seems to echo, albeit mildly, a Lollard suspicion against the use of images. Taking this a step further, I would argue that sight, as in seeing is believing, is a very base, quite orthodox perspective—a perspective based in materiality rather than spirituality. Thus, in accordance with this argument, those not accepted to the feast are kept away precisely because of their state of unreadiness since "spiritual sight" or in other words, donning the "robe of glory," first requires the regaining of insight.
72. Most gnostics would identify the Demiurge with the Old Testament god—in his ignorance, foolishness, wrathful, and vengeful ways. See *Against Heresies* 1:5:4; *Refutation of Heresies* 6:28; *Second Apocalypse of James* 56:20–57:3. However, that is not to say that the Valentinians had a completely negative view of the Old Testament. They claimed that

some parts were inspired by Sophia (*Against Heresies* 1:7:3; *Letter to Flora*; *Tripartite Tractate* 100:33–5).

73. Seen .6
74. See Lynn Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).
75. Gower also places such great emphasis on the sin of lust in his *Confessio Amantis*, as it will be discussed in chapter 3.
76. *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 179–80.
77. See *Pearl* lines 721–80.
78. Andrew and Waldron, note to line 581.
79. A strange occurrence, a marvel, a conundrum or a sin (MED: def. 1, 4, 7).
80. *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 131.
81. Going back and forth between passing into knowledge and moving back into ignorance.
82. MED, *manēr(ē):d* ef.1 .
83. Bynum claims in *Fragmentation and Redemption* that “it seems clear both that bodily stirrings frequently accompanied love of God in the later Middle Ages and that what bothered or delighted medieval people about such stirrings was not their exact physiological location . . . [but] whether the sensations were inspired or demonic – that is, whether they were sent by God or by the devil” (88).
84. A place of in between that heretics used to occupy, keeping vigil (Sullivan, 17–114).
85. Francis Ingledew, “Liturgy, Prophecy, and Belshazzar’s Babylon: Discourse and Meaning in *Cleanness*,” *Viator* 23 (1992): 247–80.
86. This scene is reminiscent of Jonah’s expulsion from the whale, where the notion of resurrection is problematized. The same issue occurs in this instance with regard to sacrifice.
87. MED, list (n. (1)).
88. Illnesses were traditionally grouped together with heretics, along with external defilement and internal impurity; “Heresy, like leprosy, was spread by the poisoned breath of its carrier, which infested the air and was thus enabled to attack the vitals of those who breathed it, but was also and more efficiently transmitted as a virus—that is, in seminal fluid” (Moore 1987, 6 3).
89. See Kelly and Irwin, pp. 248–9.
90. Ingledew claims in his article that the entire poem revolves around the notion of the sacrilegious, unclean priest who should be equated with the devil, drawing on Wycliffe and other works. I agree to the extent that the poem aims to showcase traditional conceptions including the church and its officials as dangerously foolish.

3 The Truth about Piers Plowman

1. Nevertheless, from 1960 onward several other scholars have attempted to produce texts that were closer to the original versions of the manuscripts,

- though the issue remains controversial as seen in Jill Mann, "The power of the alphabet: A reassessment of the relation between the A and B versions of *Piers Plowman*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 8 (1994): 21–50, and Lawrence Warner, *The Lost History of Piers Plowman: The Earliest Transmission of Langland's Work* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).
2. William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Facsimile of the Z-Text in Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Bodley 851*, ed. Charlotte Brewer and A. G. Rigg (D.S. Brewer, 1994).
 3. The evidence, slender as it may be, rests mostly on references from the manuscript held at Trinity College (MS 212). And though this has been widely accepted by most scholarship and commentators, it is not beyond dispute as shown by David C. Benson, "The Langland Myth" in *William Langland's Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays*, ed. Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith (New York: Routledge, 2001), 83–99. See also Jill Mann, "The power of the alphabet: A reassessment of the relation between the A and B versions of *Piers Plowman*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 8 (1994): 21–50; Larry Benson, "What then does Langland Mean? Authorial and textual voices in *Piers Plowman*," *YLS* 15 (2001): 3–13; and Miceal Vaughan (ed.), *Piers Plowman: The A Version* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).
 4. John M. Bowers, "Piers plowman and the police: Notes toward a history of the Wycliffite Langland," *YLS* 6 (1992): 1–50.
 5. See *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive* (The University of Michigan Press, 2000), CD-ROM, 2011; J. A. W. Bennett, *Middle English Literature* (Clarendon Press, 1986); David Lawton, "The subject of *Piers Plowman*," *YLS* 1 (1987): 1–30; Anne Middleton, "William Langland's 'Kynde Name'," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain 1380–1530* (University of California Press, 1990), 15–82, and "Langland's Lives," in *The Idea of Medieval Literature* (University of Delaware Press, 1992), 227–42; Burt Kimmelman, *The Poetics of Authorship in the Later Middle Ages* (Peter Lang, 1996); James Simpson, "The power of impropriety: Authorial naming in *Piers Plowman*," in *Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays* (Routledge, 2001), 145–65; Joseph Wittig, "'Culture Wars' and the Persona in *Piers Plowman*," *YLS* 15 (2001): 167–95; and Susan Deskis and Thomas Hill, "'The long man ys seld wys': Proverbial Characterization and Langland's Long Will," *YLS* 18 (2004): 73–9.
 6. George Kane, "The perplexities of William Langland," in *The Wisdom of Poetry* (Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), 73–89.
 7. See James Simpson, "The Power of Impropriety: Authorial Naming in *Piers Plowman*," in *William Langland's Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays* (Routledge, 2001), and David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
 8. Nicholas Watson, "Visions of inclusion: Universal salvation and vernacular theology in pre-reformation England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27.2 (1997): 154.
 9. E. Talbot Donaldson, "Langland and some scriptural quotations," in *The Wisdom of Poetry* (Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), 67–72.

10. Morton Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1962). For more scholarship on eschatology in Langland's work, see David Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory* (Arnold, 1975); Robert Adams, "Langland's Theology," in *A Companion to "Piers Plowman,"* ed. John A. Alford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 87–114; Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Reformist Apocalypticism and "Piers Plowman"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and David Aers, *Salvation and Sin: Augustine and the Fourteenth Century* (Notre Dame University Press, 2009).
11. Bloomfield argues for a "dialectical relationship between the world and the questing hero" (*Apocalypse*, 16) which posits the personal search for perfection on the backdrop of social reform and apocalypse. My argument will take a less orthodox approach by placing the narrator's personal soul-journey at the center and beyond the mystical fog of revelation.
12. See Introduction, 23.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
14. See Sarah Kelen, *Langland's Early Modern Identities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
15. Criticism on the subject started with Pamela Gradon. See also Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford, 1988), 393; David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy* (Penn State University Press, 1996); and Derek Pearsall, "Langland and Lollardy: From B to C," *YLS* 17 (2003): 7–23.
16. See Joseph Wittig, "Piers Plowman B, Passus IX–XII: Elements in the design of the inward journey," *Traditio* 28 (1972): 211–80; Britton Harwood, *"Piers Plowman" and the Problem of Belief* (University of Toronto Press, 1992).
17. Burrow, "The audience of *Piers Plowman*," *Anglia* 75 (1957): 373–87.
18. Used by Chaucer as well in his description of the Plowman in *The Canterbury Tales*. For more on social practice in late-medieval culture, see Helen Barr, *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England* (Oxford University Press, 2001).
19. See Anne Hudson, "Piers Plowman and the peasants' revolt: A problem revisited," *YLS* 8.8 (1994): 85–106 and Jill Mann, "The power of the alphabet: A reassessment of the relation between the A and the B versions of *Piers Plowman*," *YLS* 8.8 (1994): 21–50.
20. R. B. Dobson, "The Black Death of 1348–9," in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1983), 59–60.
21. Dobson, "The Black Death of 1348–9," 62–3.
22. R. B. Dobson, "The outbreak of the Revolt according to the 'Anonimalle Chronicle,'" in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 123–31.
23. The quotes used are taken from William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Parallel Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, vol. I (London and New York: Longman, 1995).
24. In other words, "there is no return to the Malvern Hills. Yet the end of his last dream does carry us back, most readers have felt, to the beginning

- of the poem... this circularity creates an effect very different from the 'endless round' of *Pearl*, in *Piers* it signifies the cycle of spiritual growth and decay which will go on until the end of time, both in individuals and in institutions" (Burrow 1971, 66).
25. Donaldson examines Langland's use of macaronic text and the way in which he applies biblical references and quotes and reverses their meaning by manipulating their syntactical ambiguity and thus skirting on the verge of orthodoxy. He takes as an example: "For Nullum malum ꝑe man mette with inpunitum / And bad Nullum bonum be irremuneratum" (B.4.143-4). Donaldson translates this into "the king should not punish those who do no evil nor reward those who do no good" (69). This idea connects to the theory in *The Virtuous Pagan* and the one encapsulated by gnosticism as well, where it does not matter what the believer does but who he is.
 26. See Robert W. Frank Jr., "The number of visions in *Piers Plowman*," *Modern Language Notes* 66.5 (1951): 309-12.
 27. *Piers*, unlike his "followers" is somewhere in between "low" labor and high spiritual authority.
 28. See John Alford, "The design of the poem," in *A Companion to Piers Plowman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 32-3.
 29. See n.37 in chapter 2.
 30. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1967), 9.
 31. The tradition of thinking of the poem as a kind of spiritual journey goes back to Joseph Wittig, "*Piers Plowman* B Passus IX-XII: Elements in the design of the inward journey," *Traditio* 28 (1972): 211-80.
 32. MED, def. 4. (a) and (b).
 33. Vitto, *The Virtuous Pagan*.
 34. Only the merchants receive this "secret" message.
 35. Saint Augustine, *Against Julian*, trans. Matthew Schumacher (New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1957), 45.
 36. *Proverbs* 24:16
 37. See Elliott, 145.
 38. MED, nīce(adj.), 1.
 39. See Kane, "The perplexities of William Langland," in *The Wisdom of Poetry*, 8 6.
 40. One of the main themes of Holy Church's Passus—Passus I, but which informs the poem in its entirety.
 41. MED, hāten(v.).
 42. Matthew 7:6.
 43. See Grover A. Zinn Jr., "Personification allegory and visions of light in Richard of St. Victor's teaching on contemplation," *UTQ* 46.3 (1977): 190-214.
 44. As depicted by Karen Sullivan in her book.
 45. This notion appears in the lines of the Mandaeen poem, "Song of the Poor Man": "I didn't ask for it. I didn't want to come / to this awful place.

/ By my strength and light I suffer through / this misery. By illumination and praise. / I remain a stranger in their world.” From “Mandaean Sources,” in *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, vol. 2, ed. Werner Foerster and trans. Kurt Rudolph (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

46. MED, *fōrmen* (v.): defs. 1, 5.
47. *list(e)* (n.(1)).
48. *recchen* (v.(2)).
49. MED, *conjūren* (v.): defs. 1, 2.
50. The words “sorcerie” and “conjured” emphasize Will’s orthodoxly influenced fear of the unknown.
51. See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Bynum also calls attention to “artistic depictions that suggest another sex for Christ’s body—depictions that suggest that Christ’s flesh was sometimes seen as female . . . Theologians did not discuss Christ as a sexual male; they did discuss Jesus as mother” (*Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 82).
52. A popular medieval tale appearing in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*.
53. See Mary Teresa Tavormina, *Kindly Similitude: Marriage and Family in “Piers Plowman”* (Boydell and Brewer, 1995) and Andrew Galloway, “Intellectual pregnancy, metaphysical femininity, and the social doctrine of the trinity in *Piers Plowman*,” *YLS* 12 (1998): 117–52.
54. Sophie Page, *Astrology in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 7–49, (emphasis added, 12).
55. For more on Langland’s riddling tradition see Schmidt’s commentary in *Piers Plowman: A Parallel Text Edition of the A, B, C, and Z versions*, vol. 2: *Introduction, Textual Notes, Commentary, Bibliography and Indexical Glossary* (London: Longman Group United Kingdom, 1995).
56. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse* (Rutgers University Press, 1962).
57. See Justice’s reading of the poem’s reaction to 1381 in *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), where he claims that “by refusing to represent the rising in narrative, Langland refused any attempt to contain it by explanatory cause and effect, and therefore by closure” (240).

4 Gower’s Bower of Bliss: A Successful Passing into Hermetic Gnosis

1. For more on the unique style of the *Confessio* and the intermittent use of Latin verse and prose on the margins of the “simpler” English, as Robert Yeager puts it, see Robert Yeager, “‘Oure Englishshe’ and everyone’s Latin: The Fasciculus Morum and Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” *South Atlantic Review* 46.4 (1981): 41–53; Yeager, “English, Latin, and the text as ‘Other’: The Page as sign in the work of John Gower,” *Text* 3 (1987): 251–67; and Derek Pearsall, “Gower’s Latin in the *Confessio Amantis*,” in *Latin and Vernacular: Studies in Late-Medieval Texts and Manuscripts*, ed. A. J. Minnis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1989), 13–25.

2. On the power of women in the *Confessio* and their authoritative stance, see Amanda Leff, "Writing, gender, and power in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Exemplaria* 20.1 (2008): 28–47. Leff hints at the possibility that Gower's use of female writing has the potential to "destabilize the social hierarchy" but more concretely, "to reinforce the transformative power of writing itself" (43).
3. See Winthrop Wetherbee, "Classical and Boethian Tradition in the *Confessio Amantis*," in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Sian Echard (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 181–96; Russell A. Peck, "The politics and psychology of governance in Gower: Ideas of kingship and real kings," in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Sian Echard (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 215–38; William Robins, "Romance, exemplum, and the subject of the *Confessio Amantis*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 19 (1997): 157–81; Kurt Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992); and Robert Yeager, "John Gower and the uses of allusion," *Res Publica Litterarum* 7 (1984): 201–13.
4. See Paul Clogan, "From complaint to satire: The art of the *Confessio Amantis*," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 4 (1973): 217–22; Russell Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's Confessio Amantis*, ed. John Gardner (Southern Illinois University Press, 1978); Robert Yeager, "Pax Poetica: On the pacifism of Chaucer and Gower," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 9 (1987): 97–121; and Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990).
5. Amans as a representative of "Everyman" and Gower as the individual, enlightened "good man."
6. See Russell A. Peck, "John Gower," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Jeffrey Helterman and Jerome Mitchell (Detroit: Gale Research, 1994), 178–90; George Campbell Macaulay, "John Gower," in *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), 133–55. Macaulay argued that each of the "recensions" represented a different stage of authorial revision. He dated the first to 1390, the second c. 1392, and the third to 1393. He also added that certain textual changes—the omission of the reference to Richard II and to Gower's contemporary poet and "friend," as well as the addition of a dedication to Henry of Derby—indicated a change in Gower's political affiliation. However, this has been disputed by Nicholson and Pearsall. Also see Joyce Coleman, "'A Bok for King Richardes Sake': Royal Patronage, the *Confessio*, and the *Legend of Good Women*," in *On John Gower: Essays at the Millenium*, ed. Robert Yeager (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 2007), 104–21. Coleman argues for restoring the first "recension's" eminence as well as Richard II's contribution to the poem's inception.
7. Alastair J. Minnis, "Moral Gower and medieval literary theory," in *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments*, ed. A. J. Minnis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), 50–78.

8. Unlike *Piers Plowman's* macaronic structure, which includes the Latin, Gower's glossing pushes it to the "margins."
9. For more on possible intended audience, see Joyce Coleman, "Lay Readers and Hard Latin: How Gower may have intended the *Confessio Amantis* to be read," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002): 209–35.
10. Derek Pearsall, "Gower's Narrative Art," *PMLA* 81.7 (1966): 476.
11. Steele Nowlin, "Narratives of incest and incestuous narratives: Memory, process, and the *Confessio Amantis's* 'Middel Weie'," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35 (2005): 217–44.
12. For more on exempla, see Kurt Olsson, "Rhetoric, John Gower, and the late medieval exemplum," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 8 (1977): 185–200 and R. F. Yeager, "John Gower and the exemplum form: Tale models in the *Confessio Amantis*," *Mediaevalia* 8 (1982): 307–35.
13. All subsequent quotes are taken from John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 3 vols, ed. Russell A. Peck, with Latin translations by Andrew Galloway (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2006).
14. I will be using Gower in reference to his narrator for convenience's sake.
15. MED,d ef.1 (b).
16. See Andrew Galloway, "Gower in his most learned role and the Peasants' revolt of 1381," *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993): 329–47.
17. See n.37 in chapter 2.
18. MED,d ef.2 .
19. See Andrew Galloway, "Gower in his most learned role and the Peasants' revolt of 1381," *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993): 329–47; Galloway, "Reassessing Gower's dream visions," in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, John Hines, and R. F. Yeager (D.S. Brewer, 2010) and Robert Epstein, "London, Southwark, Westminster: Gower's urban contexts," in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (D.S. Brewer, 2004).
20. MED, delven (v): def. 3.
21. In Hebrews 5:4 Aaron is mentioned as chosen by God and thus called to perfection.
22. Some of the earliest Judaeo-Christian writings of complex and mixed origin. Early references include Origen and Eusebius.
23. An early Jewish Christian sect that emphasized poverty and whose general tenets were based in Gnosticism. The Church Fathers claimed they used the *Gospel of Matthew*, *The Circuits of Peter* and *The Acts of the Apostles*. For more on this issue see Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds.) *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Paul Mohr Verlag, 2003) and Joan Taylor, "The phenomenon of early Jewish-Christianity: Reality or scholarly invention?" *Vigiliae Christianae* 44.4 (1990): 313–34.
24. See *Confessio Amantis*, edited by Russell Peck, note to line 196.
25. Recalling the pseudo-Dionysian writings which "though the Dionysian orders are not, strictly speaking, a cosmological religion, there is something in the whole idea of orders set out in this fashion which recalls the

- gnostic religion of the world, or religious experience in the setting of the cosmic orders. R. Roques has drawn attention to the parallels between the Dionysian mysticism and gnosticism, particularly of the Hermetic type, and has suggested a possible influence of Hermetism on the hierarchies" (Yates, 118).
26. For more on Gower's ethics see J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004).
 27. According to Gnostic tradition, the serpent is revered as the wisest animal that was in Paradise. The serpent instructs Eve to taste the apple of the Tree of Knowledge. See "The Testimony of Truth" in *NHL*, 234–9.
 28. Self-love was commonly associated with a kind of incest by medieval writers.
 29. James T. Bratcher, "Gower's 'Tale of Three Questions' and 'The Clever Peasant Girl' folktale," *Notes and Queries* 53.4 (2006): 409–10.
 30. "The Effendi and the Riddles" retold by Josepha Sherman in *Trickster Tales: Forty Folk Tales from around the World* (August House, 2005), 68–70.
 31. Sufism is a doctrine of the inner, esoteric dimension of Islam and resembles Gnosticism in many ways, which again emphasizes the percolation of Eastern traditions into Western thought and especially the lack of insularity of English literature at the time.
 32. See Book 4, on "The First Alchemists."
 33. See note 234ff. to Latin Marginalia in *Confessio Amantis*, vol. 2, edited by Peck.
 34. See Yeager on English as the "middel weie" and the text as an engagement between "self" and "other."
 35. See note to lines 745–50 in *Confessio Amantis*, edited by Peck.
 36. Peck 1980, xxi.
 37. Yates claims that "Bruno's magical Hermetism offered to sub-Catholics, discontented intelligentsia, and other secretly dissatisfied elements in Elizabethan society, a new outlet, quite independent of the hated Spanish Catholicism, for their secret yearnings" (233–4). In this instance, Hermeticism indeed appears to be the perfect cure for the growing problem of fallacious forgetfulness.
 38. Walter Scott (ed.) *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious and Philosophical Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus* (Boston: Shambhala, 1985), 33.
 39. "The mirror for princes supposedly composed by Aristotle at the request of his pupil Alexander the Great" (Staley, 121).
 40. Yeager argues in *John Gower's Poetic* that CA was in many ways intended to offer wisdom for a ruler. He claims, however, that Gower "distinguished carefully between knowledge possessed to serve others, and when it simply enhanced reputation" (142). This distinction may be taken further into the relation I have established between spiritual, secret knowledge that may ultimately serve others by serving the self, and knowledge of the many that is earthly, superficial, and essentially faulty.

41. Brian P. Copenhaver (ed.). *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
42. Stephan A. Hoeller, "On the trail of the winged god," *Gnosis: A Journal of Western Inner Traditions* 40 (1996): 20–8.
43. See *Confessio Amantis*, edited by Peck, note to 7.5307.
44. For a discussion on Gower's mirroring technique, see Andrea Schutz, "Absent and present images: Mirrors and mirroring in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *The Chaucer Review* 34.1 (1999): 107–24.

**Conclusion Knowing the Christian Middle Ages:
A Gnostic Journey into the Self**

1. The intellect and imagination must at one point be abandoned in order to achieve the state of contemplation in the apophatic method [from "Introduction," in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Patrick J. Gallacher (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997)].

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