THE MEDIEVAL PERSON: CONCEPTS OF SELF AND PERSONHOOD

IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE

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In a debate significant for both its stakes and longevity, medievalists and early modernists have engaged the question of selfhood and argued about its ostensible "beginning." Scholars on both sides have imagined the medieval concept of selfhood as fundamentally shaped by political systems of national violence or various programs of social control. Within this imagination, the critical concept of selfhood has assumed its modern definition, which equates selfhood to "agency" and associates the self with choice, mobility, and power. Such assumptions perpetuate the notion that medieval selfhood was underdeveloped for those with limited social power and implicitly value white, male, and classed subjects as "selves." In this way, our criticism has reinforced modern biases via scholarship, and we have imposed these values upon the past. Additionally, these critical assumptions have led to problematic views about medieval conceptions of the "person" in conjunction with race, gender, and key medieval social institutions, especially the church.

This dissertation confronts these assumptions and shows how three late medieval literary texts instead define selfhood and identity in accordance with the Christian concept of a relational and Trinitarian God: for them, relationship with God and neighbor is the basic frame of the self. In the morality play of *Wisdom*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, I show how medieval writers are concerned with the evolution of the self toward perfection through their conceptions of charity, “transcendent autonomy,” and conversion.

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It is the Light that charity knows.

—St. Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.10

Non nisi te domine.

— St. Thomas Aquinas

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God.[1]

Context and Methodology of the Present Argument

In a debate significant for both its stakes and longevity, medievalists and early modernists have engaged the question of selfhood, working to understand both its ostensible "beginning" and its range of definitions. In response to Jacob Burckhardt's 19th century claim that the concept of selfhood originated in the European Renaissance, medievalists have proposed various interpretations of the self, arguing that the concept originated much earlier and that it had various legitimate meanings.[2] The debate itself continues as an "auto-legitimizing" process that seeks to validate not only medieval people as selves, but also scholarship of the Middle Ages.[3] David Aers, Anthony Lowe, Lee Patterson, Peter Haidu, and others have argued that medieval selfhood was fundamentally shaped by the influence of communities, formed as a result of political systems of national violence, or manipulated by various programs of religious and social control.[4] Echoing Haidu's argument that "the millennial interregnum of the medieval

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[1] Irenaeus of Lyon, *Contra Haeres*. IV. *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*. Translated and Annotated by Dominic J. Unger, OFM CAP. New York: The Newman Press, 2012. Ch. 20, 7.

[2] Jacob Burckhardt. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. New York: Penguin, 1990.

[3] I borrow the term "auto-legitimizing" from Cole and Smith's Introduction to *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, 23.

[4] David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1988; Anthony Low, *Aspects of Subjectivity: Society and Individuality from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare and Milton*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2003; Patterson, Lee. *Chaucer and the Subject of History*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, esp. "The Subject of Confession," 367-421; Peter Haidu, *The Subject, Medieval/Modern*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. For instance, Haidu argues that

period *is* the revolution which cast the die of futures we tremble in," Andrew Cole and D. Vance Smith assert that "medieval modes are sustained within modernity [and] no theory of modernity can be complete or legitimate without a constant reckoning with the 'medieval'."[5] Haidu's analysis of the medieval subject and Cole and Smith's study of periodization are entangled in the process of legitimization.

Likewise, these are critiques of periodicity and the desire for legitimacy are wrapped up in claims of identity. Cole and Smith's "rejection" of Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* summarizes the problem:

> For Blumenberg, a radical shift takes place between the Middle Ages, with its emphasis on sacred ontology and the divine presence infusing the intelligible world, and modernity, with its new modes of inquiry, self-reflection, and human agency via epistemology, hypothesis, new scientific cosmologies, and the processes of rationalization that render nature as inherently knowable in its laws. Indeed, this radical shift…is most evident in the rise of the new person, the self-determined, free subject of modernity.[6]

For Blumenberg in 1983, as for Burkhardt in 1878, the question of the self is intimately tied to modernity. The "shift" is most evident in the "rise of the new person" because in this scheme, modern epistemologies of the world *are* epistemologies of the self and vice versa.

Blumenberg's argument is predated only slightly by Stephen Greenblatt's 1980 landmark study, *Renaissance Self Fashioning*, which demonstrates this scheme in literary criticism. Greenblatt observes in the sixteenth century "an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process," and he shows

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"'Literary' texts and historical practices from the Middle Ages participate in the cultural invention of the subject as part of the political invention of the state."

[5] Haidu, Peter. *The Subject: Medieval/Modern*, 2.

[6] *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages*, 3.

that a new prevalence of the term *fashioning* "seems to come into wide currency as a way of designating the forming of a self."[7] Greenblatt's highly influential argument has shaped critical definitions of selfhood in early modern and medieval studies for the last 39 years, and the terms of the debate remain centered within his framework and methodology.[8] When critics discuss Margery Kempe's "agency" as an outspoken woman in the Middle Ages, for example, they assume Greenblatt's terms "encounter" and "achievement of identity" as evidence of her medieval selfhood.[9]

In his preface to the second edition, Greenblatt clarifies that his argument, like its subject, was a result of its own historical context and influence. Greenblatt names Foucault's ideas as a clear inspiration for his thought about selfhood. In more recent years, critics such as Laura Varnam also make the connection explicit by using Foucault's terminology—"technologies of the self"—to explain the mechanics of Greenblatt's method.[10] With Foucault, Greenblatt's work remains foundational for the terms we use to understand the concept of medieval selfhood via the notion of this modern self.

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[7] *Renaissance Self Fashioning*, 2-3.

[8] Ibid. Greenblatt's sustained influence in this debate is also evidenced by the release of a second edition of the book in 2005. I discuss these ideas in more detail as they pertain to each chapter, with the added analysis of several other scholars' similar ideas, especially in chapter 2.

[9] See, for example, Riddy, Felicity, "Text and Self in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*. Ed by Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton. University of Notre Dame Press, 2005, 437. See also Lynn Staley's caution against such framing in "Introduction," *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Edited by Lynn Staley. Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS, 1996, 8. I would argue that when we articulate (and value) Margery's agency in terms that uphold this paradigm, especially the measures by which identity is "successfully achieved," we ourselves impose its limits upon her. A critical history that views Margery's narrative as *manipulative* or as the operation of an *ulterior motive*—even a motive resistant to patriarchy, clericalism, and misogyny—is still patriarchal because it adopts misogynist terms and limits the possibilities for interpretation of a specifically female text. It is no small matter that these limits cooperate with misogynist views of women active in both the Middle Ages and our present day.

[10] Laura Varnam, "The Crucifix, the Pieta, and the Female Mystic: Devotional Objects and Performative Identity in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 41.2 (2015).

A significant line of argument in this dissertation shows how medievalists have accepted this foundation uncritically and presses the limits of this critical bias. Having accepted Greenblatt's framework of "self-fashioning" as wholly applicable to the medieval paradigm, we have articulated a definition of self that equates self- and personhood to *agency* and modern notions of freedom. The ideal of selfhood is constructed through choice and power. This is the pattern Greenblatt observes among the subjects of his case studies for whom "self-fashioning occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien," through which the "alien" asserts agency in the face of power. These writers thereby "fashion" a self in resistance to or competition with authority. Such fashioning is an "achievement of identity," which "always contains…the signs of its own subversion or loss."[11] The assumption that selfhood correlates with agency, "achievement," and competition implicitly values the subject's power, even if associated with loss.[12] Without this power, the self remains subject *to* authority. Yet such assumptions applied to *medieval* subjects perpetuate the notion that medieval selfhood was underdeveloped for those with limited social power and implicitly value white, male, and classed subjects as "selves."

In this way, our criticism has reinforced modern biases and imposed modern values upon the past. We have re-entrenched a rupture between medieval and modern because we have privileged modern definitions of selfhood in our analyses of medieval selves. This dissertation upholds Cole and Smith's critique of this presentism first by articulating how medieval conceptions of self and personhood have already been

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[11] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self Fashioning*, 2-3.

[12] Ibid., 9.

established on their own terms according to different values and second, by illustrating a path of continuity for those terms into the present age.

As Cole and Smith argue, medieval selfhood is intimately bound up with the future: "to be medieval is to posit a future in the very act of self-recognition, to offer a memory or memorial to a future that will be recognized at a time and place not yet known."[13] Indeed, Augustine, "who shaped medieval thought as no one else did," articulates this argument in his *Confessions*:

> The power of the memory is great, O Lord. It is awe-inspiring in its profound and incalculable complexity. Yet it is my mind: it is my self. What, then, am I, my God? What is my nature? A life that is ever varying, full of change, and of immense power…This is the great force of life in living man, mortal though he is![14]

For Augustine, memory reminds the self of its being—and all being. It is not only in the mind, but the memory is the self, a "force of life," that recognizes God/Being within itself. Augustine cannot know what he is without the past he remembers. Nor, I argue, can we. Despite modern resistance to this "logical consequence" of memory, the medieval concept of self, as Cole and Smith suggest, "adds historical substance—memory—to the present."[15] That is to say, even while the medieval conception of self is fundamentally different, its relationship to the modern must be one of continuity, not rupture.

In the same three decades that *Renaissance Self Fashioning* came to prominence in studies in literary selfhood, the theological and philosophical movement of Christian

[13] *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages*, 2010, 3.

[14] Spade, Paul Vincent. "Medieval Philosophy." In *The Oxford Illustrated History of Philosophy*. Edited by Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994. 57; Augustine, *Confessions*, X.17.

[15] *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages*, 2010, 6, 19. Cole and Smith cite Foucault as one voice of resistance, 6.

personalism developed from a point of view of continuity between periods. Jan Bengtsson shows that the movement has a long history with several iterations that stem from the late eighteenth century, which coincides with Burkhardt's now infamous claims.[16] Then, in the latter half of the 20th century—that is, at the same time Greenblatt and Foucault came to the fore in literary and cultural studies—Christian personalism took up its roots in Augustine, "the first personalist," and in Aquinas, who "reinterprets Boethius' definition [of person]…in order to present a definition of the person."[17] As a development from classical and medieval philosophy, it witnesses to the legitimacy of these early definitions of self and personhood as well as their continued relevance. This is a truly interdisciplinary movement; Christian personalism draws on the work of philosophers and theologians as well as cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology, to respond to ontological questions of the human person and the concept of selfhood.

Invigorated by the thought of Karol Wojtyla, Deitrich von Hildebrand, Jean-Luc Marion, John Zizioulas, W. Norris Clarke, John Crosby, and others, Christian personalism develops "a comprehensive view of personal selfhood" from its classical and medieval foundations that addresses "those aspects of personal being that seem to stand in contradiction to selfhood, such as interpersonal communion, contingent existence, and

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[16] Bengtsson, Jan Olof. *The Worldview of Personalism: Origins and Early Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. I will not rehearse that history here, as other scholars have reviewed it. In addition to Bengtsson, see De Tavernier, Johan, "The Historical Roots of Personalism," *Ethical Perspectives*, 362-92. 16.3 (2009).

[17] Tavernier, Johan, "The Historical Roots of Personalism," 362-63. The five characteristics are: "(1) substance—excluding accidents; (2) completeness—it forms a complete nature; (3) *per se subsistens*—the person is *sui generis*, exists in him/herself and for her/himself, the ultimate subject of his/her nature and acts; (4) *separata ab aliis*—excluding the universal; (5) *rationalis naturae*—excluding all non-intellectual life and non-living forms," 363.

dependency on God (theonomy)."[18] Distilling notions like "the individual," "self," "human nature," and "the soul" into the term *person*, Christian personalism both encompasses and qualifies them. As John Crosby explains, it views the person as at once independent and autonomous and dependent and interpersonal.[19] These seeming contradictions "are in fact grounded in selfhood, [and] selfhood is grounded in them, [and] they serve to specify the exact sense of human selfhood."[20] Personalism proposes a selfhood grounded in memory, yet transcendent of periodizing boundaries.

In this dissertation, I examine three well-known medieval texts: the morality play of *Wisdom*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I explain how these texts present a view of human selfhood founded in Augustinian and Thomist ontological thought. The method of inquiry for this dissertation is thus theological and philosophical as well as literary. I investigate ontological and theological questions that emerge from the text as they pertain to the notion of selfhood. I do not formally claim that the above three texts can be interpreted according to the modern philosophical or theological paradigm of Christian personalism. I endeavor to remain sensitive to the dangers of presentism and anachronistic readings. However, insofar as the established research shows that each of these texts has theological bases in Augustinian or Thomist thought, the texts themselves draw upon and participate in these shared roots of Christian personalist philosophy. My dissertation does not apply personalism as an interpretive key; rather it shows how Christian personalism offers useful terms for

[18] Crosby, John, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 2-3. Other theorists whose work contributes to this line of inquiry include Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Maritain, Sarah Coakley, and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 2.

articulating the sense of relationality and simultaneity at the heart of medieval selfhood. I use terms from personalist philosophy only when the text shows how that term develops from its Augustinian or Thomist context of thought.

The Argument

> *From the fact that the human being is a member of the Church, he becomes an 'image of God,' he exists as God Himself exists, he takes on God's 'way of being.' This way of being is not a moral attainment, something that man* accomplishes. *It is a way of* relationship *with the world, with other people and with God, and event of* communion*, and that is why it cannot be realized as the achievement of an* individual*, but only as an* ecclesial *fact.*[21]

The full argument of this dissertation extends beyond critical problems of framing to investigate a medieval alternative paradigm of the self. I show how medieval writers view selfhood as an onto-theological category, rather than an "identity." I also examine their expressions of *self-formation* and *communion* as ideals of selfhood, even while they recognize the benefits of power and choice for personal gain in social negotiations. My dissertation demonstrates that medieval writers recognized the value of the self as intrinsic—ontologically *given* and giving in imitation of the Incarnate Christ. As Cecelia Hatt writes of the *Gawain* poet, these medieval writers "evidently understand art as a formalized sign of the reciprocity inherent in createdness."[22] They understood that the soul is fully itself when it achieves its proper end, reestablishment in its original likeness to God. Finally, I show how these texts define self and personhood in terms of the soul's

[21] John Zizioulas. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993. 15.
[22] Cecelia Hatt, *God and the Gawain Poet: Theology and Genre in* Pearl, Cleanness, Patience *and* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2015, 2.

conformity to the persons of the Trinity, as participants in the divine life rather than as its competitors.

For the medieval person, knowledge of God's selfhood through Augustine or Aquinas provides understanding for human selfhood and all other ethical and spiritual goods, which flow from their similitude. So, although recent critical discussion of selfhood tends to ignore or malign medieval religious paradigms and values as mechanisms of institutional power, these texts insist upon the legitimacy and seriousness of religious and theological considerations for our understanding of medieval selfhood.

The centerpiece of the project analyzes the "doctryne of charite" in the fifteenth century morality play, *Wisdom*. The drama illustrates a soul's path toward self-knowledge and responds to contemporary criticism of orthodox doctrine and ritual. I show how *Wisdom* employs a longstanding orthodox response to heresy through its reframing of theology, doctrine, and ritual under the ontological truth of God's selfhood. Insisting that all theological and doctrinal truth flow from God's selfhood, the play meets Lollard criticism with Augustinian ontology, using it to both reestablish ontological truth as "soveren" and to establish a theological selfhood of the soul.[23] The play argues that, properly understood, selfhood manifests in the soul's reformation to its original likeness to God through self-giving love (charity). I further advance the argument, developing the connection between the play's onto-theology of penance and charity. I show how the protagonist, Anima (Soul), becomes more a self as she gives way to the mutual and relational self-giving that marks a proper love of God. In this first chapter, a dialectical

[23] The term "Lollard" refers to the followers of John Wycliffe, a proto-protestant who advocated for reform in the medieval church. His views, which preceded Luther's in philosophical content, were considered heretical by the official institutional church.

selfhood emerges in which the self constantly negotiates between its original likeness to God and its fallen state.

To better access the experience and implications of a dialectical selfhood, I examine in the beginning of Chapter Two the reason that, for a modern audience, the notion of *formation* connotes subjection and self-suppression, while for Margery Kempe, as for the *Wisdom* writer, formation leads to freedom. Specifically, for Margery, self-formation is the *antidote* to self-fashioning and marks freedom from a slavery to sin. In fact, Margery's "power to control identity" does not depend on an "achieved identity."[24] Rather, her power depends on a willing participation in the personalist concept of "transcendent autonomy," which marks the self's decision to conform to its *true* nature.[25] What Greenblatt calls a "loss" of self is, for Margery, a willed gain of the good; the struggle for identity is not to "achieve" it, but to return to it. Margery's ever-developing negotiations between her earthly society and "heavenly bliss" affirm that God's plan is non-competitive with human thriving.

In *Gawain and the Green Knight,* we encounter a third expression of selfhood based on the same ontological paradigm. However, we shall see that this poem reflects a Thomist sense of "personal" being, through which *actus humanus* (human action) "engages the intelligence and freedom of the person" to reveal what he is. [26] Here, selfhood is grounded in Aquinas' notion of a divine *persona*, which is revealed through acts which accord to the dignity of personal being. As Karol Wojtyla explains, we find

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[24] *Renaissance Self Fashioning*, 1, 9.

[25] For "transcendent autonomy," see Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 2.

[26] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, qq. 6ff; Buttiglione, Rocco, *Karol Wojtyla: The Thought of the Man who Became Pope John Paul II*, trans. Paolo Guietti and Francesca Murphy (Cambridge: Willaim B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 119.

Aquinas' discussions of *persona* "mainly in his treatises on the Trinity and Incarnation" because *persona* is first a category of God's being. [27] Aquinas' *persona* reflects Augustine's sense of God as reality in that God's personal being remains the basis for human personal being. From this premise, I show how Gawain and his hosts engage in a series of depersonalizing acts, which render Gawain susceptible to sin, and degrade his personhood.

Throughout this dissertation, but explicitly in the second and third chapters, my analysis is inflected by the late 14th century poem, *Pearl*, which anticipates the theo-philosophical arguments of Christian personalism. It is a sublime and disorienting meditation which recalls the speaker and reader alike to the ultimate Good, the marriage of the soul to Christ in heaven. Through a poetic re-telling of Matthew's account of the laborers in God's field, the Pearl urges the speaker to consider his ontological origin in God and his duty to re-align his selfhood with it. *Pearl* claims that the human soul has intrinsic value, specifically without power or agency.

My research makes the case that medievalists must attend to the theological and philosophical underpinnings of medieval conceptions of selfhood. Scholarship must look beyond the *defense* of medieval selfhood and into the realm of positive claims for its legitimacy, taking its concept of selfhood on its own terms and exploring its potential social consequences. This understanding of the human person has increasingly significant implications in other humanistic fields, such as disability studies, critical race studies, and women's studies because it offers useful terms for theorizing an alternative paradigm that

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[27] Wojtyla, "Thomistic Personalism," *Person and Community: Selected Essays*. Trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM. In Catholic Thought from Lublin, vol. 4. Ed by Andrew N. Woznicki. (New York: Lang, 1993), 166.

regards human value as intrinsic and non-dependent on capitalistic production or social competition.

In a 2016 keynote address at the annual conference of the Medieval Association of the Pacific, Zrinka Stahuljak demonstrated the potential of the human imagination to create future possibilities and explained how such imaginative possibilities create real social change.[28] In that spirit, my research shows how a recovery of this medieval conception of selfhood, with its placement of value upon the givenness of the human person, provides an opportunity for us to re-imagine the modern self. In this imaginative space, we might view the human person as worth more than their power or agency, and recognize instead that each is ontologically and intrinsically valuable.

[28] Zrinka Stahuljak, "On the Medieval Potential," Keynote Presentation, Medieval Association of the Pacific. 17 March, 2017. Loyola Marymount University.

CHAPTER II

"WAT YS A SOULL?": ONTOLOGICAL SELFHOOD IN THE MORALITY PLAY OF *WISDOM*

"For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."[29]

As many were astonished at him—his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men.[30]

The fifteenth century morality play, *Wisdom*, examines the soul's salvation via dramatic events structured, as David Klausner notes, in a "sequence of temptation, fall, and redemption."[31] Its strategy for conveying the sequence of the moral life is common to morality plays, but as Eugene Hill argued decades ago, there is a curious difference between *Wisdom* and other plays in its genre: certain "standard features of the morality form are excluded from Wisdom by the very tight focus of the poet's attention."[32] For Hill, "the point at issue is…the context of thought, Augustinian or Scholastic, within which the play is properly to be interpreted."[33] The distinction is significant, he argues, because "context of thought" has direct bearing on the play's "psychology." Scholarly consensus seems to have finally agreed with Hill's Augustinian interpretation and has recently taken new directions as a result. For example, Julie Paulson's recent work shows that the play's Augustinian sources and their framing of the penitential ritual are central

[29] Heb 4:15

[30] Is. 52:14

[31] Klausner, David. "Introduction." *Two Moral Interludes: The Pride of Life and Wisdom*. Middle English Texts Series. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2009. All quotations from the play come from Klausner's edition. See also Eugene D. Hill, "The Trinitarian Allegory of the Moral Play of Wisdom," *Modern Philology* 73 (1975), 121. Hill offers a helpful overview of early criticism of the play, in which he explains that critics find it "different."

[32] Hill, "The Trinitarian Allegory," 122.

[33] Ibid., 121.

to its strategic response to Lollardy.[34] Other research on *Wisdom* has been meaningful to our understanding of ritual, mysticism, and the interaction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, as well as the concept of drama in the period.[35]

The outcome of Hill's argument for *Wisdom*'s Augustinian context has been fruitful, but a deeper question lies behind his and other inquiries about context, especially those which point up the striking, and yet unnamed, "difference" between *Wisdom* and the other morality plays. At this point in the trajectory of scholarship on *Wisdom*, I propose to return to Hill's directive, to engage that Augustinian "context of thought" toward a better understanding of the play's Trinitarian "psychology." [36] I argue that this psychology, or "the very tight focus of the poet's attention," in fact expresses a medieval ontological paradigm significant to our understanding of the medieval concept of selfhood. Ultimately, the difference in *Wisdom*'s "characters, its structure, and its theological content" reveals a radically different educational objective.[37]

Specifically, while *Wisdom* shares the conventional "sequence of temptation, fall, and redemption" with its counterpart plays, its didactic focus diverges from *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Mankind*, *Everyman*, and *The Pride of Life*. In these other morality plays, the sequencing teaches the viewer to avoid sin or at least to repent of it after an inevitable fall. However, in *Wisdom*, the "typical structure" instead expresses the ontological

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[34] Paulson, Julie. "A Theater of the Soul's Interior: Contemplative Literature and Penitential Education in the Morality Play Wisdom." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 253-83. 38 (2008).

[35] See, for example, Riehle, Wolfgang, *The Secret Within: Hermits, Recluses, and Spiritual Outsiders in Medieval England*. Translated by. Charity Scott-Stokes. New York: Cornell University Press, 2014, esp 290-92, and Gibson, Gail McMurray, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

[36] Hill, "The Trinitarian Allegory," 121.

[37] Klausner, "Introduction."

mechanisms of sin and mercy or, in other words, how sin works within the soul, whose being and identity are grounded on a relationship of likeness to God. As a result, rather than merely "confirm and celebrate" orthodox doctrine, *Wisdom* educates the audience about sin and mercy through rigorous engagement with the philosophical principles of Augustinian selfhood.[38]

Within an Augustinian context of thought, penance is self-educative in that it literally re-constitutes the self through the soul's return to God's likeness. With Augustine, the playwright understands sin as a category of being—actually a non-being—rather than a vice. And, likewise, selfhood has less to do with active claims for identity than with the ontological category of likeness to God. So, while Paulson rightly argues that the play responds to Lollard heresy by emphasizing the self-educative practice of sacramental penance, I would extend the idea to center upon the playwright's understanding of the mechanism of sin within the soul, which is grounded in the ontological view I shall investigate here.[39] My critical investigation of that context of thought clarifies why Anima is played by multiple actors and precisely how the playwright responds to the social and political realities of the time during which this play was produced.

I argue that the play is self-aware of its ontological argument, which assumes that salvation and redemption depend on an Augustinian ontological perspective of God and the soul. The play's conception of being and reality are inextricably tied to a theology of Christ's gift of himself to the soul, "graunted" through his merciful charity. Under this

[38] King, Pamela. "The Morality Plays." *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theater*. Edited by Richard Beadle. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994, 242.

[39] See Paulson, "A Theater of the Soul's Interior," 256-57.

rubric, the play argues that God's selfhood and the soul's "knowynge" of it are ultimately questions of onto-theological knowledge based in the nature of Trinitarian self-giving. The soul's identity *is* its formation to the Trinitarian nature, therefore, and it depends upon the soul's grasp of this ontological personhood. Concerned more with what the soul is than how it should behave, *Wisdom* establishes and develops an Augustinian ontology of the soul based, first and foremost, on a proper understanding of God's selfhood.

Wysdom's Ontology of the Godhead

To arrive at an ontology of the self, Wysdom, the eponymous character representing Christ, employs a rhetorical strategy through which he constantly reframes Anima's inquiry in an attempt to engage his more fundamental questions. Negotiating rhetorical control of Anima's interview through this reframing, he ultimately steers the conversation to conform to his vision of reality. In the process, Wysdom presents a two-fold argument that acknowledges Anima's desire for knowledge of the Godhead, but develops the subject on his terms. Specifically, while Anima is concerned with an epistemological question—"How may I have knowynge/ of thi Godhede incomprehensyble?"—Wysdom repeatedly redirects her line of inquiry toward an ontological inquiry: "wat ys a soul?"[40]

I will briefly sketch each part of the argument and then explain its implications in closer detail. Wysdom's initial argument meets her epistemological concern: Anima can have knowledge of the Godhead "by knowynge" herself. He explains that self-knowledge can offer a true—albeit partial—understanding of God: "by knowynge of yoursylff…the

[40] *Wisdom*, l. 94.

more veryly ye shall God knowe."[41] Yet here, knowledge is not an end, but a means; knowledge of God leads to a purpose beyond knowledge itself. Over and again, Wysdom argues that knowing God is less a question of doctrinal knowledge, the "scolys of [his] dyvynyte," and more a question of understanding his being.[42] Rather than explain ecclesiastical doctrine, Wysdom consistently refocuses the dialogue on Anima's experience of what he is because, he argues, experience is the first point of knowledge.

Having specifically framed the question of being, he can make his second argument: the soul's knowledge of God is marked by intimacy rather than distance. Wysdom explains to Anima what she is in relation to him: "the ymage of Gode that all began/And not only ymage, but hys lyknes ye are."[43] He reasons that because she is the *imago dei*, she can know him by knowing herself and, moreover, this double knowledge is marked by her closeness to him, via their "lyknes." Together, Wysdom's two-fold argument makes use of the rhetorical strategy through which Augustine principally works to negotiate heretical doctrine: he reframes the ontological questions of God and soul as fundamental.[44]

According to Wysdom, Anima will require experiential knowledge in addition to intellectual "knowynge" because the fundamental issue is ontological, not

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[41] Ibid., ll. 94-98.
[42] Ibid., l. 86.

[43] Ibid., ll. 103-4.

[44] See Robert Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*. Ada, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2015, especially ch. 1-3. On *Wisdom*'s concern with heretical doctrine, see Walter K. Smart, *Some English and Latin Sources and Parallels for the Morality of* Wisdom. Menasha Wis: Banta Publishing Co, 1912, 80, and Paulson, "A Theater of the Soul's Interior," 256.

epistemological.[45] While he provides some doctrinal understanding within the opening dialogue, which speaks to Anima's intellectual desire, Wysdom insists that Anima's intellect alone will not suffice to understand this "as yt ys veryly":[46]

> The hey worthynes of my love
> Angell nor man can tell playnly;
> Yt may be felt from experyens above,
> But not spoke ne tolde as yt ys veryly.
> The godly love no creature can specyfye.[47]

Wysdom explains that knowledge of him cannot be expressed in words "veryly." Such knowledge is intimately experiential and must be "felt." At first Anima demonstrates an intuitive "felynge," which Walter Hilton describes as knowledge of God gained through the spiritual senses.[48] But neither she nor the audience can know Him "veryly" without experiencing his love.

Even while Wysdom insists upon the concept of experiential knowledge as real, or true ("very"), he argues simultaneously that such experience is not of this world; it is, rather, "felt from experyens above." In this sense, the soul's internal experience of love is

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[45] Paulson argues that the play responds to Wycliffite philosophy, which, as Ian Levy explains, "offered the possibility of epistemological certitude whereby human beings can attain through metaphysics a knowledge of the divinity and other things necessary for salvation," *John Wyclif's Theology of the Eucharist in its Medieval Context*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2014, 49. A more thorough examination of Paulson's argument follows.

[46] *Wisdom*, l. 64.

[47] Ibid., ll. 61-65.

[48] For more detail regarding what is meant by "felynge," see Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, Bk. 2, ch. 31. Hilton cites Paul's letter to the Colossians 1:9 to develop this idea. As Paul Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley note in *The Spiritual Senses: Percieving God in Western Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, both classical and medieval understandings of spiritual phenomena, were widely discussed under the linguistic frame of sensory perception. For example, Gregory LaNave shows how, "for Bonaventure, the spiritual senses are the name of a distinctive kind of experiential knowledge of God, namely, a five-fold way that he can be experienced as present," 15, and further, ch. 9. Additionally, as Gregory the Great argues, Spiritual "sight" is a "divine-human encounter," ch. 4. And finally, as Gavrilyuk and Coakley note in their introduction, "medieval monastic writing," which has a "strong link to the thought of Augustine," exhibits his inclination to perceive eschatological reality without "the effects and limitations of sin," 14. In other words, in view of medieval theology and religious practice, experiential phenomena of a spiritual nature (e.g. images and iconographic art) are within the purview of ontological truth.

at the same time outside of herself: the subjective experience of divine love transcends the soul into objective reality.[49] In other words, her "subjectivity" isn't something she possesses. Instead, it is referential, something that exists in proportion to her participation in God's love. Only then does she know love "as yt ys veryly." As a result, Anima's innermost experience of self-actualization, personal intimacy with God, is an experience of divine love that transcends her being. As we shall see, the above description of Wysdom's love works in parallel to the Augustinian Trinitarian Formula in that objective reality (God), his self (Jesus Christ), and his love (the Holy Spirit) relate to each other and are one in the same. When Wysdom speaks of love, grammatically, as an object of possession ("my love"), he is really speaking of objectivity itself: his love is objective reality.[50] Wysdom argues that experience is as essential as the intellect to real knowledge, which is knowledge of the real.

If we are to grasp the pith of *Wisdom*'s ontological argument, we must examine its Augustinian source. In the *Confessions*, for example, Augustine meditates on his experience of God's reality. He affirms first that God "has being" in Truth: "I heard your voice saying *I am the God who IS*."[51] And later: "I heard your voice…and at once I had no cause to doubt. I might more easily have doubted that I was alive than that Truth had

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[49] King elaborates: "what may seem abstract was, for the period when the [morality] plays were written, representative of true reality, transcending the ephemeral and imperfect world of everyday existence," "The Morality Plays," 242.

[50] My discussion of this paradigm, below, is Augustinian, but this is true for Aquinas as well. Barron explains: "this is why Thomas typically refers to God not as *ens summum* (highest being) but rather as *ipsum esse subsistens* (the sheer act of to-be itself)." *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 21. Additionally, for Aquinas, God is "properly discovered as the deepest ground of the creature's ontological identity," 24.

[51] Augustine, *Confessions*. Translated by R.S. Pine-Coffin. New York: Penguin Press, 1961, VII.10. Here, Augustine cites Exodus 3:14, where God reveals his name to Moses: "*ego sum qui sum*.".

being."[52] The *experience* of hearing God's voice, rather than the intellectual knowledge he gains from the "books" of the first half of the *Confessions*, erases his doubt; experience confirms that truth exists in a way even more *real* than Augustine himself may exist. Augustine explains that the absoluteness of God's reality means not just that he is real, but that he *is reality*. After all, when Augustine hears God's voice, he is received into his being. Wysdom argues for experiential knowledge in this vein; experience of God is ineffable, but it leads to the purest knowledge of his being.

At the same time, pure knowledge gained by experience remains complex for Augustine; he continues his meditation, explaining that God's reality is, first of all, paradoxical and second, the paradox of his reality functions through the concept of giving. God is at the same time utterly other *and* intimately related to the creature:

> I considered all the other things that are of a lower order than yourself, and I saw that they have not absolute being in themselves, nor are they entirely without being. They are real in so far as they have their being from you, but unreal in the sense that they are not what you are.[53]

In other words, for Augustine, the intimacy between God and the creature to whom he gives his being is grounded in God's utter otherness. Augustine's God, in the words of Kathryn Tanner, is in fact "*otherly* other,"[54] or, as Robert Barron puts it, "he enjoys a transcendence that is not contrastive to the world."[55] Over and again, Augustine affirms

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[52] *Confessions*, VII.11.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Tanner, Kathryn, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: a Brief Systematic Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001, 12.

[55] Barron, Robert. *Exploring Catholic Theology*. Baker Academic, 2015, 8. Barron explains here that "if God is capable of true incarnation—becoming a creature without ceasing to be himself—then God cannot be a worldly nature, a thing, one being among many, even the supreme being."

God's otherness, emphasizing God's eternal nature: "Eternal Truth, true Love, beloved Eternity—all this, my God you are."[56]

Yet as Augustine observes in the *Confessions* and later in *de Trinitate*, the paradox also indicates intimacy between the Creator and the creature because their relationality is founded on gift. It is only through the intimacy of giving that God's "non-contrastive" otherness can contribute being itself to the creature. The creature's specific experience of God—reception of the gift of being—reveals God's reality *as* givingness. Augustine thus proclaims: "I should not even exist if it were not by your gift."[57] God gives his reality to the creature, and the creature receives it in order to exist.[58] Through this grace, God becomes incarnate in the soul, dwelling there in communion with his creature.

For its part, the play closely follows Augustine's ontological paradox in its insistence that "godly love no creature can specyfye," as well as in its emphasis on giving throughout.[59] Together with these, the play's rhetorical parallel of Augustine's onto-theology of reality also serves Wysdom's second theological argument of the opening dialogue, that relationality between God and the soul is marked by intimacy, rather than distance. That is to say, *Wisdom* participates in and develops the Augustinian principles

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[56] *Confessions*, VII.10.

[57] Ibid., I.20.

[58] Aquinas will later develop this ontology, perhaps more clearly expressing the congruency between gift and love. This congruency explains God's Trinitarian selfhood as relational in nature, but it also explains the way in which God relates to his creation. As Barron explains, for Aquinas, "God's creative act is a gesture of love…since God has no ontological need, any and all of his actions *ad extra* are for the good of the other." Aquinas develops what we might call an ontology of love from this Augustinian doctrine, carefully associating love with gift *pro bono creationum*. See Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 25. See also Aquinas, *De potentia Dei*, q.3, art.3, in *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*. Edited by P. Bazzi. Turin: Marietti, 1965.

[59] *Wisdom*, l. 65. For references to "gift" directly following, see ll. 78-83.

of God's reality, suggesting congruence between the nature of reality, the selfhood of God, and the relationship between God and his human creatures.

The functional mechanism of God's paradoxical reality, self-giving love, results in Augustine's formulation of the Godhead as *communio*. For Augustine, the Incarnation perfectly expresses this ontology of self-gift because God becomes human without ceasing to be God the Son, who is simultaneously the Father and the Holy Spirit, so that humans might once again be the image of God. Barron explains how the relational nature of the Trinity underpins Augustine's theology of communion:

> In most forms of metaphysics, both ancient and modern, and in accord with common sense, substance is privileged over relationship, the latter viewed as a modification of the former. On Aristotle's reading, for example, substance comes first, since substance coincides with the basic category of being, and relationships, derivative of substance, come definitively second. But in light of [Augustine's] Trinitarian Formula, we see something completely different: at the most fundamental level of existence, substance and relationship utterly coincide. To be is to be in rapport with another, for the Father is the Father only in relation to the Son, the Son is the Son only in relation to the Father, and the Holy Spirit is nothing but the relation between the Father and the Son. Through and through, the divine reality *is* a communion of love.[60]

In short, Augustine finds that divine relationality—which is specifically marked by self-giving—is ontologically basic.[61] Reality itself is given, and eternally giving. For the human soul, the experience of God's love-gift, then, is to transcend itself by entering into its objective reality.

Wisdom's emphasis on intimacy manifests, not accidentally, in its central motif of spousal symbolism. Drawing from the Song of Songs, Wysdom expresses selfhood as

[60] Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 11. See also Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV.17. Walter Hilton, in his theological meditation *On Mixed Life* uses this passage of *De Trinitate* to explain that each part of the Trinity has memory of the other, understands the other, and loves the other simultaneously. The very nature of the Trinity is to exist for the sake of another.

[61] Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 12.

intimacy, specifically in terms of spousal relationality: he is "Spous of the chyrche …Wyffe of eche chose soule."[62] Here again, Wysdom frames his selfhood upon the principle that relationality, not substance, is ontologically basic. He chooses the specific type of relationality symbolized by the spousal bond to indicate how the relationship ideally works.[63] The spousal metaphor indicates the specific structure of self-gift and mutual communion in the relationship between the persons of the Trinity as well as between the Trinity and the human creature.

In fact, spousehood, whether between human subjects or within the *sponsa Christi* tradition, gains its entire meaning from Trinitarian love because, like Trinitarian relationality, it ideally enacts total self-giving. Wysdom's spousal relationship with "eche chose soulle" is inextricably bound up with the requirements of human salvation enacted through the personality of the Son, who gives himself bodily and spiritually to humanity in both incarnation and atonement.[64] In return, the "clean" soul receives the Son, and keeps a dwelling place for him. Receptivity is the soul's reciprocation of self-gift; it is not equal (God's self-gift cannot be equaled), but is nevertheless total.[65] The exchange of total self-gift between God and the soul results in mutual in-dwelling, which not only

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[62] *Wisdom*, ll. 15, 16.

[63] Much recent criticism on *Wisdom* assumes that spousal language draws on a Bernardian explanation of the biblical metaphor from Song of Songs. See especially Paulson, 270, and Klausner's "Introduction." However, I argue that the play exhibits a deep examination of the reality behind the *sponsa* tradition from an ontological point of view, not just that it incorporates the metaphor as a trope. *Wisdom* insists that the spousal relationship participates in the reality of the Trinitarian life. Articulating this deep reality, it responds, as Paulson argues, to heretical doctrine and practices that misconstrue the spousal metaphor.

[64] My use of the concept of "personality" follows the philosophical understanding of the term developed by Christian personalists from Aquinas, especially in Karol Wojtyla. *The Acting Person*. Translated by Andrzej Potocki. Hingham Mass: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1969, Karol Wojtyla. *Love and Responsibility*. New York: William Collins Sons & Co., 1981, and John Crosby. *The Selfhood of the Human Person*. Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996.

[65] See *Confessions*, XI.31: "your dwelling is in the humble of heart," and *Wisdom* ll. 126-32, 176.

imitates, but also participates in Trinitarian selfhood. Wysdom's self-identification makes this participation concrete:

> Therfor the belovyde Sone hathe this sygnyfycacyon,
> Custummaly Wysdom, now Gode, now man
> Spous of the chyrche and very patrone,
> Wyffe of eche chose soulle. [66]

Here, Wysdom explains why he is called Wysdom, recalling his relationship with God the Father as "the belovyde Sone." This relationship, he continues, "hath this sygnifycacyon." In other words, the relationship, which is his self, can be named. In this case, he offers multiple signifiers: "Wysdom" (both God and man, or, Christ), "Spous," "patrone,"[67] and "Wyffe."

For Wysdom, as for its Augustinian source, the word "sygnyfycacyon" signals participation, which Heather Phillips reminds us was "the fundamental philosophical attitude of the Middle Ages."[68] Likewise, Lucien Levy-Bruhl explains that under the paradigm of participation, symbol "was not a linguistic mechanism, a conceptual category or a code to be cracked, but a living reality."[69] Symbols of every degree, including the human self, whose being participates in the *ipsum esse subsistens* of God as the *imago dei*; linguistic symbols, both spoken and written; and objects used in liturgical

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[66] *Wisdom*, ll. 13-16.

[67] The *OED* misses this earlier meaning of the word, explained in the MED: "patrone, a. a model of behavior or appearance…; b. a model from which an object is made, exemplar, prototype…; c. image, likeness."

[68] Phillips, Heather. "John Wyclif and the Religion of the People." *A Distinct Voice: Medieval Studies in Honor of Leonard E. Boyle, O.P*. Edited by Jaqueline Brown and William P. Stoneman. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997, 564. See also Owen Barfield, "Self and Reality," in *The Rediscovery of Meaning and Other Essays*. Middletown, Conn: Barfield Press, 1977, 159-167; Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952; and Armand A. Maurer, *Medieval Philosophy*, 2nd ed. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1982.
[69] Phillips synthesizes a number of Levy-Bruhl's works here. See "John Wyclif and the Religion of the People," 563.

practice participate in and therefore make visible God's invisible reality. Symbols do not merely represent, but re-present, reality to the world. Under this paradigm, simultaneity is key: as Phillips explains, "the subject was at once himself and the being in which he participated."[70] Wysdom takes this paradigm so for granted that his initial self-description need not even mention the actual name by which he is "customarily" known: Jesus Christ. He can designate only signifiers because in view of participation, they re-present Christ to the audience. Wysdom doesn't merely stand for Christ, he is Christ.

Founded on the concept of relationality, Augustine's theology of participation insists again on intimacy—rather than the distance—between "sygnyfycacyon" and the signified. To be clear, the name itself is not equal to God's reality—God is still "*otherly* other"—but, as Phillips shows, "the symbol or sign…participated in the reality that it signified….the image was a participation, not, as it was to become in the fourteenth century, a *mere* image."[71] Because the phenomenon, which Augustine calls *sacramentum*, reveals the "invisible and spiritual reality" that gives it meaning, their relationship is not parallel, as with metaphor, nor oppositional, as in the hierarchy of substance over relationship. Rather, it is a relationship of "rapport" reflective of Trinitarian self-giving: "the visible *sacramentum* participates in the invisible reality that it signifies…the *sacramentum* is the *res*."[72] In this way, Thomistic thought also follows: "creatures don't

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[70] Phillips, "John Wyclif and the Religion of the People," 564.

[71] Ibid., 567.

[72] Participation explains how, for example, "in a certain manner the bread *is* the body of Christ"; the doctrine of transubstantiation also depends on it. This "certain manner" is the idea that "the *res*, in which the sign participates, gives the sign its life and meaning." Phillips, "John Wyclif and the Religion of the People," 567.

so much *have* relationships to God, they *are* relationships to God."[73] So, though it may appear that Wysdom metaphorizes himself by self-identifying as "spous" or "Wyffe," he instead elevates the concept of spousal relationality to a *sacramentum* of his being, which speaks to his nature as self-gift.

Under the paradigm of participation, *Wisdom*'s spousal imagery can no longer be mere metaphor; instead, *Wisdom* argues that spousal self-giving is the image of and "very" real participation in divine love. Read this way, *Wisdom* expresses a philosophy of selfhood as participation in God's reality through intimate union with God. Marriage, in this view, is not only modeled on Trinitarian love, but it also participates in Trinitarian intersubjectivity through the mutual self-giving of spouses. Most of all, *Wisdom* synthesizes spousal union with participation through Augustine's ontology of God as fundamentally relational.

As a result, the play views such intersubjectivity, mechanized by self-gift, as ontologically basic. Only through the intimacy of the spousal relationship—the constant re-formation toward mutual self-giving with the beloved—can Anima know God "veryly." Put another way, self-giving is the (paradoxical) action by which the soul becomes itself. Thus, selfhood is communion, and it requires active participation in God's reality of giving and receiving. To know oneself, therefore, is to experience divine love and to become more like it. As we have already glimpsed, *Wisdom* argues for this concept of selfhood even while recognizing that mutual self-giving is a prelapsarian ideal, toward which the fallen soul must continually strive. The play's self-conscious awareness of this striving suggests that by the time we meet her, Anima is dislocated

[73] Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 24. See also L.B. Geiger, *La participation dans la philosophie de S. Thomas d'Aquin*. Paris, 1942, and Barfield, *Saving Appearances*, pp. 84-91.

from her basic ontology, not by sin, but by the fall; her task, Wysdom says, is to reform herself to that original state.[74]

In other words, *Wisdom*'s assumptions about the self are rooted in the concept of original likeness. Original likeness is a term which borrows from Augustine's doctrine that the soul is the image and likeness of God, which *Wisdom* examines in detail. Additionally, the term *original* refers to the pre-lapsarian ideal, which I consciously borrow from Karol Wojtyla's *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*.[75] In it, amidst a vast and exhaustive meditation on the meaning of the human body and the ontology of the soul, Wojtyla reflects upon Augustine's exploration of selfhood in the *Confessions*, interpreting the Genesis accounts of Adam's "original solitude." Wojtyla observes, with Augustine, that God "did not say 'Let man be made according to his kind' but *Let us make man wearing our own image and likeness*. You [God] spoke in this way because you meant us to see for ourselves what your will is."[76] From this observation Wojtyla suggests that God communicates his will for the human self by means of being "alone," that is, the only creature made in God's image and likeness:

> The body, by which man shares in the visible created world, makes him at the same time aware of being 'alone.' …The analysis of the Yahwist text will allow us, further, to *link man's original solitude with the awareness of the body*, through which man distinguishes himself from all the *animalia* and "separates himself" from them, and *through which* he is a *person*.[77]

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[74] *Wisdom*, ll. 109-33.

[75] Wojtyla, Karol. *Man and Woman He Created Them: a Theology of the Body*. Boston: Pauline Books, 2006. Wojtyla later became Pope John Paul II; he remains an influential figure in the philosophy of Christian Personalism. See n. 35 above.

[76] *Confessions*, XIII. 22.

[77] Wojtyla, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 150.

Thus, in his original state, Wojtyla argues, Adam found that he was a creation like the other creatures, but he was the only creature that did not have a "kind." He found that "the distinctiveness of his being" was, in fact, the image and likeness of God, the gift of an embodied rational soul. Thus his solitude among the other creatures revealed his nature in that it set him apart from their various "kinds," and defined his specific relationship of self-giving love with God as likeness.

For Wojtyla, the concept of personhood flows from *original likeness*, and articulates the kind of relationship God shares with human creatures to whom he has given his own likeness. Personhood, then, is grounded in the soul's responsiveness to this gift. The specific relationship of giving, Wojtyla argues, makes the human creature a "subject of the covenant," and "partner of the Absolute"; this peculiar association sets the human person "into a *unique, exclusive, and unrepeatable relationship with God himself*."[78] Finally, because it is rooted in the Augustinian paradox of being, God's selfhood—his relationship to the soul—is non-competitive with human thriving.

In the play's opening dialogue, Anima remembers her original likeness instinctively. At her entrance, Anima proclaims "*Hanc amavi et exquisivi*," quoting the biblical book of Wisdom, proclaiming her spousal relationship to her creator through Wisdom's echo of the Song of Songs.[79] And, similar to Wojtyla's account of Adam's realization of his original solitude, Anima recognizes her unique relationship with Wysdom for which she is "wroute," and notices that her own "bewty" is a result of her creation "in wysdom":

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[78] Ibid, 151. All italicized text is original to Wojtyla.

[79] See Song of Songs 1:7 and 3:1. Anima will later quote directly from the first chapter of Songs.

> '*Hanc amavi et exsquisivi*'—
> Fro my yougthe thys have I soute,
> To have to my spouse most specially
> For a lover of your schappe am I wroute.
> ….
> In wysdom I was made all bewty bryghte![80]

Anima's initial self-understanding, which articulates her relationship to God as both likeness and spouse illustrates the simultaneity of God's being, giving, and loving. This intuitive understanding reflects Adam's recognition of his original likeness to God and articulates a basic knowledge of God's nature learned by studying the "scolys" of the Bible.

Yet, though she speaks righteously, Wysdom knows that she lacks "experyens"[81] of self-giving love, a naïveté that diminishes the effect of her first speech. Still, his pedagogical strategy is puzzling. Despite her claim that it is impossible to know his "full exposycyon," Wysdom responds to Anima's naïveté by continuing to describe himself: "*Sapientiae specialitor est sole…*".[82] This response strikes some readers as a "brag" that seems to emphasize Anima's naïveté and point up her "inability to move beyond literal, carnal meanings."[83] For example, Paulson suggests that Anima is unable to sense the difference between worldly love and the love of the divine: "While Wisdom's words may appear to make him culpable as well, the point here is not that the Son of God is a Casanova, but that a soul without self-knowledge could not tell the difference between

[80] *Wisdom*, ll. 17-24.

[81] Ibid., l. 63.

[82] Ibid., l. 27.

[83] Paulson, "A Theater of the Soul's Interior," 270.

the Son and a Lothario."[84] Paulson ultimately concludes that this scene "reflects the danger in affective piety of mistaking the medium for the message."[85] Indeed, Anima's inability to distinguish between them becomes clear when she next replies, requesting Wysdom to "speke of love" as if it were a game.[86] The answer, Paulson rightly suggests, is self-understanding.

However, to view Wysdom's participation in the language of this affective exchange as a "brag" is to miss the play's underlying pedagogical strategy. Anima's understanding of divine love is certainly naïve, but Wysdom's self-descriptive response isn't "bragging." On the contrary, it's a strategy of disputation, and the stakes are high for interpreting this response accordingly. He anticipates Anima's eventual question, "how may I have knowynge/Of thi Godhede?,"[87] by actually addressing the question, "what *is* the Godhead?" That is, to her claim that full knowledge of him is impossible, Wysdom responds with ontological description: "I am light," "mirror," "the image of [divine] goodness," etc.[88] He is adamant that self-understanding, and knowledge of the Godhead, be framed under a specific kind of knowledge. Thus, Wysdom's response argues that he *can* be known, but not "veryly" by epistemological means: "Yt may be felt from experyens above,/but not spoke ne tolde as yt ys veryly."[89] This dialogue—indeed the

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[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid.

[86] *Wisdom*, l. 40.

[87] Ibid., ll. 93-4.

[88] Ibid., ll. 28-32.

[89] Ibid., ll. 63-4.

entire play—is ontologically oriented; its primary pedagogical focus is to establish the parameters of the soul's being as well as what it means to be a soul in relation to God.

In the second half of the opening dialogue, Wysdom finally makes explicit his argument that the question Anima really needs answered is ontological, not epistemological:

> By knowynge of yoursylff ye may have felynge
> Wat Gode ys in your soule sensible.[90]

Here, Wysdom proposes the final and highest objective of her inquiry and how she will arrive there: as with both Augustine's *Confessions* and Wojtyla's "original solitude," the more fundamental question of "what God is" can be reached by self-investigation. Moreover, such investigation leads to "felynge" what God is, which is the deepest sense of "knowying" him. For Wysdom these processes are, in a sense, simultaneous; knowledge of his nature comes through the "sensible" soul, and it will satisfy any and all other questions she could have about him.

By this point in the exchange, the opening dialogue of *Wisdom* has established a pattern in which Wysdom consistently redirects Anima's questions about him, each time revising her approach away from epistemological questions and toward ontological truths. For example, when Anima suggests that Wysdom "wolde speke of love, that wer a game!" Wysdom redirects the conventional pedagogy of the court—a tale of love, or perhaps a poem—and gently admonishes her worldly desire for diversion.[91] The

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[90] Ibid., ll. 95-6. The term "felynge" signals the effect of experiential knowledge and, at the same time, the arguments of the Pauline epistles.

[91] Ibid., l. 40. The playwright takes advantage of the polyvalent meaning of the middle English "game," pointing up Anima's naïve understanding of love as, perhaps, "happiness," "pleasure," or "amorous play," MED, "Game," def. 1, 2d.

admonishment doesn't come as a scolding but as a speech on the divine nature of his love and its salvific power.[92]

Again, in the style of a disputation, he reframes the "game" of love, pointing toward *his* love, which is the infinite source of love itself: "Of *my* love to speke, yt ys myrable."[93] Wysdom insists again on questions of ontological definition. As he continues his response, the subject of love becomes immediately interchangeable with the personal noun, "wysdom," and the pronoun, "I." It's even used, simultaneously, as a verb:

> Of *my love* to speke, yt ys myrable.
> Beholde now, Soull, with joyfull mynde,
> How lovely *I* am, how amyable
> To be halsyde and kyssyde of mankynde.
> To all clene soulys *I* am full hende
> And ever present wer that they be.
> *I love* my lovers wythoutyn ende
> That ther love have stedfast in me.
> …
> *My love* dyschargethe and puryfyethe clene.
> It strengtheth the mynde, the soull makyt pure,
> And *gevyt wysdom* to hem that perfyghte bene.[94]

In fact, love shifts from object, something Wysdom has, to subject, something he is, and back again, suggesting that love's nature is simultaneous. "My love" becomes an "I" who is rightly "halsyde and kyssed." Just as seamlessly, love becomes a verb, and then a noun: "I love my lovers." And after that, the ambiguous "ther love," might be "there, love" or "their love," which implies a transmutability between the love he gives, the love that he is, and the love he receives in return. In this passage, love perfectly reflects its self and

[92] See especially ll. 49-60.

[93] *Wisdom*, l. 41.

[94] Ibid., ll. 41-48, 54-56.

source in Wysdom, who is himself simultaneously God and man, the Word incarnate, the lover and the beloved.

Yet, for all this transmutability and simultaneity, Wysdom insists somewhat rigidly that, as love, he self-communicates in a specific way: he is a gift that relieves "the hevy burthen of synne," that "strengtheth the mynde, the soull makyt pure," and above all "gevyt wysdom" to the beloved.[95] In other words, Wysdom's love will heal the soul and strengthen it against its tendency to offend the love that Wysdom himself offers, all by means of the gift that he will give of himself. Here is a love that is offered without the merit of its receiver or the expectation of equal reciprocity. Indeed, Wysdom acknowledges his "prerogatyff" to offer an unmatchable gift, one "so grett" that it makes pale all other worldly desires, and which no person can even articulate.[96] Moreover, this love is a total gift of himself: he is "full hende," or fully ready at hand, and "ever present wer that they be." Wysdom holds nothing of himself back, and he doesn't parcel himself out. This is no secular courtly love, which may borrow from Wysdom's self-exhaustive language, but cannot match it "veryly."

To her credit, even if she cannot understand his love fully, Anima desires to reciprocate, indicating an intuitive understanding of the creature's proper response to God. Anima's intuitive reciprocity within Wysdom's ontological discourse demonstrates that knowledge of the self is primary to her knowledge of moral action: "Wat may I geve you agayn for this,/O Creator, lover of your creature?....Wat may I geve to your most

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[95] Ibid., ll. 53-56.

[96] Ibid., l. 50-52.

plesaunce?"[97] Specifically, ontological knowledge of her original likeness in the *imago dei* brings about the memory of God, which in turn enables her finally to re-form herself in his likeness through the sacrament of penance.[98]

However, before Anima can fully recover this memory, it remains for her to reform her habits of inquiry. Anima's question—what can I give?—still slightly misses the mark because it assumes a parceling of the gift. She would give some part of her self, but Wysdom's reply expects more:

> *Fili, prebe michi cor tuum!*
> I aske not ellys of all thi substance;
> They clene hert, thi meke obeysance,
> Geve me that and I am contente.[99]

The response is easy to gloss: Wysdom desires nothing of her except her heart and obedience. But the use of "substance" here, in the context of the allegory, signals that Wysdom wants nothing less than everything.[100] "Substance" necessarily acquires ontological overtones because Anima is a soul without any tangible substance that can be divided. "Give me what you are," he seems to say, "I ask for nothing else." Wysdom furthermore invokes the father-son relationship of the Trinity, alluding to its tri-fold and yet undivided substance, which is itself total gift. Anima's "substance" consists completely of her "clean heart" and "obedience." In other words, Wysdom's desire is the

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[97] Ibid., l. 73, 78. Anima's response draws on Augustine's first observation of human selfhood in the *Confessions*: "Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you…. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you," I.1.

[98] Augustine's inquiry of memory insists on the "image" as requisite for the functionality of memory, whether the image is introduced to the mind through the senses or the "collection" of thoughts via the process of *cogitare*, *Confessions*, X.11. While Augustine will later settle on the image of Truth as the basis of his memory (X.24), *Wisdom* will argue that Anima herself is the "image" required to enact her memory.

[99] *Wisdom*, ll. 79-82.

[100] The OED defines "substance" as "the divine essence or nature, esp. as that in which the three persons of the Trinity are united as one," I.1; and secondly, "a being that subsists by itself; a thing, being," I.2.

complete and total requisition of her heart ("*cor*") and her will—a request we see fulfilled in later scenes as her Mights reunite through the process of penance.

Through these opening exchanges, Wysdom argues that experiential knowledge of divine love is a knowledge framed by ontological truth, and he recalls Anima to her original likeness, which is a communion between God and the human soul. Communion, then, is the state toward which Anima must be re-formed. Underlying this dramatic objective is its specific ontological argument: a philosophy of self as communion means that the self becomes more itself in the measure that it gives itself. Wysdom's definition of selfhood is a gift of the heart, total and self-exhaustive. In the next section of this essay, I explore this concept of selfhood in more detail as the dialogue shifts from description of the Godhead to an account of Anima's selfhood.

***Imago Dei:* The Meaning of Existence and Anima's Ontology**

The first half of *Wisdom*'s opening dialogue establishes an ontological perspective of the Trinitarian God, which has at its heart the notion of self-giving relationality. The second half maintains this principle as Wysdom explains the soul's onto-theology. However, the perfect harmony of self-giving relationality shifts significantly in the second half: Wysdom sets forth a kind of simultaneous selfhood for Anima, which articulates the tension between her original likeness and concupiscence, the lasting effect of original sin. That is, he expresses her postlapsarian selfhood as double: she is simultaneously created in his image and likeness and also fallen, since "the tyme of Adamys offence."[101] The simultaneity with which Wysdom describes Anima signals her complex ontology: she is removed from God in that she is not God, but she is further removed from her original likeness to him by original sin and the tendency to

[101] Ibid., l. 106.

concupiscence that follows, even after baptism.[102] Yet she remains the *imago dei* through his self giving: the once-for-all sacrifice on the cross and the recurring grace of the sacraments.

The tension is palpable in his grammar as Wysdom begins to describe Anima's nature. He leaves off speaking in the pure sense in which we can understand the ontology of the Godhead, and "I AM" becomes "ye ware":

> Anima: Wat ys a soull, wyll ye declare?
> Wysdom: Yt ys the ymage of Gode that all began,
> And not only ymage, but hys lyknes ye are.
> Of all creaturys the fairest ye ware
> Into the tyme of Adamys offence.[103]

In the same breath, Wysdom declares that she is the image and likeness of God, and yet she is no longer the "fairest" of his creatures. Grammatically and theologically, *Logos* shifts to *logos* as concupiscence makes its mark on the soul. Still, Wysdom describes her this way because, he argues, sin does not change the ontological foundation of her being. The soul's basic nature, the *imago dei*, remains despite her distance from the nature of God. Moreover, through his plea for her to return to communion with him, Wysdom argues that sin does not equate to selfhood. Selfhood, for Wysdom, is expressed primarily in terms of the soul's ontological potential. Wysdom is always thinking of Anima as "hys restyng place, hys plesant see."[104]

The tension becomes clearer through the play's dramatic development. At the height of the opening dialogue, when Anima finally asks the right kind of question—

[102] Baptism is only the first of the "sacramentys sevyn," l. 124-26. The play is chiefly concerned with two sacraments by name (marriage and penance), and with at least two others by implication (Eucharist and holy orders).

[103] *Wisdom*, ll. 102-06.

[104] Ibid., l. 132.

"Wat ys a soull?"—Wysdom makes the play's clear and definitive declaration on human selfhood:

Wysdom: Yt ys the ymage of Gode that all began,
And not only ymage, but hys lyknes ye are.[105]

This seemingly simple answer will become the thesis upon which rests the exposition of the play. We have seen that Anima's selfhood is expressed as a tension between the perfection of *imago dei* and concupiscence, but ontologically speaking, there is something even deeper at work here. As with the language of spousehood above, this thesis can be easily metaphorized and abstracted. Specifically, as Phillips notes, the notion of "image" was beginning to lose a sense of participation in the late fourteenth century; for modern audiences, this sense is nearly completely lost. Wysdom's phrasing now appears to the modern reader as metaphorical poeticism—"*mere* image or picture."[106]

Yet, as Hill explains, late medieval theology of "image and likeness" had complex ontological underpinnings. Hill points out that the phrase is not to be understood, in the modern sense, as a hendiadys. Rather, "Image and likeness" is an extrapolative phrase in which "equality is a special, limiting case of likeness."[107] That is, the medieval understanding is that image and likeness are actually distinct; the human soul can be in the image of Christ on the condition of its likeness to Him. In *Wisdom*, when the action of the soul is synonymous with gift, and therefore with love, it is like unto Christ because it therein participates in him and the activity of his selfhood. As a result, the soul becomes

[105] Ibid., ll. 103-4.

[106] Phillips. "John Wyclif and the Religion of the People," 567.

[107] Hill, "The Trinitarian Allegory," 130.

an image of God that participates in his "bewty."[108] Hill explains: "one does not approach God across intervals of space but by likeness, and by unlikeness he draws away from him."[109] Closeness can be expressed in terms of the clarity of the image rather than spatial distance. So, the image accompanies likeness, but the two are not one and the same. When the soul becomes more like God, it appears like him, actually re-presenting him in the world.

It is fitting, then, that following the opening dialogue, the drama introduces Anima's "Mights," and carefully establishes their self-giving relationality in God's likeness. First, as Wysdom introduces the Mights, he explains that their relationship "ys symylytude of Gode." Next, as the three Mights introduce themselves, they syntactically imitate God's Trinitarian mutuality:

> Mynde: All thre here, lo, byfor your face:
> Mynde,
> Wyll: Wyll,
> Undyrstondynge: And Undyrstondynge, we thre![110]

Then, as they offer their respective self-descriptions, each refers to their unity in "the soule," demonstrating how they participate in God's "lyknes."[111] Finally, Wysdom warns against their "thre enmyes," imploring the Mights to work together in unity to resist the influence of "the Fende":

> Wan suggestyon to the Mynde doth apere,
> Undyrstondynge, delyght not ye therin!
> Consent not, Wyll, yll lessons to lere![112]

[108] In the final scene, Wysdom declares Anima "reformyde to your bewtys bright," 1093.

[109] Hill, "The Trinitarian Allegory," 130.

[110] *Wisdom*, ll. 179-82.

[111] See, for example, Mynde, ll. 183-88; Wyll, ll. 213, 231-2, 240-44.; and Undyrstondynge, esp. ll. 245-52.

[112] *Wisdom*, ll. 301-303.

In other words, when a "suggestion" of sin appears to the Mind, his counterparts are responsible for keeping the entire soul "in" Wysdom.[113] Just as the persons of the Trinity are unified by their relationship of self-giving, the Mights maintain Anima's image and likeness through mutual self-gift.[114] Accordingly, Wysdom emphasizes the "partnership" of the Mights as he speaks to them, and Anima answers him as a unified voice for the three. [115]

Conversely, when the soul's action is unlike God, that is, either when the gift is made symbolic or when it is denied through disobedience, the image becomes disfigured.[116] Just as Anima appears "*in the most horrybull wyse*," Wysdom rebukes her "dedly synnys" and reveals three assumptions that speak to her ontology as image and likeness: "Wy art thou creature so onkynde,/Thus to defoule Godys own place…so many devllys in your soule be./Beholde wat ys therin reclusyd!"[117] First, her visible appearance signals the state of her invisible soul. Anima's "horrible" appearance becomes an icon for her invisible unlikeness. [118]

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[113] Ibid., l. 306.

[114] Ibid., ll. 285-87.

[115] Ibid., ll. 308.

[116] This concept manifests in the various costume changes indicated in the stage directions in the play. See for example, the stage direction at l. 902.

[117] *Wisdom*, stage direction l. 903, l. 904-10, original emphasis.

[118] Both Phillips and Barron explain the centrality of participation to the concept of the icon, in theological and artistic terms. The icon participates in the reality it signifies; Jesus is the visible Icon of God, bread is the icon of Jesus' body. See Phillips, "John Wyclif and the Religion of the People," 566, and Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 55-6. The tradition of icon painting and manuscript illumination is also imbued with the paradigm of participation, as George Galavaris explains in *Colors, Symbols, Worship: The Mission of the Byzantine Artist*. London: Pindar Press, 2012, 1-2: "The illuminated manuscript embodies the basic ideas of the Christian faith: Word and light. Word is the pre-existing God; the true light *which illuminates everyone who comes in the world* (John I, 9). Christ revealed this light to the world. The

Anima's sin perversely imitates—and reverses—the Incarnation which, we recall, is the icon of reality itself. Second, "devllys" corrupt what was first "God's own place," signaling Wysdom's original intention that her very self should be a "dwelling" for God. As he reiterates the fundamentality of original likeness over fallenness, Wysdom assumes that her unlikeness to God is "unnatural."[119] In this way, *Wisdom* suggests that original likeness and sin co-exist in the soul after the fall, but (1) their co-existence is an internal war and (2) likeness is the clear objective toward which the soul should always strive.

While Lucyfer's intent to corrupt the soul to some extent follows the conventions of devils in the other morality plays, his specific strategy in *Wisdom* underscores the play's argument that selfhood is the ontological category of likeness to God. In particular, sin is marked by the state of the Mights' relationship, and their discord brings about Anima's disfigurement. When Lucyfer plots the soul's destruction, he strategizes not directly to send Anima to hell, but to "dysvygure" her so that she can no longer participate in God's likeness.[120] Lucyfer instigates Anima's internal striving by disrupting the harmonious relationality of her Mights:

> In the Soule ben thre partyes, iwys:
> Mynde, Wyll, Undyrstondynge of blys—
> Fygure of the Godhede—I know wele thys!
> …

believer and his creations reflect this divine light. Thus the word and the manuscript '*is illuminated*' by the shape and the colour of the image."

[119] *MED*, "kinde." It isn't surprising that Wysdom prioritizes her original likeness over sin, nor that he denounces sin at this climactic point in the play. However, as he builds Anima's ontological foundation in the opening dialogue, this simultaneous and hierarchized selfhood challenges the post-Reformation world-view. For example, Luther's concept of *theologia crucis* was largely informed by this sense of conflation, which follows Wyclif's critique of *theologia gloriae*. Theologically, Wysdom insists on what the theologian and mystic, Thomas Merton, would call a "war within us," which looks forward to salvation, rather than a post-Reformation ontological conflation of sin and self. See Merton, Thomas, *The New Man*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961, 3.

[120] *Wisdom*, l. 353.

> To the Mynde of the Soule I shall mak suggestyun,
> Ande brynge hys Undyrstondynge to dylectacyon,
> So that hys Wyll make confyrmacyon.[121]

Lucyfer uses the vestige of the Trinity in the soul—mind, which corresponds to Augustine's memory, Reason, and Will—to "make it appear…that perfection is sin" and to convince Anima's faculties ("mights") to turn from giving to desiring.[122] In so doing, Lucyfer plans specifically to bring the soul "to nought."[123] Lucyfer recognizes Wysdom's ontological arguments and affirms that a disruption of the Mights' relationality will bring Anima out of her likeness to God.

When Lucyfer does draw the three together again, it is under the "false pretense" he has vowed to present. Here, he invokes Wysdom's earlier implication of the "clene soul" in which each of the Mights works for the good of the other, and thus for the unified Anima.[124] But he twists the concept of the "clene soul," as Klausner observes, "redefining the 'clene soull' (which Wisdom had identified as 'Godys restynge place') as 'mery'."[125] While the "clean soul" participates in Trinitarian relationality, the disunified soul can only be "mery" by taking pleasure in lower-order goods or by indulging its desires. When he requests that the Mights "acorde you thre togdyr," he ultimately suggests they make a false Trinitarian image under the pretext of his revised definition of the "clene soul."

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[121] Ibid., ll. 357-59, 365-67.

[122] See fn 7 in the TEAMS edition, which explains the source for these lines in Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*. In a later fn, Klausner observes that "throughout his conversation with the three Mights, Lucifer has been directly subverting the arguments of Wisdom which opened the play."

[123] *Wisdom*, l. 356.

[124] Ibid., ll. 285-89.

[125] See footnote to l. 494 in the TEAMS edition. The "mery" life of the soul offered by Lucyfer stands in contrast here to the "everlastynge joy" guaranteed by Wysdom, l. 308.

Under Lucyfer's influence, the Mights' "acorde" eventually guarantees Anima's movement into the *regio disimilitudinis*, but that movement is not fundamentally a result of the sins—that is, the actions—the Mights commit. Lucyfer's plan is not primarily to convince the soul to commit the sins traditionally associated with vice. In fact, he desires to *change her likeness*; and he acknowledges that he must do so in order to root out God's dwelling there, and make the soul "the Develys place"[126]:

> That Soule Gode made incomparable,
> To hys *lyknes* most amiable,
> I shall make yt most reprovable,
> Evyn *lyke* to a fende of hell.[127]

Here, Lucyfer acknowledges what it is to be a soul in God's likeness. He knows that simply tricking Anima into sinful action will not condemn her. Evil acts are only a means. Instead, he reasons that his only recourse is will change the soul from the image of God to an image of himself. His goal is to shift the soul's ground of being from the harmonious self-giving relationality between her Mights, which makes her the image and likeness of God, to a false inner-relationality that makes it like him—fallen, deficient, a non-being.

In order for Mynde, Wyll, or Undyrstondynge to consent to sinful action, he must first be dislocated from the free and total self-giving relationality of the unified soul. This dislocation is itself already a movement into unlikeness. Here, because the audience can view the disruption of Wysdom's opening arguments under Lucyfer's plan, the play begins to develop its theology of the self in a most comprehensive way. *Wisdom* argues

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[126] *Wisdom*, ll. 543-45.

[127] Ibid., ll. 534-37, emphasis added.

that the root of sin itself is the ontological mutability of the soul: the vulnerability to ontological change within the soul's own inner relationality is "original sin."

Thus, as Hill implies, even as the *imago dei* remains imprinted upon the soul from its creation, the soul's post-lapsarian selfhood constantly flows between perfect image and "disfigurement." To signal this fluidity and the internal struggle it effects, Wysdom speaks with utter grammatical strangeness, at once in the past and in the present. Likeness, Wysdom explains, was the soul's original, prelapsarian state, though sin dislocates it into Augustine's *regio disimilitudinis*:[128]

> For every creature that hath ben or shall
> Was in natur of the fyrst man, Adame,
> Of hym takynge the fylthe of synne orygynall,
> For of hym all creaturys cam.
> …
> For ye be dysvyguryde be hys synne[129]

Original sin "disfigures" the soul, marring the image as a result of unlikeness. Still even as he speaks of the soul as once and for all "dammyde to derknes," [130] Wysdom offers the sacraments, which confoundingly restore the soul to the present:

> Fyrst baptem clensythe synne orygynall,
> And reformyt the soul in feythe verray true
> To the gloryus lyknes of Gode eternall
> Ande makyt yt as fayer and as celestyall
> As yt never dyffoulyde had be,
> Ande ys Crystys own specyall,
> Hys restynge place, hys plesant see.[131]

Wysdom moves with frustrating fluidity between the present and the past tense, the subjunctive and the indicative: is Anima the image and likeness of God, or was she? Is

[128] *Confessions*, VII.10.

[129] *Wisdom*, ll. 109-17.

[130] Ibid., l. 118.

[131] Ibid., ll. 126-32.

she his “specyall” or was she already “dammyde” by Adam’s sin? Wysdom’s simultaneous grammar reflects the tension the soul experiences within herself and manifests this sense of warring within her.

More significantly, however, this sense of tension within the self via the playwright’s use of simultaneous tense and mood signals God’s eternal perspective, which occurs outside of the sense of time that governs our grammar. For humans, fluctuation between likeness and unlikeness happens linearly in time. But for God, who is eternal, the soul can be both present and past. Here again, *Wisdom* relies on Augustinian thought. Grappling with this notion in the *Confessions*, Augustine frames the soul’s return to self as a return to the unchanging and eternal Beginning, who is Wisdom:

> Even when we learn from created things, which are subject to change, we are led to the Truth which does not change. And there we truly learn, as *we stand by and listen to him and rejoice at hearing the bridegroom’s voice*, restoring ourselves to him who gave us our being. He is therefore the Beginning, the abiding Principle, for unless he remained when we wandered in error, there would be none to whom we could return and restore ourselves. But when we return from error, we return by knowing the Truth; and in order that we may know the Truth, he teaches us, because he is the Beginning…The Beginning is Wisdom and Wisdom is the Beginning in which you made heaven and earth.[132]

Augustine explains that the Beginning is, for us, temporally qualified, but from the perspective of eternal Truth, it is coequal. A return to the Beginning, therefore, amounts to a return to unchanging, eternal Truth. While the soul may “wander in error,” the Beginning “abides,” reminding her that she can be “restored” to the Truth. Augustine’s notion of “restoration” signals that “wandering” is not permanent “change” but, instead, depletion. “Restoration” to the Truth suggests, then, that the soul has some part in eternality; even while she exists in time and is subject to change, the eternal Beginning

[132] *Confessions*, XI.8,9, original emphasis. Augustine is quoting the same passage from the third chapter of John upon which Anima seems to rely above.

"gave us our being," fundamentally providing the mark of her potential. The soul's eternal quality and potential, as Augustine explains, is Truth: the eternal establishes a True human self, and maintains it in the non-time of Wisdom's eternal Beginning.

The eternal perspective explains the possibility for Wysdom that original likeness and concupiscence can be simultaneous states of the soul, even while he resists their conflation. That is, while he implies that her likeness to him has been altered with finality, "ye be dysfyguryde be [Adam's] synne/Ande dammyde to derknes from Godys syghte," he anticipates Anima's response, which simply assumes the possibility of Johanine re-birth:[133] "How dothe grace than ageyn begynne?/ Wat reformythe the soull to hys fyreste lyght?"[134] In response, Wysdom proclaims that he himself, "that was Gode and man ryght," made a complete atonement ("full sethe") from which the sacraments "spronge."[135] Here again, Wysdom speaks simultaneously in the past and present: the singular act of Christ's "sethe" occurred once, in the past, but the sacraments "all synne wasche awey" in the present.[136]

Similarly, when Wysdom combines the subjunctive and indicative moods, he signals his indifference to the concept of time: the soul "reformyt [reforms]…to the gloryus lyknes of Gode eternall…As yt never dyffoulyde had be [been],/ Ande *ys* Crystys

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[133] In the John 3, Jesus explains the concept of re-birth "in the spirit" to an incredulous Nicodemus. This play draws heavily on Johanine theology, particularly in its articulation of Trinitarian relationality and the relationship between Christ and his disciples. Themes of in-dwelling, gift, and unity throughout the play draw on the John 17, in particular, 17: 20-25.

[134] *Wisdom*, ll. 119-20.

[135] Ibid., ll. 121-24.

[136] Ibid., l. 125.

own specyall."[137] Grammatically, we could make sense of this if Wysdom were to use either the subjunctive or future tense: the soul could reform, or it will reform, as if it had never been defiled. Instead, he uses the indicative, "the soul reforms," and "is Christ's own intimate," once more signaling that all is in the present tense from his eternal perspective. Indeed, the only portion of the sentence in the past tense is the clause associated with sin, as if Wysdom somehow always looks forward to the reformative possibility. However disorienting to Anima (and the audience), Wysdom, Word Incarnate, grammatically illustrates the argument that the human soul fluctuates on a spectrum between perfect likeness and complete unlikeness to God. Yet it is never changed with finality until the body dies, and its potential for reform, through grace, remains ever present.

The play's thesis unfolds in the opening dialogue with this in mind. Wysdom establishes Anima's simultaneous self, subject to concupiscence, but imprinted with the Truth to which he implores her to return:

> Thus a soule ys both foulle and fayer:
> Foull as a best, be felynge of synne,
> Fayer as an angell, of hevyn the ayer [heir],
> By knowynge of Gode by hys reson wythin.[138]

The project of the play, then, is to show how the soul might return to what she is, and the exposition of the drama leaves nothing vague about her re-formation, even while the penitential act itself occurs offstage. Wysdom's "docrtyne" of re-formation is "charite," the virtue that expresses his own selfhood with all possible precision. God's relational selfhood—*caritas*—is the key to Anima's epistemological-turned-ontological quest.

[137] Ibid., ll. 1127-31.

[138] Ibid., ll. 157-60.

Wisdom ***as Response to Wycliffite Heresy***

Since Eugene Hill's examination of the play's Augustinian influences, several critical works have addressed the play's theology and doctrinal message to suggest that *Wisdom* was written as a response to Wycliffite heresy. Two are particularly relevant. Clifford Davidson's *Visualizing the Moral Life: Medieval Iconography and the Macro Morality Plays* argues that the iconography of the play "extends the allegorical treatment of the human condition in the direction of mysticism" and is "driven by phenomenological considerations." [139] Davidson addresses the play's response to Lollard objections to images. He concludes that "the play of *Wisdom*…is intended to function as an extended visual reminder of man's earthly fate according to contemporary theology" and, further, that the iconography of the suffering Christ as refuge for sinners reaffirms the contemplative life and authenticates "image theology."[140] The more recent analysis is Julie Paulson's, in which she examines the ritual of penance as the play's response to Lollard anti-sacramentality. She argues that "*Wisdom* presents penance not merely as a vehicle for the communication of Church doctrine and authority," but as "a ritual that constructs meanings and values (such as what a soul is) that are central to Christian faith."[141] Both analyses contribute to our understanding of *Wisdom* as a response to Lollard criticisms of medieval orthodoxy.

As a response to Wycliffite teaching, *Wisdom* is profoundly innovative in that not only does the play make a compelling response to doctrinal conflicts, but the playwright

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[139] Davidson, Clifford, *Visualizing the Moral Life: Medieval Iconography and the Macro Morality Plays*, New York: AMS Press, Inc., 10, 12.

[140] Davidson, Clifford, *Visualizing the Moral Life*, 111. For a definition of Davidson's "image theology," see p. 88.

[141] Paulson, "A Theater of the Soul's Interior," 257.

also uses an Augustinian rhetorical strategy to negotiate unorthodox doctrine: he reframes the epistemological questions of doctrine under ontological terms. This kind of response should not surprise us given *Wisdom*'s Augustinian influences, in which theological argument persistently returns the reader to its foundations in the ontological "Beginning."[142]

In the *Confessions*, for example, Augustine responds to Neoplatonism by meditating on his experience of God's reality, rather than responding directly to doctrinal questions. He affirms first that God "has being" in Truth: "I heard your voice saying *I am the God who IS*."[143] And later: "I heard your voice…and at once I had no cause to doubt. I might more easily have doubted that I was alive than that Truth had being."[144] Rather than the intellectual knowledge he gains from the Platonists' "books" of the first half of the *Confessions*, it is the *experience* of hearing God's voice that erases his doubt; experience of God's being confirms that truth exists in a way even more *real* than Augustine himself may exist. Likewise, in *De Trinitate*, Augustine meets the Arian heresy with a meditation on the definition of God established in Exodus 3:14, "I AM WHO I AM." It is here that Augustine establishes his Trinitarian formula to refute the Arian theological heresy.[145] For Augustine, Trinitarian theology must find its basis in Trinitarian ontology. Finally, *De Civitate Dei* similarly relies on the foundations of ontological argument to respond to the Roman social and theological order, arguing that

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[142] Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.9.

[143] Ibid., VII.10. Here, Augustine cites Exodus 3:14, where God reveals his name to Moses: "*ego sum qui sum*."

[144] Ibid., VII.11.

[145] See especially, *de Trinitate*, V, VIII, and IX.

participation in the *civitate dei*—the ontologically basic *communio* established in *de Trinitate*—is the proper role of the *civitas terrena*.

With respect to *Wisdom*'s contemporary sources, we should note that all of them have, to adjust Davidson's phrase, "ontological considerations." [146] Still, *Wisdom*'s principle achievement is its way of drawing their doctrinal theses together and interrogating their ontological foundations. For example, as we have seen in the opening dialogue, the Wisdom playwright also argues for experiential knowledge to reflect the doctrinal orthodoxy of his source.[147] More than that, however, he emphasizes experience of God in imitation of Augustine's most effective rhetorical strategy. Through Augustine, our playwright recognizes that the primary cause of theological doctrine is ontological truth. Rather than meet unorthodoxy at its doctrinal questions—Are sacraments good and necessary? What function do images have in religious life?—Augustine models for the *Wisdom* playwright how to reframe the discussion on the basis of a more fundamental set of truths: what God *is* determines what we know about him; what God is determines what humans are; and what humans are determines how they should act, and not the reverse. For both writers, experience of God's being is an encounter with ontological selfhood that should direct every action. As a result, *Wisdom* offers a response to Lollard heresy based on an Augustinian reframing of doctrinal arguments within more fundamental ontological truths.

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[146] Klausner lists these, with corresponding passages, in the TEAMS edition of *Wisdom*: Heinrich Suso's *Orologium Sapientiae*, and its anonymous English translation, *The Sevene Poyntes of Trewe Love and Everylasynge Wisdame*; Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* and *Epistle on the Mixed Life*; the possibly Bernardian *Meditationes Piisime de Cognitione Humanae Conditionis*, later translated and published by Wynkyn de Worde as *The Medytacyens of Saynte. Bernarde*; the anonymous *Tractatus de interiori domo, seu de conscientia aedificanda*; St. Bonaventure's *Sililoquies*; and the anonymous *Novem Virtutes*.

[147] Here Klausner suggests St. Bonaventure's *The Mind's Road to God* and the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*.

As the play's opening dialogue insists through Wysdom's constant re-direction of Anima's inquiries, both the ritual of penance and the play's iconographic descriptions are not ends in and of themselves, but signs that participate in transcendent reality. Through them, *Wisdom* testifies that only through these sensible signs do we begin to know; they are the first and the last step, since the knowledge Anima gains is always embodied knowledge. Even though she allegorically represents a non-bodied soul, her presence on stage demands that she must return to her body with the truth she comes to know and activate it by her Wyll. She must live the truth. When she does so, Wysdom argues, she participates in his divine life.

Paulson alludes to the ways in which ritual and sign accomplish this transcendence in a particular way:

> The elaborate spectacle of Anima and her inner faculties' penitential cleansing is finally a visible sign of the invisible grace of human redemption. For it is, as *Wisdom* insists, through the elaborate spectacles of orthodox practice, the sensible signs through which the divine is not studied but recognized, that such grace is known.[148]

However, without articulation of the mechanism by which the "elaborate spectacles" function, the "visible sign" loses its *participatory* connection to the "invisible grace" it re-presents to the world. The playwright recognizes that "orthodox practice" is deeply rooted in the ontology of God who is non-competitively transcendent and relational, and which renders invisible "grace" God's *gift*. When they are not recognized as participants in divine reality, signs and rituals become mere spectacles, and both become more difficult to justify in religious practice. *Wisdom* insists on the connection between reality and symbol through participation, and particularly through a relationship of giving. This is the deepest rhetorical objective of the play: through its dramatization of the ritual,

[148] Paulson, "A Theater of the Soul's Interior," 279.

Wysdom expresses the ontological concern at the heart of orthodoxy and the paradigm of participation that bridges them.

Furthermore, Wisdom's ontological response to Lollardy addresses Wyclif's ultimately ontological concern. Gordon Leff explains that Wyclif's "rejection of the prevailing explanation" of the Eucharist was based in his opposition to "two assumptions…almost universally held until Wyclif," that explained how the host maintained its accidents—the appearance of bread—while its substance was completely changed in the consecration to Christ's being. Leff explains:

> Wyclif's position meant two fundamental shifts away from the hitherto accepted one… Wyclif distinguished between the eucharist in its natural form as bread and wine and in its sacramental import. In the latter sense Christ was really and truly present spiritually in the host, as he was not in a mere sign for him such as a crucifix. But at the same time that did not for Wyclif…mean that Christ was there in his own person. Wyclif gave none of Ockham's consideration to the problem of Christ's mode of existence in the host, because he did not conceive him in the eucharist in a personal manner; nor indeed did Wyclif ever specify what he meant by Christ's spiritual presence.[149]

Wyclif ultimately fell into heresy under an ontological problem: as Leff explains, his dismissal of the Thomist account of the Eucharist marked "a divergent ontology and with it a conflicting conception of what God can legitimately do."[150] While Wyclif believed that Christ was present in the Eucharist, he did not believe that Christ transubstantiated the substance of the host. According to Leff, Wyclif understood God to be *in all created things* by means of "the archetypes or intelligible being (*esse intelligibile*) that God had of all possible or actual creatures."[151] In other words, Wyclif's ontology held that God's

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[149] Leff, Gordon. "Ockham and Wyclif on the Eucharist," *Reading Medieval Studies: Annual Proceedings of the Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies in the University of Reading*, vol 2, (1976), 7.

[150] Ibid., 1.

[151] Ibid., 2.

"eternal and indestructible" being infused creation, such that created substances were not an image and likeness but, in at least some small manner, a shared being.[152] For this reason, "he refused to accept transubstantiation as the supersession of one substance by another; for that would entail the annihilation of what was transubstantiated."[153] Ultimately, Wyclif's obstacle is his rejection of Augustine's ontological paradox whereby God's utter otherness facilitates intimacy with his creation, rather than competition.

Like Duns Scotus and Ockham before him, Wyclif's ontology gave way to a "univocal construal of the term *being* [which] turned God into one being—however supreme—among many."[154] Under Wyclif's framing, for Christ to truly transubstantiate the substance of bread, he would be forced to compete with his own presence in the substance of created bread, which Wyclif denied was possible. Put into competition with other substances, God becomes one being among many, rather than the *ipsum esse subsistens*. Wyclif's view is strikingly opposite of the Augustinian and Thomistic paradigm of participation by which God gives his being to creation and invites them to participate *in him*.[155]

Augustinian participation, we remember, establishes and articulates the intimate connection between the creator and creation, the invisible and the visible, the sign and the *res*. Both intimacy and connection *are* the specific relationship of gift; giving is not merely the thing God *does*, they are that which he *is*. When, like Anima, the human

[152] Ibid.

[153] Ibid. See also Phillips, "John Wyclif and the Optics of the Eucharist," 257.

[154] Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 15.

[155] See Leff, "Ockham and Wyclif on the Eucharist," esp. pp. 2. Additonally, in *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, Leff explains that Wyclif's "doctrine of being [was] the metaphysical basis of his thinking," and shows how this doctrine, and the "extremes to which [it] was pressed," landed him in heretical thought, 501-2.

reassumes her original likeness, she participates in this giving, and thereby becomes its icon. Within its subsequent Thomist framing, everything that participates in God is elevated into his Reality. And God's "noncompetitive transcendence," in Robert Sokolowski's words , makes participation possible.[156] Or, as Barron says, participation suggests that

> God is so radically other than creation that he can enter into what he has made in a nonintrusive manner…The true God, who is the sheer energy of to-be itself, is not a threat to human flourishing but precisely the ground of human flourishing.[157]

It is, finally, the idea that as the human creature participates in God's relational nature through *original likeness*, he also transcends into Reality without loss. Like Christ he is human and through Christ he is divine.

For Aquinas, transubstantiation implied *conversion* of the substance of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ; the twin concepts of participation and non-competitive transcendence are at its heart. Aquinas argued by "analogy"[158] that the substances of bread and wine do not compete but convert—their "being" is thereby elevated—into the transcendent Reality of God's selfhood. And, as above, God's selfhood is, for both Aquinas and Augustine, understood *as* relationship, the convertibility of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is the basis of all ontology.

For Wyclif, however, Eucharistic participation shifted toward competition—the bread remains bread, and competes for physical space, even after it becomes Christ's

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[156] Sokolowski, Robert. *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology*. South Bend IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982, 35-36. This is a concept grounded in the Chalcedonian doctrine of Christ's two natures.

[157] Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, xiii.

[158] Ibid., 15.

body. He rejects God's ability to "legitimately" coinhere.[159] Wyclif wished to claim that all being shared, somehow, in the nature of God's "intelligible being,"[160] but he insisted that such sharing could not involve the destruction or loss of the sacraments as material objects. He could not admit that God's unique nature, his being "*otherly* other," would let them participate in his transcendent Reality without making them one with it.

As Leff says, "by identifying the intelligible in God with being," Wyclif's theory actually corralled God's being into the realm of equality with creation because he supposed them both incapable of destruction.[161] Wyclif seems to maintain God's omnipotence, but he levels God and his creation despite his insistence that God was "supreme." Thus "transcendence" for Wyclif meant becoming something akin to "supreme being." The ironic result of this leveling was Wyclif's argument that Christ was "present" in the Eucharist only potentially; the substance of bread and wine remained attached to their accidents. Because, for Wyclif, God and creation shared an ontological

[159] The notion of coinherence is the "formula" of Christ's two natures articulated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Barron explains: "Jesus's two natures—human and divine—are grounded and instantiated in the person of the Logos, affecting thereby a hypostatic union of divinity and humanity. Though the natures are realized in the one person, they come together without 'mixing, mingling, or confusion,' that is to say, without losing their ontological integrity and distinctiveness. According to the logic of Chalcedon…divinity and humanity come together in the most intimate kind of union, yet noncompetitively…since, in the incarnation, God becomes a creature without ceasing to be God or compromising the integrity of the creature that he becomes, God must be other than a creaturely nature," *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 33-34. For text from the Council, which Barron cites above, see also Denzinger, Robert, ed. "Definition of the Two Natures of Christ," Council of Chalcedon 451, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Press, 1954: "we confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in human nature, truly God and the same with a rational soul and a body truly man, consubstantial with the Father according to divinity, and consubstantial with us according to human nature, like unto us in all things except sin, [cf. Heb. 4:15]; … one and the same Christ only begotten Son, our Lord, acknowledged in two natures, without mingling, without change, indivisibly, undividedly, the distinction of the natures nowhere removed on account of the union but rather the peculiarity of each nature being kept, and uniting in one person and substance," 60.

[160] But this was especially momentous, as Leff notes, because it "conferred upon [created being] the same attributes of eternity, necessity and indestructibility as God enjoyed," *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, 503.

[161] Ibid., 510.

category, annihilation was impossible and, therefore, the notion of transubstantiation could not be sustained.

As Leff explains, Wyclif's ideas constitute primarily an ontological shift, and only secondarily a theological one. From the orthodox perspective, Wyclif's theological error—his claim that transubstantiation is impossible—resulted not from a lack of faith in miracles so much as it was a failure to understand God's ontology.[162]

As a result, if we take Paulson's suggestion that Wisdom should be seen as a response to Lollard heresy, I argue that that response is focused less on the specific ritual of penance and more on the fundamental question regarding the nature of the human soul. Theorizing the play's dramatic visualization of the "route to self-knowledge [as] a manifestly and materially penitential one," Paulson makes a strong case for the play's specific defense of the penitential ritual as an educative practice that responds to the Lollard criticism that "traditional confessional language was an inadequate means of representing the interior."[163] However, as I have shown above, both Wyclif and *Wisdom*'s central concerns are ontological; any response the play may be making to Lollardy should be understood this way as well. If penance is educative, it performs that function with the ultimate end of restoring Anima's selfhood to her *original likeness* by means of self-giving love.

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[162] Examinations of Wyclif's antisacramentalism are numerous. See, for example, Anne Hudson, *Studies in the Transmission of Wyclif's Writings*. Ashgate, 2008 and *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988; Ian Levy, *John Wyclif's Theology of the Eucharist in its Medieval Context*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2015; Heather Phillips, "John Wyclif and the Optics of the Eucharist," *From Ockham to Wyclif*. Edited by Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks. Blackwell, 1987; Stephen Lahey, *John Wyclif*. Oxford, 2009; on the extension of Wyclif's antisacramentalism situated within the historical context of *Wisdom* (i.e. 15th century East Anglia), see John Thompson, *The Later Lollards, 1414-1520*, London: Oxford University Press, 1965, 127-38, and Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion*, London: Hanbledon Press, 1984, 60-61, 84, 88.

[163] Paulson, "A Theater of the Soul's Interior," 266, 261. Here, Paulson cites Katherine Little, *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England*, Notre Dame, Ind: Univ of Notre Dame Press, 2006, esp. ch. 2.

The Self According to Good Friday: Anima's Re-formation to Selfhood

In the preceding discussion, I have argued that *Wisdom*'s central concerns are ontological and that its rhetorical choices are a response to theological and philosophical ideas that dissent from an orthodox understanding of being. However, these concerns drive the play's *further* argument, which develops beyond the opening dialogue in the remainder of the drama. While the opening dialogue frames the play's immediate concern with the soul's ontology, the rest of the drama develops the meaning of that ontology as well as how Anima can return to *original likeness*. The final portion of this chapter, then, addresses these essential questions: what, specifically, is *Wisdom*'s ontological vision? That is, how does the universal claim of *original likeness* become manifest in the particular soul, and how does Anima exhibit that universality? Given the allegorical nature of the play, is it possible to outline *Wisdom*'s argument for *original likeness* of the soul in more practical terms? What is the vision of selfhood Wysdom has in mind, and how does the play's climactic event—sacramental penance—educate Anima so that she comes to know herself?

With regard to each of these questions, I propose that the "doctryne" of charity Wysdom elaborates is both a moral directive and an unfolding of Anima's selfhood. The soul's charity, he shows, is the ground of Anima's *original likeness* to the Trinitarian God who "ys charyte."[164] When she is like God, Anima actualizes her being through a self-gift of love. In *Wisdom*, charity is something one *does* to be who one *is*.

On one hand, as we have seen above, the play insists that God's being love and his giving love are simultaneous and that the relationality implied by this simultaneity is

[164] *Wisdom*, l. 270. See also ll. 272, 285-7, 1135.

ontologically basic: it is the third person of the Trinity, one with the Father and the Son. On the other hand, though the fallen human soul still bears the likeness of its creator, only by being and giving love can it be reformed in its *original likeness*. This is the problem with which the play is concerned following the opening dialogue: *Wisdom* argues that such reformation hinges on Anima's "undyrstondynge" of the love-gift through both knowledge and experience, and through it she becomes most fully a self. So, as we shall see, she must freely choose to be "in charyte," by remembering and conforming herself to him.

Re-formation to her *original likeness* comes to fullness only when Anima "images" the simultaneous harmony of Trinitarian relationality, which the play calls "charyte." The way Anima "images" charity is expressed by her Undyrstondynge; we see this perhaps most clearly when Wysdom explains that souls can be "in charyte" or "cum to charyte."[165] Undyrstondynge makes a case for this combination of concepts under the term "charyte" when he first introduces himself as the part of Anima that "behold[es] wat Gode ys":

> For, for love, that Lorde made man of nought.
> Thys ys that love whyche ys clepyde charyte;
> For Gode ys charyte, as autors tellys[166]

With a characteristic nod to its patristic influences, *Wisdom* affirms, through Undyrstondynge, the Irenaean doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*[167]: "for love, that Lorde

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[165] *Wisdom*, ll. 271, 274.

[166] *Wisdom*, ll. 268-70.

[167] Irenaeus of Lyon, *Contra Haeres*. IV. *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*. Translated and Annotated by Dominic J. Unger, OFM CAP. New York: The Newman Press, 2012, esp. book 4.

made man of nought."[168] It is precisely this love—with which God speaks his creature into being and gives the creature his Reality—"whyche ys clepyde charyte." *Caritas* is God who IS and who DOES: giv*ing*, lov*ing*, and both simultaneously. The *Wisdom* writer's insistence that the soul's likeness to God depends upon one's self-giving constitutes the difference between orthodox and heterodox doctrines of being and non-being. For Wysdom, "charyte" is *being*[169] in that it verbally combines the gerunds "loving" and "giving": it reflects the Trinitarian relationality of the Word as the ontological ground of the *human* soul.

The *Wisdom* writer's syntactical construction indicates a further argument in that "for" implies another simultaneous meaning. Not only does God create man out of love for—or, because he loves—him, but God also created man *intending him for* the purpose of love. This simultaneous meaning bears out in the rest of the passage, as Undyrstondynge makes explicit the inherent mutuality of "charyte": "Ande woo ys in charyte, in Gode dwellyt he,/And Gode, that is charyte, in hym dwellys."[170] Here, Undyrstondynge clarifies this double purpose of God's creation: the soul who is "in charity" dwells "in God," and God, likewise, "in hym dwellys." As above, when Anima maintains her *original likeness* to God, who is love-gift, she is in him and he in her.[171]

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[168] Summarizing Irenaeus' *Adversus haereses*, Barron frames this doctrine in a way that strikes at the heart of Undyrstondynge's claim: "creation and the providential guidance of the world involve an iconic representation of the internal dynamics of the divine life. God does not need the world, nor is he in any kind of competition with it; rather, he loves it into being and lavishly shares his life with it," *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 53.

[169] That is, the human's *being*, which is itself a gift of the One who IS, and is not to be confused with the ontologically other Being, or *esse ipsum subsistens*.

[170] *Wisdom*, ll. 270-71.

[171] Notable in this passage, as in the opening dialogue, are the allusions to John's gospel. Here especially, see Jn. 15. Another complete study regarding these connections could be quite fruitful.

They are in communion when Anima participates in God's Trinitarian givingness. This communion both parallels and participates in His Trinitarian relationality.[172]

In God, love and gift do not merely exist simultaneously; they are in fact the same. They are not attributes or qualities: God's Being is Loving Giving. For this reason, Undyrstondynge and Wysdom (themselves both epithets for Christ) express this co-being by means of copulatives: "Gode *ys* charyte." With the introduction of the Mights, the play shifts its focus in order to emphasize this copulative relationship between love and gift; through their harmony, they explicitly imitate and thereby participate in God's being. The soul and its intra-relationality is, as Philips explains, beyond signs; "the sign is the *res*."[173]

When the play re-situates the emphasis of God as Love to God as Charity, it necessarily shifts our understanding of the human soul. The play emphasizes self-giving as requisite to Anima's original likeness as Undyrstondynge finishes his introduction: "Thus, undyrstondynge of Gode compellys/To cum to charyte—than have hys lyknes, lo!"[174] Here the playwright reenlists Wysdom's emphasis on participation from the opening dialogue and applies it to the human soul: to participate in God's Reality, one must also be loving-giving. To do so is to be one's self. As it unfolds beyond these opening "introductions," the drama underscores the simultaneous relationality of *caritas*: the human self must also be a gerund. So, when Wysdom replies to Anima that she should give him her heart, it is not as a *sign* of her love that she should give it; rather it is

[172] This is not to say that she is another person of the trinity—that she becomes a deity. It is only to say that being *like* to him, she participates in the love He gives and is.

[173] Philips, "John Wyclif and the Religion of the People," 567.

[174] *Wisdom*, ll. 269-74.

a real giving-over to his governance, and a new existence of herself *as gift* that he requires. His most basic desire is for her to be love-gift, as he is.

However, the moment the gift is separated from the self, it becomes a mere transaction of symbols. Indeed, the precursor to Anima's fall shows her inner life deteriorating into the realm of symbolic exchange, which denies participation its power to image reality. Aware of the participatory power of the mights' unity, Lucyfer strategizes to "dysvygure" Anima, so that she can no longer participate in God's likeness.[175] When Lucyfer plots to "sew damnacyon," he accomplishes it by separately convincing each Might to work against his former nature, and therefore against unified participation in the soul's likeness to the Trinity.[176] For example, as he attempts to gain Wyll's consent to "leve [his] stodyes," Lucyfer works to divide him from his two counterparts:

> The Wyll of the Soule hathe fre dominacyon,
> Dyspute not to moche in this wyth reson,
> Yet the nethyr parte to this taketh sum instruccyon,
> And so shulde the over parte, but he were woode.[177]

Lucyfer explains that Wyll has freedom over himself and that he need not "dispute" too much with "reason" (Mynde), nor consult with Undyrstondynge; instead, Wyll should take instruction from Lucyfer, unless he is crazy. And, as Klausner notes, "since Will is not much given to logical argument, he falls easily."[178]

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[175] Ibid., ll. 353.

[176] For example, Lucyfer convinces Mynde, to cease contemplation and live the active life instead, which is a direct turn away from what Mynde is made for. Undyrstondynge, for his part, is convinced to *feel* through the bodily senses, rather than seek "knowynge" with the help of Mynde. Finally, Lucyfer convinces Wyll to cease that which he was made to do—offer praise and choose righteous action—and to "lede a comun lyff" instead, ll. 389-92, 472.

[177] *Wisdom*, ll. 482-85.

[178] See fn to ll. 473-76 in the TEAMS edition.

In both the Augustinian and Thomistic traditions, reason understands that something is true and presents it to the will that further knows that it should be desired as Good. However, in this traditional medieval epistemology of "act," the will is not beholden to the dictates of reason; it is free. Lucyfer plays on the sense that the Wyll is superior, and not in need of Mynde or Undyrstondynge's guidance. In reality, Wyll needs his two "partneres" in order to be fully himself, a fact of which Lucyfer takes full advantage. Lucyfer later reasons that since he has made reason (Mynde) "both deff and dumme," and since Grace (Undyrstondynge) "ys out and put arome," he can easily cause Wyll to "spyll."[179] Lucyfer is jealous of "man" for displacing him from his heavenly dwelling, that is, his communion with God.[180] So he plots to instigate Anima's internal self-rupture by disrupting the harmonious communion of her mights.

As the Mights begin to commit active sins—those familiar ones such as maintenance and lechery—the play demonstrates how those sins flow from the destruction of the Might's relational harmony. Specifically, we see how *caritas* changes from an element of *being* and becomes instead a symbolic exchange. For example, before the Mights commit themselves to their debauched revelry, they consider the cause of their "welfare."[181] Their self-giving relationality already disrupted, the Mights offer various "condycyons," or reasons, that they have to "worschyppe": each of their "causes" demonstrates an objectification of the notion of gift.[182]

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[179] *Wisdom*, ll. 522-25.

[180] Ibid., ll. 325-40.

[181] Ibid., l. 624. The contrast between "welfare" and "everlasting joy" might be drawn again here.

[182] Ibid., ll. 625, 28. Note that now, words like "worship" and "reason" are used by the Mights under the false pretense of "cleneness" introduced by Lucyfer above.

For example, Mynde, they say, is a steward many fear because of the possible consequences of a sudden withdrawal of his "frendeschyppe."[183] He then reveals that he supports the "shendeschyppe," or shameful behavior of others under his "lordeschyppe" "for, to get good, this a grett spede ys!"[184] That is, he gives monetary support for the sins of others in return for certain "goods" he can get in return. Mynde's gift is no longer a gift of self in charity; his giving is conditional, and comes at a great price to his receiver. In linguistic terms, his gifts leave off being gerunds and become nouns; they are *things* to be exchanged for services. Divorced from being, they become symbols to be *used*.

Undyrstondynge, likewise, has come to objectify the gift, but much more explicitly: "[I] choppe and chonge with symonye,/ And take large geftys!" Here, he admits to bargaining and trading with simony, the illicit practice of selling ecclesiastical offices, benefits, and pardons for money. This is a particularly egregious offense because it attempts to equate the participatory Reality of the gift that obtains in the supernatural realm to the temporal and material advantage to be gained by a simoniac.[185] To take bribes in return for sacraments and sacramentals is to reduce them to objects for sale. Simony falsifies the economics of redemption; it turns Christ's buying back the soul, embodied, as it were, in the Eucharist, into a financial transaction.

Finally, Wyll takes Undyrstondynge's commodification of the sacred and applies it in his own way to the flesh. Spending three times the amount he "takes," Wyll engages in an unequal exchange in which "onclennes [sexual impurity, lechery]" is a "nysyte

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[183] Ibid., ll. 629-35.

[184] Ibid., l. 635.

[185] See Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, paragraphs 354 (Roman Council of 1060) and 364 (Second Lateran Council of 1139).

[nicety, trivial object].”[186] For Wyll, who sometimes gives and is sometimes given[187], the exchange of objects—including bodies—is as “cumun [common] as the way!”[188]

But these kinds of exchange, which the Mights claim are the source of their “welfare,” are clearly not the “charyte” Wysdom had in mind earlier in the play. Here instead, *giving* becomes mere “gift,” a symbolic exchange of object for object, which disassembles the original ontological self-sameness of *caritas* and self.[189] Indeed, as the dialogue between the Mights progresses, each admits that he “takes” money and property from unsuspecting victims, which marks the deterioration of exchange into outright theft.[190] Because it is no longer a full giving-over of the self out of love for the other, as among the Trinitarian persons or between God and the Soul, *giving* cannot remain *being*.

From Wysdom’s perspective, then, Anima’s “re-education” through sacramental penance must be a process that restores the copular relationship between giving and being.[191] He begins by “re-minding” the Mights—in other words, by helping them to remember their true selfhood. Speaking to the Mights and Anima simultaneously, he exclaims his horror at her “horrybull wyse”: “Wy art thou creature so onkynde

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[186] *Wisdom*, ll. 645-51. Worth noting is the pun on the Middle English “take,” which meant “to seize,” but also “to penetrate.” See MED, def. 1c.

[187] Ibid., l. 646. Later he admits that he “takes amedys,” or fines, from the brothels he visits, stealing the “purs” of those that haven’t made offenses, ll. 801-03.

[188] Ibid., l. 651.

[189] See also l. 922, where Wysdom rebukes the Mights for their misdirected “giving,” in which they have “usyde” the gift that Wysdom has given them and “gevyst thou myn enmy.”

[190] *Wisdom*, ll. 800-11.

[191] Paulson hints at the necessity of this restoration, but her focus is on their performance of ritual as an educative habit that in some way forms the soul, “A Theater of the Soul’s Interior,” 277. However, I suggest that, through a participation paradigm, the play argues that such “performance” of relationship between the Mights isn’t a performance of things that already are, it is being itself.

[unnatural]/Thus to defoule Godys own place/That was made so gloryus wythout ende?"[192] Drawing attention to the unnaturalness of her current state—her choice, literally to de-nature herself—and to the contrast between her hellish appearance and her *original likeness*, Wysdom reminds Anima not only of what she was created to be but also of what she was supposed to do with his giving: "Thou hast made thee a bronde of hell/Whom I made the ymage of lyght….Why gevyst thou myn enmy that I have wrought?...Why lovyst that ys nought?"[193] Wysdom's line of inquiry here reveals the ontological consequences for misdirected giving: Why do you give my enemy [Lucyfer] what I have made [the soul herself]? How can you mistake a hellish brand for the spiritual light that is God in you? Why do you love that which does not illuminate but burns until nothing remains? In other words, the Mights' distortion of the self-gift relationship has led to a love of nothingness. And such love, Wysdom argues, is no love at all.[194]

Mynde responds, finally, by recognizing his offense, which spurs his companions to recognize their own sins as well. This moment enacts the play's argument regarding the educative process of penance as an ontological project: the scene reveals that *Wisdom* is not solely concerned with ritual penance as a pedagogical tool. Of course, sacramental penance is self-educative, but the play is particularly careful to indicate its participatory

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[192] *Wisdom*, ll. 904-06.

[193] Ibid., ll. 916-23. The contrast between the "bronde of hell" and "ymage of light" is strange here, as "bronde" can be understood as a "fire" or "torch for illumination." However, if taken ontologically, we might understand the "bronde" as something to be destroyed and consumed, whereas "ymage of light" is likely meant as a reflection or fruitful reproduction of the good.

[194] Here Wysdom contrasts the "love" Anima has given to the devil with the "love [that] may brynge drede to mynde," *Wisdom*, l. 915. While he uses the same word for each, he also uses the former simultaneously with the concept of hate, especially as Anima has directed it toward him through her "love" for the devil: "Why hatyst thou thi frende?...Wy doyst thou, Soule, me all despyght?...Why hatyst thou vertu? Why lovyst that ys nought?" ll. 913-23.

understanding and concern with the ontological reality effected by penance. Specifically, the moment when the Mights recognize their sin is not yet penance, and not yet contrition. Instead, we witness their *compunction*—that "pricking" of the conscience, through which the soul is re-minded of its true self through its memory of What and Who God IS.[195]

In this moment, the play dramatizes the opening dialogue's theoretical differences between "knowynge" and "experiens." That is to say, the difference between compunction and contrition is the difference between knowledge and experience; and just as the *Wisdom* writer was careful to parse their theoretical differences in the opening dialogue, he is careful now to show their different ontological effects in practice. This parsing, as Paulson suggests, serves to "[mark] the importance of contrition in the penitential process."[196] Paulson refers here to the height of the drama when Anima becomes contrite and devils literally run out from under her garments, which is indeed visually dramatic.[197] However, this visual drama signals, rather, that contrition is a source of deep ontological change that involves a shift from knowing to being. *Wisdom* shows that while compunction and contrition appear emotionally similar, they have different epistemological and ontological consequences.

Whereas compunction is a "pricking" of the conscience, which speaks to its epistemological capacity, contrition is a deep and genuine "sorowe," a "bruising of the

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[195] Here again we can see the thorough influence of Augustine's theory of memory, being, and Reality. See *Confessions*, X.24, XI.8-9 and, especially, XII.10.

[196] Paulson, "A Theater of the Soul's Interior," 276.

[197] *Wisdom*, s.d. ll. 911, 977.

heart," a "crushing," or even "destruction."[198] The latter are ontological rather than epistemological conditions; they actualize the knowledge that is "pricked" by compunction. Thus, as the devils finally exit the scene, Wysdom observes that "contrycyon avoydyth [drives out] the devllys blake!/Dedly synne ys non you within!"[199] The power of contrition is so great an ontological modifier that even though she has not performed the full act of penance, the strongest consequence of her sin (a turn toward non-being) is literally driven out of her. In this moment, Anima begins to live again.

Indeed, the Mights demonstrate the difference between the epistemological change produced by compunction separately from the ontological effect of Anima's contrition of heart. They display knowledge of their sins and even their dependence upon God to "be amendyde."[200] Wyll, for example, understands that he will be "grounded" in God through "the giffte of hys specyall [intimate] grace."[201] However, even after each Might has diligently prompted the others to acknowledge his sin, and after they have thereby restored a working relationality, Anima is surprised to see herself unchanged:

> Than wyth you thre the Soule dothe crye,
> "Mercy Gode!" Why change I nowte,
> I that thus horryble in synne lye,
> Sythe Mynde, Wyll, and Undryrstondynge be brought
> To have knowynge they ill wrought?

Why, she asks, have I not changed, despite my Mights' knowledge of their sins? She continues:

> What ys that shall make me clene?

[198] See McEntire, Sandra. *The Doctrine of Compunction in Medieval England: Holy Tears*. Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1990.

[199] *Wisdom*, l. 978.

[200] Ibid., l. 935.

[201] Ibid., l. 943-45.

Put yt, Lorde, into my thowte!
Thi olde mercy let me remene.

Here Anima finally realizes that, beyond all knowledge of her sins, she must "remene"—remember—mercy, which is God's very self-giving. And remembering, as in Augustine, prompts not merely the soul's knowledge of sin, but her reciprocal experience of self-giving, since what the soul re-members is God's incarnation and crucifixion.

The distinction *Wisdom* sets up in this moment, wherein Anima realizes that knowledge of her sins is not enough to make her clean, parallels her opening inquiry about love, in which Wysdom shows her the difference between knowing about love and *being* love itself. As a result, Wysdom's answer to her question—"what is it that shall make me clean?"—parallels his response to her question about love in the opening dialogue. That is, when Anima desires an epistemological answer to her problem—"Put it, Lord, into my thought!"—Wysdom reframes the resolution ontologically:

Thow the soule mynde take
Ande undyrstondynge of hys synnys allwey,
Beynge in wyll, yt [sin] forsake,
Yit thes do not only synnys awey,
But very *contrycyon*, who that have may,
That ys purger and clenser of synne.[202]

Wysdom explains that even if the Mights acknowledge, understand, and resolve not to sin again, sin has already produced a shift away from being that this knowledge cannot resolve. Instead, the only remedy is "very"—that is, true in the sense of experiential—contrition. The word must become deed.

Next, Anima begins to weep—exhibiting the sorrow of "very" contrition—and resolves to complete her penance. As she exits, the *Wisdom* writer draws attention to the

[202] *Wisdom*, ll. 956-61, emphasis added.

Latin *contricio* through Anima's singing of verses from the book of Lamentations: "*Magna velud mare contricio, contricio tua: quis consoletur tui*?"[203] Here Anima recalls the utter destruction of Jerusalem (itself the dwelling of the Lord in the Pentateuch) in the second chapter of Lamentations: "As great as the sea is your sorrow, your destruction; who can console you?"[204] Yet here, though the Vulgate has *contricio* only once, the *Wisdom* writer repeats the word and personalizes it, adding "*tua*." Rhetorically, this addition emphasizes the gravity of the concept of *contricio* by allowing space for polyvalent translation.[205] It is possible, in other words, to imagine that the *Wisdom* writer not only wishes to emphasize the importance of contrition to the sacrament, as Paulson notes, but signals as well the destruction of sinful self that Anima had become.

From this position of utter humility, Anima realizes her complete poverty in the face of Christ's sacrifice—his *being caritas*. And only from this position can Anima remember that God is love-giving. Augustine describes this moment well: "I wandered away, but I remembered you. I heard your voice at my back, calling me to return…I was death to myself. But in you I live again."[206] In the act of remembering, Anima can access the education that sacramental penance truly offers: she can re-learn how to be *caritas*

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[203] Ibid., ll. 996-97.

[204] This is my translation. In the footnotes to the TEAMS edition, Klausner provides this translation: "Greater than the sea is your breach, your contrition; what can comfort you?"

[205] The Vulgate version of Lamentations 2:13 has "…*magna enim velut mare contritio tua quis medebitur tui*." We can note here the difference in spelling as well as the *Wisdom* writer's substitution of "*consoletur*" for "*medebitur.*"

[206] *Confessions*, XII. X.

and return to her original self. The humility of contrition leads to this return; the sacramental act itself is, as Wysdom instructs, a "yeldynge."[207]

Still, at the moment Anima is ready to engage in the sacrament, she exits the stage, and the ritual itself is "performed" outside of the public view. Paulson notes that this decision provides the opportunity for a costume change.[208] More than that, however, it complements the following scene in which Wysdom delivers his "sermon" on the nine points. While the contrition scene demonstrates the interior effect of the heart's contrition upon the soul, Wysdom's sermon makes visible the effect of the second step of penance, confession of the mouth. Together, these scenes "show" the audience the inner ontological workings of sacramental penance within the soul. After Wysdom's sermon, we witness the ontological effect of the third step, satisfaction of deed. Contrition of heart, confession of mouth, and satisfaction of deed express the same relational act, which restores givingness within the soul so as to recover its original likeness of being.

The contrition and sermon/confession scenes figure first the soul's destruction and then a subsequent process of re-creation at the hands of Wysdom. The contrition scene reveals the ontological gravity of sin within the soul, particularly the way in which it disfigures the soul. Then we see how Wysdom uses Anima's "*contricio*" to restore her original likeness to God in his sermon. By means of his creative word, Anima is, in a real sense, re-formed. As a pair, the two scenes illustrate a more complete picture of the

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[207] *Wisdom*, l. 974.

[208] Paulson, "A Theater of the Soul's Interior," 276. Paulson goes on to suggest that the play is able to "elide the juridical role of the priest in penance, one of the most objectionable elements of the ritual according to the Lollards." Katherine Steele Brokaw argues the opposite, suggesting that Wysdom's "sermon" attempts to please both orthodox and Lollard-leaning viewers. See *Staging Harmony: Music and Religious Change in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2016, 40-42. I argue that, in fact, the *Wisdom* writer's concern with the ontological change effected by the sacrament doesn't elide, but instead explains, how this "juridical role" is meant to work in the confessional.

ontological transformation that occurs in sacramental penance: the soul's re-formation is a new birth.

Wysdom re-forms Anima by verbally constructing her "poyntys," or "features" under the order of *caritas*.[209] Each of these virtues engages the soul in self-giving love, whether directed toward God or "thi neybure."[210] Moreover, Wysdom presents the soul's characteristics under this "order" by drawing careful distinctions between symbolic self-giving and the giving of self that participates in God's reality. In elucidating the third point, for instance, Wysdom explains that he would rather the soul "suffyr pacyenly for my love" and reprove her neighbor with mercy than "dyscyplyn…thi body wyth peynys greve," that is, to perform acts of self-mortification.[211] In other words, he would rather that Anima love both God and neighbor with patience and self-giving love than that she practice a symbolic asceticism that is entirely self-focused.[212] Similarly, in the fifth point, Wysdom implores the soul to "have pyte and compassyon/ Of thi neybur whyche ys seke and nedy," rather than to "[fast] forty yer…in water and brede."[213] Here, Wysdom re-orders the ontological relationship between the self that imitates Christ by suffering and

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[209] The MED lists the following definitions of "poynt," which are used in the same historical period and sense as the "poyntes" of the *Pearl* poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; see especially (a) State of being, condition, situation, disposition;… (c) a good quality, virtue; (d) a characteristic, trait; also, a physical feature, facial feature; (e) reputation.

[210] *Wisdom*, l. 1015.

[211] *Wisdom*, ll. 1014-17.

[212] Scholars have imagined Wysdom's priorities in this section as a contribution to the debate about the *vita mixta*. For this discussion see, for example, Paulson, "A Theater of the Soul's Interior," 263, or Lawrence Clopper's earlier argument in *Drama, Play, and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period*, University of Chicago Press, 2001, esp. 262-65. In my view, Wysdom's argument is not an attempt to play this debate out on stage, even though *Wisdom*'s source is, in part, Hilton's *Mixed Life*. Rather, the *Wisdom* writer seems to assess the meaning of actions within both dispositions, contemplative and active, under the alternate order of the participatory versus the symbolic.

[213] *Wisdom*, ll. 1030-35.

the soul that restores its likeness to Him by self-giving. The first is a solitary askesis, the second is a participatory act that imitates the love that is one with the Father and the Son.

This is why, in the capstone to the nine points, Wysdom makes clear the proper *order* of Anima's love, requesting that she "love me soverenly." That is to say, Wysdom doesn't necessarily condemn the ascetic practices of self-mortification and fasting, but he insists that these come after "dedys of charyte." The demand to act charitably is in no way superficial; to love him, he clarifies, is not a symbolic act. Deeds of charity participate in him and effect the soul's original likeness. In fact, in this passage, Wysdom formally equates loving him sovereignly with charitable deeds:

> The nynte, God sethe, "Love me soverenly,
> Ande that to me more plesant ys
> Than yf thou went upon a pylar of tre
> That wer sett full of sharpe prykyys
> So that thou cut thi flesche into the smale partys."
> Lo, Gode ys plesyde more with the dedys of charyte
> Than all the peynys man may suffer iwys. [214]

As in each of the points, Wysdom cites first God's word and then develops his own commentary, summarizing the "poynte." In this final virtue, the love of God as one's sovereign and above all else, is more pleasing than even undertaking to literally imitate the crucifixion.[215] Wysdom's commentary then rephrases this love of God as "deeds of charity," reaffirming the copular relationship between loving and giving. This equation between the soul's love of God and giving of one's love to her "neybur" is another

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[214] *Wisdom*, ll. 1058-63.

[215] The word "soveren" in the MED displays also under definitions for the word "suffer," and the *Wisdom* writer plays on this ambiguity. To love God above all else, as the poet shows in the contrition scene, is ontologically a death to the sinning self. Even physical death—or its imitation—is less significant to him than ontological change, since the soul is eternal.

illustration of his insistence that the soul's likeness to God is participatory, that it resides in the giving of itself to others.

In this way, the play dramatizes the sacrament's ontological effect. Wysdom, who is Christ the Logos literally re-forms the soul into his likeness, using his Word to re-install the order of charity. As Anima participates in the rite—with all its external requirements—offstage, Wysdom literally creates anew her interior, shaping her in the nine virtues under the order of charity.

That Anima has been reformed by penance isn't surprising; however, to view Wysdom's speech on the *novem virtutes* as re-formative in a creative sense is to understand how the *Wisdom* writer imagines the sacrament's ontological effect. The following scene testifies to this effect: having completed the sacrament, Anima emerges from off-stage appearing more beautiful than even her initial entrance in the play.[216] Moreover, without prompt or direction, she exhibits *caritas* immediately, singing: "*quid retributam Domino pro omnibus que retribuit mihi? Calicem salutaris accipiam et nomen Domini invocabo* [What can I render to the Lord for all that he has given me? I will accept the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord]."[217] Thus re-formed in the order of *caritas*, she can appropriately respond to Wysdom's self-giving mercy with her own self-giving: "what can I render to him?" She recognizes and enacts a renewal in mutual self-giving, accepting his mercy and calling upon him in mutual love-giving.[218]

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[216] Compare stage directions from ll. 17 and 1065. Klausner notes that the costumes and "crownys" of Anima, Wyll, Undyrstondynge, and Mynde are all more elaborate than in the first entrance. See fn to l. 1065.

[217] *Wisdom*, s.d. l. 1065.

[218] Klausner's footnote to the TEAMS edition incorrectly identifies the source of this line as Psalm 115. The Psalm is 116. Note also that the context of the Psalm makes clear the mutuality of the soul's

Her praise not only participates in the ontological compulsion to givingness, but it also rightly orders her relationship to him. Because it comes in the form of a question, Anima's praise recognizes the utter otherness of God, even while she has been restored in his likeness.

The reactions of both Wysdom and the Mights affirm that this is no superficial change, but is instead deeply reformative on the ontological level. Wysdom's immediate response witnesses to Anima's restored selfhood through two seemingly paradoxical images: first spousal union and then crucifixion. Wysdom's marriage of these images explicitly joins suffering and self-gift, beauty and destruction, pain and joy. In so doing, the *Wisdom* writer concretizes the relationship between loving and giving oneself away; the cross is joy because in God's economy total self-gift is total self-gain.

Wysdom first affirms their renewed spousal union by invoking the Song of Songs: "*Vulnerasti cor meum, soror mea, sponsa* [you have wounded my heart, my sister, my bride]."[219] He follows with declarations of her "hye [divine] love," her "bewtys bryght" appearance, and how she "were never so leve to me verelye," all signaling the joy of marriage.[220] Immediately thereafter, he recalls the image of his crucifixion:

> Ande ther [where] your fyve wyttys offendyde has [have],
> Ande to mak a sythe [atonement] be impotent,
> My fyve wyttys, that never dyde trespass
> Hathe made a sythe to the Father suffycyent.[221]

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relationship to Christ. Each gives to the other, such that to "call upon the name of the Lord" *is* to "yield" or "give back" to him.

[219] *Wisdom*, ll. 1084-85. See also Songs 4:9.

[220] Ibid., ll. 1089-93. For the definition of "hye" as "divine," see MED "heigh" 2a.

[221] Ibid., ll. 1094-97.

Wysdom explains that whereas Anima's deeds aren't sufficient to satisfy the demands of justice for original sin and cannot make their own atonement, his self-givingness prevails, atoning through his gift of self for her sake. He explains his suffering in detail, according to each of his senses, especially "by touchynge": "I felte peyns smerte…My body full of holys as a dovehous."[222] Emphasizing the destruction of his body in his passion and crucifixion, he signals the ontological gravity of both his *becoming* a body and suffering death as punishment for the sins of his creation.

Wysdom lingers, remembering his crucifixion in such detail. Yet this slow accumulation of detail is more than mere description, as was popular in the affective tradition of meditation; instead it lends dramatic power to what becomes a *volta* or, dramatic turn, in his response to Anima's reformation: "In *thys* ye be reformyde, Sule, my plesere,/ And now ye be the very temple of Jhesus."[223] That is, in *his* giving, she is restored to her *original likeness*, the "temple" and dwelling place of Jesus. Here, this chapter's epigraphs from Isaiah and Hebrews reveal their ontological weight: Christ is the pure self-giving of God who becomes man, who *knows* human suffering, and who has atoned for the sins of humankind by that suffering. Wysdom explains that this suffering—Christ's self-giving love—is the source and end for her own re-formation.

The possibility for restoration is, of course, a grace—a gift of God's selfhood to the human soul. God, *ipsum esse subsistens*, remains in the soul, despite her "wandering," ever giving an imprint of reality to her, that she might return to herself and thus to him.[224]

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[222] Ibid., l. 1107.

[223] *Wisdom*, ll. 1108-9, my emphasis.

[224] See also *Confessions*, X.16-19.

From Wysdom’s eternal perspective, Anima “ys” and “ware” simultaneously. In *Wisdom*, God is reality, and likeness to God is the human soul’s participation in his transcendent selfhood. Participation in reality is the natural state of the soul, as even Lucyfer attests.[225] The essence of human selfhood, then, according to Wysdom’s ontological argument, is its consistent effort of re-formation to its original likeness.

[225] *Wisdom*, ll. 349-59.

CHAPTER III

CARITAS IS A PERSON: THE TRANSCENDENT SELFHOOD OF MARGERY KEMPE

In his famous dream vision, the “joyless jeweler” of *Pearl* realizes that his daughter, dead at two years old, is married to Christ in heaven and was “quen mad on the fyrst day!” Yet though he rejoices that she is in heaven, the Jeweler’s belief that earthly values have purchase in heaven casts a shadow on his happiness. He cries out:

> “That Cortayse is to fre of dede,
> Ȝyf hyt be soth þat þou conez saye.
> Þou cowþez neuer God nauþer plese ne pray,
> Ne neuer nawþer Pater ne Crede—
> And quen mad on the fyrst day!
> I may not traw, so God me spede,
> Þat God wolde wriþe so wrange away.
> Of countes, damysel, par ma fay,
> Wer fayr in heuen to halde asstate,
> Other ellez a lady of lasse aray;
> Bot a queen!—hit is to dere a date.”[226]

His incredulity, which edges into dismay that his pearl has become a queen shows he does not at all understand God’s mercy; indeed, he even has the presumption to say the “Cortayse” that has been shown her ‘is to fre.” A “lady of lasse aray,” he could perhaps accept, but queen is too high a rank for someone like her. After all, she died so young, she “cowþez neuer God nauþer plese ne pray,/ Ne neuer nawþer Pater ne Crede.” Lacking the daughter’s experience of Christian doctrine, and practice with doing good deeds, the “tale” she tells is “vnresounable” to her earthly father, the jeweler.[227]

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[226] Anonymous. “Pearl.” *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*. Edited and translated by Casey Finch. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, ll. 481-92. Hereafter all citations of Pearl will appear as *Pearl*.

[227] Ibid., l. 590.

I open this chapter on *The Book of Margery Kempe* with a brief reading of *Pearl* because its narrator's misunderstanding of the nature of God's *caritas* strikingly echoes the way many readers have misjudged Margery and her *Book*.[228] Critical uneasiness with Margery's sense of her own singularity has the same source as the Jeweler's difficulty in crediting what his daughter tells him. Would a rational observer say either has any convincing evidence that she has in fact been *chosen*? Yet, as the Pearl maiden teaches her father, God's ways are not our ways. "*Þer is no date of Hys godnesse...And He may do noþynk bot ryȝt*...Of more and lasse in Godez ryche…lys no joparde"[229]; human standards not only do not apply in heaven, they are pulled inside out.[230] God's love is "unreasonable"; the blessedness it confers escapes all earthly gradations, and it is not measured by innocence or the good works of those who receive it.[231] This is the character

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[228] The critical encounter with *The Book of Margery Kempe* has long expressed disbelief, discomfort, and even disdain toward her assumed singularity as *sponsa Christi*. Like the "gentle jeweler" of *Pearl*, we seem unable to believe that "God would work in so strange a way." David Aers observes this critical reaction, citing studies by Clarissa Atkinson and Sarah Beckwith that, prior to the 1980s, reveal "hostility among medievalists" and an "uncritical deployment of…obscure but loaded terms," "The Making of Margery Kempe: Individual and Community." In *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430*. London: Routledge, 1988, 74-75. Clarissa Atkinson. *Mystic*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1983. For recent examples of this critical skepticism, see, for example, the conclusion of Tara Williams', "Manipulating Mary: Maternal, Sexual, and Textual Authority in The Book of Margery Kempe." *Modern Philology* 107 (2010), 550. For an example of the flippancy with which critics have regarded Margery's experience, see the end of Felicity Riddy's "Text and Self in The Book of Margery Kempe" in which she employs the sarcastic phrase "as if" in her critical commentary on Margery's self-presentation.

[229] *Pearl*, ll. 593, 596, 601-02, emphasis added. The Pearl poet draws on Isaiah 55, especially verses 8-13.

[230] In addition to meaning "correct" and "good," the word "ryȝt" here also means "in accordance with justice," and "righteous," MED "right," definitions 3 and 4. For the jeweler's daughter, God's ways may seem unreasonable to the world, but they are always just in "Godez ryche [kingdom]." The daughter's queenship is not just good, but *due* to her.

[231] *Pearl*, ll. 601-60.

and condition of *caritas*, which is where the author of Margery's *Book* situates her encounter with the reader.[232]

In this chapter, I maintain that Margery defines herself and her relation to others in light of her understanding of God as *caritas*.[233] While I do not necessarily advocate for a sympathetic reading of the *Book*, I propose that the skepticism we feel, like the Jeweler's in *Pearl*, is unwarranted if we attend to the intellectual and religious context that determined Margery's conception of selfhood. I argue that Margery shares the same ontology of a self negotiating with its "real" being that we see in *Wisdom*, especially in the opening dialogue of that play. This should not surprise us since *The Book of Margery Kempe* was written in the same region and period as *Wisdom*; its sense of participation, reality, and transcendence draw from the same theological, philosophical, and cultural underpinnings. As a result, I will focus attention on modern critical responses to the *Book,* which tend to find Margery's emotive excesses discomfiting, since they do not accord with current neoliberal opinions about the expression of belief. The purpose of my work is to expose and begin to fill the gaps in these critiques of Margery.

The Recent Critical Approach and its Problematic Assumptions

About halfway through her narrative, Margery recounts how, at Saint Stephen's church in Norwich, she experiences bouts of uncontrollable weeping and sobbing:

[232] Textual criticism on the *Book* is longstanding given that the protagonist admits to illiteracy and must depend on amiable priests to take her dictation. For a helpful summary of that critical history, see Riddy, "Text and Self in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." I don't think it necessary to take a firm perspective on authorship in order to investigate the underlying assumptions and theo-philosophical underpinnings at work in the text. I am not concerned with the question of authorial motive so much as the question of what, philosophically, plays out in it.

[233] As we shall see, Julian of Norwich instructs Margery about the explicit connection between "charyte" and the selfhood of God.

> Whan sche cam in the chirch yerd of Seynt Stefyn, sche cryed, sche roryd, sche wept, sche fel down to the grownd, so fervently the fyer of lofe brent in hir hert. Sithyn sche ros up agen and went forth wepyng into the chirche to the hy awter, and ther sche fel down with boistows sobbyngys, wepyngys, and lowed cryes besyden the grave of the good vicary, al ravyschyd with gostly comfort in the goodnes of owr Lord that wrowt so gret grace for hys servawnt.[234]

As soon as she enters the church yard, Margery is unable to quiet her reaction to the "spiritual comfort" that has "ravished" her. Seized by devotion, she "myth not mesuryn hir wepyng ne hir crying."[235] Inconsolable as she is, the people question the cause and purpose of Margery's tears: "the pepil had gret merveyl of hir, supposyng that sche had wept for sum fleschly er erdly affeccyon."[236] The priests "charitefully led hir to a taverne" where a "certain lady" [237] desires to meet with her. Margery follows the lady to church, whereupon she views the "pete," or *pieta*, and dissolves again into tears:

> And thorw the beholdyng of that pete hir mende was al holy ocupyed in the Passyon of owr Lord Jhesu Crist and in the compassion of owr Lady, Seynt Mary, be which sche [Margery] was compellyd to cryyn ful lowed and wepyn ful sor, as thei sche schulde a deyd."[238]

Again, Margery cries uncontrollably. In response to this display, a witnessing priest remarks wryly: "Damsel, Jhesu is ded long sithyn."[239] With the exception of the Lady, everyone who sees her weeping interprets it in human terms. Such emotion is either the result of some material loss or untimely because the event she bewails happened so long ago. No one seems to think the tears she sheds are the tears of devotion.

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[234] Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Edited by Lynn Staley. Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS, 1996, ll. 3475-80.

[235] Ibid., l. 3485.

[236] Ibid., ll. 3486-87.

[237] There is no critical explanation of this Lady's identity. The *Book* only explains that she is a "certyn lady" of Norwich who wished to accompany Margery to dinner on the day of her visit.

[238] Ibid., ll. 3492-95.

[239] Ibid., l. 3496.

Observing this scene in her essay "The Crucifix, the Pieta, and the Female Mystic: Devotional Objects and Performative Identity in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," Laura Varnam argues that "Margery achieves…historical and spatial transcendence when she makes the death of Christ present in the contemporary time and space of the medieval church…Margery's emotional performance has an important consequence in the *Book*."[240] For Varnam, this transcendence comes as a result of Margery's ability to "mirror" Christ's suffering and "appropriate" Mary's sorrow by means of a calculated performance in view of an audience, the Lady, who "validates her identity as a holy woman."[241] According to Varnam, such validation is the purpose toward which Margery directs her "performance" of a "devotional event." With regard to transcendence, Margery's is merely an "achievement" of performance that directly contributes to her efforts of "self fashioning."[242]

Varnam's analysis is one of many critical interpretations that suggest that identity-formation, performance and appropriation, and "transcendence" in terms of agency and gender roles are important themes in Margery's *Book*. Under the broader notion of "self-fashioning," the term coined by Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self Fashioning*, these readings make a number of assumptions about the role of agency, particularly female agency, and the role it plays in Margery's narrative.[243] Specifically,

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[240] Laura Varnam, "The Crucifix, the Pieta, and the Female Mystic: Devotional Objects and Performative Identity in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 41.2 (2015), 225.

[241] Ibid., 224.

[242] Ibid., 208, 225.

[243] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self Fashioning*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. See especially, for our purposes, the Introduction to this dissertation. For examples of this work throughout the 1980s and 90s, see Sarah Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism: the Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe," in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. David Aers. Brighton: Harvester (1986); Eluned

the notion of "self-fashioning" tends to dovetail with the *Book*'s many feminist readings, which unfailingly point up Margery's "agency" within the narrative, her marriage, and medieval society.

Yet despite Lynn Staley's caution that to view the *Book* as a "pre-feminist manifesto" is to be "guided by our own communal values," Margery still often appears as a figure desperate to create a sense of self outside the conventions of her time and place.[244] Felicity Riddy, for instance, suggests that Margery was "trying to escape" the roles determined for her in the world.[245] Even sympathetic readings of the *Book* propose "a conscious authorial strategy" that "modifies [devotional traditions] to suit her purposes."[246] Some see her knowingly develop a sense of agency through her "effort to fashion a distinctive form of spiritual authority."[247] Lisa Manter, for example, suggests that Margery "works within these identificatory parameters [of the Passion narrative] to create a fictional space where her desires are temporarily reconciled."[248] Such claims all

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Brenner, "Margery Kempe and the Critics: Disempowerment and Deconstruction," Sandra McEntire, "Journey into Selfhood: Margery Kempe and Feminine Spirituality," and Janet Wilson, "Margery and Alison: Women on Top," all three in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*. Ed. Sandra McEntire. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Karma Lockrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); and Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994). This chapter, for the most part, shall cite more recent work, which reproduces the attitudes first established in the criticism of the 1990s, after Greenblatt's seminal work appeared.

[244] Staley, Lynn, "Introduction," *The Book of Margery Kempe*. (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS, 1996), 8.

[245] Riddy, "Text and Self in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," 437.

[246] Williams, "Manipulating Mary," 529.

[247] Ibid., 529.

[248] Manter, Lisa, "The Savior of Her Desire: Margery Kempe's Passionate Gaze." *Exemplaria*, 13 (2001), 41.

posit Margery fashioning her self-identity by opposing the roles society and religion prescribed for women.[249] As David Aers, who speaks for many others, puts it,

> for Margery…a major part of the struggle for a viable identity was inevitably against many of these definitions of [licit female identities] and against the traditional bonds of the nuclear family… Conformity with conventional female life goes against the grain of her own religious identity.[250]

Margery confronts figures of authority in the community and "negotiates" a self: "The anguish and the cultural sources of her divisions are clear in Margery's attempt to fashion an identity in accord with clerical versions of purity and sanctity."[251] More recent work has echoed this argument.[252]

Yet even while Margery's *Book* seems to reflect certain hallmarks of Greenblatt's readings of Wyatt, Shakespeare, or More, framing Margery's experience as self-fashioning imports a notion of intentionality that the later English Middle Ages did not know.[253] The language we have used to describe Margery's *Book*—"strategy," "fashion,"

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[249] See Greenblatt on "mobility," in *Renaissance Self Fashioning*: "We should note in the circumstances of the sixteenth century on whom this study focuses a common factor that may help explain their sensitivity as writers to the construction of identity: they all embody, in one form or another, a profound mobility," 7. On the "point of encounter" between alien and authority, see Greenblatt's list of "governing conditions common to most instances of self-fashioning," 9.

[250] Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, 98-99.

[251] Ibid., 96, 95.

[252] For instance, Jessica Rosenfeld refers to Margery's desire to "transcend certain social ideals" as Margery's ultimate motivation, see "Envy and Exemplarity in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Exemplaria* 26 (2014), 118. See also Christie, Sheila, "Extra-ordinary Woman: Teaching Female Agency in Margery Kempe and the York Play." *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* 21 (2014).

[253] See, for example, Nanda Hopenwasser, "A Performance Artist and Her Performance Text: Margery Kempe on Tour," *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary Suydam and Joanna Ziegler. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999: "My analysis…based on my approach to performance theory, is eclectic for like Margery, I draw my inspiration from multiple traditions. I employ biological, psychological, anthropological, sociological, and mythic approaches, but primarily perceive the visionary act as an act of personal creation," 99. For a helpful analysis of the critical reception of Margery's text that accounts for "anxieties of the times," see David Wallace, "Anchoritic Damsel: Margery Kempe of Lynn, c. 1373-1440," in *Strong Women: Life, Text, and Territory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 61-80.

"create"—charge the text with meanings that are unavailable to Margery's concept of the self. For *The Book of Margery Kempe*, we seem to allow ourselves interpretive liberties we have been cautioned not to take with Chaucer, Langland, or even with Julian of Norwich.

The same can be said of readings that cast Margery's "self-styled" saint-hood in terms of performance theory.[254] As a critical lens, performance theory proposes that the female protagonist can have (at least, perceived) control over her identity.[255] Framed within performance theory, this control manifests as Margery asserts herself through performances that enact "licit female identities."[256]

A number of scholars working in performance theory have in fact recently borrowed Aers' notion of "viable identity," which is itself imbued with Greenblatt's mechanisms of self-fashioning. Drawing on Austin and Butler, these critics argue that Margery's actions were "identity-producing performances" that allowed her to participate in religious and social discourse "outside of ecclesiastical control" and to cross the gendered boundaries of marriage and motherhood.[257] In Varnam's reading these "identity-producing performances are especially important" because they "confirm [Margery's] identity as a holy woman":

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[254] See Varnam, "The Crucifix, the Pieta, and the Female Mystic." This critical move judges Margery's "fashioning," simultaneously lauding her "agency" and also deriding her for daring to perform it. For "self-styled sainthood," see Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 64. Despite this quip, Gibson's take on the cultural work of the Book is evenhanded compared to more blatant examples of the critical imposition of "self-fashioning" upon the *Book*. Hopenwasser makes the connection explicit in "A Performance Artist and Her Performance Text: Margery Kempe on Tour." Calling Margery a "spiritual gadfly," Hopenwasser argues that she is "a direct antecedent to the self-fashioners described by Stephen Greenblatt," 98.

[255] See, for example, Williams, "Manipulating Mary," 529-30.

[256] Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, 98-99.

[257] Varnam, "The Crucifix, the Pieta,." 213.

> Gender identity is a 'doing' rather than a 'being'; it is produced and constituted in the individual moment of performance. The same, I would argue, is true of religious identity, especially for a laywoman such as Margery Kempe, who, as a married mother of fourteen children, could not assert her piety and holiness in the traditional ways available to women in the period, that is, as a virgin, nun, or anchoress.[258]

Varnam claims that religious identity works similarly to Butlerian gender identity, as a matter of "'doing' rather than 'being'." For Varnam, religious identity is a matter of performance, and Margery's sense of self is inextricably tied to her ability to assert agency outside of the roles and expectations of a wife and mother in late medieval England. These performances and the agency they suppose is the "transcendence" to which Varnam refers as she interprets the above "crying scene." Performance is the mechanism by which women achieve self-fashioning.

Critically, we have assumed that the medieval conception of selfhood valued autonomous self-*production* as "real" selfhood in the ways that Greenblatt has shown in accounts of Early Modern figures like Wyatt and More.[259] Varnam's concluding remarks reveal this valuation plainly:

> Devotional events inspired by religious imagery function…as an opportunity not only for *identity-producing performance* but also for building female communities. Both accounts show how women can *attain autonomy* and come together in a community of female worshippers…For Margery Kempe, the opportunity offered by a performative response to devotional objects enables her to become a devotional mirror at the center of a female community that evades ecclesiastical control and renegotiates the location of sacred space itself.[260]

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[258] Varnam, "The Crucifix, the Pieta, and the Female Mystic," 212. As we shall see, Margery recognizes that virginity is not the same as chastity, and her attempts to live chastely are not attempts to reclaim virginity.

[259] See, for example, Aers, David, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, 98-99; Low, Anthony, *Aspects of Subjectivity: Society and Individuality from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare and Milton*. Medieval and Renaissance Literary Studies. Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 2003; and Little, Katherine C. *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006.

[260] Varnam, "The Crucifix, the Pieta, and the Female Mystic," 233, emphasis added.

Varnam lauds Margery's ability to "produce" a selfhood via Butlerian performance theory, a performance that others could emulate through an autonomous agency that opposes ecclesiastical (male) control and creates a literal space in which she can be a self outside of it. This analysis invokes a substantial history of feminist criticism on medieval holy women, which has helped to outline the boundaries of female religiosity in the period from the High Middle Ages through the Reformation and has studied the development of female agency in the period.[261] These studies express the reigning understanding of selfhood as an object to be owned, an affect to be performed. Margery's achievement of agency, it would seem, is the end toward which medieval proto-feminism should strive.[262]

Such notions, especially the ways in which we value the subjects who enact them are anachronistic, in large part because they hold that no subject has a self unless she has the power and ability to assert agency. For example, although Margery herself identifies as "the creature" throughout the text, Riddy rhetorically connects the identifier to her

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[261] These include Lochrie, Karma., McCracken, Peggy, and Schultz, James A. *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*. Medieval Cultures; v. 11. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; Elliot, Dyan. "Flesh and Spirit: The Female Body." In *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition, C. 1100-1500*, 13-46. Brepols Essays in European Culture. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2010; Elliott, Dyan. *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages*. Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004; and Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. New Historicism. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

[262] Sheila Christie argues, for example, that Margery's sense of agency was likely bolstered by the characters of Mary Magdalen and the Virgin Mary in the York Corpus Christi Play: "while she demonstrates agency prior to seeing the [Corpus Christi] cycle, the cycle reflects and reaffirms Margery's attitudes towards her own subjectivity and her authority to negotiate within the family unit." However this argument is based on anachronistic assumptions vis a vis "women's rights" in the York plays. Christie continues: "In other words, Margery is a case study in reception. Her perspectives and behavior suggest how female audience members might understand the York cycle, seeing it as an affirmation of women's rights within a patriarchal dynamic and finding a reformation of women's social position through Mary," "(Extra)Ordinary Woman," 98.

claim that Margery has a “limited self-understanding.”[263] Lisa Manter comes to the opposite conclusion, but works under the same assumption. For Manter, “the success of her texts is the success of her identity negotiations.”[264] In this regard, Margery’s selfhood is tenuous, as it depends upon the persuasiveness of her narrative. Margery and her text are what they do.[265]

However, such readings come perilously close to participating in the patriarchal criticism of Margery’s peers who mocked her for aspiring to holy life even while she has so many children.[266] They ironically affirm that “licit female identities” exist and are legitimately categorized and contained by the patriarchal imagination. Even sympathetic readers view her identity in terms of opposing “roles,” arranged teleologically in a progression from least to most “feminist.” Tara Williams, for example, frames this progression as a “spiritual career”:

> her first difficult childbirth leads to her first vision of Christ and ultimately to her life as a spiritual figure and author…Margery remains a mother and wife, but she

[263] Riddy, “Text and Self in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” 447.

[264] Manter, “The Savior of Her Desire,” 40, fn 2. In this footnote, Manter offers a thorough review of the feminist criticism on the *Book* for the decades between 1980 and 2000, noting an overwhelming consensus among feminist scholars who “regard her enterprise as ultimately flawed, the result of an overdetermined interaction of oppressive patriarchal structures and a subjugated female participant,” 40.

[265] To be clear, this is not an outcome Greenblatt intended. He is first to point out, in his introduction to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* that his observations arise from linguistic shift: the word “*fashion* seems to have come into wide currency as a way of designating the forming of a self,” 2. Greenblatt argues that the rise of the term *fashion* is related to and dependent upon cultural and historical “control mechanisms, the cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment,” 3.

[266] Compare, for example, Riddy’s skepticism of Margery as a holy figure with the response of a certain anchorite:
Riddy quips, in “Text and Self in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” that the *Book* “argues, conventionally, for the primacy of the contemplative life but, wholly unconventionally, locates that life in the born-again mother of fourteen children bellowing her way around Europe. As if.” 448.
The anchorite, for his part, mocks Margery’s motherhood upon meeting her: “and askyd wher sche had don hir chylde the whech was begotyn and born whil sche was owte,” ll. 2419-20. Though Margery cannot respond to Riddy, she at least defends herself from the mockery of the anchorite, explaining, “I dede nevyr [nothing] sithyn I went owte wherthorw [wherethrough] I schulde have a childe,” ll. 2422-23.

will redirect her domesticity and sexuality into an intimate relationship with Christ.[267]

Thus, even while critics recognize a necessary simultaneity in Margery's negotiation between roles, such readings assume the "replacement" or "renunciation" of one role for the other.[268] Yet unlike her contemporary critics Margery saw herself as simultaneously holy woman, wife, and mother; the roles neither were opposed nor were her actions in any way the same as her identity.[269] She didn't "achieve" her "self" by choosing between them.

To view episodes like the "crying scene" as singular "devotional events" that participate in "fashioning identity" removes them from their narrative context and overlooks the narrative's self-conscious thematic concerns. These are, first, a view of reality that aligns culturally, theologically, and philosophically with the Augustinian paradox we have encountered in *Wisdom* and will see at play in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Additionally, as we have seen in *Wisdom*, *The Book of Margery Kempe* conceives of the self in terms of the soul's participation in the highest degree of reality, that is, its likeness to Trinitarian relationality. Participation in God's self-giving love is the means by which the soul reforms into original likeness, or what we will call in this

[267] Williams. "Manipulating Mary," 528, 533, 535.

[268] Ibid., 537-538.

[269] Margery isn't the only medieval holy woman to be viewed in this way by critics. In an otherwise sympathetic reading of the *Vita* of St. Birgitta of Sweden, Jeannette Nieuwland consistently presents her roles as wife and mother as opposed to her spiritual life, as if the combination of motherhood and holiness was a necessary conflict: "Most intriguing is the question of how Birgitta in her life and work managed to combine motherhood and a religious way of life," 300. Nieuwland's conclusion is that Birgitta is finally able to pursue religious life, though "she was not always successful" because she "could not banish her children completely from her heart," 320. "Motherhood and Sanctity in the Life of Saint Birgitta of Sweden: An Insoluble Conflict?" in *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker. New York: Garland Publishing, 1995. My contention is not whether Birgitta in fact preferred one role over the other, but in the framing of the question in terms of "conflict" and "success," which are terms that value one outcome over the other.

chapter, the fullness of personhood. For Margery, participation is a process toward full personhood that necessitates simultaneity where it isn't "reasonable," whether for contemporary or modern audiences. Like the jeweler in *Pearl*, we bristle at Margery's self-proclaimed holiness. Yet her persistence in that process demonstrates what Christian personalists have called "transcendent autonomy," which, as the Pearl explains, defies human reason. Within this frame, we attend to the theo-philosophical underpinnings of Margery's world and begin to grasp her sense of selfhood.

Margery attains her fullness of selfhood by degrees, which reflect the mode in which she participates in being by becoming like Christ. Rather than abandon her various social roles and responsibilities in the name of agency, she incorporates her social position, her marriage, and both her natural and spiritual motherhood into what might be called an incarnational spirituality. With Christ at the center of her identity, she begins to see her social and domestic roles as guides for participation in his mission. Christ directly intervenes in each of her "roles" and reorients them, "techyng" Margery the "wey" of *caritas*. The process described in her narrative, therefore, reflects a deeply personal selfhood based on her developing understanding of "ower Lord" as her model self. The more she reflects *caritas* in the world, the more she acts "in [her] propyr persoone."[270]

Transcendent Autonomy, Personhood, and Agency

As in *Wisdom*, *The Book of Margery Kempe* consistently presents charity as the essential definition of God, particularly as she encounters him in the second person of the Trinity. Immediately in its preface, Margery frames the following narration as the result

[270] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 19-20. In this line, Margery speaks of Christ, who showed "whech parfyth wey…in hys propyr persoone examplyd." Yet, as I will show, Margery is modeling herself on Christ's personhood as a specific iteration of God's self.

of God's "charitable movement of a sinful caitiff." [271] Yet, for Margery, the concept of *caritas* as Christ is both practically and theoretically linked to the concept of person. Margery's preface notes that God came to her as he came into the world: as the Savior "in hys propyr persoone." [272] In practical terms, her use of the middle English word "persoune" immediately associates the notions of being and selfhood with Christ, who is the second person of the Trinity.[273] This linguistic association has theoretical implications because in the medieval participatory imagination, the word "person" participates in the Trinitarian concept it signifies. For Margery, as for the playwright of *Wisdom*, the definition of "Cryst ower Savyowr in hys propyr persoone" automatically and inextricably links his Trinitarian personhood with self-giving and sacrificial love, or *caritas*.

As a result, Margery's sense of her own selfhood hinges on this notion of *personality*, that is, the capacity she has for acting in accordance with her God-given being. Specifically for Margery, as for Anima in *Wisdom*, human personality is fully realized when it participates in God's selfhood, which is *caritas*. As we have seen in *Wisdom*, God's grace enables the soul to accomplish this participation through a process of returning to its original likeness to God. The soul's total self giving is its total self fulfillment.

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[271] Ibid., l. 10.

[272] Ibid., ll. 19-20.

[273] MED, "Persoune," def. 1-3.

This paradoxical process has been developed from Augustine and Aquinas by Christian personalists as the concept of "transcendent autonomy." [274] Relying on its conceptual roots in classical and scholastic thought, it frames the concept of selfhood within a world-view that acknowledges original likeness, or what John Crosby has called "ontological nobility," as a given. More specifically, the development of the personalist concept of "transcendent autonomy" is firmly grounded in the Augustinian concept of reality we have observed in *Wisdom*: it acknowledges God as reality itself, and the human person as free—through *caritas*—to transcend itself into God's reality. Through Aquinas, personalists articulate this freedom to transcend as "personal acting," or freely willed acts that accord with Aquinas' understanding of personal "nature," or "value." I will unfold these ideas more thoroughly in the latter half of this chapter. Before I do, however, I will examine how Margery navigates between the reality of her social world and reality she knows through her mystical experience in ways that reveal her understanding that the former is not separate from but fulfilled by the latter.

Margery's tearful reaction to the pieta in fact previews a set of assumptions about reality. Specifically, the scene unfolds from two contrasting perspectives. On the one hand, the people around Margery and, later, the priest, expect that Margery's tears result from her grief over the death of the vicar, Richard Caister, who was recently buried. Supposing that she was weeping for him, Margery's witnesses "had gret merveyl of hir, supposyng that sche had wept for sum fleschly er erdly affeccyon."[275] To them, her tears are excessive, but they recognize the real and necessary cause of her grief to be the death

[274] Crosby, John, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press (1996), 2.

[275] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, l. 3486.

of a beloved priest. For the witnessing priest, they reflect too great an attachment to the man himself or to the time they spent together; why else cry for a man who now is surely blessed in heaven?

Margery, on the other hand, experiences the situation from another point of view: her emotion is, perhaps, excessive from the perspective of a reality dulled by separation from God. However, Margery's narration shows a second cause for her tears that transcends "fleshly or worldly affection." She betrays no self-consciousness of her tears because she does not share the reality through which her onlookers understand the event. Even while she grieves the vicar's death, Margery says she is "ravyschyd with gostly comfort." Indeed, her gratitude and "holy thowtys" for the vicar render her unable to "mesuryn hir wepyng ne hir crying."[276] Her tears express the joy and spiritual comfort she experienced through the vicar's good works in her life, having "many tymes herd hir confession…and ministryd to hir the precyows sacrament of the awter."[277] This simultaneous and overwhelming emotional response of both grief and joy is paralleled by her juxtapositional framing of opposites throughout the scene. In this second perspective, Margery's inability to "measure" her tears is a sure sign of unity with God, which she expresses as a visible sign of the "the fyer of lofe brent in hir hert."[278] Both grief and joy are expressed through tears, which themselves signify a "fire of love." The contrasting realities of Margery's uncontrollable wailing in front of a simple statue, on the one hand, and her experience of unity with God, on the other, expresses the difference between the

[276] Ibid., ll. 3479, 3485. For theological explanation of Margery's copious and uncontrollable tears, see McEntire, Sandra, "Walter Hilton and Margery Kempe: Tears and Compunction" *Mysticism: Medieval and Modern*, ed. Valerie Lagorio. Salzburg: University of Salzburg Press, 1986.

[277] Ibid., ll. 3481-82.

[278] Ibid., ll. 3476. Cf: Richard Rolle, *De Incendio Amoris*, especially Bk I, ch. 23.

soul's knowledge of God's love and its experience of it. Margery's experience of God's love—that is, reality itself—through "spiritual comfort" compels her to act, even if her action cannot be justified by the logic of earthly reality.

Formally, the text compresses the contrasting experiences of Margery and her witnesses such that the reader experiences both simultaneously; the narrative carefully illustrates that her witnesses exist in such a different reality in the moment that they completely misinterpret the cause of her tears. As Margery professes repeatedly throughout the *Book*, her purpose is to make the reader see that reality, to "undyrstondyn the hy and unspecabyl mercy of ower sovereyn Savyowr Cryst Jhesu."[279]

At the end of the scene, this sense of double reality intensifies as Margery experiences the Lord's passion "thorw the beholding of that pete [in] hir mende."[280] Again, Margery momentarily participates in a reality that starkly contrasts the experience of onlookers, prompting her to "wepyn ful sor, as thei sche schulde a deyd."[281] Though the priest seems unable to join her in that reality, the Lady is convinced of Margery's "exampyl." She affirms Margery's momentary rapture and weeping as a direct result of, as she says, "the grace that God werkyth in hir sowle."[282] The Lady recognizes Margery's affect as the result of God's supernatural and self-giving grace.

Within the larger narrative context, the scene pivots within Margery's ongoing devotion to Mary through adoration of the pieta. Yet as we shall see, Margery's tears and

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[279] Ibid., ll. 2-3.

[280] Ibid., ll. 3493. As Varnam notes, Margery spells "pieta" differently. Sometimes it is "pete," and other times, "pyte," 222-23.

[281] Ibid., ll. 3495.

[282] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 3500-01.

transcendence are not merely an imitation, nor "appropriation" of Mary's sorrow.[283] They are instead the embodied effects of her participation in God's being and they express her sense that her own selfhood is grounded in that being. Despite consistent negative reactions to her "excessiveness," Margery's experience of God's reality provides a fulfillment and "bliss" she cannot find in the world. Rather than viewing holiness as an end in and of itself, Margery recognizes holiness is "the wey" to communion with God.

Accordingly, terms that have become common in discourses of medieval selfhood must be reframed with attention to the underlying theo-philosophical structures and paradigms in which Margery's *Book* was written. A particular conception of self and being is at work in *The Book of Margery Kempe* that is similar to the concept of selfhood I have shown operates in *Wisdom*. [284] This deeply integrative view orders the proper relationship between doing and being as a ground for self-knowledge, self-determination, and indeed, one's relationship of likeness to God. Being determines performance, rather than the other way around. A soul determines its selfhood not by asserting its agency but by conforming its actions so that they express its ontological origin in God, who created it.[285] And, whereas performativity conceives the self as the center around which events and objects are to be interpreted, ritual invites the self to participate in the center of

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[283] Varnam, "The Crucifix, the Pieta, and the Female Mystic," 208, 225.

[284] As Gibson shows in *The Theater of Devotion*, *Wisdom* was written and produced in the same region and time period as Margery's *Book* and the two are produced of the same "rich and varied East Anglian religious culture," 31. Additionally, both the *Widsom* writer and the author of *The Book of Margery Kempe* knew Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*. For Kempe's knowledge of Hilton, see McEntire, Sandra, "Walter Hilton and Margery Kempe: Tears and Compunction."

[285] Contrast this order with Varnam's account (above) of Butlerian gender performance theory, which works precisely in the opposite direction.

reality, who is God, by means of events and objects, which are *sacramentum*.[286] Indeed, for Margery, ritual is participation in the highest degree of reality, whether liturgical or sacramental, whether affective or meditative, and whether prayer or contemplation. Accordingly, the concept of agency needs to be considered within the context of medieval philosophical explanations of how free will works in conjunction with reason to align the self with God's reality.

An earlier encounter in Norwich shows how Margery's discourse with both the "White Frer," Wyllyam Sowthfeld, and Julian function within a world view based on this ordered paradigm of reality and experience. The white friar in particular simply assumes that a properly ordered relationship between doing and being reflects the soul's participation in the highest reality. Margery first visits him to "wetyn yf sche wer dysceyved be any illusions or not."[287] She wants to know whether or not her mystical experiences are genuine, whether they are real or whether they are deceptions of the devil. The text closely ties Margery's concern with the reality of her mystical experience to her actions in the world, including "preyers," "comfort," and her "maner of levyng."[288] Her concern, therefore, is two-fold: first, do her mystical experiences belong to God's reality or the deceptions and "illusions" of the devil? And, second, does her active life participate in God's reality or the devil's non-being? The friar responds to her query by

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[286] Mary Suydam and Joanna Ziegler provide a clear example of the way performance theory has developed recently—via Foucault and Butler—has seeped into our critical psyche to create a framework in which we have claimed that "Mystics *performed* their mysticism" and that "Catholics, for example, probably perceive the Mass as inherently theatrical—a spectacle to behold on the stage of the altar…with an audience in attendance," *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary Suydam and Joanna Ziegler. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), xiv-xix. Such frameworks, however, refuse to take seriously the participatory work that mystic "performance" does and remains ignorant to the modern biases of critical work on medieval religion and culture.

[287] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 931-32.

[288] Ibid., ll. 934, 937.

arguing that her deeds, in part because they benefit the community, are the result of the "Holy Gost werkyng plenyouwsly hys grace in yowr sowle."[289] He counsels that Margery can be confident that her mystical experience and its extension in her active life both bear fruit because they participate in God's grace.

To the friar it seems obvious that the state of Margery's soul, infused with God's grace and love, causes her acting, not the other way around. For him, it is impossible to consider that she could perform holiness without first *being* holy. Since God "dwellyth not in a body soget [subject] to syn," he encourages Margery to "receyvyn the gyftys of God," which he goes on to equate with "hys mercy."[290] As in *Wisdom*, God's self-gift of mercy is his dwelling in the soul, and the concept of soul as God's dwelling grounds the understanding of selfhood as the mutual relation of being one with God. Citing Isaiah, the friar biblically reinforces his point: "Owyr Lord seyth himself, 'My spyrit schal restyn upon a meke man, a contrite man, and dredyng my wordys.'"[291] God's preferred dwelling is the soul of the person whose actions in the world mirror his self-giving love. God asks via the prophet: "qui *est iste locus quietis meae*? [*Who* will be my resting place?]." His answer in the next verse: "*ad quem autem respiciam* [this is the man to whom I will look."[292] The friar's paraphrase may flatten Isaiah's force, but the ontological assumption underpinning his words to Margery is clear: God will not rest in a place, but in the soul of a *person* who is meek and contrite and who has made herself a proper place for him to

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[289] Ibid., ll. 934-35.

[290] Ibid., ll. 941-43.

[291] Ibid., ll. 946-47.

[292] Isaiah 66:1, Vulgate. Most English translations render the question: "Where will my resting place be," but the Latin uses "qui" to indicate the answer with a personal pronoun.

dwell. This kind of relationship between God and the soul is bound to bear fruit both in the community and within the soul itself.

Margery's encounter with the white friar foreshadows Julian's response to a similar inquiry. Once again, Margery is "deeply concerned about the legitimacy of her grace."[293] She presents her mystical experiences to the anchoress, "for the ankres was expert in swech thyngys and good cownsel cowd gevyn."[294] Margery explains that she feels

> the grace that God put in hir sowle of compuncсyon, contricyon, swetnesse and devocyon, compassion with holy meditacyon and hy contemplacyon, and ful many holy spechys and dalyowns that owyr Lord spak to hir sowle, and many wonderful revelacyons.[295]

In response, Julian advises that Margery should be less concerned with the authenticity of her experience than with its degree of reality. These are two different concepts for Julian, and the latter has ultimate consequences for the soul. Julian's counsel reflects the exact language used in *Wisdom* to describe the soul as the "sete of God," affirming that Margery's "mornynggs and wepyngs" are "tokenys" of God's presence within her.[296] She advises that the more Margery "hath thes tokenys," the more she must "stedfastlych belevyn that the Holy Gost *dwellyth* in [hir] sowle."[297] Julian explains that the question is not whether Margery's spiritual experience is legitimate, but whether it is real. Legitimacy is a standard of men, while reality is determined by God. Julian reasons: "The

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[293] McEntire, Sandra, "Walter Hilton and Margery Kempe: Tears and Compunction," 55.

[294] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 960-61.

[295] Ibid., ll. 956-61.

[296] Ibid., ll. 976-77.

[297] Ibid., ll. 972-73, emphasis added.

Holy Gost mevyth nevyr a thing ageyn charite, and, yf he dede, he wer contraryows to hys owyn self, for he is al charite."[298] As in *Wisdom*, Julian knows that God dwells within the soul that receives his grace and it is that indwelling *caritas* that shapes and legitimates its actions.

Julian also differentiates various degrees of reality and relates them to the kinds of experience Margery might have. Her guidance provides a spiritual and philosophical basis for Margery to distinguish that which is "ageyn the worshep of God and profyte of hir evyn cristen" from "*rygth* feyth and the *rygth* beleve."[299] Significantly, Julian affirms that both are possible and perhaps sensible experiences, but only the latter is "good" and "real." For Julian, God and the devil "schal nevyr dwellyn togedyr in on [one] place": the further one gets from God, the less one participates in his reality.[300]

For precisely this reason, Julian explicitly warns Margery against giving way to "doubleness": "a dubbyl man in sowle is evyr unstabyl and unstedfast in al hys weys."[301] The anchoress counsels Margery to recognize and adhere to "rygth," the reality not shared by "pepyl [who] slawndryd hir, not levyng it was the werke of God but that sum evyl spyrit vexed hir in hir body."[302] Margery begins to realize that as she allows God to "dwell" in her soul, she dwells less in the "langage of the world."

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[298] Ibid., ll. 965-66.

[299] Ibid., ll. 964-69. Emphasis mine. MED "rygth," definitions 3, 5.

[300] Ibid., ll. 980-81.

[301] Ibid., ll. 969-70. We might fruitfully compare this sense of doubleness to the internal unrest we witness in *Wisdom*.

[302] Ibid., ll. 908-09.

Nevertheless, Julian implores Margery to have patience with her experience in the world and bear it as "necessary unto yow for in that schal ye kepyn yowr sowle."[303] Forbearance with the removed reality of worldly experience is the mark of her own self-possession. Rather than succumb to the language of the world, Margery must dispose herself to receive God's gifts and "tremble at *his* word."[304] If God dwells within Margery's soul, and her mystical experience originates in communion with the Logos, then the words she exchanges "in her mind" with Jesus are the Word that alone "Is."

Margery's experiences with the *pieta* and her encounters in Norwich show that she could access an onto-theological sense of reality and the soul, even as a lay, illiterate woman.[305] And, significantly, this specific understanding of reality is not only "in her mynde," but also culturally present in the teachings of those she encounters socially.[306] The narrative affirms three general conclusions about the nature of reality that guide her concept of selfhood throughout: first, that her experiences may legitimately reflect different degrees of reality; second, that her sense of communion with Jesus in their "dalliance"—and in her suffering loneliness and rejection—is itself participation in the highest reality; and third, that when her soul participates in his reality, it becomes a fit

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[303] Ibid., ll. 85-86.

[304] Ibid., ll. 940-47, emphasis added.

[305] As Wallace observes, Margery "might be thought to dwell unselfconsciously within the universalist claims of [her] religion: but, as we shall see, [she shows] marked awareness—through travel and local knowledge—of the limits and borders of Catholic faith," *Strong Women*, xxvi. He continues, describing the false dichotomy of "religious" and "secular," a move that, I think, presses the limits of our thinking about Margery's roles: "it seems inadequate to consider these women as merely *religious*: for the category of *religious*, especially in Medieval Studies, comes too often twinned with implied, ghostly opposition to *secular*—an archaic antithesis which undersells the labile complexities of premodern writing."

[306] Beyond the influence of the white friar and Julian, Margery had encountered Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* and *The Prikynge of Love* along with Richard Rolle's *The Fire of Love* and several other works through which she could directly access this doctrine on reality, likeness, and the soul as dwelling. McEntire, Sandra, "Walter Hilton and Margery Kempe: Tears and Compunction," 57.

"dwelling" for the Lord. In these scenes, Margery expresses concern for her own legitimacy, not in terms of "self-styling," but in terms of the relation between her experiences and objective reality. She and her confidants simply presume the Augustinian paradigm of ordered reality and the place of the self within that order. Their judgements on Margery's spiritual legitimacy proceed from that premise.

Transcendent Autonomy and the Fullness of Personhood

Early in the *Confessions*, Augustine recognizes a sense of dialecticism of selfhood. He describes wrestling with the knowledge that while "he bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin…still he is a part of your creation."[307] Two selves emerge here, and Augustine proclaims that they abide simultaneously within the person. This simultaneity is an internal tension; it is the "dubbyl" self that Julian warns Margery to guard against.[308] Her warning voices Augustine's opening argument from the *Confessions*: "he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."[309] To reach God's peace, Margery understands that she will always be poised between her striving to attain her original self and the fallen self who lives in the fallen world. Her selfhood must take in both; it will be marked by fluidity, simultaneity, and transition.

Accordingly, Margery frames her *Book* within an understanding of this dialectic selfhood. In the preface, she explains what is, perhaps, her thesis: "this creatur which many yerys had gon wl and evyr ben unstable was partythly drawen and steryd to entren

[307] Augustine, *Confessions*, I.i.

[308] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 969-70.

[309] Augustine, *Confessions*, I.i.

the wey of hy perfecyon."[310] Margery shows awareness that her journey to "perfection" depends on Christ's "example." Further, she explains her responsibility to respond with participation in mutual charity: "Alle the werkys of ower Saviowr ben for ower exampyl and instruccyon, and what grace that he werkyth in any creatur is ower profyth yf lak of charyte be not ower hynderawnce."[311] Perfection, in other words, is realized by getting out of her own way—by allowing God's grace to direct her toward *caritas* and away from fallenness.

Within Margery's framing of dialectic selfhood, agency remains the prerequisite for selfhood, but the free agent is "fre to God."[312] Freedom correlates to an authentic selfhood which, for Margery, is enabled by the freedom to act in charity. Freedom "to God" resolves the internal tension between the ideal, ontologically original self and its fallen counter-self. The capacity one has for this true freedom is an understanding of agency that personalists have developed as the concept of *personality*. That is, the condition or quality of being a person is the capacity one has to act in accordance with one's given original likeness or "value." The actions taken by the soul that accord with value indicate what personalists have called "transcendent autonomy," that is, the free agency of the will to transcend itself by means of participation in God's reality.

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[310] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 19.

[311] Ibid., ll. 5-7. Margery borrows the Pauline theme from his Roman epistle, and plays with the same theme to preface and defend her forthcoming narrative: "For everything that was written in the pas was written to teachus, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope," Rm 15:4. Margery follows with her own Pauline justification: "this lytyl tretys schal tretyn sumdeel parcel of hys wonderful werkys, how mercyfully, how benyngly, and how charytefully he meved and stered a sinful caytyf unto hys love," ll. 8-10.

[312] See Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, book III; Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 568.

The notion of transcendent autonomy is fundamental to Margery's self-concept. It is a notion founded in classical and scholastic ontological thought—the heart of medieval philosophy—which personalists reconcile and develop. Reframing God's reality as "absolute value," they draw a through-line from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas. Through this development, personalists synthesize Augustine's "degrees of reality" with Thomistic thought on the distinction of Goods, especially the concept of *bonum*.[313] Yet as we have seen in *Wisdom*, the concept of transcendent autonomy is already at work via the medieval paradigm of epistemological and ontological truth. Margery's *Book* articulates a lived example of this paradigm.

Personalists further develop their synthesis of Augustinian and Thomist thought to distinguish between Aquinas' *bonum* and their concept of value:

> Is value just a new term expressing what Thomas meant by *bonum*? No, value expresses an absolute goodness, or goodness in itself, whereas *bonum* expresses a relational goodness, a goodness that is for someone (this is why Thomas says that *bonum* always involves some *respectum ad aliud*).[314]

So, while *bonum* is a higher good than the merely agreeable or pleasurable, it "lacks that absoluteness (goodness in itself) that distinguishes value."[315] *Bonum* must always be understood as relational goodness, not goodness inherent in the thing itself. This distinction becomes essential to our understanding of Margery's desire for chastity.

One realizes transcendent autonomy when the will, recognizing the difference between relational and absolute good, freely chooses *bonum* and, even better, value, the

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[313] Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Bk. 3, ch 111-114. Trans. Vernon J. Bourke. Garden City: Image Books. 1956. Aquinas also speaks here of "personal acting," which we will discuss presently. Additionally, Thomist thought on the distinction of goods draws explicitly on Boethian doctrine from *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, a mainstay of medieval philosophy.

[314] Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person* (1996), 177.

[315] Ibid., 177.

inherent good in an object over what may be pleasurable or agreeable in it.[316] Further, the action resulting from that choice recognizes the absolute good for its own sake, and not because it is a benefit to the subject. The choice personalizes the soul that makes it because, like Christ's *caritas*, they realize their own nature by bringing it into accord with their ontological reality. Personalists call this condition the "dignity" and "value" of personal being. Personal action depends upon freedom (as opposed to license), which stems from one's "ontological nobility," the inherent and absolute *value* of the person.[317] In short, the fully personal human being strives to live according to her given ontological value through a proper use of her freedom to choose the Good. Transcendent autonomy elevates the human *creature*, who is perhaps unaware of her value and subject to mere pleasure, to human *person*, who is detached from pleasure and free to choose *bonum* and value. The person values herself by valuing others for the good that is in them. For this reason, Crosby marks *transcendent autonomy* as the highest aspiration of the human being and the fullest expression of her personhood.[318]

Personality and transcendence are therefore inseparable, as Dietrich von Hildebrand argues: ontologically, transcendence marks fullness of being. Additionally, he suggests that a participatory paradigm is fundamental to the relationship between being and acting:

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[316] See Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person* (1996), ch. 6, for "*bonum*," see especially pp. 177-78. Crosby has written of the Thomist conception of *bonum* also in "The Idea of Value and the Reform of the Traditional Metaphysics of *Bonum*," in *Aletheia* I/2 (1978), 221-336, and "Are Good and Being Really Convertible? A Phenomenological Inquiry," in *The New Scholasticism* 57 (1983), 465-500.

[317] Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 175.

[318] Ibid., 5.

> the specifically personal character of man as a subject manifests itself in his capacity to transcend himself. This transcendence displays itself above all in participation in the objective logos of being.[319]

The objective logic of our being—Crosby's "ontological nobility"—paradoxically arises from participation in the reality that exists outside of ourselves. Being, in other words, is God-givenness and the fullest expression of human selfhood is participation in that givenness. Crosby clarifies:

> What a value calls for from me is not my self-affirmation performed with reference to the value, but rather affirmation of the value for its own sake. And yet it remains true that the demands which the world of value makes of us do not inflict heteronomy on us, but rather engender the deepest personal life of which we are capable.[320]

Here, both Hildebrand and Crosby develop the longstanding Augustinian claim that God is nearer to me than I am to myself: *intimeor intimo meo*.[321] In a personalist reading, the very subjectivity of humans to God is, paradoxically, the key to their capacity for transcendence. This transcendence, which issues in the form of personal acts, constitutes the fullness of personhood.

For personalists, as well as for Margery, choosing subjectivity to value is non-threatening and non-oppressive because value is the goodness inherent to the person and knit into her very being. Being one with God does not, as Crosby says, "inflict heteronomy" on the person as she confronts the demands of the world; he offers goodness as a gift of his own reality in the creative act.[322] Value, then, is "a goodness that persons

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[319] von Hildebrand, Dietrich, *Ethics*. (Chicago: Fransciscan Herald Press, 1972), 218.

[320] Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person,* 185.

[321] Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 6.

[322] Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 177. This principle draws directly from Thomas Aquinas' understanding of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*; as Barron explains, Aquinas concludes from this doctrine "that nonviolence is metaphysically basic," *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 70.

have in themselves"; it is how we cooperate with our inherent goodness. In this way, for Crosby, "we possess ourselves in transcending ourselves towards value."[323]

Hildebrand extends the point, echoing what we have seen in *Wisdom* and in Margery's encounter with the white friar, by considering the relationship between doing, being, and reality: "This kind of participation is absolutely impossible for any impersonal being."[324] The *capacity* for personal acting, in other words, and one's disposition toward one's own *value* is the *result* of personal being, not vice versa.[325] This idea insists on a participatory, not performative, relationship between doing and being. Hildebrand gives the Augustinian argument a Thomistic slant by proposing that as the soul grows increasingly like God, so a person comes to her fullest autonomy by her increasing transcendent participation in the good. [326] For both Hildebrand and Crosby, the good is accessible only because the soul has a specific personal capacity for participation granted by its God-given likeness to the Trinity. Grace enables the transcendence that confers selfhood on the being that properly values the good.

A close look at Margery's negotiations with her husband John on the subject of chastity demonstrates her sense of a dialectical selfhood and transcendent autonomy. The

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[323] Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 217.

[324] von Hildebrand, Dietrich, *Ethics*, 218.

[325] We are speaking strictly here of the *capacity* for acting in a way that accords with value; neither Hildebrand nor Crosby are discussing here the actual choices humans can make (good or bad).

[326] See especially books 11 and 12:7. Hildebrand does this with an eye toward political philosophy of the early and mid 20th century, in an effort to make a relevant ethical case for transcendent participation in objective reality. In a similar way, he develops Augustinian thought on transcendence as a "movement beyond" oneself to "find you, my true Good," *Confessions*, bk 10:17. On the development of the Augustinian notion of participatory doing and being, see Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, ch. 1, especially pp. 25-40 and Karol Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki. D. Reidel Publishing Company: Boston (1969).

traditional view of Margery's embrace of chastity sees it as an attempt to create space for self-making by "freeing" herself from patriarchal authority. In fact, Margery's campaign for chastity does not arise from a desire to be free from her husband, nor is the product of the trauma she experiences in childbirth. It is the outgrowth of an ecstatic vision in which she realizes the paleness of her earthly experience in comparison to the bliss of heaven. As she lay in bed with John, she unexpectedly

> herd a sownd of melodye so swet and delectable, hir thowt, as sche had ben in paradise…Thys melody was so swete that it passyd alle the melodye that evyr might be herd in this world *wythowtyn ony comparyson.*[327]

The moment causes her to weep and sigh "aftyr the blysse of heven" any time she hears earthly music because it immediately brings to mind the contrast between the sounds she hears on earth and the "myrth and the melodye that was in heven." [328] Margery's bedroom is the place where she first inhabits two worlds at once. It is where she first moves away from the world and toward union with the transcendent reality of Jesus.

Margery's response to her vision is to talk to everyone about it, starting with John. She emphasizes the difference between her fallen experience and the fullness of joy in heaven: "sche styrt owt of hir bedde and seyd, 'Alas, that evyr I dede synne, it is ful mery in hevyn.'"[329] Overcome by the "myrth that is in hevyn," Margery "cowd not wyl restreyn hyrself fro the spekyng therof."[330] The people she speaks to "wer wroth wyth hir for sche wold not her no speke of wordly thyngys as thei dedyn and as sche dede

[327] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 240-45, emphasis added.

[328] Ibid., ll. 247, 249.

[329] Ibid., ll. 243-44.

[330] Ibid., ll. 253, 250.

beforntyme."[331] She acts, that is to say, to bring herself into accord with the truth of what has been revealed to her.

Margery's experience of contrast brings into relief the dissimilitude of her actions to God's reality. Margery is compelled to act differently as a result, and this is the impetus for her negotiation with John for chastity. Indeed, she reports: "aftyr this time, sche had nevyr desyr to komown fleschly wyth hyr husbonde."[332] While she consents to relations out of obedience, she states the explicit reason for seeking chastity: that "the lofe of myn hert and myn affeccyon is *drawyn fro alle erdly creaturys* and sett only in God."[333] She does not want to free herself from John, for marriage is a sacrament, nor does she resist carnal relations; in fact, she admits that she continued to struggle with lust.[334] Instead, the desire for chastity results directly from the suddenly stark contrast between earthly "comowning" and spiritual communion. At this point of contrast, Margery views the "bliss of heaven" as an end, reality, and *value*. In relation to the absolute value of heaven, Margery perceives chastity as a means by which she can "entren the wey whech wold leden hir to the place that sche most desyred."[335] Chastity, in other words, is a *bonum*, a good which relates to the value of heaven.

Put another way, Margery begins to recognize relationality to—and specifically a sense of *communion* with—Christ as the ultimate end of her sexual desire. This does not mean that Margery sexually desires Christ, but that sexual desire is a *sacramentum* of

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[331] Ibid., ll. 254-55.

[332] Ibid., l. 256.

[333] Ibid., ll. 260-61, emphasis added.

[334] See, for example, ll. 320-25.

[335] Ibid., l. 290.

spiritual communion with God. Rather than breaking with the “identity” created by her role as wife, Margery’s desire for communion with Jesus allows her to *use* wifehood as a model for fostering a relationship with him. As a model, marriage is not a burden but a *bonum* that assists her self-formation. Incorporating wifehood as a model for self-giving, Margery negotiates chastity as a “riȝt” and just gift of herself to Christ.

In this way, Margery’s early desire to be “free to God” expresses freedom in the personalist sense. Freedom from her husband is not the final objective; it is instead the means of detachment from partial goods that makes her available to form her self according to value. Margery distinguishes the notion of selfhood from “wifeness,” and in doing so she does not reject her identity, but realizes it. Using marriage as a model for self-formation to Christ, Margery both embraces and transcends “wifeness” toward the ultimate end of wifehood, which is to be in communion with him, the biblical “Bridegroom.” Ultimately, Margery brings her earthly marriage and her sexuality under the “right order” of things: they come second, as earthly music is second to that of heaven.

When John falls ill near the end of Book I, Margery shows how this rightly ordered model of a self-giving marriage brings her closer to understanding her selfhood in relation to Christ. John is “passing” sixty years of age; he suffers a fall down the stairs and thereafter becomes incontinent and “childish” and can no longer live on his own. Margery, for her part, is afraid to be held responsible for his death, since they are living apart. Out of apparent self-concern, which she frames as fear that “sche shuld not be

lettyd [hindered] fro hir contemplacyon," she asks Jesus to let John live for one year so that she will "be deliveryd owt [of] slawndyr." [336]

Jesus agrees to perform the miracle and let him live, but not for the reasons she has requested. Instead, Jesus bids Margery to "take hym hom and kepe hym for my lofe."[337] When she protests that she won't have enough time for contemplation, his response reminds her that marriage is a *sacramentum* of her spiritual devotion to him: "thu hast seyd many tymys that thu woldist fawyn [gladly] kepyn me. I prey the *now kepe hym* for the lofe of me."[338] Jesus requires her to take care of John, to practice charity toward her earthly husband, because this "wifely duty" to him is an extension of His *caritas* to her. He commands Margery to "helpyn hym in hys need at hom as yyf thu wer in chirche to makyn thi preyerys."[339] Wife to John and bride to Jesus are made one through *caritas*, even as Margery's active and contemplative life are united in Jesus' command that she must "geve [him] not ellys but lofe."[340]

Margery does not think of herself as occupying different social identities; Jesus explicitly teaches that to embrace "wifeness" will be to embrace both its earthly and spiritual senses. In fact, the earlier contrast between earthly and heavenly realities is now reconciled through charity. Though she says "hir labowr [was] mech the mor" (l. 4285), "she was glad…and toke it mech the mor esily and servyd hym and helpyd hym…as sche

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[336] Ibid., ll. 4265, 4268-69.

[337] Ibid., l. 4271.

[338] Ibid., ll. 4274-75.

[339] Ibid., ll. 4273-74.

[340] Ibid., l. 4354.

wolde a don Crist hymself."[341] From Margery's perspective, the duties of an earthly wife's self-giving love toward an ailing husband prepare her soul and fulfill her formation to original selfhood. In the same sense that "charyte" unites Anima to Christ in *Wisdom*, Margery's charitable care for John forms her in Christ's image and unites her to him as spouse.

Further, John's illness occasions the narrative's explicit claim about personhood. Margery notes the many ways in which John becomes a burden. He "turnyd childisch agen and lakkyd reson that he cowd not don hys owyn esement to gon to a sege."[342] Incapable of caring for himself, John loses all sense of personal and bodily autonomy. Margery is alarmed because her house-hold labor becomes "meche the mor in waschyng and wryngyng," which prevents her from contemplation.[343] But Jesus reminds her that John "hath sumtyme fulfillyd thi wil and my wil bothe," and Margery also "bethowt hir how sche in hir yong age" had loved him.[344] Indeed, she had "ful many delectabyl thowtys, fleschly lustys, and inordinate lovys *to hys persone*."[345] Margery remembers the person he was before illness and concludes that she "was glad to be ponischyd wyth the same persone and toke it mech the more esily."[346] As she remembers her response to "hys persone," she realizes that his incapacity has enabled her to turn the sexual lust into a

[341] Ibid., ll. 4289-91.

[342] Ibid., ll. 4282-83.

[343] Ibid., ll. 4285-86.

[344] Ibid., ll. 4276, 87-88.

[345] Ibid., ll. 4288-89.

[346] Ibid., ll. 4289-90; MED "persoune" 3a.

higher form of love of "the same persone," even in his "childisch" state. The good she loves in John's personhood is grounded in the goodness of the love she bears Jesus.

Moreover, Margery loves him personally; she acts in a manner befitting her own personhood by treating John with the charitable care and love that befits *his* inherent personhood. In the process of caring for him, and in fulfilling the will of Jesus, Margery treats him as worthy of *caritas* for his own sake, rather than a means to her own holiness. As in the very beginning of the narrative, Margery uses the word "person" to mean not simply "man," but being. She does not say, "she loved *him*," but instead that she had "pleasing thoughts, physical lust, and extraordinary love *to his person*." This peculiar phrasing suggests she understands his being transcends his physical and mental ailments, that he is worthy of charity according to the value he has through Jesus, in whom the goodness of personhood resides. John is the "same person" who is valuable in and of himself before and after his illness; Margery's charitable service transcends her "punishment" and personalizes both John and herself by recognition of that value. She shows, in Crosby's words, "respect for persons as ends in themselves," serving him "as sche wolde a don Crist hymself."[347]

With this is mind, we should view Margery's relationship with John, and especially the way she negotiates for chastity, within the much broader bounds of Margery's onto-theological understanding of the world. We need to remember, for instance, that her desire to be chaste fulfills an earlier covenant she has made with Jesus when he first "ravished her spirit" and instructed Margery to "boldly call [him] Jesus, thy

[347] Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 35.

love."[348] To do so, Jesus gives her a set of "commands": she is to do away with the "hayr upon [her] bakke" and "forsake that [which she] lovyst best in this world, and that is eytyng of flesch."[349] By no longer punishing herself, by giving up her favorite fare, Jesus says, she will grow closer to him, eventually joining him in the "blysse of hevyn."[350]

These renunciations are not at all a means by which she will claim "freedom" from the "conventional female life" or claim agency in opposition to "licit female roles." When Jesus requires Margery to fast from eating flesh, he is not merely asking her to go hungry as a performance of self-mortification. Rather, he explicitly directs her to replace her literal act of eating meat with the incarnational act of consuming *him*: "instead of that flesch, thow schalt etyn my flesch and my blod, that is the very body of Crist, in the sacrament of the awter."[351] By fasting, that is, by detaching her desire from her favorite food, she takes a first step in making herself available to Jesus. By taking communion, what she has given up is replaced tenfold. Meat becomes the body and blood of Jesus, who took on flesh to redeem mankind.

As Margery discovers how to live her earthly and spiritual life simultaneously, her narrative reveals a significant underlying assumption about the relationship, which we have seen in *Wisdom*, between the *sacramentum* and the *res*. When Margery negotiates with John for her chastity, one of John's conditions is that she eat with him on Fridays, traditionally a day on which the devout abstain from meat. But this condition would put her chastity into conflict with another of Jesus' commands. She reacts strongly, citing

[348] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 368, 375.

[349] Ibid., ll. 378-79.

[350] Ibid., l. 372.

[351] Ibid., ll. 379-81.

Jesus' command for her to abstain from meat: "'Nay ser,' sche seyd, 'to breke the Fryday I wyl nevyr yow whyl I leve.'"[352] In face of John's threat to "medyl" her again, she consults with Jesus. Jesus reiterates that her fasting from "eating flesch" is instrumentally connected to her "fasting" from the consummation of flesh in her sexual relationship with John. He releases her from the vow against meat because the fast was never an end but a means: "my derworthy dowtyr, this was the cawse that I bad the fastyn for thu shuldyst the sonar opteyn and getyn thi desyr [for chastity in your marriage]."[353] Her participation in the symbolic fast from eating meat was all along in service of the more meaningful fast from the "marriage dette."

Eating meat in this exchange is double-valent: Jesus' command to fast from eating meat reorients the meaning of "receiving the body." Both participate in embodiedness, consummation, *carnality*, and both are merely symbolic of Margery's ultimate destiny: marriage to Christ. Each is a foretaste of the "blisse" of the heavenly banquet, itself a metaphor for union with God. They are, in fact, *sacramentum* of different degrees, which imitate the ultimate *sacramentum* of the Eucharist. And the body received in the Eucharist participates in the *res*, which is the full union of flesh and spirit in Christ in heaven. Step by step, through the parallel means of fasting and chastity, Jesus prepares Margery to receive him as her true spouse.

To get a clearer picture of what this means, we can view Jesus' re-orientation of consummation alongside a parallel scene from Augustine's *Confessions*. When Augustine theorizes sin as a "land of unlikeness," he too experiences a command to re-order his

[352] Ibid., ll. 548-49.

[353] Ibid., ll. 561-62.

concept of consumption: "I heard your voice calling from on high, saying 'I am the food of full-grown men. Grow and you shall feed on *me*. But you shall not change me into your own substance, as you do with the food of your body. Instead you shall be changed into me.'"[354] Here, God transfigures the concept of food, by turning physical digestion into spiritual nourishment. With physical food, Augustine is the "center" in the event of consummation: the food becomes part of his substance, his self. But God decentralizes Augustine's self in the event of consuming spiritual food. Spiritual food re-orients the process of consumption. Augustine finds his selfhood depends on God's self-giving presence in him as God becomes the center of Augustine's self.

Jesus' commands to Margery, which transmute literal food into spiritual food, and physical union into spiritual union, reveal that she is, ontologically, his bride. In other words, Margery's spiritual marriage with Jesus fulfills the *sacramentum* of her earthly marriage. Jesus transfigures her earthly experience by becoming the center of her selfhood. For Margery, union with God reconciles the self's dialecticism; spiritual union enables her to act upon her proper ontology. In this communion Margery discovers the fullness of personhood, which turns her worldly desire for the infinite toward the actual infinite and converts her previous lust and vanity into hunger for Jesus, whose mercy satisfies all desires.[355]

Personal Selfhood and Simultaneity

This strange and otherworldly conception of selfhood belies an association of identity with social roles and "fashioning." Margery's selfhood isn't fashioned, but given

[354] Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.10.

[355] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 389-90.

and learned through God's mercy. The center of her self-concept rejects categorization, though not as a proto-feminist strategy. Rather, Margery's rejection of categories results from her understanding that selfhood is not socially constructed but an ontological principle determined by reality itself.

This principle, which runs from Augustine, through Boethius and Aquinas to 20th century personalist thought, explains the famous scene in which Jesus tells Margery that he "lofe wyfes also."[356] Critics have presented the interchange as a signal example of Margery's self-authorization as earthly wife and holy woman. [357] In fact, Christ offers this revelation on wives in the service of a fairly typical and plainly orthodox doctrine on the relationship between God's mercy and human existence. God's self-giving mercy makes a person who she is by reforming her fallen nature so that, if free, it can accord with heavenly "ryght." Jesus' affirmation that "I lofe the as wel as any mayden in the world," prefaces his larger point: "of unworthy I make worthy, and of sinful I make rytful."[358] Jesus can love Margery as well as any virgin because her very being, as much as any other's, is the result of his merciful love in the first place. God's self-giving and relational personhood loves the human creature into the fullness of being.[359]

In other words, Christ's ability to "love wives also" allows Margery to understand the theological underpinning of her selfhood. She sees herself simultaneously from

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[356] Ibid., l. 1115.

[357] See, for example, Williams, "Manipulating Mary," 551: "Parallel to the ways in which her physical motherhood made her claim to spiritual motherhood more credible…her experience with earthly sexuality makes her claim to spiritual eroticism stronger and more meaningful. And it adds to the authority that Margery can claim."

[358] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 1130-31.

[359] The fullness of being, of course, is communion with God, as the scene discusses in terms of sainthood, especially Jesus' mother, the blessed virgin. This association becomes very important to Margery, as we shall see.

earthly and heavenly perspectives; she is Margery, the daughter of Eve, and Margery the bride of Christ. Indeed, the dialectic that joins and orders these elements of her personhood reflect the being of the God who communicates with Margery "sumtyme the Secunde Persone in Trinyte; sumtyme alle thre Personys in Trinyte and o substawns in Godhede."[360] We often attend to Margery's experience with Jesus, the second Trinitarian person, but Margery's mystical experience clearly reflects her knowledge and experience with all three persons. The "o" in her testimony above indicates "one," meaning combined or "as one." Margery encounters God often in differentiated persons of his being, but also as "one substance in the Godhead." They can be distinguished but they are the same; Margery communes with God. This simultaneity underwrites the simultaneity of her identity in the world.

In the same way, the "quene" in *Pearl* attests that Jesus loves wives and widows as well as maidens. God's love is uncontained; no human category can classify or limit it: "Ther may no man let me to lofe whom I wele and as mech as I wyl."[361] As Jesus goes on to explain, "for lofe, dowtyr, qwenchith al synne." That is, Jesus can love anyone because of what love is. Since all humans are born in sin, Jesus' love not only saves all, whether she be wife, widow, or maiden, it extends to everyone: "Ther is no gyft so holy as is the gyft of lofe…and therfor, dawtyr, thow mayst no bettyr plesyn God than contynuly to thinkyn on hys lofe."[362] Love is a holy gift from God to his creature and the gift his creatures render back to him when they give themselves in love to him. It is not a finite

[360] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 895-97.

[361] Ibid., ll. 1119-20.

[362] Ibid., ll. 1121-23.

resource to be doled out only to the worthy, but is in fact a gift for the unworthy—all fallen creatures, maiden or not, become holy through being loved and loving in return. Upon this foundation, layers of simultaneity present themselves to the reader. Thus, even as the simultaneous and Trinitarian person of God explains his love to Margery, Margery understands herself as simultaneously fallen and redeemed by the Trinitarian nature of *caritas*, at once the *alpha* and *omega* of being, giving, and receiving.[363]

Margery's discovery that she is simultaneously wife and mother, prefaces the "revelacyons" she is about to receive about love. Before Jesus instructs her to "call him her love," he informs her that she is pregnant. Margery registers her unease at Jesus' annunciation; she says she is "not worthy to heryn the spekyn and thus to comown wyth myn husbond."[364] How can she be a spiritual figure and a wife and mother? She wonders how she will "do for kepyng of [her] chylde" while participating in "this maner of levyng [which] longyth to thy holy maydens."[365] Jesus' answer reveals worldly roles and identities do not apply to his love.

Indeed, as Margery remarks early on, Jesus' "pety and compassyon" has the effect of "thyngys turning up so down" so that she feels very *little* in control over her earthly identity.[366] Upon learning she is pregnant, Margery becomes alarmed and suggests the child in her womb is a product of the "gret peyn and dysese" of communion with her

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[363] Or, as Robert Barron puts it in Exploring Catholic Theology, "The person of Jesus Christ—in which divinity and humanity coinhere—is constituted by the mission that he has from his Father. He is, at the deepest ground of his existence, the One who was sent by the Father into godforsakenness for the salvation of the world," 158.

[364] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, l. 1110.

[365] Ibid., ll. 1108-09, 1114.

[366] Ibid., ll. 17-19.

husband.[367] Jesus tells her, however, that "thow schalt have nevyrthelesse grace, for I wyl that thow bring me forth mor frwte."[368] The pun on "fruit" succinctly expresses the simultaneity of Margery's being. Contrary to her panicked suggestion, Jesus explains that the baby "is to the rathyr mede and meryte."[369] Indeed, Jesus will "ordeyn for an kepar" of the "fruit" of her womb. At his direction, Margery does not reject motherhood; instead the fruit of her union with John is made to coincide with the spiritual fruit of her participation in God's will as a holy woman.

Indeed, Jesus identifies the pregnant Margery not only as wife, but as daughter and as chaste: "Ya, dowtyr, trow thow rygth wel that I lofe wyfes also, and special tho wyfys which woldyn levyn chast."[370] How can this be? Christ recognizes that because of her marriage, the matter of Margery's chastity depends upon whether she "mygtyn have her wyl" with John. Once again earthly and spiritual realities coincide. Still, there is something ontologically deeper at play here: by conflating the roles available to her as a woman, Jesus acknowledges not only their simultaneous legitimacy but also, more significantly, Margery's likeness to his own simultaneous being. Margery's motherhood, daughterhood, and chasteness combine to form her personhood, just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the three persons of the single Godhead.

An earlier scene previews this ideal likeness between human and divine persons; in it, the Lord clarifies the concept of ontological simultaneity from the divine perspective. After a series of social rebuffs and threats on her life brought on by her

[367] Ibid., ll. 1109, 1111.

[368] Ibid., ll. 1112-13.

[369] Ibid., l. 1112.

[370] Ibid., ll. 1114-15.

tearful encounters with the "monkys and prestys and seculer men," the Lord clarifies for Margery the origin and purpose of her tears.[371] While holy tears are "fre gyftys of God" and "the heyest and sekerest gyftys that I geve," they are not the definitive sign of her relationship with him.[372] In fact, he admits, he "far sumtyme wyth my grace to the as I do wyth the sunne."[373] That is, while he is always with her, his grace is sometimes felt more "brightly" than at other times. So Margery will "wepe not alwey at [her] lyst" though his "grace is nevyrthelesse in the."[374] Even if she at times will weep without intending to, Margery is nevertheless fully herself, for Jesus' self-giving love is constant.

If her tears are not the sign of his grace, nor of her steadfast relationship with him, how can she be assured of his constant grace? Citing the Gospel of Mark, Jesus assures her that her own personal acting is the sign and, moreover, personality is fundamentally simultaneous: "He that doth the wyl of my Fadyr in hevyn he is bothyn modyr, brothyr, and syster unto me."[375] As we have seen, those who participate in the will of God enter into relationship with him, and by participating in his selfhood they are united in him, though not the same as him. Jesus then elaborates, affirming the Augustinian principle that the basic ontological form is not substance but relationship:

> "Therfor I preve that thow art a very dowtyr to me and a modyr also, a syster, a wyfe, and a spowse…Whan thow stodyst to plese me, than art thu a very dowtyr; whan thu wepyst and mornyst for my peyn and for my passion, than art thow a very modyr to have compassion of hyr child; whan thow wepyst for other mennys synnes and for adversytes, than art thow a very syster; and, whan thow sorwyst

[371] Ibid., ll. 622.

[372] Ibid., ll. 697, 701.

[373] Ibid., ll. 707-08.

[374] Ibid., ll. 711-12.

[375] Ibid., ll. 714-15; see also Mark 3:35.

> for thow art so long fro the blysse of hevyn, than art thu a very spowse and a wyfe."[376]

This gloss is unusual. The scripture passage itself suggests that those who do the will of God lose their individuality as mothers, brothers, and sisters when they become members of the mystical body of Christ. But here the Lord restores that individuality; Margery's actions on earth allow her to participate relationally in God's selfhood, yet whether mother, spouse, or wife, she is always Margery. Margery is a mother to him when she mourns his suffering, a sister to him when she grieves over the sins of her fellow human beings, and so on. The reciprocality of the ways in which she stands in relation to God is an image of the simultaneity of the persons of the Trinity.

From Jesus' words we see that social roles for Margery are not ends in themselves; they pattern or model different ways of achieving selfhood by participating in God's.[377] Each social role, moreover, entails actions specific to its purpose: for example, motherhood expresses a particular mode of compassion, such that the mother can suffer with Christ in ways that a spouse may not.[378] The spouse, for her part, longs for Christ, while the daughter advocates on his behalf. Together, these actions, which make a person like Christ, combine to bring that person to the fullness of being. For Margery, to do the "wyl of my Fadyr," as Jesus asks, is to love him in every expression of her being.

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[376] Ibid., ll. 712-20.

[377] Ibid., ll. 716-17.

[378] Ibid., ll. 716-17.

This sense of integration assures Margery that God's grace is constant, even if he is "an hyd God in the," like the sun behind a cloud.[379] Whether or not she cries and no matter her social identity, Margery is a self because she loves as God loves, in *caritas*. Because *caritas* brings about the reality of God through "hys propyr persoone" in "Cryst ower Savyowr," it elevates the human self to participation in him through the simultaneity of transcendent autonomy.[380]

Conclusion: Marian Simultaneity and Integral Selfhood

Margery's conception of selfhood as a simultaneous, integrative sense of being, incarnates Godliness in lay experience. In her *Book*, as in medieval culture more generally, Mary, the "Modyr of Mercy," is a primary model of this integrated being by virtue of "alle the grace that thow hast."[381] As Tara Williams notes, "the Virgin Mary was the most powerful and honored female figure of the Middle Ages, so it is hardly surprising that Margery…would seek to imitate her."[382] Williams observes as well that Margery's *imitatio Mariae* draws particularly on the two Marian devotional models of the *Mater Dolorosa* and the *Mediatrix*; she adds however that "Margery takes advantage of the power [of these devotional models] while virtually ignoring its counterpart: humility."[383] I would argue that Margery's imitation of Mary on the contrary reflects a Thomist ontological notion related to the Augustinian paradox of being. Margery, that is, understands Mary as a model of selfhood not simply because she is the "most powerful

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[379] Ibid., ll. 695, 708-10.

[380] Ibid., ll. 19-20.

[381] Ibid., ll. 458, 405-06.

[382] Williams, "Manipulating Mary," 540.

[383] Ibid., 542.

and honored female figure" of her time, but because Mary is the perfect human self. Simultaneously Mother and Virgin, she more than any other epitomizes the integrated and relational selfhood that is grounded in original likeness to the creator.

As we have seen in my analysis of *Wisdom*, Augustine theorizes being as God's giving of his own reality to his creature. The gift of that reality marks the utter difference of God from human beings at the same time that it establishes their likeness to him. Aquinas develops this paradox. As if to anticipate modern performance theory, in which "identity is a 'doing' rather than a 'state of being'," Aquinas theorizes that with God, doing is being: "creation, as an act, is in God, since whatever God does is identical to what God is, given the divine simplicity."[384] The ontological nature of the created being, in Aquinas' words, is "*quaedam relatio ad creatorem cum novitate essendi* [a kind of relationship to the Creator with freshness of being]"[385]; it "is that which is receiving the act of creation." For him, relationality, and specifically receptivity, is the fundamental "ontological form."[386]

"Doing" and "being" also cohere in Mary, the virgin-mother "full of grace." The integration of social roles in Mary—she is daughter of God the Father, mother of Christ the Son, and bride of the Holy Spirit—is her very identity, and it is a most complete expression of original likeness to him that ever was and will be found in any creature. Margery, as we have seen, receives and reflects God's love in the same way by means of an *imitatio Mariae*: "a very dowtyr to me and a modyr also, a syster, a wyfe, and a

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384 Varnam, "The Crucifix, the Pieta, and the Female Mystic," 212; Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 23; Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatem*, q.3, art.3, (Turin: Marietti, 1965).

385 Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatem*, q.3, art.3; translation of this passage in Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 23, 71.

386 Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 71.

spowse."[387] In this "identity," all earthly roles and activities stem from and integrate toward the center, who is Christ. Mary models the integration that constitutes the fullness of reality.

Margery's intimacy with Christ, therefore, is not "startling," "strategic," or "patently unorthodox," as critics have described it, so much as the instantiation of Aquinas's idea of "creatureliness" as based in "relationship." Like Augustine's doctrine on the relationship between *sacramentum* and *res*, "creature" is both noun and copulative verb; the identity of creature is itself "a kind of relationship" of receptivity.[388] As Aquinas argues elsewhere: "the transcendent God is 'in all things by essence, presence, and power…and most intimately so.'"[389] Mary embodies this relationship of receptivity to the perfect degree. Nowhere more than in Mary was the presence, power, and essence of God so intimately lodged.

Because she imitates Mary, Margery's experiences of ecstatic union with Christ aren't "excessive," even when she describes them in "domestic and 'homly'" sexual terms.[390] When, for example, Christ tells Margery that she "mayst boldly take me in the

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[387] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 712-13.

[388] See a full discussion of this concept in my analysis of *Wisdom* in Chapter 1. Barron notes Aquinas' use of Aristotelian language, particularly the word *quaedam*, "but in a decidedly non-Aristotelian way," because he sees relationality, not as an accident between two substances, but "as the deepest ground of the creature's ontological identity," Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 24. That is, "creatures don't so much have relationships to God; they are relationships to God," 24.

[389] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 8, art. 3., quoted and translated in Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 24.

[390] Williams, "Manipulating Mary": Margery "finally shifts from a selective *imitatio Mariae* to exceeding any available precedent…she must take it up another level to confirm her true specialness," 547. Indeed, for Margery, the concept of being "homly" with God can always be linked to her experience of the Eucharist, itself a *sacramentum* of Christ, the *res*. When, for instance, Christ expresses gratitude to Margery for having "herberwyd me and my blissyd modyr in thi bed," the subject of harboring is just one item in an extensive list of Margery's personal actions for which he is grateful, ll. 5089-90. The list is framed by the ultimate earthly transcendence, the literal consummation of Christ and the human body in the

armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as sweetly as thow wylt" she expects her readers to recognize that the coupling she describes is a form of communion.[391] This is why every time Christ mentions fleshly communion to Margery he begins with a discussion of "fastyng" which is "good for yong begynnars" and concludes with "and thu schalt have gret mede therfor in Hevyn."[392] At the end of this "bedroom scene," Christ clarifies what he means in bidding this "homly" affection from Margery: "Be thes tokenys mayst thu wel wetyn that I love the, for thu art to me a very modir and to al the world for that gret charite that is in the, and yet I am cawse of that charite myself."[393] Margery's acts of "domestic, 'homly'" affection are the "tokenys," or *sacramentum*, of *caritas*, which she has "in" her by means of Christ's very selfhood. Yet these acts, he says, make her his mother, rather than the spouse one might have expected. Jesus' trope links Margery to Mary, and to the grace that made her the exemplar of humankind's original likeness to God.

When Williams, then, argues that "this sexually suggestive scene…noticeably lacks the explicit metaphoricity insisted on by other female visionaries," she overlooks the fact that Margery presents it not only as a form of communion but also as an *imitatio Mariae*.[394] Indeed, Margery seems to signal her sense that her descriptions are tropes by

"many tymys [Margery] hast receyvyd the blissyd sacrament of the awter," ll. 4980-81. Every subsequent item in the list should be understood within the frame of transcendent Eucharistic consummation.

[391] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 2106-08.

[392] Ibid., ll. 2083, 2122-23.

[393] Ibid., ll. 2120-22.

[394] Christ's presentation of gratitude through the frame of the Eucharist redoubles his explicit reminder that all of her experiences "arn my gyftys and my gracys whech I have govyn the…for frely I have govyn hem to the," ll. 4984-86. Just as he gives himself in the Eucharist to be consumed and received by his beloved, so all experiences of communion with Christ occur through the mechanism of ontological giving and receiving.

saying that she presents Jesus' forthcoming litany of gratitude not literally but according "to hyr gostly undirstondyng."[395] It is entirely in keeping with her mode of presentation, then, that Margery ends this revelation by having Christ make the Middle English verbs "kept," "bathyd," and "herberwyd" metaphors of one another.[396] They all express Margery's receptivity to his grace, which she simultaneously "holds," and "cares for," and "basks," and "immerses" herself in, as she makes a "dwelling" for Christ "in [her] sowle."[397]

Finally, I return to the "joyless jeweler" of *Pearl*. Just as he learns he can seek the New Jerusalem only through grace, *The Book of Margery Kempe* teaches its readers that grace is center and circumference of Margery's identity. Her claim that Jesus tells her that she is to him "a synguler lofe" and that she could have "synguler grace in hevyn" is much more than a "strategy" to "certify her intimacy with Christ."[398] It is a declaration of identity that is based entirely in rendering back to God the *caritas* that God extended to her and to everyone else made in his image. If Margery aims to certify her intimacy with God, she does so in view of the belief that she, like everyone else, will be subject to final judgement of the singularity of that intimacy.

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[395] Ibid., ll. 4979-80.

[396] Ibid., ll. 5085, 5086, 5089.

[397] MED, "kepen," def. 1 and 4; "bathen," def. 5 (this very line of Margery's *Book* is the MED example quotation); and "herberwen," def. 4; Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, l. 5087.

[398] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ll. 1158-59; Williams, "Manipulating Mary," 550.

CHAPTER IV

PERSON AND ACT IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

> *Since Descartes knowledge about man and his world has been identified with the cognitive function…And yet, in reality, does man reveal himself in thinking or, rather, in the actual enacting of his existence—in observing, interpreting, speculating, or reasoning…or in the confrontation itself when he has to take an active stand upon issues requiring vital decisions and having vital consequences and repercussions? In fact, it is in reversing the post-Cartesian attitude toward man that we undertake our study: by approaching him through action.*[399]

In light of the overall claim of this dissertation, in which I have argued that a medieval view of selfhood depends on an onto-theological view of the person as image and likeness of God, the inclusion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* might surprise my readers. Decades of criticism on this poem have set its religious content against its secular genre and concerns. W.A. Davenport, for example, speaks for many when he says that the poet

> was aware of theological ideas and debates about morality and salvation, though in my view, he did not have a profound interest in either, except insofar as they could provide a framework for the imaginative exploration of situations and feelings.[400]

John Halverson made a similar point ten years earlier, arguing flatly that "Gawain's journey has no supernatural motivation."[401] This early treatment has had a significant influence on more current readings of the poem, which Britton Harwood has pithily termed "an aristocratic-Christian conflict."[402] More often than not, the critical view of

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[399] Wojtyla, Karol. "Preface," *The Acting Person*. Translated by Andrzej Potocki. D. Reidel Publishing Company: Boston 1969, vii.

[400] Davenport, W.A., *The Art of the Gawain Poet.* Athlone Press: London, 1978, 220.

[401] Halverson, John, "Template Criticism: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Modern Philology* 67 (1969), 137.

[402] Harwood, Britton, "*Gawain* and the Gift," PMLA 106.3 (1991), 483.

this conflict echoes David Aers' view that "Christianity is thoroughly assimilated to the celebration of forms of life aspired to by contemporary gentry and nobles."[403] For example, Andrew James Johnson argues that "aristocratic culture seems wholly to absorb religion and to transform it into but another facet of the glittering pageant of courtly display."[404] This view persists despite Harwood's warning that the poem's staging of the conflict is "superficial" since, in the end, the poem's "economy of the gift" subsumes and refutes it. Though Harwood takes seriously the poem's Christian notion of gift, the majority of the poem's criticism treats it as a strictly secular work bound to secular interpretation.[405]

However, these readings ironically force the text into a "template" as much as any allegorical analysis. Halverson himself pointed out the dangers in "templating" the poem:

> once the template is imposed, it becomes tyrannical. It not only excludes other interpretations and clouds perception, but also sends the interpreter off into a multiplication of detailed identifications often so far-fetched that they arouse the amusement or scorn of all except other believers. It demands that everything be reduced to a single set of terms.[406]

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[403] Aers, David. *Faith Ethics and Church*. D.S. Brewer: Cambridge, 2000, 80. See, for example, J.A. Burrow, *A Reading of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966, 46-47; Jonathan Nicolls, *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain Poet*. Woodbridge: Brewer, 1985; Wendy Clein, *Concepts of Chivalry in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'*. Norman: Pilgrim 1987, 92-93.

[404] Johnston, Andrew James. "The Secret of the Sacred: Confession and the Self in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in *Performances of the Sacred in Late Medieval England and Early Modern England*, ed. by Susanne Rupp and Tobias Doring, 86. New York: Rodopi, 2005, 46.

[405] See, for example, Wadiak, Walter. "Gawain's 'Nirt' and the Sign of Chivalry," in *Savage Economy: The Returns of Middle English Romance*. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017, 88-118. The preference for secularism in readings of Gawain, especially in readings that employ gift theory, overlook the crucial theological notion of "being as gift." I have discussed this concept more fully in chapter one under an Augustinian frame, and Hatt engages the Thomist idea throughout her book, *God and the Gawain Poet*. For an extended study of the relationship between God and humans as a "gift economy," see Stephanie Clark, *Compelling God: Theories of Prayer in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

[406] Halverson, "Template Criticism," 139.

As Cecelia Hatt explains, to "template" the text is to "apply a single idea to the interpretation of *SGGK* and try to make everything in the poem fit into it."[407] Yet the notion that generic secularity overrides the theological concerns of this poem and that the religious "may be brought in from time to time to add extra flavor, or to trace a shape on [the poem] that would otherwise be unnoticed" exemplifies a "template" reading driven by a "single idea."[408]

As Hatt suggests, we need to view the poem's secular and religious elements together. I agree with her that "the poet's resistance to a single interpretation is an expression of his theological position."[409] By integrating secular and religious content, we are enabled to view the fantastic and material elements of the narrative not as dismissive of its religious concerns but as participants in its theo-philosophical underpinnings. Unless a critic engages the contexts of thought with which the poet is otherwise invested, her vision will be incomplete.

My argument extends Hatt's analysis to engage what she calls a "Creation-Consummation model," which is her name for the particularly medieval epistemological framework I have explored in previous chapters. Indeed, the model is "central to the theology of Thomas Aquinas"; it encapsulates the Augustinian and Thomist accounts of reality we have seen before. Rather than center human experience as the origin and meaning of reality, this "model" places God at the center of human life. Creation and consummation are the beginning and end of human selfhood, and they revolve around

[407] Cecelia Hatt, *God and the Gawain Poet: Theology and Genre in* Pearl, Cleanness, Patience *and* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2015, 168.

[408] Ibid., 170.

[409] Ibid., 170.

God's mercy, which is the source and summit of human experience. To this end, I show that *Gawain and the Green Knight* expresses a concern not primarily with the "individual"—though it presents the individual as a kind of problem[410]—but with the notion of *person* (and personality) as an objective ontological category. I argue that a concept of the person emerges from the poem and guides it with or without intention, not as an interpretive device per se, but as a context for interpretation. Within the poem's theo-philosophical vision, Gawain's actions reveal the extent to which his personhood is founded in the *persona* of God.

Selfhood and the Human Person: Reconciling Terms

Previous chapters in this dissertation have outlined the Augustinian idea that selfhood is in constant flux between likeness and unlikeness to God. Sin, both original and actual, disrupts the self because it disrupts the soul's being which resides in its having been created in God's image. As a result, the term selfhood, as I have used it in previous chapters, obtains two senses: the selfhood of original likeness and selfhood as the *process* of reformation to its likeness to God's being. This second sense is not a product of self-fashioning or human creation; it is a state of being brought about by conforming one's will to God's. I have shown how two medieval writers (the *Wisdom* playwright and Margery Kempe), whose experience and education vastly differed, have assumed the same notion of human selfhood and its necessary relationship to the selfhood of God. Their works argue that the theological connection between God and the human being was widespread in medieval culture.

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[410] Finch, Casey. Editor and translator, "Introduction," *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 40.

In *Gawain and the Green Knight,* we encounter a third expression of selfhood based on the same ontological paradigm. However, we shall see that this poem reflects a Thomist sense of "personal" being, through which *actus humanus* (human action) "engages the intelligence and freedom of the person" to reveal what he is.[411] Here, selfhood is grounded in Aquinas' notion of a divine *persona*. As Karol Wojtyla explains, we find Aquinas' discussions of *persona* "mainly in his treatises on the Trinity and Incarnation."[412] We find it there because *persona* is first a category of God's being. Aquinas' *persona* reflects Augustine's sense of God as reality in that God's personal being remains the basis for human personal being. God and creature are not the same, but human creatures have their likeness to God, and so have their personhood from him:

> the particular and the individual are found in the rational substances which have dominion over their own actions; and which are not only made to act, like others; but which can act of themselves; for actions belong to singulars. Therefore also the individuals of the rational nature have a special name even among other substances; and this name is "person."[413]

Aquinas finds the hypostatic union of God and human in the person of Jesus to epitomize the concept of *persona* and define the human person's ontological basis. *Persona* is thus a category outside of creaturely existence, though it remains directly relevant to human

[411] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, qq. 6ff; Buttiglione, Rocco, *Karol Wojtyla: The Thought of the Man who Became Pope John Paul II*, trans. Paolo Guietti and Francesca Murphy (Cambridge: Willaim B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 119. As I shall demonstrate, personal acting is not the same as the performance or self-fashioning I critique in previous chapters. Whereas performance and self-fashioning are believed to create one's selfhood, personal acting reveals the ontic subject who already exists through the givingness of God.

[412] Wojtyla, "Thomistic Personalism," *Person and Community: Selected Essays*. Trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM. In Catholic Thought from Lublin, vol. 4. Ed by Andrew N. Woznicki. (New York: Lang, 1993), 166. Wojtyla explains that Aquinas takes a proto-phenomenological method to arrive at his understanding of a "personal God," observing first the Boethian definition of person: "*persona est rationalis naturae individua substantia*," 167.

[413] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 29, a. 1. Aquinas notes the influence of Boethius, who defines person as "first substance" in his discussion of this question. For Aquinas' special consideration of the human person in light of this definition, see article 4.

experience because humans are created as persons, that is, given personhood in their creation. As a result, human persons have the capacity to act in a manner that expresses who they are, their personhood.[414]

Aquinas' notion of *actus humanus*, as Rocco Buttiglione explains, indicates an act through which a human "engages his humanity"; it is distinguished from the *actus hominis* ("act of man"), which is much more passive and limited in its nature. By this Aquinas means that "the concrete man [is] not an abstract subject but a subject which is at the same time a created being, and therefore an object, and who manifests his complexity in action."[415] In other words, through *actus humanus* the person participates in the objectivity of his createdness through subjective experience as an embodied soul. Acts which reflect the goodness of human objecthood—that is, free and moral acts—are necessarily subjective experiences, but they cooperate with and therefore reveal the reality of the one who creates. This revelation indicates both the truth and reality of God, the creator, and God's self-giving of reality to the human person. As a result, *actus humanus* is *personalizing* because it participates in and reveals God's perfect personhood and thereby draws the human being toward original likeness.

Aquinas' understanding of *actus humanus* has been developed by Christian personalists as the term "personal acting" to emphasize the notion that free and moral action draws the creature up to his created personhood.[416] This development of the term

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[414] I shall discuss the claim of personalization further on in the chapter. For now, I wish to focus on reframing the concept of original likeness under the Thomistic sense of persona and the notion of self-formation as *actus humanus*, or "personal acting."

[415] Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyla*, 120.

[416] See, for example, Clark, Norris W, S.J. *Person and Being.* Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993, 94-107, and Crosby, John, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*. Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996, especially pp. 26-27, 34-35, and ch. 6.

remains firmly rooted in the "dyadic structure" of "Thomistic metaphysics…with its indissoluble complementarity of substantiality, the *in-itself* dimension of being, and relationality, the towards-others aspect."[417] Such framing maintains as well the Thomist "notion of existential being (*esse*) as act and as intrinsically ordered toward self-communication."[418] Action that responds to the proper personhood in both the actor and the receiver of the action "speaks" that personhood, is a witness to it, indeed, in a sense, creates it in the visible world.[419] As Crosby explains, "Aquinas expresses it with precision when he says of the acting of persons: 'non aguntur, sed per se agunt: persons are not acted on but act through themselves.'"[420] For Aquinas, personal acts "reveal" the personality of the creature because they involve the full freedom and moral consciousness of the act and thereby honor the dignity of both actor and receiver.

Further, because the divine *persona* forms the creature's ontological basis, acts associated with relationality and love (concepts we have seen in Augustine as synonymous with self) are, for Aquinas, processes that accord with "nature." They are synchronous and yet distinct from being (*esse*): the two senses of selfhood we have discussed before—original likeness and self-formation—are distinguished as *persona* and *actus humanus*.[421] Yet though they are distinct concepts, they make up an "undivided

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[417] Clark. *Person and Being*, 5.

[418] Ibid., 3. See also pp. 1-20.

[419] This is why Wojtyla says that Thomistic personalism emphasizes both createdness and creativity as "natural" to human persons: "we are creators because we are persons. Creativity is realized in action. When we act in a manner proper to a person, we always create something," "Thomistic Personalism," 171.

[420] Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 26.

[421] I use the term "synchronous" here because for Aquinas acting and being implicate each other and cooperate in personhood. Aquinas' hylomorphic view of the human being insists that while he considers

whole" in the person, whether human or divine.[422] In their complex unity, these two principles express "the person as the highest manifestation of being itself, with the resulting characteristics of the person as self-possessing, self-communicative, and self-transcending."[423] Each of these characteristics is, for Aquinas, an *act* of being and becoming, and together they convey the ontological foundation of the person.[424]

Gawain's Fault: Person and Nature

With regard to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the notion of ontological personhood does not refer to Gawain's "identity" per se. Rather, it assists in unravelling the problem of his fault in accepting and failing to return the girdle. In other words, we can only perceive Gawain's "identity" through a proper view of his actions as an expression of his personhood. Gawain's realization that the Green Knight is Sir Bertilak offers an entry point to this claim. Once he is caught, Gawain articulates his auto-critique as an internal conflict of "kynde":

> 'Corsed worth cowarddyse and couetyse boþe!
> In yow is vylany and vyse, þat vertue disstryez.'
> …
> 'Lo! Þer þe falssyng—foule mot hit falle!
> For care of þy knokke, cowardyse me taȝt
> To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake:
> Þat is larges and lewte, þat longez to knyȝtez.
> Now am I fawty and falce'[425]

them distinct, "he regards the human being as a composition of matter and form" with body and soul "intrinsically dependent" upon one another. See Wojtyla, "Thomistic Personalism," 168.

[422] Clark, *Person and Being*, 31.

[423] Ibid., 31.

[424] For a helpful explanation of the term "nature" as I intend it, see Ibid., 26-28.

[425] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 2374-75, 2378-82.

Using the first-person pronoun, Gawain says his cowardice and covetousness has made him "faulty and false," but he recognizes the loss of his virtue as an abandonment of his knightly "kynde." "Kinde" means "nature," and it indicates an ontological grounding of the self altogether different from the modern concept of identity. Having forsaken his virtuous nature, Gawain *becomes* another "kind": "Now *am I* fawty and falce." As he throws the "falssynge" off of himself, he articulates the connection between the seductions of Lady Bertilak and his attachment to his own life ("For care of þy knokke): the connection is cowardice. Through the "teaching" of cowardice, he now "accords" to the nature of avarice, an excess of desire. Avarice, which is awakened in him by Lady Bertilak's advances, causes him to "forsake" the nature of generosity and loyalty which "belongs to knights." Imagining that he has abandoned one nature for another, Gawain realizes that, through the act of accepting the life-saving girdle, he has in fact lost himself.

To a modern reader, Gawain's view of his failure as a conflict of "natures" may seem ironic; facing a foe like the Green Knight, we can hardly begrudge his desire to preserve his life. Bertilak himself says that Gawain should not judge himself too harshly: "Ʒe lufed you lyf—þe lasse I yow blame."[426] Yet Gawain insists that some essential fact of his being has changed. This "kynde" which Gawain's cowardice has perverted is not subjective; it is his nature as a creature God made in his image and endowed with life. Human beings do not "own" their lives so much as life has been given to them by the God who made them. Indeed, the synoptic gospels each contain this doctrine, and the antidote to Gawain's failure, which reflects the economy of God's giving: "For he that

[426] Ibid., l. 2367.

will save his life, shall lose it: and he that shall lose his life for my sake, shall find it."[427] Salvation comes through grace alone, the gift God gave the world he so loved that his Son became flesh and suffered death to redeem those he created from dust. Knowing this, Gawain acknowledges that "Cowardyse me taȝt/To acorde me with couetyse," which causes him to feel the shame any knight ought to feel who lacks "larges" and "lewte." But his fault as a knight is underwritten by a larger, existential betrayal: by coveting life, he has fallen away from himself as a human being, to whom God gave life and through whom death shall be dead.

Here, Aquinas' distinction between person and nature proves instructive.[428] The distinction, as Crosby explains, "[does] not express two different subjects of being" within the person but, rather, "one and the same subject of being that now acts through itself, and now undergoes what happens in itself."[429] We, the "subjects of being," experience subjectivity in two ways: first, we experience our own acts, which occur "on the basis of [our] own understanding of the point of [our] action" (*per se agunt*).[430] This is the experience of "*acting with an acting that is radically [our] own*…not an undergoing, or an enduring, or a transmitting of what originates outside of [our]self."[431] These acts, that is to say, realize ourselves as conforming or falling short of our nature as human beings. We also, however, experience an event as something that happens to us

[427] Here, Mt 16:25.

[428] Several personalists articulate the philosophical and doctrinal reason for this distinction. See Clarke, *Person and Being*, for a brief summary, 25-28.

[429] Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 39.

[430] Ibid., 27.

[431] Ibid., 26.

(*aguntur*, literally, "are acted upon").[432] Crosby describes how subjects can be "acted upon" by coercion or through the "transmission" of emotions through which the subject acts, but understands neither why he acts, nor his action's consequences. These are subjective experiences of "individual" action, but they are actions imposed by other subjects.

The difference between these natures, *aguntur* and *per se agunt*, is germane to Sir Gawain's behavior within the walls of *Hautdesert*, especially when the lines of individual fault become blurred. Aquinas' original distinction poses *aguntur* as internal to the subject, experienced by him but not consciously intended nor performed "through" the person himself. These experiences are, for example, emotions, desires, urges, or cravings.[433] Gawain's experiences of fear, shame, or cowardice reflect the meaning of *aguntur*. Proper to Aquinas, subjective experience, whether *aguntur* or *per se agunt* is "nature"; *agere* is "natural" to man as it arises through him and he experiences them in mind and body.[434]

How Gawain responds to them, however, belongs to an order crucial to our proper understanding of personal acting. To the extent that he reacts, his words and deeds are extensions of his feelings; to the extent that his words and deeds make him "visible" by acting "through him," they align him with virtues or vices that exist apart from him. In Wojtyla's words, "efficacy [*per se agunt*] and subjectiveness [*aguntur*] seem to split the field of human experiences into two mutually irreducible factors." However, he continues, they are in fact two natures within the same "ontological nucleus"—the

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[432] Ibid., 27.

[433] Ibid., 39.

[434] Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, 72.

"subject as a being [in which] every dynamic structure is rooted, every acting and happening."[435] These two natures within the person obtain a proper order, so that they are said to reveal the person.

Indeed, "the person is identifiable with an ontological basic structure" fundamental to and yet coincident with action.[436] As Wojtyla concludes, this

> synthesis not only has its foundation but also occurs actually through the mechanism of the basic ontological structure, that is to say, the ontic subject. This is the reason why the human being, even while he is the agent in acting, still remains its subject.[437]

Wojtyla's notion that the person has a "basic ontological structure" despite the "dynamism" of its acting, reflects Aquinas' objectivistic view of the person. This objectivistic view recognizes the subjectivity of the person in the individual "experience and activity" of each "individual subsistence of a rational nature," but it takes that rational nature as the ground of all experience and activity.[438] What makes a creature human, Aquinas argues, is his rational nature, which he receives from God's very being; a person's rational nature is thus something he possesses both as a subject and as an object, something he belongs to as much as it belongs to him. This objective good is at the same time what a human being shares with God and what one receives from God as his subject.

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[435] Ibid., 71.

[436] Ibid., 74.

[437] Ibid., 75.

[438] Wojtyla, "Thomistic Personalism," 170. The quoted definition is Boethius' "*persona est rationalis naturae individua substantia,*" to which, Wojtyla shows, "St. Thomas continually has recourse," 170.

In the Thomist worldview, rationality and freedom are "the principle means, so to speak, whereby the human person is actualized."[439] As Wojtyla points out, these indicate the "objectivity" of personhood, which constitutes a "completely different treatment" from the modern reader's experience of post-Cartesian selfhood, in which subjective lived experience is "absolutized" through consciousness and conceived as the "essence of the person."[440] This post-Cartesian model witnesses directly to the notion of "self-fashioning," as we have seen in my previous chapters. In the pre-modern view, the person *is not* their experience, nor their consciousness, but *is* the ontic subject, created as person by God, who *has* experiences and whose consciousness *reveals* his personhood through moral action.

It follows, then, that "freedom of the will is not given to us as an end in itself, but as a means to a greater end."[441] In the Thomistic view of the cosmos, freedom participates in a moral "order" proper to "rational beings, which are persons."[442] In other words, freedom "exists for the sake of morality."[443] Properly understood, freedom enables humans to express their personhood, which Aquinas argues with regard to the created world is *perfectissimum ens*, the most perfected form of being.[444] So, while moral actions are not persons, they derive from the perfection of personality and order themselves toward perfect ends: actions have moral relevance, on the one hand, and

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[439] Ibid., 170.

[440] Ibid.

[441] Ibid., 172.

[442] Ibid.

[443] Ibid.

[444] Ibid., 167.

moral consequences, on the other, because they are made by and are directed toward persons.[445] Moral acts respect the created value of persons in both the actor and the recipient; they therefore speak to the personhood of both parties. In Crosby's words:

> selfhood, foundational as it is in human persons, does not contain the whole essence of personhood…[human] selfhood is a transcendent selfhood. We possess ourselves in transcending ourselves towards value. Our self-possession is raised to a higher power when the transcendence is potentiated in moral obligation.[446]

By the same means, immoral action depersonalizes the subject because it deforms his nature and perverts his relation to others. Depersonalization does not change the ontological structure of the human being—what Crosby calls "value"—but it nevertheless damages the soul of the actor because it chooses to *accord* with lesser goods that act on him rather than acting in a manner that realizes his value as a person. Self-possession and transcendence are thwarted by the subject's attachment to vice and lack of self-determination.

Gawain's failure illustrates this precise problem. The temptation of lesser goods ultimately tests not simply his knightly "identity" but his personhood, his being as such. The Green Knight reveals that he engineered Lady Bertilak's enticements precisely to reveal the shortcomings that inhere in courtly conduct:

> I wroȝt hit myseluen;
> I sende hir to asay þe, and sothly me þynkkez
> On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede.
> …
> Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wonted;
> Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowing nauþer,
> Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf—þe lasse I yow blame.[447]

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[445] Crosby. *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 9.

[446] Ibid., 217. When Crosby uses the term "value," he means "ontological value," a given dignity inherent to all persons created in the *imago dei*.

[447] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 2361-68.

The Green Knight says Gawain is not guilty of "wylyde werke," nor has he violated the rules of "wowing." Indeed, he finds him "the most faultless man that went upon the earth." Yet while Gawain negotiates his knightly identity perfectly, the perfection he achieves in courtly manners is the source of his failure in spiritual virtue. Virtue, Gawain recognizes, is his moral responsibility regardless of his courtly identity.[448] Gawain's sin results ultimately from depersonalizing actions through which he clings to his life rather than keeping the truth.

The Person, the Pentangle, and the Maintenance of Mystery

Grounded in Thomistic thought, the concept of the self I have outlined above articulates a logic of selfhood that is well-established by the period in which the *Gawain* poet composed his romance. The differences between the concepts of person and nature, a distinction between types of action taken by persons, and the potentiality of human action to depersonalize the self are the intellectual context for an assessment of Gawain's personhood and conduct. Gawain's identity, however, has usually been analyzed according to other, post-medieval criteria.[449] Hatt, for example, points out that "critics have claimed that there are two Gawains in the poem."[450] She adds that

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[448] Hatt argues that "it was important that this Gawain at least should be a man for whom virtue, as derived from religious belief rather than just good manners, really matters. This is why his response to the Green Knight is so violent and why it also matters (to the poet, as to a clerical audience) that he should move on from a simple aspiration towards good behavior to a more mature understanding of how a human being might hope to apprehend the goodness of God," *God and the Gawain-Poet*, 203.

[449] See, for example, Woods, "Nature and the Inner Man": "the pentangle, his personal emblem," 215. Another example can be found in Olga Burakov-Mongan, "Supplication and Self-Reformation in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Leeds Studies in English 50 (2009), 49: "it is first necessary to consider the knight's famous pentangled shield, whose symbolism anticipates the model of selfhood generated by the Pater Noster prayer the knight rehearses. Few studies of the romance fail to acknowledge the importance of the pentangled shield for understanding the narrative in general, and the figure of its bearer in particular." Burakov-Mongan frames this distinction rightly, suggesting that the pentangle manifests an "ideal selfhood" that is "transparent and unified," 48. Arguing that the pentangle is "a blueprint for Gawain's inner man," Burakov-Mongan acknowledges the shield as a "model of selfhood," 49. This reading is, I

> Gawain himself is a collection of contradictions, a gentle and courteous man who is apparently quite happy to behead a perfect stranger, a knight famed for his amorous escapades who tenaciously guards his chastity.[451]

This emphasis on identity—whether singular or multiple—rather than on his moral consciousness—seems to me to be misplaced.[452]

Critics have paid inordinate attention to so-called textual "instrument[s] of self-expression and self-constitution"; these "instruments" turn out to be Foucauldian synonyms for self-fashioning.[453] As a result, more than one scholar has lamented that "Gawain's subjective consciousness—not his emotions and desires, which are often quite apparent, but his reflective, indwelling sense of self—will never be directly accessible to us."[454] If, though, we view Gawain's "subjective consciousness," as an expression of his onto-theological personhood, we can see him more clearly.

Actually, a logic of a personal selfhood establishes the person—in this case Sir Gawain—as an ontological being distinct from, and yet coincident with, actions that

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think, adept, but it doesn't address where the value of "transparent and unified" comes from, nor what notions of selfhood are the basis of the model. See also Catherine Batt, "Gawain's Anti-Feminist Rant, the Pentangle, and Narrative Space," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992), 117-39, Ross G. Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory and* "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987, and "Gawain's Shield as *Signum*," in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives on the Pearl-Poet*, ed by Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman. Troy: Witson, 1991, 221-26.

[450] On the claim for "two Gawains," see also Mary Dove, "Gawain and the 'Blasme des Femmes' Tradition," *Medium Aevum* 41 (1972), 20-26.

[451] Hatt, *God and the Gawain-Poet*, 200.

[452] For the theory of character development see, for example, M. Mills, "Christian Significance and Romance Tradition in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *MLR* 60 (1965), 483-93. Hatt also discusses this idea, *God and the Gawain Poet*, 201-203. John Finlayson argues that Gawain shifts more starkly between the identities of religious and worldly hero in "The Expectations of Romance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Genre* 12 (1979), 1-24, esp. pp. 13.

[453] Woods, William. "Nature and the Inner Man," 210.

[454] Ibid., 210. See also Olga Burakov-Mongan, "Supplication and Self-Reformation," 47-48, and Johnson's "The Secret of the Sacred," in which he suggests that readers' "uneasiness" results from the "narrator's staunch refusal to give us the necessary insight into the workings of Gawain's mind," 50.

"identify" him by revealing his personhood. This medieval concept of personal selfhood maintains the idea of mysterious simultaneity, rather than internal conflict or collapse, as the default condition of post-lapsarian human experience. The poem posits Gawain as a human person created in God's image with both free will *and* the tendency toward concupiscence; he is not so much "a collection of contradictions" as always on the line between conforming or perverting that image.[455] The more he conforms, the more he achieves personhood, but this process is always unstable. Moreover, this dialecticism of selfhood means that his exact "status" between conformation and perversion at any given point remains a mystery throughout the poem.

The character of Gawain makes visible to the reader this invisible ontological tension. We have seen the tension emerge in Gawain's regret at having betrayed his "kynde": because Gawain admits he has betrayed his nature, we are able to perceive the underlying paradigm of difference and simultaneity between person and nature. Thus Gawain embodies the sustained tension between poles of self-expression that allows the human creature to transcend himself into personhood. Without Gawain's simultaneity, we cannot see that both degrees of reality are available to the person. Only this tension allows for the revelation that personhood—Aquinas' *perfectissimum ens*—exists.[456] Accordingly, the poem argues that the mystery of Gawain's status, and mystery more

[455] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 82, art. 4. Aquinas explains that concupiscence is an effect of original sin, which is passed from parents to their children as a *libido habitualis*, that is, not a sexual sin in particular (*libido actualis*), but a wound of the whole human nature occurring from a lack of the obstacle of "original justice." In *Gawain*, we should view concupiscence with this fuller meaning.

[456] Wojtyla explains that Aquinas himself realized that God's personhood is only perceivable through man's imperfect imitation of it: "whatever is a true perfection in the created world must be found in the highest degree in God, and so the person, too, which signifies the highest perfection in the world of creatures, must be realized in an incomparably more perfect degree in God," "Thomistic Personalism," 166.

generally, is not solvable, nor should it be. *Gawain* avoids resolution because resolution forecloses the possibility of transcendence.

With this in mind, the poem conditions the reader to abide in mystery throughout the poem, often by means of paradox. As David Baker observes, "paradoxes of self-reference are crucial to the poem" because they reveal the full range of narrative and stylistic choices.[457] These paradoxes work against hierarchies in both content and form, and they are ultimately the reason that "templating" the poem is unproductive. Paradox, Baker argues,

> is introduced, cultivated, and prolonged by the poet. Through paradox the *Gawain*-poet challenges linguistic hierarchies by reinventing a French story in an altogether English tradition, and further by exploring even the divine nature in the vernacular, and that again through paradox. His maintenance of paradox and refusal fully to resolve it is a literary refusal to submit to medieval philosophy, and a demonstration of the problems and potential of language which impedes understanding even as it communicates truth. He chooses the romance style in which to do all this, and all in an East Midlands dialect…He assists in raising the romance style to a higher intellectual level, undermining another implicit literary hierarchy."[458]

Baker demonstrates how the poet uses paradoxes "of symbol, narrative, and form" to subvert other linguistic and social hierarchies, including the association of poetic style with class, and to reject the supremacy of logic within medieval philosophical and educational systems.[459]

For logicians, paradoxes were problems to be solved; except for those concerning God, they could all be organized into taxonomic classes.[460] Aside from divine paradox,

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[457] Baker, David. "The Gödel in Gawain: Paradoxes of Self-Reference and the Problematics of Language in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.' *The Cambridge Quarterly* 32.4 (2003), 355.

[458] Ibid., 365.

[459] Ibid., 352, 355-62.

[460] Ibid., 359.

logic was to be applied to all "insoluble" problems, even to the extent that a linguistic and literary hierarchy was invented as a work-around.[461] To challenge the hierarchical association between romance and the noble class specifically, Baker argues that the Gawain poet "[raised] the romance style to a higher intellectual level" by employing multiple recursive and unresolved paradoxes. Baker concludes that paradox is the poet's method of subversion—an intervention in the medieval preoccupation with hierarchical structures of all kinds, especially the formal and linguistic.

However, while Baker is right to associate *Gawain*'s paradoxes with the opening of formal and narrative possibility, I posit that the resistance to hierarchy he observes in the poem ultimately resists the "solutions" that hierarchies often propose. As a result, Baker too broadly associates hierarchy with "medieval philosophy." In fact, a rhetoric of paradox maintains the mysterious theo-philosophical doctrine of reality at play in the poem. This doctrine of reality depends on the viability of mystery, and it insists that human beings tolerate unsolvable problems. The unsolvable problem at the center of the doctrine is the "unreasonableness" of God's mercy, as we have seen in my previous chapters. As *Wisdom* argues, the point of human existence is not to have *knowledge* of the *logos* of God's *caritas*, but instead to experience it by receiving and reciprocating it. Through sustained paradoxical tension, which Gawain's person embodies, the poem illustrates the limits of the human ability to "solve" mysteries.

Beyond the simultaneous characterization of Gawain, several scenes in the poem express a sense of mysterious tension through descriptions of "otherworldly" or "liminal" characters and spaces. The Green Knight is one such character, who carries a deadly ax in

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[461] Ibid., 350, 352.

one hand and a holly branch in the other.[462] Though fully decked in “clene” [perfect] armor, he lacks a helmet or hauberk for battle.[463] The Green Knight’s embodiment of contradiction begins a series of similar descriptions that build narrative tension throughout the poem. Such tension is appealing to audiences who delight in suspense, but through Gawain’s example, it also prepares us to engage in mystery without feeling compelled to resolve it.

For example, when the castle of *Hautdesert* suddenly appears, Gawain’s sense of awe betrays the feeling that the castle is, perhaps, unreal: at the same time that “þe haþel auysed,/ As hit schemered and schon þurȝ þe schyre okez,” he notes “þat pared out of papure purely hit semed.”[464] The massiveness of the castle, its impregnability, its sheer being is equally emphasized. The poet’s detailed yet confounding description of the castle intensifies the mystery of his subject; even while the castle seems indestructible, this impression is balanced with the sense that even the mightiest structures man makes on earth seem flimsy and unstable.

As he approaches the castle, Gawain seems to abide in the mysterious tension of the scene and allow for all possible outcomes: is the castle is an actual building? a medieval Christmas craft project? is it a hallucination, like a desert oasis that may disappear just as he comes too close? The poet notes that the castle integrates seamlessly with its surrounding “borelych bole”; its towers match the trees within which it hides, and the castle seems to fit its natural surroundings perfectly as it is “loken,” or “framed,” by

[462] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 203-09.

[463] Ibid., ll. 154, 158, 163.

[464] Ibid., ll. 770-71, 802.

boughs.[465] Yet anchored as it is in the material world, its appearance "out of nowhere" makes it seen more than natural. Indeed, Gawain doesn't see it until he prays to the Virgin. As soon as it appears he takes the castle as a divine gift of "Jesus and Sayn Gilyan…þat cortaysly hade hym kydde," who heard his prayer for shelter and befriended him.[466] The place he approaches is real, supra-real, and spiritual all at once.[467] Gawain seems to remain open to various possible causes for its sudden appearance, whether they be natural, spiritual, or magical, and he responds to this strange situation with surprising flexibility. Indeed, throughout the first half of the poem, Gawain models a response to mystery that embraces the unknown rather than resolves or rejects it. Rather than grasp for clarity upon the paradoxical appearance of the castle, Gawain simply asks the porter if he can come in.[468]

Gawain's engagement with mystery in several other scenes offers readers a vision for how to approach the complex and simultaneous conception of his selfhood as both person and nature revealed by his acts. His acceptance of mystery without grasping for full understanding shows us how to engage, for instance, with the simultaneity and paradox of personhood imaged by his pentangled shield:

> For hit is a figure þat haldez fyue poyntez
> And vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oþer
> And ayquere hit is endelez (and Englych hit callen
> Oueral, as I here, 'þe endeles knot').

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[465] Ibid., ll. 765-66.

[466] Ibid., ll. 774-75.

[467] Of course, Gawain's experiences within the castle similarly sustain two realities at the same time. Despite his "real" experiences there, we find out in the end that everything to do with his quest occurred through the "myȝt of Morgne la Faye…bi craftes wel lerned—/ þe maystres of Merlin," which Morgan "hatz taken," ll. 2446-48.

[468] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 810-12.

Forþy hit acordez to þis knyȝt and to his cler armez[469]

As Baker's extensive analysis shows, the pentangle is a self-referential and self-replicating paradox, with its "endless," "overlapping" lines, and "points" that "lock" or interlace each other. Like the other mysterious points of tension in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this shape reveals surprising possibilities, the first of which is a concept of "truth" with ontological implications.

Through its endless interconnectedness, the pentangle becomes an image of eternity. As Baker argues, "the *Gawain*-poet is suggesting that, even though language itself cannot express God in medieval thought, linguistic paradoxes can."[470] That is, paradoxes can express God insofar as they maintain the legitimacy of mystery—the gap between words, which image God's attributes, and the Word who is God. The gap itself, which is always present and acknowledged in medieval modes of thought, holds space for God while not attempting to perfectly articulate him.

By the same method, the ontological concept of "pentangle"—that is, the notion of pentangleness—has a being analogous to God's: as primary substance and form, its reality remains imperceptible, even while it gives its shape, image, and meaning to what it creates in and of itself.[471] Drawing on Ross Arthur's study of the pentangle's geometry, Baker shows not only that the pentangle is itself a paradox but also that "the pentangle is *symbolic* of paradox…since it contains not itself exactly but merely similar pentangles of

[469] Ibid., ll. 627-30.

[470] Baker, "The Gödel in Gawain," 359.

[471] I am drawing here on Thomistic and Aristotelian thought on form and matter. See, in particular, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bks 7 and 8.

decreasing degrees of magnitude."[472] So, as a function of its "medieval mathematics," the pentangle expresses infinite self-replications: "Every regular pentangle contains within itself a regular pentagon, in which a new, similar pentangle may be inscribed."[473] All perceivable pentangles, such as the one on Gawain's shield, are the image and likeness of their original form.

In other words, the pentangle expresses mathematically the ontotheological conception of personhood in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and also in *Wisdom* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*: the pentangle's self-contained and endlessly repetitive self-replication articulates the gift of the *res* to the *sacramentum*. And the relationship is reciprocal: through the visible *sacramentum*, we gain "philosophical access" to the absolute and invisible *res*.[474] Thus, just as God gives his image and likeness to the human person through his sheer act of being, the geometrical pentangle gives its shape to new and unique pentangles through the creative act of *simply existing*.[475] The pentangle images the "truth" that human beings are the *imago dei* by means of God's self-givingness.

To create imaginative space for transcendence and to articulate its means, each point of the pentangle articulates simultaneously a vision of the divine *persona* and of the

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[472] Baker, "The Gödel in Gawain," 358, my italics.

[473] Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory*, 34.

[474] I borrow this phrase from Wojtyla's analysis of Aquinas' process for discovering the personality of God through both theological and philosophical means, "Thomistic Personalism," 166.

[475] As Norris Clark explains, this concept of relationality is "already implicit, waiting just under the surface to be developed, in Thomas' own highly dynamic notion of existential being (esse) as act and as intrinsically ordered toward self-communication," *Person and Being*, 3. Of course, the pentangle remains an earth-bound sign, despite its singular ability to articulate the givingness of God.

perfection of human nature that makes a person God's image.[476] The pentangle's mutually dependent points, separately and by means of their interlocking, show what Gawain ought to be, and they show what he is in the world. For instance, the third point, "þe fyue woundez/ Þat Cryst kaȝt on þe croys," explicitly "makes reference to specific divine paradoxes central to Christianity—those of the incarnation and crucifixion."[477] Compressing the entire notion of divine *persona*, and particularly the notion of a hypostatic union of God and man into less than two lines, the poet invites Gawain to contemplate, with the reader, on the personhood of Christ as the answer to "quy þe pentangle apendez to þat prynce noble."[478] Indeed, the poem presents Christ's personhood as the answer to Gawain's identity throughout: its beginning on Christmas, when Christians celebrate the Incarnation and human birth of God marks the specifically personal nature of God in Christ and clarifies Gawain's own person in the *imago dei*.

Specifically, "þe crede tellez" not the details of Christ's five wounds per se, but of Christ's personhood as God, who "came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary," who "suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day."[479] The poet connects the description of Christ's five wounds to the ancient Creed of the church to argue that, though Gawain is not God, he is called to be like him

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[476] The Middle English word *pointe* is both a verb and a noun. It simultaneously means "an activity, action," and "a state of being, condition…virtue…or trait." MED, "pointe," def. 9 and 10.

[477] Baker, "The Gödel in Gawain," 359.

[478] Wojtyla, "Thomistic Personalism," 168. See also Hatt, *God and the Gawain-Poet*," 3-4; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 623.

[479] For the Latin text see "Symbolum Fidei," *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae*. Vatican. June 25, 1992. Retrieved January 31, 2019.

"vpon folde."[480] That is, for Gawain's "affyounce" to be in the *wounds* of Christ means that even though Gawain's "faith" remains in the Resurrection, he must be prepared to die. Ironically, because the shield cannot protect Gawain from death, it locates the concept of faith precisely in the Resurrection. Transcendence through faith depends upon the *persona* of Christ who is grace, but it also results in the personhood of Gawain.

The fourth point of the pentangle reiterates the personalism of Christ as it applies to Gawain through its depiction of the five joys of Mary. These are five of the most simultaneously intimate and transcendent of divine-human encounters, which fully personalize Mary as *theotokos*: the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Assumption. Compressing the mystery of the human-divine encounter into such small space formally emphasizes the poem's themes of tension and transcendence. But it also articulates another element of Gawain's personhood: *fiat*. While Christ's "five wounds" model for human persons the givingness of God, Mary's "five joys" model the humble receptivity with which persons are to respond. Mary's *fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum* [let it be done to me according to your word] embraces the mystery of the Incarnation and virgin birth, which allows God's personalizing work to be accomplished. This embrace is a free and autonomous transcendence toward God and a reciprocation of his *caritas*: it personalizes Mary, who recognizes God's absolute value and gives herself back to him in love.

Indeed, the concept of *fiat* frames the meaning behind Gawain's oath to the Green Knight. Now, Gawain's oath in no way theologically compares to Mary's *fiat*. However, it does imitate the principle of self-giving behind the *fiat* of the Annunciation. The Green

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[480] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 642. Precisely which creed the poem references is unclear, though both Nicene and Apostle's creeds refer to these mysteries of Christ's life.

Knight first proposes his "game" to Arthur via the court—an indirect proposal to anyone brave enough to engage, with the promised reward of the ax framed as a "gyft."[481] But when no one will accept the challenge, and Arthur is forced by courtly courtesy to take up the ax, Gawain issues his *fiat*: "I beseche now with saȝez sene/ Þis melly mot be myne."[482] With "plain speech," he clarifies that he will give his life in Arthur's place and associates that gift with his request to take the oath: "And syþen þis note is so nys þat noȝt hit yow falles,/ And I haue frayned hit at yow fyrst, foldez hit to me."[483]

In response, the Green Knight narrows the proposal, making the "game" specific to Gawain. He first requests to know Gawain's name, and then insists that he repeat the terms of the oath:

> Þen carppez to Sir Gawan þe knyȝt in þe grene,
> 'Refourme we oure forwards, er we fyrre passe.
> Fyrst I eþe þe, haþel, how þat þou hates
> Þat þou me telle truly, as I tryst may.'[484]

The Green Knight customizes the oath for Gawain, attaching his name, indeed his person, to it. Then Gawain "reforms" the accord and becomes, himself, the gift. They discuss the terms of Gawain's quest a year hence. Gawain promises to seek out the Green Knight and "foch þe such wages," that is, to accept the return blow and surely die. In other words, the oath that Gawain "swere[s] þe for soþe and by [his] seker traweþ" affirms that the exchange be executed according the Green Knight's word. Gawain accepts these terms

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[481] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 298.

[482] Ibid., ll. 341-42.

[483] Ibid., ll. 358-59.

[484] Ibid., ll. 377-80. The Green Knight puns on the word "fyrre," which Finch translates as "farther." But the word could also refer to fire, which invokes Abraham's covenant with God in Genesis 15: "When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham…" Gen 15:17-18.

because he recognizes Arthur's value: "No bounte but your blod I in my bode knowe."[485] Gawain's *fiat*, the giving of his own life for Arthur's sake, will occur if he keeps his "traweþ."

Despite the entire court's hesitation, Gawain responds to his moral consciousness and accepts the Green Knight's Christmas challenge on Arthur's behalf. This is a personalizing act because at the same time Gawain's *fiat* acts against his own interests, it transcends his lower nature—the "wakkest" and "feblest"—to reveal the mystery of his personhood.[486] Certainly, he acts as a knight by his bravery and courtly courtesy, but he ultimately chooses to act in a personalizing way "quatso bifallez after," because it is the action that accords with value.[487] When he steps into Arthur's place to accept the Green Knight's challenge, Gawain makes the mystery of self-sacrifice a visible and legitimate choice. His *fiat* illustrates that the *per se agunt* involved in that choice not only makes him a courteous knight but "engages the intelligence and the freedom of the person."[488] Significantly, his offering reflects the reason for Christmastide, that Christ gave himself freely and totally to humanity by his Incarnation and thus became the salvation of the world. Gawain's self-giving action can thus be viewed as a truly personal act, one that accords to his personal nature in likeness to the divine *persona*.

The symbolism of the other points—the five senses, the five "fyngres," and the five virtues—articulate the means by which fallen human beings transcend their lower nature to participate in the perfection of personhood. The text's description of these

[485] Ibid., l. 357.

[486] Ibid., l. 354.

[487] Ibid., l. 382.

[488] Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyla*, 118.

remaining three points illustrates a means of transcendence using "horizontal" and "vertical" language. [489] Because "pointe" can mean "virtue" as well as "corner," we must reckon with both "horizontal" and "verticle" meanings of each crook of the pentangle. Used together, horizontal and vertical language maintain a fraught interdependence reflective of the tension in a paradox.

This tension insists that horizontal reality is not comprehensive, and therefore presents a perspective of the human person as created *for*, that is, intrinsically directed toward the object of eschatological union with God.[490] Here again, in form and content, simultaneity reigns: for example, the first point, Gawain's "fyue wyttez," refers to physical "senses," which are the body's means of perception. Then again, with the word "wit," the poet simultaneously invokes the common medieval theory of "spiritual senses."[491] As Sarah Coakley and Paul Gavrilyuk explain, "it is not uncommon for Christian writers to use the language of sense-perception to describe the divine-human encounter without qualifying the sense as 'spiritual' or correlating them with the soul,

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[489] Drawing on Barthes' notion of "classical and modern" language, Finch develops a concept of "vertical and horizontal language" for the *Pearl* poet. He argues that, while these different types of language are seen by Barthes as "mutually exclusive…in the *Pearl* poet, these seemingly antithetical modalities exist side by side." Finch, "Introduction," 15-17.

[490] Crosby explains this fundamentally Thomist idea: "Every conscious act…is directed to some object; joy is always joy *over something*, doubting is always doubting *about something*, perceiving is always the perceiving *of something*, etc. In our conscious lives we do not have to do with ourselves, but with another; consciousness in this sense is objective, that is, object-directed." He continues, explaining that this "objectivity of consciousness" developed through Dietrich von Hildebrand as the idea of "*value-response*, which is the idea that in our responding to the world we do not always bend things towards our needs but can transcend ourselves to the point of giving things their due," *Selfhood of the Human Person*, 5, original emphasis. On the claim that Gawain's ultimate journey is toward "eschatological union with God," see Hatt, *God and the Gawain-Poet*, 1-5.

[491] The MED does not separate the human and divine implications of the word; instead it combines them into one category of definition. See MED, "wit," def. 1, a.

mind, heart, and so on explicitly."[492] Therefore, if Gawain is "fautlez in his fyue wyttez," he has both a "fit" experience of perception in his body in addition to a sense of unity with God in his soul.[493] Gawain's "wyttez" are in no way passive. The active, disciplined response of his bodily perception (horizontal) corresponds to a similarly disciplined spiritual response toward objective value—God—in his soul (vertical). This is why the poet can speak of Gawain as "funden fautlez."

Gawain's "fyue fyngres" has a similar double meaning, referring to bodily digits, but points to supernatural influence on human experience. Notably, as the fingers extend from the body, they are associated with specific actions, which, in the *Gawain* poet's day, convey the effects of both "the five means by which the devil tempts" and "eternal life, good works, and various virtues...the Holy Spirit or his gifts."[494] Because Gawain has "fayled neuer" in his "fyngres," which may be temptations, good works, or the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the second point of the pentangle reaffirms the ideal of unity with God through specific, embodied, and disciplined action.

Unsurprisingly, then, each of the virtues listed in the fifth point contains a depth of meaning through a tension between horizontal and vertical language. This final point

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[492] Coakley and Gavrilyuk, *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God is Western Christianity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.

[493] For another perspective on this notion among the early Church fathers, see John Climacus: "When a man's senses are perfectly united to God, then what God has said is somehow mysteriously clarified. But where there is no union of this kind, then it is extremely difficult to speak about God." *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, XXX, Translated by C. Luibheid and N. Russell. New York: Paulist Press, 1982. 288.

[494] MED, "finger," def. 3. Chaucer's Parson details these five "fyngers" of the devil's temptation in order: looking, touching, speech, kissing, and lechery. See Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, ll. 852, 863. For the "fyngres" as symbolic of the Holy Spirit or other supernatural influence, see Gregory Sadlek, "The Image of the Devil's Five Fingers in the South English Legendary's 'St. Micheal' and in Chaucer's Parson's Tale," in *The South English Legendary: A Critical Assessment*, ed. by Klaus P. Jankofsky. Tubingen: Francke, 1992, 49-64.

of the pentangle lists an additional five virtues, which also serve as traditional ideals of courtly conduct: "fraunchyse" [generosity], "felaȝschyp forbe al þyng" [fellowship/loyalty beyond all things], "clannes" [purity, chastity], "cortaysye" [courtesy], and "pite" [piety], all of which "croked were neuer."[495] However, beyond their role in courtly etiquette, these virtues have vertical meanings through which the human soul can participate in divine life. For instance, "fraunchyse," in addition to "generosity," also meant "spiritual freedom."[496] As Hatt argues, each of these virtues bears "full semantic weight."[497]

As we shall see, the virtue of courtesy becomes increasingly significant in the latter half of the poem. However, its relevance there is predicated upon its meaning as a feature of the pentangle. Though critics have long viewed courtesy in *Gawain* in a strictly secular light, I argue that this virtue participates in the same paradoxical tension between secular and religious meanings. This tension itself reveals both what Baker calls "resistance" and what I view as the didactic opportunity of the poem. For instance, Burakov-Mongan identifies several critics who, after J.A. Burrow's suggestion, view courtesy as "a constellation…of specifically secular or courtly values."[498] Finch, as we have seen, acknowledges a more complex view, claiming that the poem "concerns, above all, the relation of a very real and individual knight to the chivalric and Christian ideals symbolized, for instance, in the pentangle depicted on Gawain's shield."[499] Here Finch

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[495] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 652-53.

[496] MED, "fraunchis(e)," def. 1 and 2.

[497] Hatt, *God and the Gawain Poet*, 2.

[498] Burakov-Mongan, "Supplication and Self-Reformation," 50.

[499] Finch, "Introduction," 39.

simultaneously aligns chivalric and Christian ideals and sets them in opposition, arguing ultimately that their entanglement signals a "*negotiation* between heavenly virtue and political reality."[500] Yet, whereas Finch ultimately reads "a complete conflation of the two orders," Harwood offers a third perspective by arguing that the secular and religious maintain an "aristocratic-Christian conflict," which the poem resolves through "the economy of the gift."[501] The concerns among *Gawain*'s critics are diverse and comprehensive, but they broadly privilege the secular conventions of the poem's genre at the expense of the poet's otherwise clear, if implicit, understanding of courtesy.

In fact, the *Gawain* poet illustrates courtesy in several instances as more than just a courtly virtue. If, as is commonly accepted, the *Gawain* poet is the author of the other Cotton MS poems, the religious dimension of social virtues is easier to acknowledge. For example, Burakov-Mongan points out that "in *Patience* and *Cleanness*, for instance, the poet describes courtesy as a divine attribute, as well as an inner state of spiritual perfection."[502] She shows how the poet's view of courtesy remains consistent with his contemporaries "who identify the origins of courtesy with the Annunciation, linking this virtue to the life of the Blessed Virgin."[503] On the theological side, Hatt argues that "this poet's interest in embodied human life," that is, the life of the court, was much more integrative than it may appear: "to continue to assert the relation [between human and

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[500] Ibid., 40. Emphasis original to Finch.

[501] Ibid., 42. Harwood, "*Gawain* and the Gift," 483. Harwood's reading of *Gawain* under the terms of gift theory is astute. I do not wish to argue against it except on this point.

[502] Burakov-Mongan, "Supplication and Self-Reformation," 50.

[503] Ibid., 50. Mary's *fiat*, then, is the exemplar of courtesy.

divine] seems to be the task the poet has chosen."[504] For Hatt, the poet's investment in the endeavor of humanity is itself an attempt to reveal God's glory, to "point" toward God in every instance: the poet's "interest in human life is not a denial but an assertion of his theology."[505] As I will demonstrate, the poet has a clear sense that courtesy has both courtly and spiritual meanings, and he deliberately uses them together.

Here, for example, is *Pearl*'s description of "cortaysye":

> 'Of courtaysye, as saytz Saynt Poule,
> Al arn we membrez of Jesu Kryst:
> As heued and arme and legg and naule
> Temen to hys body ful trwe and tryste,
> Ryȝt so is vch a Krysten sawle
> A longande lym to þe Mayster of myste.
> Þenne loke: what hate oþer any gawle
> Is tached oþer tyȝed þy lymmez bytwyste?
> Þy heued hatz nauþer greme ne gryste
> On arme oþer finger þaȝ þou ber byȝe.
> So fare we alle wyth luf and lyste
> To kyng and quene by cortaysye.'[506]

At this point nearly half way into *Pearl*, the "gentle" jeweler's daughter offers her thesis: true "courtaysye" cannot be comprehended by any appeal to earthly status or rank, as the Jeweler assumes. Everyone in heaven is a king or queen by virtue of being a member of Christ's mystical body. True courtesy is the absolute harmony of the constituent "limbs." For her, "head and arm and leg and insides/belong to his body truly and faithfully"; each are necessary to the body's life and equal participants in it. This harmony is the model of

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[504] Hatt, *God and the Gawain-Poet*, 5.

[505] Ibid., 5.

[506] *Pearl*, ll. 457-69. The daughter's "thesis," paraphrases St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, 12: 12. Here is my translation: "Of courtesy, as says Saint Paul, we all are members of Jesus Christ. As head and arm and leg and innards are taken to his body truly, faithfully, and reliably, just so is each Christian soul a limb belonging to the Master of might. Now look, what hate or gall is attached or tied by twisted limbs? Thy head has neither anger nor resentment toward the arm or the finger that you bear there. So journey we all in love and longing as king and queen by courtesy."

which the body politic is the institutional image, the noble court the cultural image, and the coordinated physical and moral make up of human beings the knightly image. "By courtesy," she argues, love triumphs over hate and jealousy.

The Jeweler's daughter follows Paul's epistle in portraying the "divine attribute" of courtesy through a metaphor involving the human body, which again calls attention to the mystery of the Incarnation, the relationship of *caritas* between God and his creation. In *Pearl*, the poet articulates this relationship in paradoxical terms that hold a reader's experience of the text in the same fraught position as Gawain's choice of "kynde." As Finch argues, the poet "seems concerned primarily with demonstrating the profound contiguity between the divine and the human," and his main mode for accomplishing this is his combined use of "vertical and horizontal language":

> Allegorical significance and individualized character, grandiose meaning and local event, vertical and horizontal language, in a word, heaven and earth: in the *Pearl* poet these are at once joined and strangely broken off from one another. A disturbing and paradoxical relation is established between the spiritual and the worldly…We have thrust upon us a pulsating sense of what simultaneously separates and joins the visible and the invisible orders.[507]

In the theological poetics of *Pearl*, in other words, universal and individual, objective and subjective realities are superimposed in the service of making visible human personhood.[508]

As a result, the poet embraces two theological mysteries "which indicates not only [his] genuine and energetic Christian faith but also and unusually lively grasp of it."[509] These are the hypostatic (fully divine and fully human) *persona* of Christ, the

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[507] Finch, "Introduction," 17.

[508] Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyla*, 119.

[509] Hatt, *God and the Gawain-Poet*, 1.

incarnate God, and second, the purpose of human life and man's relationship with the Creator.[510] Christ's person as a hypostatic union means that the invisible reality of God is fully maintained in Christ, even while Christ simultaneously takes on a fully human nature. That God became human without loss of his divine selfhood announces the objective of salvation: that the purpose of human life is communion with him. Respectively, these mysteries speak to the beginning and end of the created order, as witnessed by the Gospel of John; the point of *verbum caro factus est* is the human person's eschatological union with God. This understanding of God—and particularly Christ the "Creator and Consummator" as the incarnate meeting of divine and human personhood—provides the poet's fundamental assumption about reality and, inevitably, the notion of human persons.[511]

This assumption provides a key to one of the pentangle's intractable paradoxes: its double concept of "trawþe." The text proposes that the pentangle, by its very linguistic appointment, "betokens truth." Yet this is a truth that requires the reader to hold Gawain's subjectivity as simultaneously already perfect and also striving toward perfection. The pentangle, the poet explains, "apendez to þat prynce noble" and "acordez to þis knyȝt," that is "Gawan [who] watz for gode knawen."[512] This rhetoric has an air of finality, as though the reader can already judge Gawain's life and character. Of course,

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[510] Kelsey, David, *The Walter Farrell Lecture*, "Aquinas and Barth on the Human Body," *Thomist* 50 (1986), 643-89. See John 1: 1-18: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God…And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, the glory of the only begotten Father, full of grace and truth…and of his fullness we have received, and grace for grace."

[511] Kelsey, "Aquinas and Barth on the Human Body," 648.

[512] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 623, 631, 633.

we will learn that he “lakked a lytel” despite his goodness, when it came to keeping his truth, that is, his word.

How can these two perspectives be reconciled? The pentangle offers a vision of Gawain’s personhood and so remains an enduring truth: it is at the same time the truth in which he was created and to which he has the opportunity to return *through personal acting* modeled by the pentangle’s five points. As we have seen in my previous analyses, the soul’s progress is conceptually circular, not horizontal, and it is conceived within the eternal perspective: the soul’s reformation toward goodness is a process of becoming more itself. Aquinas maintains this idea, affirming that the creation of human beings occurred through a “supernatural endowment of grace,” not subject to loss even by sin.[513] Thus the “truth” of the pentangle is its perfection from whence Gawain, its bearer, came and toward which he is destined in the order of creation.

For this reason, as the poet “tarries” to elaborate upon the pentangled shield, he introduces it typologically: “Hit is a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle/In bytoknyng of trawþe, bi tytle þat hit habbez.”[514] Invoking King Solomon, the poet draws on the power of his reputation as a “good king,” and assumes that he, too, was “for gode knawen”[515] At the same time, Solomon, like Gawain, is prone to concupiscence, especially with regard to illicit relationships and his propensity to temptations of the flesh. Thus, the pentangle that “Salamon set” holds both bearers to account for the five points it proclaims. Each warrior must, as the poet’s descriptive puns imply, put on St. Paul’s “armor of God.”[516]

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[513] *Summa Theologiae*, I. q.95, a.1.

[514] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 624-26.

[515] MED, “setten,v.”

[516] Ephesians 6:10-18.

This is the armor of faith, which is simultaneously the symbol of the warrior himself and that supernatural grace which *enables* him to "*state ergo succincti lumbos vestros in veritate* [stand, therefore, girding up your loins in truth]."[517] Gawain *is* and is ever *called to be* the man to whom such armor "appendez." So, "as golde pured," that is, just as gold must be refined, the pentangle prophesies that Gawain will follow Solomon in the process of becoming as "cler" as his "armez."[518]

The simultaneity of the pentangled shield as both representation of perfection and instrument of formation indeed presents "a blueprint" for Gawain's selfhood, not as a model of identity, but as a model of the ontic subject.[519] This dialectic finally explains the formal discrepancy in this section of the poem. For, when the speaker introduces the pentangle, the poem's past-tense narration seems to pause, and the present, eternal-oriented narrative presents the shield as it is: "quy þe pentangel apendez"; "hit is a syngne"; "hit is a figure þat haldez fyue poyntez"; "hit is endelez"; "hit acordez."[520] That is, the pentangle's meaning is not governed by time, whether it be the future orientation of the narrative or the past-tense description of its bearer; it symbolizes eternity. The *Gawain* poet's use of paradox thus simultaneously invokes and resists one kind of "medieval philosophy," namely, a secular philosophy that would uphold courtly values as

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[517] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 629-30.

[518] Ibid., l. 634. It is notable that under the MED's definition of "cler," the poet's words are nearly perfectly reflected: "cler" 2,b: "clarified…cleared of enemies," and 2,c: "morally pure, guiltless, innocent."

[519] Burakov-Mangan, "Supplication and Self-Reformation," 49.

[520] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 623-30.

objective goods.[521] Like Gawain's personhood, the pentangle at once incorporates and rejects secular values, and the tension between them creates the very space wherein the truth will be revealed.

This is why Gawain expresses a sense of destiny as he prepares to leave Camelot: "Of desines derf and dere/what may mon do bot fonde?"[522] More than a quest undertaken in search of adventure, Gawain's "covenant" with the Green Knight roots his "destiny" in the concept of theological personhood. In other words, the quest has ontological consequences that depend on Gawain's fulfillment of his oath to seek out the Green Knight. To accept the Green Knight's "game" in Arthur's place was only an initial response to moral consciousness. But as he leaves for Camelot, Gawain embarks on the fulfillment of truth, which is simultaneously the keeping of his word and the realization of what he is. As Kelsey explains in light of Aquinas' thought on human embodiedness, "the fact of destinedness, the context of mission and vocation to and by that end, is as primordial to concrete human personhood as is the fact of its creatureliness."[523] Gawain's mission connects his *personal acting* to his ontological personhood; the action of fulfilling the oath would map his body onto his personhood and bring him to its fullness. There is no better time for such a mission, the poem argues, than Christmas, when Gawain and the court celebrate the epitome of personal acting, God's union of the divine *persona* with human flesh in the Incarnation.

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[521] By "secular philosophy," I mean the educational philosophy outlined in Baker's essay, but also the social philosophy represented in the codes of courtly love and chivalry.

[522] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 564-65.

[523] See Kelsey, "Aquinas and Barth on the Human Body," 648-49.

Depersonalization in the Castle of *Hautdesert*

Only within the tension of the pentangle's simultaneous meanings can *actus humanus* reveal human potential for transcendence into *persona*. The pentangle models a "truthful" response to moral consciousness that accounts for ontological value, personal autonomy, and freedom from attachment. To enact such a response, however, Gawain must admit his own inhering, innate weakness. He must discover how by coveting his life, he comes close to losing it, and how his acceptance of the green girdle depersonalizes him because he fails to remember God's gift, by which he was created and redeemed.[524]

This process, as Aquinas describes it, involves detachment from lower-order goods in favor of the absolute good, he calls *bonum*. *Bonum* refers to a "relational goodness, a goodness that is *for someone*"; it is an "objective good" that has "a foundation in the nature of human beings" because humans are relational beings.[525] Personalists, including Crosby and von Hildebrand, develop Aquinas' view of *bonum* toward a notion of value, and they understand a human being's affirmation goodness as a personalizing response to "value." Crosby explains: "when we speak of [value], we do not speak of the *goodness for the human person* [*bonum*], but of a goodness that persons have in themselves."[526] A response to the value in another is personal because it draws

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[524] Concupiscence affects the person ontologically. Barron explains the notion of concupiscence in *Exploring Catholic Theology*: "The human being *is* a relationship to the God who is continually making and shaping him; essential to the good life is an acceptance of this state of affairs. At the heart of original sin, therefore, is the tendency toward self-creation and self-deification and the concomitant refusal to be shaped," 59.

[525] Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 177.

[526] Ibid., 177.

the person out of him or herself by engaging in free and moral action toward the other for the other's own sake.

Such action affirms personhood in the other without loss of it in oneself; in fact, the actor's own personhood "deepens," as Crosby explains:

> What a value calls for from me is not my self-affirmation performed with reference to the value, but rather affirmation of the value for its own sake. And yet it remains true that the demands which the world of value makes of us do not inflict heteronomy on us, but rather engender the deepest personal life of which we are capable.[527]

Persons do not respond to value out of egotistic motivation. Rather, they are drawn outside of themselves, beyond the grasp of the ego, to respond to the good*ness* in the other. To the extent that a person recognizes goodness in another "for its own sake," over and above the good that the other may be *in relation to* him, the person transcends *bonum* (good *for*) toward the Good (good*ness*).

Crosby borrows the phrase "for its own sake" from Wojtyla, who associates such a response with Aquinas' definition of love:

> Love is directed in a special way toward other persons, for in them we find an object commensurate with ourselves. True love, the kind of love of others worthy of a human person, is that in which our sensory energies and desires [what Aquinas calls "natural" love] are subordinated to a basic understanding of the true worth of the object of our love.[528]

To love the other is to recognize the other as a person; this response, Aquinas says, is a "demand and even an ideal of morality."[529] We can see, then, how Aquinas' notion of a

[527] Ibid., 185.

[528] Wojtyla, "Thomistic Personalism," 173.

[529] Ibid., 173.

moral “demand” suggests the personalist concept of value and lends a philosophical foundation to the concept of “value.”

From this point of view, the actors in the latter half of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* misunderstand value by transforming it into *use*. The juxtaposition of hunting and bedroom scenes in Fit III clearly illustrates how use requires an objectification and instrumentalization that depersonalizes both the user and the one who is used. The very equation of Gawain’s tête-à-tête with Lady Bertilak and her husband’s hunts for deer, boar, and fox points to this degradation of being. For example, the poem describes the pageantry of butchering of the hind in the form of a deer’s blazon:

> Þe best bozed þerto with burnez innoughe,
> Gedered þe grattest of gres þat þer were
> And didden hem derely vndo as þe dede askez…
> Boþe þe hede and þe hals þay hwen of þenne
> And syþen sunder þay þe sydez swift fro þe chyne
> And þe corbels fee þay kest in a greue.
> Þenn þurled þay ayþer þik side þurȝ bi þe rybbe
> And henged þenne ayþer bi hoȝez of þe fourchez…[530]

The poem spends thirty-six lines detailing the process, which fits the aristocratic courtliness the poem celebrates. Yet, as we shall see, this scene juxtaposed with Lady Bertilak’s rhetorical depersonalization of Gawain emphasizes the objectification of the hunted in both scenarios. The piece by piece dismemberment renders the deer unrecognizable: “and bred baþed in blod blende þeramongez.” The deer is reduced to meat, a “fee” for each hunter and a “blende” of blood and gore for the dogs’ consumption. From this point in the poem, there are no more “hinds,” only “venyson,” a noun which marks the ontological change in the animal from forest creature to food. By the end of the passage, the deer is no longer a living creature, but an object for use.

[530] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 1325-61.

In a similar way, Lady Bertilak spends several days deconstructing the interlacing "points" of Gawain's personhood explicitly to "wonnen hym to woȝe," that is, to put him in danger of violating the truth of his oath.[531] She continually tries to define Gawain's identity, each time defining his courtesy and other attributes for, she claims, "I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Wowen ȝe are,/ Þat alle þe worlde worchipez."[532] She uses this knowledge to induce him to court her, as if she is the hunter, he the deer, in a chase of love.

As a result, Gawain is coerced into finding a way to deny her commands without himself violating the laws of courtly courtesy. One way he tries to do this is by acknowledging that he is her prisoner, but asking to be released so that he can dress himself.[533] Even though good manners demand she grant this request, she refuses to do so:

> Ȝe schal not rise of your bedde. I rych yow better:
> I schal happe yow here þat oþer half als
> And syþen karp wyth my knyȝt þat I kaȝt haue.[534]

She will "direct" him ("rych yow") better. She will in effect circumscribe his autonomy not only by "fastening" him ("happe yow") to the bed, trapping him in the most vulnerable condition, but more importantly by then telling him who he is and what he will do.[535] In short, she depersonalizes Gawain; she turns him into an object of pleasure—and suggests that he do the same to her—then denies him the freedom to act in any manner through himself. In testing Gawain's skill as a courtly lover, the lady reduces him

[531] Ibid., l. 1550.

[532] Ibid., ll. 1226-27.

[533] Ibid., ll. 1218-19.

[534] Ibid., ll. 1223-25.

[535] Ibid., ll. 1226-36.

to an object of lust to which she can assign a "price," rather than as a person who has inherent value.[536]

Praising his honor and "daynte wordez" on their first morning together, Lady Bertilak proclaims, "And syþen I haue in þis hous hym þat al lykez,/ I schal ware my whyle wel, quyl hit lastez."[537] Gawain's responds to this praise by saying:

> I be not now he þat ye of speken—
> To reche to such reuerence as ye reherce here
> I am wyȝe vnworþy, I wot wel myseluen—
> Bi God, I were glad and yow god þoȝt
> At saye oþer at seruyce þat I sette myȝt
> To þe plesaunce of your prys; hit were a pure joye.

Although typically regarded as a demonstration of Gawain's command of courtliness, his self-deprecation reflects the spiritual virtue of courtesy: Gawain insists that he knows himself well enough to know he's not the person she has said he is. His answer is more than an elegant flourish, a way to offer his obedient service in the same act in which he refuses Lady Bertilak's compliments. His humility points to the humility among one's peers whose exemplar the *Pearl* maiden had said is the courtesy that perfectly harmonizes souls as members of the body of Christ. Gawain clearly understands how courtly discourse works, but his words open onto larger objective virtues than those that govern courtly savoir-faire.

So, from the very beginning of their time together, Gawain realizes he is in moral danger. While the lady accuses him of being a "sleeper vnslyȝe," Gawain's moral senses remain alert: he feels "schamed" even as the lady "droȝ þe dor" and before he fully

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[536] Incidentally, I note that the lady's lust need not be genuine. She doesn't need to prove that she actually lusts after Gawain, only that in referring to him only through courtly values associated with lust, she objectifies him enough to depersonalize him.

[537] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 1228, 1253, 1234-35.

processes the "meruayle" of her sudden appearance in his chamber.[538] That he is in moral danger is signaled further by Gawain's impulse to "sayn" himself (makes the sign of the cross), "as bi his saȝe þe sauer to worthe [as by his prayer the safer to become]."[539] He has need; Lady Bertilak suggests the "fine force" of courtliness behooves her to offer her body for Gawain's pleasure if he chooses:

> 'Ȝe ar welcum to my cors,
> Yowre awen won to wale,
> Me behouez of fyne force
> Your seruaunt be, and schale.'[540]

The courtesy she proposes is clearly instrumental. The lady suggests an exchange of "service," which fulfills the courtly expectation through its lack of mutuality; it demands the submission of one party to the full "force" and power of the other. In other words, Lady Bertilak perverts the mutual self-giving that spiritual courtesy implies in favor of the power-play that is courtly courtesy. While she claims that he has the upper hand, she has already forced his submission to her by "catching" him in bed. The notion that she is "obliged" to be his servant is a lie, and his acquiescence to her proposition of "service" would amount to false courtesy.

In response, Gawain appeals to value and attempts to correct the concept of knightly service under the order of virtue:

> 'I am wyȝe vnworþy, I wot wel myseluen—
> Bi God, I were glad and yow god þoȝt
> At saȝe oþer at seruyce þat I sette myȝt
> To þe plesaunce of your prys; hit were a pure joye.'[541]

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[538] Ibid., l. 1189.

[539] Ibid., l. 1202.

[540] Ibid., ll. 1236-40.

[541] Ibid., ll. 1244-47.

Gawain would be glad, he says, to offer some speech or service that might accord to her "prys." "Prys" can mean "monetary exchange value" or "price," but also "non-monetary value" or "worth," associated with Christ's redemption.[542] The word refers both to the courtly virtue of high nobility and to the "price"-lessness of human value. Just as significantly, Gawain reframes her conditions of service: instrumentalization and objectification result in exchanges based on power. Their competitiveness is destructive to the person. Instead, self-giving based on the inherent value of the other results in mutual exchanges that free the persons involved. Mutual relationality is, like the Trinity, fruitful. When Gawain uses the word "pure," at the end of the line, he points to not only the "total" but the "perfect" and "clean" joy Christ's sacrifice opens to those he redeems.[543]

However, the lady closes off the multivalence of Gawain's word, "prys," and makes clear that she speaks only of courtly renown, particularly in terms that privilege how Gawain is regarded by others. Using his proper name for a third time, she identifies him specifically as "þe prys and þe prowes þat plesez al oþer."[544] For her, Gawain is an object of the court: he is not a man "of prys," but a man-price small enough in value to be held "in [her] honde." For the Lady, it's not that Gawain has mastered the courtly ideal, but that he is *nothing but* these courtly virtues. Indeed, throughout the stanza, Lady Bertilak explicitly objectifies him using words like "chepen" (bargain, haggle, or trade)

[542] MED "pris," def. 1, 3, and 4.

[543] MED, "pure," def 1, 2, and 3.

[544] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 1249.

and "cheue" (get) to refer to her process for "choosing" him among other knights. Hers is a particularly one-dimensional proposal:

> 'For were I worth al þe wone of wymmen alyue,
> And al þe wele of þe worlde were in my honde,
> And I schulde chepen and chose to cheue me a lorde,
> …
> Þer schulde no freke vpon folde before yow be chosen.'[545]

Given the opportunity, she would spend any personal or financial capital to snag him. Through her praise of his "bewte and debonerte and blyþe semblaunt," she ultimately bargains his true value down far enough to gain his promise of service.[546]

Recognizing the lady's false courtesy, Gawain is forced to play to her power with courtly discourse that invokes both senses of courtesy and walks the line of humility that can be interpreted as both spiritual and courtly. For instance, after Gawain initially rejects her excessive praise, she reiterates that she "haf hit holly in my honde þat al desyres," reminding Gawain that she has him "in hor holde,"[547] Gawain responds:

> 'Madame,' quoþ þe myry mon, 'Mary yow ȝelde,
> For I haf founden, in god faith, yowre fraunchis nobele;
> And oþer ful much of oþer folk fongen hor dedez;
> Bot þe daynte þat delen for my disert ny euer—
> Hit is þe worchyp of yourself, þat noȝt bot wel connez.'[548]

On the one hand, Gawain is a paragon of courtliness. "May Mary, our mother, reward you!" as Finch's translation goes, "Your generosity is noble and although men will admire and imitate peers…This esteem is *your* tribute." Gawain praises Lady Bertilak's

[545] Ibid., ll. 1269-75.

[546] Ibid., l. 1273.

[547] Ibid., ll. 1257, 1252.

[548] Ibid., ll. 1263-67.

generosity, which is a model for others to emulate, but goes on to say she's been too openhanded in her praise of him, which only proves how worthy of praise she is.

On the other hand, by punning on the word "ȝelde," Gawain makes available a more literal translation:

> 'Madame,' said the merry man, 'submit yourself to Mary,
> For I have found, in good faith, your generosity noble;
> And so will many others find your deeds;
> But the courtesy that they give, I never deserved—
> It is the worship of yourself, that cannot but be well known. [549]

This reading emphasizes the depersonalizing potential of Lady Bertilak's flattery. In the final line, Gawain refers not to his own honor, but to the lady's repeated insistence that she "byndes" him in the bed and that she "schal happe" him whom the whole world loves.[550] In other words, he argues, the more she praises him for his supposed courtesy, the more she praises herself for having caught him. Indeed, it "cannot be but well known" that she has trapped him there, because she repeats the claim several times. While her generosity as his host had been noble, and while others may praise it, false praise is a means to the "worschyp" of herself. This praise, like the use of her body for pleasure, instrumentalizes courtesy and falsifies it.

The next day Gawain realizes that the moral danger of false courtesy presages the mortal danger of depersonalizing coercion. Lady Bertilak tells Gawain that he is not himself because he hasn't kissed her, as she had said he needs to do as a faithful suitor. When he parries this by saying she might take offense, she tells him the laws of love warrant his seizing the kiss anyway:

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[549] For "submit," see MED, "yelden," def. 1c. The definition of "yelde" as "reward" is far rarer. For "give," see MED, "delen," which also means to "separate" or "divide."

[550] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 1210, 1225.

> ‘Sir, ȝif ȝe be Wawen, wonder me þynkkez.
> Wyȝe þat is so wel wrast always to god
> …
> Þou hatz forȝeten ȝederly þat ȝisterday I taȝt te
> …
> ‘Ȝet I kende yow of kyssyng’ quoþ þe clere þenne,
> Querso countenaunce is couþe, quikly to clayme;
> Þat bicumes vche a knyȝt þat cortaysy vses.’[551]

If Gawain claims to “use courtesy,” which to her means if Gawain is Gawain, he will not miss his chance to claim a kiss when he is shown favor. The lady explicitly proposes force as a remedy for refusal: she says he “may not be werned” and, even if he were refused, he could “constrayne [any lady] wyth strenkþe.”[552] Yet Gawain responds by drawing a contrast between coercion and “goud wille,” arguing that “þrete is vnþryuande in þede þer I lende,/ And vche gift þat is geuen not with goud wille.”[553] There is a clear distinction for Gawain between “threats” and “good will” that renders a “gift” what it is. In fact, threats work against courtesy; they are a tactic of coercion that place both actors in grave danger.

The Lady’s rhetoric expresses the absolute opposite of *actus humanus* in that it pits Gawain’s identity against his virtue, rather than uniting them, as illustrated by the pentangle’s ideal. Her approval of coercion in fact speaks directly to the issue of identity since, as Aquinas says, coercion denies the person of his or her being (*esse*) as person. Coercion separates the *esse* from its corresponding freedom of action, which is given to intellectual creatures for their own sake. (Non-rational creatures lack the same freedom because they are created for use by other creatures.) The juxtaposition of Lady Bertilak’s

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[551] Ibid., ll. 1481-85, 1489-91.

[552] Ibid., ll. 1494-96.

[553] Ibid., ll. 1499-1500.

claim with Lord Bertilak's boar hunt becomes all the more meaningful in this context. As Crosby says, "when persons are coerced, some other is acting through them: but as persons they act through themselves."[554] This is why the *actus humanus* is crucial to personality:

> Only because persons have a being radically their own can they act with acts radically their own. Only because persons are autonomous in their being are the capable of autonomy in their acting. If persons were really nothing but instrumental means or pieces of property… their *esse* could not support the *agere* of acting through themselves.[555]

When Lady Bertilak offers "service" to Gawain in the form of praise, pleasure, or gifts, she attempts to contract him, to use him as a means, and to "remwe" his "mode" [to "remove," "take away," or "change" his "mind"].[556] Not only does she thereby distort the meaning of courteous service, she also in a sense violates his person and then invites him to repeat that violence by seizing a kiss from her. She acts against both the individual and the relational sense of personhood.

In their final exchange, Lady Bertilak again makes Gawain realize that socially sanctioned notions of courtesy can place him in a position of "gret peril." The poet underlines the difference between his hostess's maneuverings and spiritual courtesy when he says "Gret peril bitwene hem stod,/Nif Mare of hir knyȝt mynne."[557] That is, Mary, the exemplar of spiritual courtesy whose image is painted on the inside of Gawain's shield, stands between him and the Lady to defend him. In fact, the poet reiterates that Gawain is

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[554] Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 26. See also Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981, 27.

[555] Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 35.

[556] See Finch's glossary for "remwe." The MED defines "mode" much more comprehensively as the "mind as that constituent of the soul and…the seat of man's spiritual life," def. 1.

[557] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 1768-69.

“hir knyȝt,” not Lady Bertilak’s, when he underscores the dilemma Gawain faces in the press of her advances:

> For þat prynces of pris depresed hym so þikke,
> Nurned hym so neye þe þred, þat need hym bihoued
> Oþer lach þer hir luf oþer lodly refuse.
> He cared for his cortaysye, lest craþayn he were,
> And more for his meschef ȝif he shulde make synne
> And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde aȝt.[558]

Lady Bertilak has “pressed him so hard,” and “urged him so near the limit,” that rhetorical skill no longer will suffice to avoid physical sin. Gawain will have to be very clear about which definition of courtesy he will display: he must choose between the Lady and the Virgin. He worries that cowardice might taint his “courtesy,” which indicates that he’s more concerned about spiritual virtue rather than courtly manners. Indeed, he emphasizes this by then expressing the harm he would suffer if he sinned by doing “meschef” and proving to be a traitor. Gawain’s courtesy is strong enough to meet these challenges without losing his honor: “’God schylde!’ quoþ þe schalk. ‘þat schal not befalle!’”[559] But when it comes to saving his life, he will learn that only spiritual courtesy will suffice.

Although the lady does not gain the use of his body, she succeeds in coercing him into knightly service by coming to his chamber earlier each day to catch him by surprise, chastising him for “sins” associated with false courtesy, and cheapening his virtue. Each day that she hunts him, she depersonalizes him by using him as a means in a plot; the

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[558] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 1770-75. The word “craþayn” is taken by Finch to mean “churl” or “boor,” but the MED and OED tie it more closely to “crathon,” which both sources say is closer to the word, “craven,” meaning “coward” or “spiritless through fear.”

[559] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 1776.

result of her successive attacks dulls Gawain's conscience to the point that he can only act out of fear, rather than truly "through himself."

As we have seen in *Wisdom*, to dull the conscience is no small matter. Aquinas theorizes conscience as a "cognitive act," that is, the "application of knowledge" that "dominates an act."[560] Crosby explains further that conscience speaks a person's "self-presence," which is the person's awareness of himself as a subject, and his action. The conscience is "the radical way in which I determine myself (and only myself) from the center of my being."[561] The poet seems aware of this as upon the lady's very first entrance to his chamber, Gawain "compast in his concience" because he senses danger to himself and must determine he should act in response. Yet as he loses autonomy day by day, he is less able to use his conscience to direct his action. Gawain's turn from his "kynde" happens as much through the lady's insidious and persistent attacks upon his conscience as it does through actual sin.

Gawain finally begs Lady Bertilak to stop her manipulative action against his person: "And þerfore I pray yow displese yow noȝt/ And lettez be your bisinesse, for I bayþe hit yow neuer/ To graunte."[562] But by the end of their third exchange it is too late. Gawain wishes not to displease Lady Bertilak, but that is as far as his courtly courtesy can take him. He does not intend to consent to her false courtesy, nor to accept her gifts, because they lie about who he is. Nevertheless, when Lady Bertilak tells him that the girdle with save his life, "þen kest þe knyȝt, and hit come to his *hert*" that "hit were a juel

[560] *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 79, a. 13.

[561] Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 89.

[562] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 1839-41.

for þe joparde þat hym jugged were."[563] Gawain's judgement fails: he "reasons" that if he manages to escape being slain, then "þe sleȝt were noble."[564] Fear has taken over, and *actus humanus* turns into *actus hominis*. Fittingly, as he dresses himself for his encounter with the Green Knight, Gawain is no longer concerned with courtesy, but "for gode of hymseluen."[565]

What I have demonstrated thus far as coercive and depersonalizing behavior conspicuously coincides with "the system of gift exchange" that, as Marcell Mauss explains, facilitates the "struggle among nobles to determine their position in the hierarchy."[566] In fact, drawing on gift theory, which combines sociological and archeological research to examine cultural and individual systems of gift, exchange, and commodity, Harwood shows how the theory of this "system," which is developed from the work of Mauss as well as Claude Levi-Strauss, Marshall Sahlins, and others maps onto *Gawain*'s presentation of 14th century courtly culture: "Owing to the classic research by Marcel Mauss, the existence of a noble class has become linked to an exchange system of obligatory and interested gifts."[567] Arguing that the Green Knight's show of mercy in the final Fit disrupts the "obligations" of the system, Harwood concludes that

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[563] Ibid., ll. 1853-54.

[564] Ibid., l. 1858.

[565] Ibid., l. 2031.

[566] Mauss, Marcel, The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies. Translated by Ian Cunnison. New York: Norton, 1967, 4-5.

[567] Harwood provides a robust bibliography. Relevant texts are Mauss, cited above, and Levi-Strauss, Claude. "Introduction a l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss." *Sociologie et antrhopologie.* By Marcel Mauss. Paris: PUF, 1950, and Sahlins, Marshal, *Stone Age Economics*. Chicago: Aldine, 1972.

"the poet uses the economy of the gift" to illustrate the "dangerous" intersection between cultures of nobility and Christianity, and also to "cancel" that intersection by mercy.[568]

Specifically, Harwood demonstrates how Gawain, Sir Bertilak, and the Lady participate in each of the "three obligations," which hinge on "spending to the humiliation of others" as a measure of social value and wealth.[569] The Lady eagerly complies with her noble obligation to give to the point of excess and humiliation, and within this framing, Gawain is again used as a pawn in a "game." Gawain accepts the girdle, in part, because he is obligated by the conditions of his nobility and, therefore, by the conditions of the cultural system of exchange, to respond to her initiation of the gift. Indeed, the system of gift exchange in *Gawain* depends on the giver's *use* of the receiver as a means to show his or her own courtly "virtue and therefore power."[570] The obligations of this system become visible through the Bertilaks' depersonalizing actions, such that the system itself becomes the agent of depersonalization. The obligations thus reveal a structure that imitates the relationality of Trinitarian love through gift, but in every way delivers its practical and spiritual antithesis. Notably, the "obligatory largess" expected of the nobleman only *appears* like charity.[571] As Harwood explains, the *Gawain* poet's contemporary, William Langland, specifically contrasts the courtly show of "generosity" with the theological virtue of charity[572]—that is, God's free, total, faithful, and fruitful self-gift.

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[568] Harwood, "*Gawain* and the Gift," 483-4.

[569] Ibid., 484.

[570] Ibid., 487.

[571] Ibid., 485.

[572] Ibid., 485.

Lady Bertilak augments her coercive tactics by framing her proposals in terms of gift exchange. Gift giving becomes the agent of her assertion of power and of depersonalization; thus her giving acts against the "charity" by which it is disguised. As we have seen, persons only fully realize themselves through acts of true self-giving *caritas*; to withhold the opportunity for self-actualization by perverting the name of *caritas* is especially egregious. It is no mistake that both the *Gawain*-poet and modern gift theorists associate noble gift exchange with war and personal violence.[573] As Harwood explains of the Green Knight's proposal to exchange axe blows, "because reciprocal insults, boasts, blows, and gifts function alike, the poet can refer the exchange of blows as boasting and call it a gift."[574] This principle also applies to the exchange of words between Gawain and Lady Bertilak, as well as to her appropriation of *caritas* as she gives him the green girdle. The *Gawain*-poet reveals the conventions of noble gift exchange to be a kind of medieval double speak, through which obligation and the potential of humiliation facilitate the use of persons under the guise of *caritas*.

Significantly, according to gift theorists, gift objects obtain a participatory relationship with their giver. Harwood notes that "not every piece of property is utterly distinct from the person who owns it."[575] Garments, as we see throughout the poem, participate in the person they adorn; for Gawain to receive the girdle is for him to receive her person. This participatory relationship between giver and object suggests that, even if ill-intentioned, the object given both symbolizes self-gift and actualizes it on the part of

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[573] See especially, Marshall Sahlins; full citation above.

[574] Harwood, "*Gawain* and the Gift," 487.

[575] Ibid., 484.

the giver. The green girdle makes this explicit; to give it to Gawain, the lady must first remove it from her own body.[576] Gawain knows that he should not accept her token—neither the beryled ring, nor the green girdle—because he would then be obligated to reciprocate the gift. Yet this is an obligation he cannot fulfill: "I haf none yow to norne ne noȝt wyl I take."[577] Further, reciprocation of any kind, whether object, oath, or his actual self, would symbolize a consummation of the relationship, a giving of oneself to another so as to effect communion. Once he receives the girdle, he carries Lady Bertilak on his person as he once carried the Virgin Mary upon his shield.

The replacement of the Virgin's image with Lady Bertilak's token symbolizes the other more significant reason that Gawain accepts the girdle and the extent to which coercive speech and gifts of clothing have actual depersonalizing effects. Gawain's fear is significant, and he misplaces his faith in the Lady, but these are only symptoms of Gawain's slowly-developing concupiscence. In fact, he accepts the girdle because he is not free to act according to his moral consciousness—that sense of personhood which guides moral decision making and frees the person from attachments so as to act in accordance with *persona*. On its deepest ground, Gawain's acceptance of the girdle is a failure of proper personal love—the love which demands free, total, faithful, and fruitful communion in relationships, rather than the use of others. He engages in the system of exchange only because he learns that it will profit him, thereby betraying the attachment he has developed over the course of his time in *Hautdesert*. As Aquinas might put it, passion "moves [Gawain] to attachment," causing him to sin by first accepting the girdle and then withholding it from Lord Birtilak for fear of losing his head. Yet Gawain has in

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[576] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 1830-31.

[577] Ibid., l. 1823.

effect already lost his head, where moral consciousness and reason might have intervened. This is why Harwood observes—though he does not explain this claim—that "the girdle testifies to fallen humanity's inability to make a gift of itself."[578] Gawain is no longer fully personal, and he is therefore no longer free to act through himself.

For this reason, as the Green Knight brings the ax down upon his neck, Gawain flinches, unable to finally keep his "traweþ." In response, the Green Knight utters the now familiar phrase, "you are not Gawain." And this time, it's true:

> "Þou art not Gawayn," quoþ þe gome, "þat is so goud halden,
> Þat neuer arȝed for no here by hylle ne be vale,
> And now þou fles for ferde er þou fele harmez!
> Such cowardise of þat knyȝt cowþe I neuer here.
> …
> My hede flaȝ to my fote and ȝet flaȝ I neuer;
> And þou, er any harme hent, arȝez in hert."[579]

By the end of the narrative, Gawain has truly ceased to be himself as he has failed to act in accordance with his personhood by accepting the girdle.

Conclusion: Mercy Restores the Person

Morgan's plot to use Gawain as a means to embarrass Arthur and destroy Guinevere requires that he be objectified so that, as Crosby puts it, Gawain will be "lost as a person."[580] Indeed, her plot reflects a failure to act according to Aquinas' demand of love: "When I look at others only insofar as they intersect with my projects, then of course I lose them as persons, because I am not willing to let them exist for me as ends in themselves."[581] Depersonalization results from a lack of proper response to both one's

[578] Harwood, "Gawain and the Gift," 490.

[579] Ibid., ll. 2270-77.

[580] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 2446-66; *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 15.

[581] *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, 15.

own and the other's personal selfhood. At its heart, depersonalizing action is a failure of love.

Yet, as the Green Knight illustrates, mercy both restores love and anticipates Gawain's restoration to himself. By not demanding an eye for an eye, or in this case, one severed head for another, the Green Knight catalyzes the process of penance, and his speech of absolution makes Gawain "hardily hole."[582] Though Hatt holds back from arguing that the Green Knight is a Christ-figure, she does suggest that his "generosity and openness…reverberate with religious symbolism."[583] For me, the suggestion of "religious symbolism" still ventures too far. However, the Green Knight's show of mercy, whether or not a part of Morgan's larger plan, speaks to the paradigmatic order which provides this poet's "context of thought."

The poem's benediction reminds us that the answer to all depersonalization is Christ's personal selfhood, which is mercy itself: "Now þat bere þe croun of þorne/He bring vus to His blysse! Amen."[584] Indeed, mercy belongs to the order of God's glory. Through the Incarnation, mercy expresses Aquinas' notion of eternal law, "expressed by the Word" and "appropriated to the Son," a "type of Divine Wisdom, directing all actions and movements."[585] Perhaps through the Green Knight, Mercy himself, who "makes all things new," welcomes Gawain and his reader into "þis New Ȝer."[586]

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[582] Ibid., ll. 2390-94.

[583] Hatt, *God and the Gawain-Poet*, 222.

[584] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 2529-31.

[585] *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 93, a. 1.

[586] Revelation 21:5; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 2400.

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