

LAY WRITERS AND THE POLITICS OF THEOLOGY IN
MEDIEVAL ENGLAND FROM THE TWELFTH TO FIFTEENTH CENTURIES

by

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Under the Direction of Scott Lightsey

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a critical analysis of identity in literature within the historical context of the theopolitical climate in England between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The narratives under consideration are the *Lais* of Marie de France, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*. A focus on the business of theology and the Church's political influence on identity will highlight these lay writers' artistic shaping of theopolitical ideas into literature. Conducting a literary analysis on the application of theopolitical ideas by these lay writers encourages movement beyond the traditional exegetical interpretation of their narratives and furthers our determination of lay intellectual attitudes toward theology and its political purposes in the development of identity and society.

INDEX WORDS: Theology in literature, Geoffrey Chaucer, Marie de France, Margery Kempe, English romances, Canterbury Tales, English devotional literature

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I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Herb, for his love and unswerving belief in me; to my beautiful daughters, Elisabeth and Rebecca, may they continue to follow their dreams; to my precocious grandchild, Juliana, who is just beginning to know herself. I also wish to dedicate this dissertation to Max and Fran Godwin; to my mom and dad; to my beloved brother Tim: Thank you all for your love and support! I am especially indebted to my best friend and chattering magpie, Kerri: Here's to the long hours, the gallons of coffee, and the long, long talks!

In honor of Dr. Paul Riessler (d. 1935), biblical scholar and theologian of the University of Tuebingen: His love of learning and dedication to knowledge has been my inspiration.

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INTRODUCTION

LAY WRITERS AND THE POLITICS OF THEOLOGY

Scholars have long acknowledged the importance of theology in the critical analysis of late-medieval English literature, especially in the formulation of selfhood. Within this context, I concentrate my critical analysis on three literary narratives of the period: the *Lais* of Marie de France, *The Canterbury Tales* of Geoffrey Chaucer, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*. These lay writers differ in the times that they lived, their social standing, education, subject material, and in the theological and political discourses that interested them. Their commonality centers on an acute awareness of these discourses and their artistic abilities to narrate them to their lay audiences for serious contemplation and debate. Engaging in the critical study of English literature within the framework of theology poses several problems, however. First and foremost, such an interdisciplinary study has not become “universally acknowledged territory” in academe, nor is there for the student interested in this kind of study a “unified field of methodology” (Jay 3). Nevertheless, the interest in English literature and theology exists, as many scholars from both disciplines have placed their indelible mark on literary history throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But a *system* of critical study remains elusive. Thus, the publication of handbooks, such as *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, brings testimony to the continued development of this interest into a viable scholarly field of inquiry. The critical analysis in English literature and theology therefore remains as David Jasper describes, “alive and well. . . [but] unsystematic and patchy” (24).

Another problem is the term “theology.” When one hears this term, there is an almost immediate perception that the study involves discussion and analysis of exegetical practices. My intention is not to continue the discourse on such practices but to analyze narrative content in relation to the politics of theology that had an impact on lay writers and their artistic creativity concerning the search for selfhood from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. The term “religion” has also complicated matters in its general use as a synonym for theology. Such use of terminology can make analysis confusing when engaging in the theoretical realm of belief, rite, ritual, and canon law. In simple terms, religion is the practice of belief, while theology is the theoretical underpinning of those practices. My study makes this distinction by continuously engaging with the discipline of theology and not in religious lay practices. I am, therefore, more interested in the business of theology and its political influence on society concerning the search for selfhood than in the reception of the medieval Church’s teachings and practices by the laity.

As these problems reveal, “much remains to be done in establishing precisely what the relationship between literature and theology is or can achieve” (Jasper 16), or how a methodology will address terminology and definition. My intention with this study is not to address or propose a particular relationship between these two disciplines, but to join in the conversation by demonstrating the rich critical gains to literary analysis when we include the discipline of theology. For my study, to engage in literary analysis within the framework of theology is to engage in intellectual discussions concerning the theories behind the formation of a belief system that shaped the existence of a particular society, in this case, medieval England. Therefore, my study is not about a *study* of belief, but how a *system* of belief in its political make-up caused its members to create literary art concerning that system and its influence on identity and society. Consequently, in order to analyze the responses made by lay writers in their

quest for selfhood in their literary art, it is important to become knowledgeable in the construction of medieval society and Christian identity by Church authority. Identity is, of course, another slippery term.¹ For my study, the theological and political debates over selfhood are formed out of three aspects: subjectivity, identity, and experience. In this context, I define “subjectivity” to mean “Christendom” as it was described in Pope Gregory’s optimistic pronouncement that all of Europe has been unified under this concept (Markus 86).² This means that subjectivity will be termed “corporate Christian identity.”³ The term “identity” will mean the lay person’s conscious position within this matrix of corporate Christian identity, and “experience” becomes that which is the cause of contentious interaction between subjectivity and identity.⁴ In this instance, experience is the shaping of theology and politics in medieval society, which means not an analysis on lay dissent, but an analysis concerning the continual need for self-determination by the laity within Christendom.

Political ideas cannot be addressed without the Church’s participation in them, however.

Our current understanding of the discipline of politics did not exist prior to the seventeenth

¹ Medieval historian Miri Rubin argues that some members of the scholarly community have resisted the idea of a medieval search for identity and used the term instead as a yardstick to measure the progress of self-consciousness in subsequent time periods: “That perception that this sense of identity is the unique possession of an individual . . . is one that has often been denied to medieval men and women. Historians have allowed themselves an alarming degree of condescension in accepting all too easily that people of the Middle Ages possessed no, or only a weak, sense of self. This has become in some debates the very definition of modernity, with the yardstick of a ‘modern’ society being the emergence of responsible and self-aware individuals” (384).

² See also Linda Woodhead’s discussion concerning the “ideal of Christendom” in *An Introduction to Christianity*, p. 89-91. In the eleventh century, Cardinal Humbert of Silva Candida described Christendom as *societas Christianorum* (O’Donovan 232).

³ When engaging in the political history of the Church, many historians of medieval politics describe this institution as a corporation. Therefore, I have adopted this term to describe the Church’s shaping of a corporate identity for its members. See, for example, the discussion on medieval corporate theory and the Church in J. H. Burns’s *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350 to c. 1450*. According to K. Pennington, the Latin term *universitas* as it was used by the Church in describing its hierarchy, policies, and laws translates into the English term “corporation”: “*Universitas* was a term borrowed from classical Roman law where it described associations of persons in both public and private law. Much of medieval corporate theory was based on Roman terminology and definitions.” (443).

⁴ I am adapting the Hegelian view that “interrelationships,” such as the political relationship between corporate Christian identity and lay identity, are in perpetual “dialectical struggle,” with each attempting to assert its rationale onto the other (Leitch 627). Thus, the constant tension between the corporate ideal and the communal reality of identity forms the heart of aesthetic creativity in lay writing in this time period.

century (Coleman 9).⁵ Consequently, when we discuss medieval politics, we are referring to theological politics, or theopolitics.⁶ Most political writings of the period stem from theologians of various university and monastic institutions. Their interests have been to define corporate Christian identity and determine jurisdictional matters between the ruling class and Church authority and their impact on the development of a well-ordered society. An example is John of Salisbury's *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*. It is an extensive treatise on political thought of the high Middle Ages that addresses the sacred and secular order in society. Its subject matter and language, however, are couched deeply in medieval Catholic morals and values, norms and standards. Anselm of Canterbury's (1033 – 1109 CE) famous statement, 'I believe in order that I may understand,' clearly encapsulates the theory that reason is subordinate to belief in all things. Since theology determined a great deal of political thought during this time period, it therefore must be acknowledged in the literature.

What can we gain by studying the theopolitical ideas in relation to the pursuit of lay identity in medieval literary art? My study tackles this question by conducting literary analysis of the theopolitical ideas that were developed by the royal government and Church authority. Both institutions had considered it their responsibility to forge law and policy over corporate Christian identity and the well-ordered society, but for different reasons and outcomes. The political relations between these two institutions in England, as in other areas of Europe, experienced times of conflict and compromise. From the Norman Conquest to the Reformation, the theologians were heavily preoccupied with corporate Christian identity and society. So, too,

⁵ See also the introduction chapter to *A History of Medieval Political Thought, 300-1450* by Joseph Canning (xix-xxi), in which he notes that it would be difficult to discuss political thought in this time period without the ecclesiological influences that are clearly absent in subsequent historical time periods.

⁶ This term is used by theologians and historians of medieval politics to describe the political mantle of the Church, especially during the High to Late Middle Ages. See *A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* by Oliver and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (233).

were members of the aristocracy, especially with their hold on trade, diplomacy, and martial might. On account of their varying corporate interests, these two institutions created shifting political moments that had an impact on their society. The lay writers confronted and complicated the theopolitical realities of their time in their narratives in order to delve into the question concerning identity and who had the power to determine it for the laity.

As lay writers continued the Horatian attitude that poetry was intended for entertainment and improvement, their narratives became another intellectual venue for the exploration of any aspect of theopolitical thought concerning corporate Christian identity. We can think of the parish priests and their sermonic or homiletic instructions on Christian morals. The clergy clearly saw their role as interpreters of sanctioned doctrine and the authority of Sacred Scripture for the lay community. The laity, on the other hand, was quite active in its reception and responses toward these theological ideas. Intellectual activity of the medieval period was not simply confined to the small and tightly knit academic community—a community mostly made up of theologians, canons, religious clerics, other members of the Church hierarchy. By the fourteenth century a growing amount of “scepticism versus authority” had developed. This meant that education and debate became more “evident in the growing number of . . . lay people who were becoming involved in theological enquiry” (Rudd 37). In fact, conceiving “the idea that spiritual ideals passed from ‘cloister’ to ‘world’ is too simplistic” (Brown 180). This culture was, therefore, a debating culture, a highly interactive, interpretive culture, that responded in a variety of ways to the doctrines and authority of the Church.

The overall aim of my study is to demonstrate that these lay writers, regardless of their political standing and education, felt empowered to confront the contemporary currents of theopolitical thought on corporate Christian identity, responded to them, and raised questions

about them for their lay audiences. They supported, questioned, and complicated these ideas in a quest for the self-determination of lay identity within a society shaped by two distinct institutions. They couched these ideas in their use of language, themes, and motifs. The literature of Marie de France, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Margery Kempe opens up for inquiry these theopolitical ideas of their time. The discovery of these ideas, then, not only helps us to understand the writer and his or her artistry, but also enables us to catch a closer glimpse of the audience, their concerns, tastes and sensibilities, for which the literature was intended. In this way, we can come to appreciate further the intellectual relationship between writer and audience and the theopolitical ideas that flowed out of the writer's artistry and into the audience's reality.

The ability to see the theory of corporate Christian identity and the various practices of it in society helped shape the medieval narrative's figurative and literal senses of meaning. These senses of meaning produced literary space within which to explore identity based on education, social class, and gender. These lay writers were also mindful of the clear division of faith into explicit (scholastic belief) and implicit (popular belief)⁷ practices. This division acknowledges a distinct form of spiritual development for each of these two groups during this time period. In medieval thought, explicit faith was demanded of the clergy and other members of Church authorities, who received a scholastic education and were rigorously trained in theology (Wiener 212). They were prepared to guide and teach those who had no such exposure to theological theory and inquiry. Implicit faith, on the other hand, was, and still is, understood as the practice of religion by the laity who received instruction through these educated members of Church authority (Allen 58).

⁷ Refer to the *Summa Theologica*: Question 2—*Secunda Secundae Partis* by Thomas Aquinas for a more in-depth discussion concerning the medieval church's conception of explicit and implicit faiths.

As interpreters of theopolitical ideas for their audience, the lay writers found themselves with this span of innovation for their narrative output, which included a wide range of literary rhetorical practices “shared by the grammatically educated” (Irvine and Thomson 16), most particularly allegory. In his *Metalogicon*, John of Salisbury continued the age-old argument for the importance of “learning to discriminate between literal and figurative language . . . necessary for reading any kind of text” (16). The lay writers were aware of these distinctions when crafting their narratives. By positioning these lay writers between the theory and practice of corporate Christian identity, critical literary analysis can address a variety of issues, such as the transmission and reshaping of Church doctrine by lay writers, the popularization and secularization of theological thought for lay understanding, the raising of rhetorical issues concerning implicit and explicit faiths, the application of literal and spiritual senses used to form theological subject matter in narratives, etc.. How medieval literary criticism incorporated the figurative sense of meaning in secular narratives by the mendicant culture⁸ has been amply studied and discussed. What is important here is the lay writers’ application of the figurative and literal senses as the rhetorical foundation for narrative discourse on corporate Christian identity. The theopolitical issues addressed by each lay writer reveal serious examination of corporate Christian identity in relation to lay identity.

Some would say that this interrogative activity by these lay writers *is* dissent. In the spirit of Miri Rubin’s argument over identity, I argue that the subject of dissent is a post-Reformative backward view of the medieval period. These lay writers belonged to a strata of society richly informed by public discourse on many intellectual issues, including questions raised about

⁸ Much, if not all of medieval literary criticism was developed by friars of various mendicant orders throughout the medieval period. This mendicant culture was instrumental in the development of literary theory as we have come to understand its use during this time period.

selfhood. Their narratives reveal an actively passionate participation in the messy formation of theopolitical ideas that shaped Christian identity and its place in society. Thus, the lay writers' narratives are an exercise in the persuasion of these ideas, the end-result being a deeply committed search for truth in their time and place, along with the sharing and reception of that truth by their respective audiences. As a result, the following chapters will explain and argue theopolitical ideas on identity and place as intellectual sources for the shaping of these lay narratives.

In Chapter One, I provide a general historical overview concerning the development of corporate Christian identity and the shaping of medieval society. Since these are two very complex theo-political ideas, I have divided the chapter into two sections. The first section explains the history of the body metaphor for the purposes of religious unity and corporate Christian identity from Christian Antiquity to the Reformation. The evangelistic nature of Catholicism had prompted the Church early on to establish formal policies of identity for its members regardless of geographical, political, and cultural locations. This led early Church Fathers, such as Paul, to describe corporate unity with an image readily understood by the Church's followers within the far-flung Roman Empire. Thus, the human body with its many parts evolved over time as the main metaphor for establishing corporate Christian identity. The second section describes the intellectual development of society from the great thinkers of the period, such as Augustine of Hippo, Pope Gelasius, Abelard, and John of Salisbury. These men are some of the more readily known theopolitical authorities who had delved into the problem of articulating the complex nature of Christian society. In contrast to the Classical period, Christian society developed from a dual to a tri-partite structure: sacred, secular, and profane. How each of these components related to the others in theory became the greatest preoccupation of

theologians throughout the Middle Ages. By the late-medieval period, more political reasoning by the ruling class concerning the ordering of society evolved in Europe, especially during and after the era of Charlemagne. The continual jostling for control over the sacred component of society between the secular and sacred institutions caused many to question authority and corporate Christian identity, including the lay writers and poets.

Chapter Two begins in the Anglo-Norman period in England, a literary period less concentrated on for the mining of its theopolitical ideas by lay writers. Jim Rhodes's study on theology and poetry emphasizes English narrative activity "on the matter of human dignity" at the "tail end of a linguistic and theological revolution" (2), during the second-half of the fourteenth century. My study, on the other hand, pulls that idea deeper into history toward this period of conquest and the re-forming of lay identity for the ruling class. While the political tensions between Henry II and Thomas Becket are well-known and amply documented, the secular and sacred attitudes for the shaping of identity in society by lay writers remain less studied in the romance genre. Stephen Jaeger notes that the development of the romance began in an area of France less regulated by Church authority (177). A narrative analysis of the *Lais* of Marie de France will address Jaeger's idea by emphasizing the theopolitical attitude of the Anglo-Norman nobility and its interests in the martial, political, and virile power of the ruler. The entitlement attitude of this social class concerning its political relations with the Church, which can be traced back to the early days of the Lombards in northern Italy, afforded Marie an opportunity to produce poetry in which theological discourse gives way to the more secular interests of her noble audience. Rather than apply theological doctrine for spiritual growth and reinforcement of corporate Christian identity, the *Lais* clearly reveal complex political concerns that the Church's theology addressed only inadequately.

Built on historical rather than Biblical authority, the *Lais* of Marie de France connects the Anglo-Norman culture with its French continental past. Theology on corporate Christian identity, however, is absent. Instead, the *Lais* reflect heavily on the temporal existence of the Anglo-Norman ruling class. In the proem to the *lai* of Equitan, Marie praises the ancient Breton culture as noble and civilized (1-5). This kind of positive acknowledgement argues for the narrative's literal sense as the profitable teaching of secular political matters. Rather than Church authority, the ancient Breton tales become Marie's authority for political instruction of noble identity. Since the theopolitical discourse of the *Lais* centers on a ruler's temporal nature, then it follows that authority upon which the narratives are based must also be temporal, not transcendental. In the *lai* of Eliduc, for example, Marie reinforces the practice of vassalage, loyalty, oath-swearing with what she calls a peasant proverb:

The love of the lord is not a fief:
He is wise and clever
Who gives loyalty to his lord,
And love to his good neighbors. (63-6)

Perhaps this is the reason why scholars have been selective in the *lais* they use for theological or religious interpretation. Not all of the narratives fit the exegetical or doctrinal mold. Foregoing these types of critical interpretations allows for greater in-depth study of the *Lais* as a unified collection colored by narrative concerns for the secular noble ethos. Indeed, Marie makes mention twice in her proems that the *Lais* are a unified collection of tales. In the Prologue to the *Lais*, Marie offers them to the king:

[I undertook to assemble these *lais*
To compose and recount them in rhyme.

.....

If it pleases you to receive them,
 You will give me great joy;
 I shall be happy forever.
 Do not think me presumptuous
 If I dare present them to you] (46-7, 51-5)

Lay writers, such as Marie, were aware when historical material for artistic use was fact or fiction. The meaningful moral of the story or its level of authority held more weight for the lay writer than any historical validity of fact (Allen 68). In the instance of the *Lais*, Marie places a great deal of emphasis on the Anglo-Norman historical connection with a French past in order to facilitate discussion on the secular political ethos of her noble lay audience. There is very little concentration on addressing corporate Christian identity in the *Lais*. As a result, narrative focus centers on the ruling class's reflection on its secular identity and ethical standards in society and not in the formation of its corporate Christian identity.

How can we determine that there is no figurative sense in the *Lais*? When medieval writers used the figurative sense of meaning, they were obliged to provide the audience with "an interpretation along with [the] poem" when "multiple reading" by the audience was considered necessary (118). Marie had spent an inordinate amount of time crafting a lengthy prologue for the *Lais* (64 lines) in explaining its instructive value for her noble audience. If the *Lais* had been meant to be interpreted in the figurative sense, it follows that she would have instructed her audience to do so. Instead, Marie explained why glossing was tedious and unnecessary, describing the consequences for poorly prepared poetry in this way: "Whoever deals with good material / feels pain if it's treated improperly" (*Guigemar* 1-2). As far as she was concerned, the

vernacular language made the meaning of the *Lais* clear and needed no further interpretive gymnastics by her noble audience. The poetic language of the *Lais* mirrors all the temporal distinctions of a ruling class's political reality so perfectly that figurative interpretation became immaterial. Thus, the critical approach to these *Lais* requires a more "ornamented celebration of discursive truth rather than some symbolist reaching out through metaphor for the unknown" (Allen 100). The Anglo-Norman's temporal position in the *Lais* reveals a growing political self-determination of its ethos by the ruling class outside of Church authority. The sacral nature of the king's authority and the Lay Investiture Contest are two theopolitical events that caused such an attitude to develop. Based on this theopolitical climate, the *Lais* of Marie de France are a persuasive exploration of what it meant to be a part of the Anglo-Norman ruling class, fashioned upon a militant, masculine-centered ethos with little regard for spiritual consequences.

Chapter Three describes the time of Geoffrey Chaucer. The chaotic events of the fourteenth century, such as the Black Death, economic depression, and war, brought about a deep crisis in the determination of corporate Christian identity in society. As a result, stronger participation in public discourse by the increasing vernacular-literate lay community grew. The urban environment shifted much of the political tenor away from the agriculturally-based ruling class. Political consolidation of the merchant class into guild systems also brought about change in the development of literature. The romance genre of the knightly class gave way to new poetic forms and subject matter that better suited the tastes of this social class. The theopolitical ideas concerning Christian identity that was shaped by various fourteenth-century religious movements, some orthodox, some heretical, also provided a rich tapestry for the development of Middle English narratives. Concentration on the uses of the vernacular for public discourse

afforded lay writers an opportunity to shape theopolitical ideas into narratives more suitable for contemplation and exploration by the merchant class.

Though the Anglo-Norman *Lais* reveal an attempt to clearly mark the jurisdictional lines between the ruling class and Church authority, such confidence and optimism remain unclear in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. In these tales there is a developing intellectual concern for identity by the laity who questioned both feudal and Church authority in an eroding climate of trade and commerce on the one hand and wide-spread urban development on the other. The theopolitical ideas in these tales produce a picture of greater uncertainty for a corporate Christian identity. Indeed, unlike the *Lais* with its emphasis on the ethos of the Anglo-Norman ruling class, each member of English society is represented in *The Canterbury Tales*, regardless of political ranking. In the "Parson's Prologue," the character Harry Bailey makes this point clear:

Lordynges everichoon,
Now lakketh us no tales mo than oon.
Fulfilled is my sentence and my decree;
I trowe that we han herd of ech degree;
Almoost fulfild is al myn ordinaunce. (ParsT 15-20)

In Chaucer's tales the many voices of the pilgrimage party are provided ample opportunity to speak publicly. Each pilgrim is empowered to tell a tale of his or her own choosing. The vetting process of each tale by the host remains the same regardless of a pilgrim's political and social ranking, gender, or education. Only Chaucer's narrative voice has been silenced.

Chaucer's blending of the literal and the figurative senses in *The Canterbury Tales* reflects the more complex contested relationship between the lay community and Church authority. The blending of these narrative senses is so subtle that a modern reader not familiar

with theopolitical thought might come away with a more reductive appreciation for the tales than is deserved. The specific focus found in modern scholarship on the religious interpretation of *The Canterbury Tales* almost makes this kind of limited understanding possible as Chaucer has been described a dissenter of corporate religious ideas on one end and an orthodox religious poet on the other. As a lay poet, having no professional ties to Church authority, Chaucer used various theopolitical ideas as a means for confronting the reality of a corporate Christian identity in the urban environment. Consequently, *The Canterbury Tales* emphasizes the rhetorical nature of theopolitics, thereby offering the audience fewer persuasive answers than in the *Lais*, leaving more room for the contemplation of a fourteenth-century corporate Christian identity.

Chapter Four discusses *The Book of Margery Kempe* as a narrative that describes one woman's journey toward the self-determination of a Christian identity in fifteenth-century England. Margery Kempe, a woman who lived under the auspices of wealth and security, abandoned all for a religious life that she believed offered a greater sense of spiritual stability and immaterial rewards. In the first proem, Kempe describes her journey toward the perfect Christian identity as the "wey of hy perfeccyon" (MK 25) and her need to model her life based on the humanity of Christ (MK 26). Similar to Marie's *Lais*, Kempe's *Book* is fully written in the literal sense because all of her experiences are based on theological truths that she neither interrogates nor abandons in any kind of rhetorical way. Kempe narrates her experiences as simple fact, and her story "does not focus on transcendence, but rather on the most personal, empirical, and material aspects of religious experience" (Allen 127). While Chaucer was in pursuit of raising rhetorical discourse concerning the problems of a corporate Christian identity in the active lay life, Kempe saw the solution to the problem by arguing persuasively for a more unified theological underpinning of all society, contemplative and active. For Kempe, the

influential mendicant culture was the solution to the growing theopolitical problem of corporate Christian identity. Her writings, however, reveal heavy resistance against her proposed solution by the narrative audience. Kempe alerts the reader early on to the uninformed reactions against her pursuit of the mendicant ideal in the following manner:

Sche knew and undyrstod many secret and prevy thyngys which schuld beffallen
 aftyward be inspiracyon of the Holy Gost. And oftentymes, whel sche was kept
 wyth swech holy spechys and dalyawns, sche schuld so wepyn and sobbyn that
 many men wer gretly awondyr, for thei wysten ful lytyl how homly ower Lord
 was in hyr sowle. (MK 56-60)

On the eve of the Reformation, *The Book of Margery Kempe* provides us with a record of the fractionalized responses concerning corporate Christian identity in society. Unlike *The Canterbury Tales* that rhetorically explores the many strengths and weaknesses of corporate Christian identity, Kempe's narrative offers us an historically unique opportunity to witness the multi-vocal lay and Church authority perspectives and responses toward her self-determined lay identity.

As Marie's *Lais* presses the spiritual and sacred aspects of Anglo-Norman society to the narrative margins, placing corporate Christian identity under lay control, Kempe goes toward the other extreme and forges a narrative that presses lay identity under mendicant control. The outcome of which reveals a splintered society, not only among the lay members who either supported or reviled Kempe's religious activities, but also exposes a deep intellectual chasm among ecclesial authority concerning sacredness and religious practices in the active areas of society. As Kempe works in the *Book* to transform her lay identity into a well-defined apostolic one, the rhetoric and actions of the people in the narrative reveal a deep distrust against someone

who refuses to adhere to the orthodoxy of corporate Christian identity. In the *Book*, Kempe describes her journey toward lay sanctity as an attempt to breach these theological barriers of corporate Christian identity, which had kept many sacred activities of seclusion and contemplation out of the active realm of lay life.

Conducting a literary analysis on the application of theopolitical ideas concerning corporate Christian identity by these lay writers helps us to move beyond the traditional exegetical interpretation of their narratives and into an untested realm of determining lay intellectual attitudes toward theology and its political purposes in the development of identity and society. When we place these three lay writers and their narratives into the theopolitical context of their time, we find a much more complicated view on the relationship between corporate Christian identity and society than the term ‘Christendom’ implies. In fact, the combined attitudes of these writers reflect a response to the acquisition of selfhood that correlates with their political positions, their educations, and their relationships with Church authority. In the *Lais*, for example, Marie is writing for an audience who perceived themselves as the power center of society. Consequently, Marie addresses a unified identity of the ruling class in the poetry and creates from it the secular didactic purpose for these *Lais*. Chaucer, on the other hand, has no such deep political connections. As a civil servant, however, he continues to be a part of the public arena that determines social order; but his position is far enough removed from the center of power to appreciate a greater view of both secular and sacred institutions and their systems of societal regulation and identity development. A public education would have afforded this poet with the necessary rhetorical, theological, and legal knowledge to build the narrative society that we find in *The Canterbury Tales*, from which arises the dialectic on the innate need for identity self-determination. Of the three lay writers, Margery Kempe has neither the political

power nor a public education. Thus, she belongs to a political group whose public voice found purpose in a spiritual expression that bordered on the unregulated. With little connection to the center of lay political power, the royal court, Kempe's marginal position afforded her an opportunity to explore an identity unconnected with secular or sacred forms of corporate identity. Standing at the societal margins, Kempe's narrative view pans wider than that of Chaucer to include the many voices of the audiences with whom her narrative self comes in contact. As a woman of the urban environment and a mystic, Kempe experiences much less the interrelations with her audience than Chaucer, or the more tightly constructed interrelations between Marie de France and her noble audience.

As these chapters will reveal, then, the laity were as much concerned about the theopolitical issues of corporate Christian identity as Church authority. In these lay narratives we discover their quests for selfhood within the larger social matrix of "Christendom." These distinctive voices and their different approaches toward sanctity and secularity, however, continue to remind us that the medieval period was varied and complex. Situating the narratives of these lay writers within the theopolitical climate of their time makes it clear that there was a high level of concern for social ethos, stability, and an active pursuit of selfhood outside the Church's authority. The literature of these lay writers also reveals their commitment toward an active participation in theopolitical discourse with their audience, which plays a very important role for enhancing our understanding of medieval literary and intellectual history.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CORPORATE CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

The theological discourses on identity were among the most intensive preoccupations of English lay writers between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The literature of Marie de France, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Margery Kempe manifests such intellectual preoccupation. Concentrating on the development of their art within the framework of the theopolitical climate in which they lived will yield a greater appreciation for the social complexities that shaped identity. Richard Rex once observed that there are those who think of the Middle Ages as an age of “feudal anarchy and the age of faith” (1). The Middle Ages, however, was far more complex and more “alive” than these two interpretive models imply. Life in England during these centuries experienced an explosion of intellectual activity from both the sacred and secular writers that merits close attention. To these writers the conscious effort in the exploration of selfhood became the achievement of their art. Their literary creations hum with vibrant characters, exotic settings, and what seems to us like stepping “into an intriguing but curiously alien world” (Dyas viii).

The didactic nature (Rhodes 5) of their literature lends itself well to addressing the theopolitics that shaped corporate Christian identity from the high to late Middle Ages. Analyzing the literature for lay discourses on identity brings with it several challenges, however. Indeed, the discovery of unusual characters, such as demons and dragons, sinners and saints, and other-worldly places, such as heaven and hell, can make the literature difficult to understand and

appreciate. But, as Dee Dyas explains, “the medieval universe has a logic of its own which, once understood, will enormously enhance our appreciation of all that we read and see” (viii). Another obstacle is the wide chasm of time that separates modern readers from crucial theological and political events which had a great impact on the literary developments at this time. Living in our present, largely secular society, for example, we have difficulty coming to terms with Christian identity as it was shaped by Church authority. Consequently, it becomes necessary to review the Church’s theological attitudes toward identity and the construct of medieval society so that the discourses on identity found in the literature of these three writers becomes more accessible for critical interpretation

Medieval Church authority dealt with the weighty issues of identity and society in ways that were neither addressed in the Classical period nor in subsequent historical eras, including our own (Gracia 1). Thus, the development of Christian identity is uniquely a medieval paradigm, lasting until the science and technology of the enlightenment helped to shape the humanist perception on life that has become familiar to us today. Prior to the enlightenment, the discipline of theology reigned supreme as the “center of intellectual attention [on] God and his revelation rather than human beings” (3). This intellectual foundation exerted an unprecedented influence on the development of Christian identity and society (Genet 27), as well as directing the literature to address these issues in a similar manner. Thus, when we examine the literature of Marie de France, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Margery Kempe, we become witness to discourse concerning corporate Christian identity and the theopolitics that shaped it. Interpreting the body metaphor in relation to the theopolitics that surrounded corporate Christian identity enables us to appreciate these writers’ heightened artistic awareness of the laity’s concern about identity and whose power of authority over it.

Church authority, particularly through its ecumenical decrees, attempted to form a corporate Christian identity out of body and place metaphors, establishing them early in its history as symbols of unity and stability for its members regardless of geographical locations. These metaphors appeared when Catholicism arose out of some of the most unstable times in the Roman Empire. The political climate of the last couple of hundred years of the empire's history was darkened by internal political machinations by Roman emperors, the battle for power among the generals, continual civil strife, and the migrations of the Germanic tribes into fertile Roman territory. In response to the call for unity and stability came Constantine and his decision to publicly accept one religion that worshipped one God. Under his rule, Catholic authority suddenly became empowered to establish a theopolitical position that had an enormous cultural impact on Europe up until the seventeenth century.

Including consideration of the Church's historical development of its identity opens the literature up to further inquiry concerning corporate Christian identity. The best source for the Church's institutional view on its identity and political position in society is the records of the ecumenical council meetings, excerpts of which I use to highlight the Church's evolving theopolitical position on identity and place. From the First Council of Nicaea (325 CE) through the Council of Basel (1431-45 CE), these councils created institutional policies that shaped the social and political attitudes among members of society throughout the medieval period. Not only do these ecumenical councils "provide an unrivalled insight into medieval Christianity" (Tanner, *The Councils* 52), they also demonstrate its universally authoritative position on the development of corporate Christian identity.

In order to examine lay literary response to the Church's theology, it is important to understand that medieval society and attitudes toward societal development were equally

influenced by theology. Consequently, its construction was vastly different from our own. Living in a post-modern society, we strive toward a pluralistic environment that resists exclusion of any one individual regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, political or religious affiliation, etc. Individuals of the Middle Ages could not have understood or appreciated such diversity in the public arena. Their society was built on a concentric model that made Christianity the intellectual and political center of all public activity. At this time other religions, races, and cultures were excluded from access to the political power that moved the institutional machineries of royal government and the Church. Heterodoxy also caused many Christians to become ostracized from the center of that power or executed for their resistance against or attempts at redefining Church doctrines and policies. Without such knowledge, it becomes difficult to examine the lay writers' formulation of response in their literature to the theopolitical influence on the development of corporate Christian identity in their society. Since the theological concepts of identity and society are extremely complex, I have divided these ideas into the following two sections: *Theology and Christian Identity* and *Theology and Medieval Society*. Each section offers an overview of some of the major events and issues that shaped the theopolitics surrounding the literature that I will be analyzing in the following chapters, thus providing a framework within which to study these three lay writers and their literary artistry.

Theology and Christian Identity

From the very beginning of the Church's history, the metaphor of the body best described its growing status as a political and unified entity in the late-Roman world. This image offered the Church many ways for identifying itself to its members and to society at large. That the body metaphor produced the formulation of identity in the very beginning of Church history is clear in Frank Bottomley's following statement:

To the thoughtful Christian, ‘body’ is a pregnant concept, constantly giving birth to new ideas and insights and bringing to light connections and interrelations. It is not an accident that in theology, the word is used equally of the natural body of man, of the incarnate Body of Christ, of the unity in one flesh of man and woman, of the mystical Body which is the Church, and of the gift which is received in the sacrament of the altar. (96)

The Church’s metaphorical conceptions of the body—the ecclesial body, the ruling body, and the individual body—“*always* carried a political charge, as do the presence or absence of bodies, or parts of bodies . . . whether aesthetic or ideological” (Yeager 146). In the best and simplest terms, the Church “has been a religion of the body” (McFague 14), and its history bears witness to developing doctrines of embodiment: “from the incarnation . . . and christology . . . to the eucharist, the resurrection of the body, and the church” (14).⁹

The history of corporate Christian identity begins, therefore, with the ecclesial body. In Christian Antiquity the body metaphor represented an established church community. This singular signifier is found in the Epistles of Paul, who referred to a church community as “*corpus Christi*, body of Christ” (Yeager 146). In Paul’s writings the metaphor of the body created for the members of the church an image of unity (Bottomley 35). Over time this body metaphor established a definition that was capable of sustaining itself across the vast Mediterranean world in which the established churches were autonomous, widely scattered, and in competition with other religious institutions. As Robert Yeager explains, Paul’s Epistles established corporate policies that brought to these churches much-needed consistencies of theology and doctrine with

⁹ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). I am borrowing McFague’s definition of Christianity, but not her argument at this time. In her book, McFague is using as part of her argument Church history and its philosophy to help make a case against the modern conception of self-loathing of the body in ecological terms, such as our “inability to love the body of the earth” (16).

which they could identify themselves in the wider non-Christian world. In his writings, Paul persuaded the church leaders to conceive of themselves as the many parts of the body, with Christ as its head (146).

With Paul's Epistles, corporate Christian identity becomes firmly established. Representing the larger institution of the Church,¹⁰ the body metaphor "connects, coordinates and ultimately justifies the existence of them all" (146). This communitarian ethos¹¹ is actively reinforced in a variety of Church texts. The ecumenical councils' decrees, for example, offer us such insight into the application of the body metaphor for ecclesial identity. This image became so powerful that subsequent generations of churchmen continued to interpret and reinforce its use for the Christian community as the need arose (147).

The need for theological and doctrinal standardization and universal policies increased after Constantine's rise to imperial power (Prikkett 144), which among other reasons¹² prompted the first gathering of the major Church leaders from various regions of the late-Roman world (Tanner, *Decrees* 2). At the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, roughly 300 representatives of Europe and the Middle East attended. This council established the famous Nicene Creed as the definitive formulation of corporate Christian identity, placing in its affirmation of faith an emphasis on *one* God and *one* Jesus Christ (Tanner, *Decrees* 5). By the fourth century, ecumenical council attendees already saw themselves as the many under a single identity. In the

¹⁰ See 1 Cor. 12.12-26.

¹¹ This is a common term established by medieval political scholars and is synonymous with the literary term Christian subjectivity; however, since the subject matter concerns the politics of theology in literature, I have decided on the usage of such terms as corporate and communitarian to describe the overall general perception of catholic identity.

¹² This was the time of the Arian heresy that needed a response from the leaders of the Christian church as a whole as well as determining the doctrinal disposition of the growing Cathar movement. Widespread ecumenical pressures to form councils that addressed controversies of this type and Christian doctrine were also another factor in the creation of this first council meeting.

council records the word *ecclesiam*¹³ (in the church) is used in the accusative singular, rather than the accusative plural, as a way to articulate a unified corporate Christian identity. In addition to this policy development, the Church's source of authority, the Judeo-Christian Bible, reflects this theory of the many in the one.¹⁴ As a written text, the Bible consists structurally of many books. For the Church, however, the Bible has always been approached as a singular source of authority that "encompassed the history of the world from its creation, through the Fall and redemption of mankind, to the final judgment" (Prickett 143-4). Consequently, it becomes a major structural influence on the development of corporate Christian identity. In his discussion concerning the Bible and its canonical development, Stephen Prickett observes that "it is no accident, for instance, that many of the foundational works of English literature: Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, or Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* are also, in effect, collections of stories relating in various ways to a single common theme" (146). This can also explain the episodic nature of medieval romances. All of these narratives might reflect structurally the Church's theory of the many as one.

Included in the formulation of corporate Christian identity by the ecumenical councils came also early debates concerning the disposition of the nature of Jesus Christ. During the council meeting at Ephesus in 431 CE, the Nestorian heresy¹⁵ prompted a detailed clarification of Christ's divine and human natures that went beyond the affirmation of faith of the Nicene Creed. By placing a decided emphasis on the union of Christ's two natures, the established theory of the many in one was once again reaffirmed. From the fifth century onward, the Church

¹³ Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Nicaea I to Lateran V*. 2 vols. (Washington: Georgetown UP, 1990). "De paulianistis ad ecclesiam catholicam configientibus prolata definitio est, ut baptizentur omnimodes" (15).

¹⁴ The motto of the United States, *e pluribus unum*, meaning "out of the many, one," is a modern example of establishing for a group of people a cultural corporate identity.

¹⁵ Nestorius was condemned at the council meeting in Rome a year before the council meeting at Ephesus as his theological views on the nature of Jesus Christ did not coincide with the affirmation of faith as it was approved by the Nicene council in 325.

rigorously protected this fundamental theory by continuously denouncing as heretical any theological or lay formulation of Christ's natures being separate. At this point, it is worth highlighting the most important passage of Cyril of Alexandria's second letter to Nestorius affirming the disposition of Christ's nature as follows:

We. . . follow these words and these teachings [Nicene Creed of 325] and consider what is meant by saying that the Word from God took flesh and became man. For we do not say that the nature of the Word was changed and became flesh, nor that he was turned into a whole man made of body and soul. Rather do we claim that the Word in an unspeakable, inconceivable manner united to himself hypostatically flesh enlivened by a rational soul, and so became man and was called son of man, not by God's will alone or good pleasure, nor by the assumption of a person alone. Rather did two different natures come together to form a unity, and from both arose one Christ, one Son. It was not as though the distinctness of the natures was destroyed by the union, but divinity and humanity together made perfect for us one Lord and one Christ, together marvelously and mysteriously combining to form a unity. (Tanner, *Decrees* 41).

This passage is critical for my study because it places great emphasis on the concept of union. It creates a single image of Christ that disallows any formulation of multiplicity. This theological conception of "Christ is one in two natures" (Tanner, *the Councils* 75) was so important to the development of the Church's corporate identity that it continued to be reaffirmed in subsequent ecumenical council meetings: the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE)¹⁶; Second Council of

¹⁶ Tanner, *Decrees*. Pope Leo's letter to Flavian, Bishop of Constantinople, affirms the Definition of Faith as it was debated and passed by the 500 bishops present at this council meeting. In the letter, Pope Leo has this to say about the dual natures of Christ: "There is nothing unreal about this oneness, since both the lowliness of the man and the grandeur of the divinity are in mutual relation" (79). In the Definition of Faith, the Council further affirmed Christ's nature as in "two natures

Constantinople (553 CE)¹⁷, Third Council of Constantinople (680-1 CE)¹⁸; Second Council of Nicaea (787 CE)¹⁹; Fourth Council of Constantinople (869-70 CE)²⁰; Fourth Lateran Council (1215 CE)²¹; and at the Council of Basel (1431 CE)²²

At the Second Council of Niceae (787 CE)²³ new language of unity emerged that created another layer of meaning for the body metaphor. In the council's definition of faith, the body metaphor language changed from Christ as the head of the Church to Christ as spouse and the Church as bride:

The one who redeemed us from the darkness of idolatrous insanity, Christ our God, when he took for his bride his holy catholic church, having no blemish or wrinkle, promised he would guard her. (Tanner, *Decrees* 133)²⁴

In this excerpt the term *desponsata*²⁵ is used to stress a metaphorical comparison between corporate Christian identity and Christ as a bride and a groom. The responsibility of the female to the male becomes a part of the language underscoring Christ's power in spreading his divine protection upon the Church as a whole.²⁶ With this added articulation, Church doctrine also

which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation. . . the property of both natures is preserved and comes together in a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same..." (86).

¹⁷ Tanner, *Decrees* 110, 114-8.

¹⁸ Tanner, *Decrees* 125, 127.

¹⁹ Tanner, *Decrees* 134-5.

²⁰ Tanner, *Decrees* 161-3.

²¹ Tanner, *Decrees* 230.

²² Tanner, *Decrees* 551-2. This council reads into its record the history of most of the heresies since the founding of the Church as they pertain to the divine and human nature of Christ. It also read into its record those ecumenical councils, from Nicaea onward, that it approved and accepted.

²³ Tanner, *The Councils*. Introduction. This council was convened during the infamous iconoclastic controversy in order to address and "correct" the iconoclastic heretics." See Tanner's introduction to the decrees of the Second Council of Nicaea.

²⁴ Tanner, *Decrees*. See Decree 1 from the Council of Vienne of 1311 in which the Church is described as follows: "immaculata ac virgo sancta mater ecclesia, coniunx Christi" (360).

²⁵ The English translation is, betroth or promise in marriage.

²⁶ G. R. Evans, *The Medieval Theologians*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the most influential theologians of the Cistercian order from the twelfth century, believed in describing "the Word and the soul as bridegroom and bride of the Song of Songs . . . only in so far as the individual soul is a member of the Church, the true bride of Christ" (134).

evolved formulations of gendered hierarchy to include the male as the head and the female as the body (Blamires 13). The creation of this kind of metaphorical formulation encouraged a distinct demarcation in gender roles, in that the woman became subjugated to the man in both her private and public spheres of life. In keeping with its feminine, gendered identity, the Church also took on a maternally nurturing role toward the laity. The Church maintained its female persona by describing itself as the mother²⁷ to the laity. This historical development of the Church's genderfication remains outside the scope of my study; however, the attitude that is discovered here is important for the study of the literature, especially devotional literature, written by women and the reception of their mystical bridal role in their spiritual relationship with Christ.

Aside from representing a singular corporate identity, the body metaphor evolves to stress the unification between the Divine and the believer through the Eucharistic tradition. By the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, the concept of transubstantiation in that the body and blood of Christ

are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine, the bread and wine having been changed in substance, by God's power, into his body and blood, so that in order to achieve this mystery of unity we receive from God what he received from us. (Tanner, *Decrees* 230)

With the elevation of the Eucharist to cult status by the twelfth century, sacramental unity replaces the mystical conjugal image of previous centuries.

In summary, the Church and its concept of corporate identity was represented by the body metaphor with the body in parts, each representing the various autonomous churches throughout Christian Antiquity with Christ as its head. Then, in the early Middle Ages, the body

²⁷ The decrees first mention the church as mother at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 CE), followed by the Council of Vienne (1311 CE) and the Council of Basel (1431 CE).

metaphor receives an added dimension of a representation between male and female bodies by creating a mystical union between Christ and the Church as groom and bride. During the high Middle Ages, the body metaphor shifts from the mystical union between male and female bodies²⁸ to a conception of a mystical union in the absorption of one body into the other. In medieval thought, the liturgical act of taking in the body and blood of Christ becomes the “antidote for the Edenic apple” (Astell 30). As the apple stood for “disorder, disease [and] death” (32), the Eucharist stood for redemption, resurrection, and life. The body metaphor eventually lost its significance by the mid-fifteenth century, however. In the decrees of the Council of Basel (1431 CE), the established Church is described in architectural language by “laying its foundation on the cornerstone of Christ Jesus, in whom the whole structure is joined together” (Tanner, *Decrees* 455).²⁹

The ruling “body” of secular authority was consequently influenced by this historical evolution of ecclesial identity. Secular rulers, however, sought to establish themselves as a distinct entity from their ecclesial counterparts. Medieval rulers generally recognized the corporate Christian identity, but they saw ecclesial authority as only one arm of Christ, and they were the other arm, “wielding the temporal sword” (Johnson 192). Medieval theory determined that there were two aspects of Christendom:

The one representing Christian society organized to secure spiritual blessings, the other the same society united to safeguard justice and human welfare . . . church and state were in harmonious interplay, each aiming to secure the good of mankind. (Shelley 177)

²⁸ This theological theme of inseparability becomes crucial in the development of the marriage motif by the romance poets of the High Middle Ages.

²⁹ Tanner, *Decrees*. See also from this Council the decree concerning elections and confirmations of bishops and prelates. In it the Council compares the stability of the Church through the proper selection of its Church leaders with the building of a house: “Quemadmodum in construenda domo praecipua est architectoris cura...” (469).

From the early to the late Middle Ages in Europe, rulers and Church authority established a tense relationship of control over all of society. Out of these clashing perceptions, ambiguities arose, as well as hostilities between these two medieval institutions, and the theory of a singular corporate Christian identity, the many in one, became mired in various interpretations by both secular and sacred authorities.

Up until the eleventh century the balance of power between these two institutions had tilted in favor of the secular arm (Johnson 192). As baptized Christians, the nobility, with their militant culture and might, came to the natural conclusion that they were the protectors of the Church. They performed this duty in a number of ways. The state of chronic warfare until the tenth century made the use of military force necessary for the stability of Christian society. Throughout Europe, monastic life, for example, was continuously under threat and attack by invaders, such as the Vikings, Magyar, and Muslims, and the rulers provided military force to defend their territories, as well as Church property.

Secular rulers accepted the performance of this duty necessarily as a part of a higher vocation. Their inherent perception of class differences and their need to control social order and stability drove the nobility to work on establishing a higher position in society. This growing aristocratic attitude eventually placed political stress on the established theory of a corporate Christian identity. As far as the Church was concerned, the public performance of baptism placed the rulers on “equal footing with [their] subjects” (Canning 56), leading the Church to argue a justification for its involvement in secular matters, including sovereign rule. The ritual of royal unction, however, created for the nobility the proprietary sense of elevation above society, which included a formulation of secular control over Church authority. A secular ruler’s sense of entitlement came about on account of the public performance by Church authority during the

celebratory mass at the ruler's coronation. At this ceremony all strata of the community were united by the presence of the ruler, the clergy, and the nobility (57). Through this ritual, the king became a member of Church authority in his kingdom as follows:

the king was given the grace to perform a specific ministry within the church: as God's servant (*famulus dei*) to lead his people, ultimately, to salvation, a role in which Christian responsibilities were focused and intensified. As a result, in his function as king he had been made, through anointing, more than simply a layman: his status as an ecclesiastical person (*persona ecclesiastica*) was enhanced. (57)

Situated in this sacral position, the ruler found his societal place above and yet on equal footing with his subjects as Christians. This visual image of unction by the clergy signaled to the ruler's subjects his selection to be that of "co-regent" of the Divine (57), ensuring the sovereign's elevation above all. At this point, it appears that the concept of corporate Christian identity, the many as one, deteriorated into collective political interests between the secular and sacred institutions of medieval society.

Thus, local Church authorities, particularly those far removed from the spiritual and political power of the papacy in Rome, such as England, accepted the fact that they were required to pledge their loyalties both to their rulers and to their God. Archbishop Adalbert of Hamburg-Bremen (d. 1072), for example, had "prided himself on having only two masters, the pope and the king, to whose dominion all the powers of the world and of the Church were rightly subject" (Thomson 93). This kind of political attitude by local Church leaders encouraged the noble class to actively participate in the shaping of regional and local corporate Christian

identity. The reign of Charlemagne is the epitome of sovereign rule over the secular and sacred aspects of society. As Linda Woodhead observes of his rule:

[Charlemagne] actively masterminded the Christianization of the Carolingian Empire, nominating bishops, convening church councils, appointing Christian scholars, theologians and artists, promulgating church law, and promoting better Christian education for both the clergy and laity. (106)

Under Charlemagne, a “legal decree that disallowed servile work on Sundays and saints’ days” was enacted (Bottomely 110). His entitlement attitude also reflected a perception of the pope as being nothing more than a servant to his crown.

Ruler intervention in ecclesial affairs occurred similarly in England (Swanson 91). William the Conqueror’s ecclesial powers mirrored those of Charlemagne. His political strength precipitated the English episcopate to acknowledge his sacral position over it, albeit grudgingly. Generally speaking, the English Church leaders believed that “obedience to the king was preferable to any owed to the pope, because the latter could neither offer protection against royal anger nor harm the archbishop if the king were well-disposed of him” (Thomson 96). Much like Charlemagne, William I asserted a strong hand over the pope in a variety of political and ecclesial matters. As a devout Christian, William I arrested Odo of Bayeux for “showing inadequate respect to the priesthood,” an action that had greatly displeased Pope Gregory VII (96). According to John Thomson, William I had made it known to the papacy and the English archbishops that his word of recognition of any pope was essential to the political stability of that spiritual office in Rome. He was also not above the interception of papal correspondence with ecclesial authority in England, and no medieval church laws of England could be deemed valid without his royal consent. William I also forbade the English Church from judicially

condemning any nobleman under his rule for any ecclesial crimes committed (96). In 1279, King Edward I reasserted his sacral position over Church authority by proclaiming that the community of clergy were to “live under our rule no less than the rest of the people” (Swanson 89).

Though many of the Church’s ecumenical council meetings prior to 1123 CE addressed these kinds of political concerns between these two institutions, the First Lateran Council of 1123 is considered the first one to concentrate most of its time on addressing political matters that had caused continual conflicts between the authorities of the Church and the royal rulers. During the reign of Henry II, the customs established and enforced by his grandfather, William I, were reasserted in the Constitutions of Clarendon as he believed in the continued royal influence into ecclesial affairs “for the benefit of the Church” (Thomson 103). This strong stance by Henry II came, as Paul Johnson describes, not as a sign of a “reactionary,” but on account of his own Christian piety and the ineffectual authority of the English Church over its clerics. In 1163 CE, for example, it was reported to Henry II that “more than a hundred murders had been committed by clerks since his coronation in 1157 CE. There were, too, vast numbers of cases of theft and robbery with violence” (209).

The ecclesial English courts of Canterbury during the office of Archbishop Thomas Becket were too lenient for the king concerning these crimes and the respective punishments of the clergy. Most clerics who had committed murders and other heinous crimes, such as rape, were either branded or defrocked and banished—sentences too lenient for Henry II, who was “dedicated to stamping out lawlessness” in his realm (209). The frustrations of the king against the ineptitude of English Church authority eventually led to the “most celebrated state crime of the Middle Ages” (210). It goes without saying that Thomas Becket was canonized almost instantly after his murder and the cathedral at Canterbury became one of the most celebrated

pilgrimage sites, next to Rome and St. James at Compostella in Spain (210). This historical event represents the theopolitical tensions we find between the secular and ecclesial arms of Christian society in England, forming the backdrop for the literature of Marie de France and Geoffrey Chaucer, for example.

The laity's concept of corporate Christian identity was equally founded upon the ecclesial shaping of doctrine concerning the body. Aside from the regular teachings of the Church, asceticism became the popular spiritual practice that gave rise to the negative perception of the body throughout the Middle Ages and well into our modern period. Across its history, asceticism was practiced by individuals based on a variety of spiritual intensity. Many lay practices for the display of bodily discipline, from the self-dismemberment of body parts to the abstinence of certain foods and sexual activity, are testament to a search for spiritual perfection in the material world. Over the course of the Middle Ages, asceticism evolved into corporate and personal practices: the monastic and the apostolic. The monastic form of asceticism became the corporate model sanctioned by Church authority, its rules and regulations originating from the orders of the Benedictines and Cistercians. Since there was concern for achieving the right balance between "charism and order" (Evans xviii), the Church considered these monastic practices the answer toward order by forging a regulatory environment meant to control extreme practices. Charismatic behaviors continued, however, beginning with the Desert Fathers of Christian Antiquity, and enjoying great prestige and power over the laity when the Franciscans and Dominicans became sanctioned mendicant orders under papal authority. The acceptance of these orders by the papacy underscores a shifting theological philosophy toward greater apostolic practices, rather than the prevalent monastic ones, in the later medieval period.

Aside from these varying political perspectives on the physical body as a metaphor for corporate Christian identity, the Church also inherited a theoretical conception of the body from Classical thought. As Andrew Louth explains, Plato believed the “cosmos [was] understood on the analogy of the human person The cosmos [was] seen as the great body, the human being as the little body”. Plato’s *Timaeus* had a great amount of influence on the perception of the body in these early centuries of the Church’s development. In it Plato described the body “as giving physical expression to the soul” (112-4). The Church accepted this theoretical analogy and attempted to reconcile it for a fully-formed corporate Christian identity. Throughout Christian Antiquity, up until about the seventh century, the conception of the body revealed a positivistic attitude by Church authority that appears not to have survived in the late Middle Ages. The evolution of this change in attitude begins with their understanding of the two creations of life. The bodies of the first creation were made in the image of God. In this first creation, the body is in its primal state of perfection. The second creation, however, is the creation of “human beings, embodied and marked by sexual differentiation” (115). For this reason, the practice of celibacy for the pious Christian became a means for forcing the body into sanctified compliance with the initial primal state of perfection. Sex and the birth of children were considered activities bound to the material world. The rejection of these activities raised the human being above genderfication, returning the body from its material state to its “original, natural state” of the first creation (116).

The negative perspective of the body can be traced, in part, back to St. Augustine of Hippo. Though he saw all creation, including sexual differentiation, as inherently good; the fall from paradise demonstrated the ability of the body to perform evil acts. The Classical two creations theory gave way to an understanding of the human being from the perspective of “the creation and the fall” (114). From this point forward, the human being was no longer thought of

as the outcome of the second creation, but one that had fallen from its perfect state of existence through the action of evil. Subsequent to Augustine, the human being becomes a “composite” of a physical body and a soul. The physical body forms a barrier that

can hinder the spiritual: it can distract it, it can try to offer a kind of fake

inwardness, the ‘private’, in which the spiritual self can lose itself

Asceticism [becomes] a kind of effortless interiority, in which the soul is at home

in the body and in control: asceticism is not seen as addressing anything

fundamental as the resolution of duality [of the body and soul]. (119)

On account of the body’s imperfect nature, asceticism becomes the sanctioned practice that subordinates the needs of body under the spiritual needs of the soul. Bernard of Clairvaux’s theology supports this negativistic view of the body in this way:

The corruptible body weighs down the soul not through its materiality but through

the involvement of sinful will. The immortality by which we are a likeness of God

is compromised in the death of the body The soul must avoid attachment to

earthly things, all of which return to the earth. (Evans 136)

The transitory nature of the body, its corruptibility, became the fertile ground into which the seeds of asceticism were nurtured. Ascetics believed that practicing restraint and wrenching the body into compliance liberated the soul from the material environment until the end of days, or as Bernard of Clairvaux described it, the “General Resurrection” (136).

For many monastic theologians, abstinence of food and sexual activity became the two basic practices of asceticism. Church authority believed that “oral pleasure and sexual pleasure belonged to the same sphere” (Camporesi 69). As Piero Camporesi explains,

the body's health and the soul's salvation were closely linked, and this led to severe diets which fiercely treated the foulness of flesh . . . The relationship with the heavens was mediated through a series of sacrifices, purification and purgations which leaned the soul of its contamination by food. (44)

Moderate diets, work, and setting one's self to the rhythm of the liturgical year became the way of the contemplative life in the corporate monastic setting. In their literature, Marie de France and Chaucer both affirm the orthodoxy of monastic asceticism. In Marie's work, the practice of lay investiture and the retreat of the main heroes and heroines to convents and abbeys are seen as the natural ending of the noble lay-life. And, Chaucer's retraction at the end of *The Canterbury Tales* demonstrates a clear loyalty to the teachings of humility that is one of the hallmarks of the ascetic ideal.

Unlike the corporate monastic culture, *vita apostolica*, meaning the apostolic life (Hastings 433), was a religious practice that became highly popular among the laity as it placed great emphasis on personal, individual experience, and rejected the corporate ideal of monastic life. Margery Kempe found this religious practice particularly attractive, and her book is a persuasive argument on the merits of *vita apostolica*. This ascetic movement captured the attention of the literate laity from the twelfth century onward as an alternative, individualistic, and more public form of religious expression than the corporate conventions of monasticism. It was a lifestyle that enabled the laity to practice asceticism in the public areas of the community without the need for a sanctioned gathering place. The *vita apostolica* model was particularly enticing to the laity and some of the secular clergy as it offered

a life involved not [in the] withdrawal from the world, but engagement with it; its authentic marks were voluntary poverty modeled on the poverty of Christ,

mission to the unconverted, and service to the poor . . . it offered an ideal sanctity and a programme that could be realized, without abandoning marriage or worldly responsibilities. (433)

Though this movement was growing in popularity among the laity throughout the later medieval period, suspicion and down-right hostility followed the members, especially when they publically contradicted the authority and orthodoxy of the Church's well-established corporate Christian identity. One of the most famous movements that followed the apostolic religious model was the Waldesians. Founded by Peter Waldes, a merchant and banker of Lyons, his organized movement was considered heretical because of its emphasis on preaching by the laity, who refused to obtain the proper preaching licenses from the Church (Roberts, "Sermons and Preaching" 84). Though the apostolic lifestyle of the Franciscan and Dominican mendicant orders found official approval at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, they continued to be looked upon with suspicion and distaste by the leaders of the Church's clerical authority and monastic orders.

But the lay person such as Margery Kempe, who did not have the benefit of a theological education, saw the apostolic way of life as the alternative means for an intense expression of personal faith, thereby granting the individual the power to create his or her own Christian identity. Augustine of Hippo, for example, once wrote that he enjoyed the narratives of the saints "more pleasantly when [he] envisage[d] them as the teeth of the church." Such a statement reveals the intellectual engagement of a highly educated individual who approached these saintly texts from a logos-centric perspective and saw them as a collective of corporate Church identity. The spontaneous emotional appeal, on the other hand, which formed the heart of the apostolic movement, was certainly a cause for much tension between Church authority and the laity.

Margery Kempe's book offers us insight into the realm of these kinds of theopolitical tensions between corporate and lay Christian identities. Whether the Church had intended it or not, its sermons, meditational and devotional literature created an environment that enabled the laity to "imagine that they [were] actually present at the sacred scenes which [were] being recreated" in these texts (Gray 7). This prompted the laity to actively engage with the holy in such a way that had been traditionally considered the prerogative of those entering the corporate monastic life.

The laity's growing interest to experience the kind of exhilarated sanctity that had been reserved for the cloistered led to various bodily deprivations while maintaining the active life, such as extremes of heat and cold, lack of food and drink, sexual abstinence, the wearing of hair shirts and flagellation. Each of these ascetic practices was specifically designed to control and regulate the body's needs in favor of the soul's and became the laity's payment for sanctification in a flawed and material world. These lay practices toward sanctity formed a "potential source of tension between the demands of private revelation and official orthodoxy or the approved rituals and services of the church" (8). In the third century, for example, Origen practiced self-castration, a method prized by many Christians in late-Roman society as a way to live beyond bodily genderfication and natural sexual urges (Roberts; *Blackwell Companion* 217). In this newly formed state, the castrated body became the living metaphor for the "spiritual transformation" that was eagerly sought after by these early Christians (217-8). The very first canon of the First Council of Nicaea (325 CE), however, addressed this issue by rejecting the continuation of this practice. It remains silent as to why the ecumenical council was opposed to this form of bodily self-determination, but the canon makes clear that any cleric who engaged in such a practice was to be suspended and could not look forward to any form of ecclesial advancement (Tanner, *Decrees* 6). This corporate attitude emerged regularly when theological or

religious movements and practices exceeded the balance between charism and order, causing theopolitical tensions between the laity, secular rulers, and Church authority.

As this historical background concerning Christian identity and society indicates, the politics of theology developed and shaped a corporate Christian identity from the time of the early establishment of the medieval catholic Church as a means for separating itself from the rest of society, creating a culture that was distinctly different from the rest of late-Roman society. Over time, however, questions about corporate identity created an atmosphere for spiritual experimentation by the laity and clergy alike, and many became branded by Church authority as heretics who developed a Christian identity that moved farther away from the corporate one. By the time of the Reformation, the Church, and by extension its theology and doctrines, became splintered into various forms of corporate Christian identities. The clerical, the monastic, and the mendicant orders each cultivated their own political and spiritual interests, rituals, and practices. The laity, by extension, was greatly influenced by these various avenues of spirituality with many formulating for themselves different forms of spiritual piety out of these various corporate avenues.

For the lay writers of this period these various forms of Christian identity, corporate or otherwise, became a rich field of literary discourse. Having no professional attachments to the Church, Marie de France, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Margery Kempe were in a unique position for examining Christian identity determined by Church authority in relation to their own position and the political concerns of their class. In the *Lais* of Marie de France, royal concerns of the “real” rather than the “ideal” helped this poet to explore identity beyond the corporate Christian construct. In a theopolitical climate in which royal authority was continuously exercising its political muscle against Church authority, along with its entitlement attitude toward universal

control of society, the subject of defining identity for this class became central to her *lais*. The very virile ethos of the Anglo-Norman knightly culture was unsurprisingly at odds with the ascetic attitudes of the Church as described above. The language of the *Lais* makes it very clear that the knightly class was comfortable with exploring an identity shaped from material reality that included their masculine ethos, and their political position afforded them the power to reward and punish based on ethical standards shaped by their own actions to material concerns instead of Church doctrine.

In the aftermath of the Black Death and the worst economic depression of the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer viewed his society through a literary lens far more refracted than that of Marie de France. Chaucer's civil servant position and his urban roots positioned him between two powerful institutions that were rapidly failing in satisfying the political and cultural needs of English society. Educational growth, greater and more varied career opportunities, as well as opportunities for the accumulation of wealth, brought about many questions concerning one's identity and its relation to Christianity in society that had not been asked during the height of the Church's institutional power in earlier centuries. In Chaucer's time the Church's credibility in its doctrines and practices was being called into question by many intellectuals, such as John Wycliffe and Jon Hus. In this time of swirling skepticism, the Church's ability to shape culture and society for the common good gave rise to the many and varied voices in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* that were silent in the *Lais*. The optimism in the political identity of the royal institution now has given way to a cacophony of perceptions of self and society with little optimism in the Church's ability to continue defining Christian identity for all. The ambiguity of Chaucer's language in each tale reveals that in an unstable political climate, the issue of

corporate Christian identity cannot be as easily resolved as in the *Lais*, most importantly because the issue of authority has become less well-defined.

Margery Kempe tackles both of these issues, identity and who has the authority to define it, in her book. A woman on the margins of political power, Kempe speaks the language of the Church. She champions its cause in the public arena but does so on her own terms. For Kempe, the issue becomes not whether or not a corporate Christian identity should shape the actions and attitudes of individuals but *which* identity is the authoritative one. Ascetic practices and the “ideal” rather than the “real” underscore Kempe’s argument in her book for a corporate Christian identity that the *Lais* of Marie de France rejects and Chaucer’s pilgrims question. This persuasive argument for a particular Christian identity exposes the weaknesses of corporate Christian identity in her book. As a result, the narrative audience in Kempe’s book reveals the continued fragmentation of authority on identity that Chaucer explored in his tales; but Kempe will put this issue firmly to rest by championing an ascetic lifestyle that the merchant class resisted in favor of comforts and luxuries that their trade and guild systems gave them. Therefore, an examination of the history of corporate Christian identity during these time periods enables us to more closely interpret the body metaphor with these theopolitical issues in mind and encourages us to look at the medieval period in a less monolithic fashion than has been traditionally the case. The following now discusses the theoretical construction of medieval society in which corporate Christian identity was fashioned.

Theology and Medieval Society

Readers who are concerned with secularity and medieval literature will find lively discussions concerning this concept as it was repeatedly debated by many members of Church authority throughout its history. Augustine of Hippo, Pope Gelasius I, Abelard, and John of

Salisbury are some of the more readily known medieval authorities who had delved into the problem of articulating the complex concept of society and corporate Christian identity. Modern studies conducted by learned historians of religion and theology, such as Robert Markus³⁰ and Joan and Oliver O'Donovan, offer an organized overview of medieval Christian society and individuals in their quest for Christian identity.

As with the development of a corporate Christian identity, the demarcation between the sacred and secular in Christian society developed almost immediately in its early history. Early Christianity as a sect consciously formed barriers between itself and the rest of Roman society by establishing distinct locations for worship and by forming an attitude of exclusivity by its members. It became a church of martyrs, a sect that allowed adults to enter who rejoiced in the knowledge of the Messiah and the promise of His return. They were baptized as members into this sect and consciously performed actions that caused them to be seen as subversive and, in some cases, disruptive aspects of a well-ordered Roman society. As early as Tertullian, however, the impracticability of being a separate community within a larger one posed problems that eventually became known among modern scholars as the “paradox of alien citizenship” (Fergusson 24). Unlike other cults of the Greco-Roman world, early Catholicism was concerning itself with a way of life that was not compatible at best and clashed at worst with these other forms of religious practices and the practices of daily life within the Roman Empire (Hamilton 1). Up until Constantine, Christianity did not lose its distinct corporate identity as a small minority sect of outsiders, and even though it clashed from time to time with the political order, its purpose remained a distinct group (Fergusson 24). With the arrival of Constantine and his

³⁰ Robert A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*. (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2006). In this book he argues, as have others, that the notion of secular society begins with early Christianity and found expression in St. Augustine of Hippo's *City of God*, in which, according to Markus, the early theologian argued for a religious pluralism.

acceptance of Christianity, suddenly this minority religion became one of many viable choices of religions in the Empire. In this climate religious loyalties to gods was superseded by voluntary religious commitment by the individual (Markus 22).

With the acceptance of Christianity by Constantine, however, the notion of a distinct corporate Christian identity had to be redefined. The reason for this concentration on Christian identity and secular society was that “the world was [now] flowing into the Church, being taken over wholesale by the Church, and the Church was expanding its influence into more and more areas of the culture of Roman society” (23). The Church was confronted with the problem of either finding a new identity or maintaining its original one despite its new political position. The choice was for the latter. Throughout Christian Antiquity and beyond, the Church focused its energies on having to find ways for reconnecting with its pre-Constantinian sectarian, exclusive existence, which meant that it had to work toward “a way of conceiving [itself] ‘in the world but not of it’” (O’Donovan, *Irenaeus* 6). At the time, this problem of identity was addressed by two schools of intellectual thought: one school of thought looked to the conduct of the Hellenistic philosophers whose abstract conception of separateness led to the notion of the ‘self-conscious lifestyle’ (6), while the other school of thought looked toward the more concrete corporate concept of the *Jewish identity*. This latter conception is the one that the Church eventually adopted, which led it to see itself as a “political identity confronting the empire as a foreign power (even when the emperor was a Christian)” (6). The Church accomplished this conceptual development by making more formal study of its history, creating cults of martyrs from the pre-Constantine era, and, most importantly, encouraging asceticism of its members. The Church’s concerted efforts in these areas created once again a similar kind of confrontational relationship

with Roman authority that it had known before Constantine's rise to imperial power (67), albeit far less violent.

When Constantine made Catholicism the formal religion of the state (Hamilton 3-4), the sect was catapulted from its exclusive minority status to a universal establishment tied to the political machinery of the Roman Empire. Over time the Church became identified with Roman culture. The lines the Church had drawn in its infancy blurred, and by "accepting its 'establishment' status, the church had forsaken its [original] calling" (Markus 25). Such a profound shift in political status caused members of the Church to be "born, not made" (26). The problem becomes one of identity as an establishment rather than a minority sect. During the pre-Constantine days, there was no established formal form of institution. Each Christian community was autonomous, exclusive, with members admitted only after a rigorous training in the faith and baptism. Augustine of Hippo was not baptized until in his early 30s. As his *Confessions* attests, decisions to join in the faith had been left up to him, not his mother. Even though she had encouraged him to consider her faith as truth, she did not force baptism on him in his infancy or at any time in his youth. In Christian Antiquity, decisions to join the faith were not unusual to be left to adulthood. Later in its history, however, membership became a right and not an entitlement as babies were automatically baptized into the Faith. Indeed, by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 one could only be saved if a member of the corporate medieval Church. The ecumenical councils through their decrees continued to forge an image of society in that being a member of Christian society automatically meant being a member of the Church (Tanner, *The Councils* 57).

Once Constantine turned this small but growing and influential sect into the formal religious institution of the Empire, the demarcations that defined it as a church of martyrs no

longer applied. By the time Augustine of Hippo wrote *The City of God*, his preoccupation concerning the formation of a Christian society and its relationship with the rest of the Roman Empire was influenced by the rapid acknowledgement of the Church as an imperial establishment. As bishop, Augustine was well aware of the eclectic cultural backgrounds and religions of the inhabitants of Hippo. Charged with the spiritual care of the people in his area, Augustine sensed a need for the creation of a political framework of a Christian society and its position in Roman society.

In *The City of God*, Augustine attempts to formulate a solution to the growing tensions between those supporting the continuation of traditional Roman custom and those who saw Roman custom as obsolete. Many of Augustine's letters address Church rites, doctrine, and his defense of the corporate development of a Christian identity. These letters reveal the long-standing debate among Roman intellectuals about the political ordering of society based on the Church's theological theories and philosophy. In a letter to Augustine, Marcellinus points out the many logical contradictions between Church doctrine and the traditions and customs of Roman life, the most serious contradiction being that "great evils befall the state when Christian rulers generally observe Christian religion" (*Letters* 1:17). Augustine dispels this logic by explaining that "Christ's exhortation to meekness and forgiveness of injuries is not inconsistent with the duty of maintaining discipline in a Christian commonwealth" (Parson xi). For Augustine there was not necessarily a conflict of interest between Christian ideals and Roman public life. It was a view not fully sustainable throughout medieval Church history, however.

Augustine's argument concerning the formulation of society based on theological principles permeates *The City of God*. The reason for this kind of preoccupation by Augustine was that the concept of the secular came into existence with the Church's preoccupation with the

sacred and profane spaces in society. Robert Markus explains that the concept of the secular was new and not known in the Classical age. In the Greco-Roman world the realms of the sacred and profane were distinct: the gods, their cults, and the temples that the gods occupied were sacred (14). The profane became the geographical area that surrounded these sacred places and in the performances of daily life. With the birth of Christianity, the definition of sacred space became exclusive to the institutions of that religion and the profane became anything not associated with the Catholic system of beliefs and practices. In this kind of societal matrix, the sacred and profane became “contraries, mutually hostile spheres” (*Letters* 1:4-5). In this context, the Church began developing an ambivalent and ambiguous attitude toward the political shaping of society by co-opting Classical concepts, but to the exclusion of any other sacred cults.

Augustine addressed this contradiction in Book XIX of *The City of God*. He understood the secular as a necessary component to a well-ordered Christian society. An important addition to the evolving matrix of Christian society, the secular becomes the “shared overlap between insider and outsider groups, the sphere in which they can have a common interest and which . . . need not be repudiated or excluded” (Markus 6). Augustine defines Christian society based on Classical teaching that conceives the public aspects of society as follows: “For what is the commonwealth if not the common property? There, the common property is the property of the state. And what is the state but the generality of men united by the bond of common agreement?” (*Letters* 3:43). Here, Augustine creates the secular space, a space in which virtuous men, both Christian and non-Christian alike, can shape the future of society based on common interests, needs, and virtues. Indeed, Augustine argued that the Roman culture was built on natural virtues that benefited its people: “God showed in the rich and far-famed Roman Empire how much can be achieved by natural virtues without true religion, so that we might understand how. . . men

can become citizens of another state whose king is truth, whose law is love, whose measure is eternity” (*Letters* 3:50).

In a time when Catholicism was the state religion, Augustine poses a theoretical societal matrix in which virtues of peace and love form the foundation of the community (TeSelle 110-2). In this instance the secular ground becomes neutral public space in which Christians and non-Christians can co-exist (Markus 6). It is this space that Augustine believes will disappear in the end time of the world. Until then this secular space holds a measure of political legitimacy with all of its “agencies of compulsion and enforcement” (14). The Christians of his time were living in an interim existence that Augustine referred to as the “middle ages,” in which the “city of God and the city of man . . . were intermingled until the Last Judgment” (Pelikan 2). Thus, secular space, which was made up of these two cities, became crucial for the maintenance of a well-ordered society for as long as Christians lived in these Middle Ages.

Along with the belief in the dual nature of Christ, divine and human, the Church also propagated the belief in Christ’s dual lordship over it and the world. As Robert Markus explains, from the perspective of the Church the societal matrix is made up of three concentric spheres with the Church forming the innermost circle. It is surrounded by the larger one made up of the world upon which Christ claims lordship. This second sphere is space filled with those who have not fully recognized or acknowledged His sovereignty over them. Throughout its history, the Church theologically develops this second sphere into the secular space (5). The third, most-outer sphere of this theoretical societal matrix is the profane space in which resides all that the secular and the sacred spheres reject.

For both Christians and non-Christians alike, Augustine’s time was a time of victory and a time of cultural concern as the intellectuals of Roman society embraced, resisted, and debated

the growing Catholic hegemony of their culture (Hamilton 22). *The City of God*, Augustine's most mature work, responds to this mixture of responses by making it clear that while the sacred and the secular realms remained bound up with each other until the end-time of the world, the sacred sphere could not encroach on the "autonomy of the secular." In theory, the neutrality³¹ of the secular prevented the sacred or profane spheres from absorbing this space. Augustine's trichotomy of society incorporated the sacred, the body of the church, the secular, the membership of both Christian and non-Christians who have mutual interests based on love and peace, and the profane, that sphere of undesirable aspects of society that both Christian and non-Christian equally rejected. In his letters, it is clear Augustine believed that the good of society meant cooperation between Christian and non-Christian with an aim for a just society built on mutual virtues and goals. About Augustine we might be able to say, Roman first, then Christian. Based on Augustine's theories on society, these two aspects of the individual became no longer mutually exclusive as in the pre-Constantinian era of the Church. As *The City of God* attests, the *saeculum* became defined as a "mixed inextricably intertwined state in a temporal life" (Markus 39).

As long as imperial institutions did not abolish the right to a Christian way of life and worship, Augustine bids in *The City of God* for the restriction of government and its power upon the practice of religion in the political (secular) sphere of society (40). In modern terms, Augustine saw his society as "pluralistic" with each group "dedicated . . . to the love of different objects" (65). But the self-interests of each group inevitably lead to conflict, and this conflict remained a perpetual part of the secular realm of society. As Ernest Fortin argues, Augustine did not believe in such a thing as "Christian polity" (Fortin 32); in fact, Augustine believed that

³¹ In this context I mean neutrality to be not a religious-free environment, but a religious-tolerant environment.

Christianity was never intended as a substitute for the political life. It transcends all regimes and is of necessity limited in its practical application by the modalities of its existence in this world. Christian wisdom and political power may occasionally coexist in a single subject, the person of the Christian ruler, but even in that case they remain distinct, cooperating with each other whenever possible but never merging one into the other. (32)

But these two ideals, Christian wisdom and political power, did merge into single rulers who wielded power over the secular and sacred spheres of society: Constantine, Theodosius, Charlemagne, William the Conqueror, Henry II, and, of course, Henry VIII and the development of the Anglican Church. In Emperor Theodosius we have an example of everything that Augustine stood against. The emperor's edict *Cunctos populos*, in which all of the people under his rule should practice Christianity, was the direct justification for imperial officials to destroy pagan temples and idols (Markus 31-2).

Augustine was not the only one who addressed the problems of Christian identity and society. At this time when Catholicism was absorbing more and more Roman customs, losing more its pre-Constantinian identity, Pelagius and his followers demanded a clear separation between Christians and the rest of society. Instead of accepting secular society as a realm of goods to be used to the enjoyment of eternal peace by members of the Heavenly City, he advocated for the wholesale rejection of Roman society in favor of the higher ideal of Christian perfection obtained only through asceticism. For Pelagius, a Christian who used the goods of Roman society was a 'mediocre Christian.' Unlike Augustine, Pelagius created a societal matrix divided into two aspects: the baptized Christian and the ascetic (Markus 74-5). For many theological reasons, Pelagius's theological ideals were eventually considered heretical by the

Church; but Augustine's complex trichotomy theory did not last either. In fact, medieval Christian society evolved into a dichotomy not wholly dissimilar to the one Pelagius had championed and Augustine had rejected. The growing movement of asceticism and its developing prestige among the intellectual community and the upper echelon of Roman society moved Christianity into an ascetic direction not foreseen by Augustine. His fears of the sacred sphere absorbing the secular did not come to pass. Instead, the secular sphere of society absorbed all the negative aspects of the profane.

Within two hundred years of Augustine's death the new paradigm of secularity had lost its "pluralistic" character. By the time of Gregory the Great, the secular was no longer understood as a diverse populace of varying self-interests, giving rise to conflicts for the love of objects, but mutual aims of peace. The new secular society became the place filled with what Pelagius called the "mediocre Christian" (Woodhead 52). The secular sphere of society now became space made up of Christians unable to conform to the model of the ascetic ideal (Markus 74), while the sacred sphere encompassed those who successfully embraced asceticism. Other religious groups, the Jews³² and Muslims³³, the heretics, for example, were confined and

³² Tanner, *Decrees*. See Constitutions 68 and 69 of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 CE) and the Decree on Jews and neophytes of the Council of Basel (1431 CE) in which Jews living in every Christian province are required, under severe penalties, to wear clothing distinguishable from the clothing of Christians worn in public. In this way there can be no public confusion as to who is Jew and who is Christian. Jews and Pagans were also forbidden from holding any form of public office in Christian provinces (266). See also the Decree on Jews and neophytes of the Council of Basel (1431 CE) in which Jews reaching 'the age of discretion' are compelled to attend sermons that "expound the truth of the catholic faith. . . under pain both of being excluded from business dealings with the faithful and of other apposite penalties" (483). This same decree from the Council of Basel expressly orders Jews to be housed in separate locations from "dwellings of Christians and as far distant as possible from churches" (484).

³³ Tanner, *Decrees*. See Decree 25 of the Council of Vienne (1311 CE) as an example in which the Christian sovereigns were enjoined to forbid the public invocation of Mahomet's name by Muslims living in any Christian province. Muslims were also forbidden to make any form of pilgrimage to places in Christian provinces deemed sacred by Muslims (380). Also, see previous footnote concerning the wearing of special clothing in public for Muslims.

relegated into profane space, the outer margins of society,³⁴ and outside of corporate Christian identity.

It was during the papacy of Gregory the Great when the term “Christendom” was applied to all of medieval Europe. Pluralism as Augustine sought to define it changed from a rich diversity of believers and nonbelievers into a pluralism of the “less and the more perfect within the Church [Unlike Augustine,] he could think of *conversio* more easily as something undergone by the Christian soul on its way to perfection than as the conversion of a non-Christian to Christianity” (Markus 86). This perception implies an homogenous viewpoint “with regard to its religious affiliation” (Lincoln 57), describing the Middle Ages “by an overwhelming uniformity of thought and belief . . . when independence of inquiry was utterly stifled” (Tovey 235). The term Christendom is deceptive, however, in that it does not take into account the “broad variation [that] often exists regarding the nature and intensity of the religious commitments held by different factions of the nation” (Lincoln 55). Indeed, “medieval societies were never unitary” (Aers 2): neither in their thoughts, their beliefs, nor in their actions—be they concerned with secular issues or sacred ones. This form of pluralism necessarily gives rise to tensions among the various social groups, especially when determining the reception and acceptance of Church theology and doctrine. The short, but powerful verse-line from Chaucer’s *General Prologue of The Canterbury Tales* “his studie was but litel on the Bible” (GP, 436) not only describes the secular character of the physician, it also reveals the preoccupation of intellectuals concerning lay sanctity and secular society. As this verse line implies, the laity was by no means complacent in their reception of Catholicism.

³⁴ See the Decree of the Council of Basel (1431 CE, in which all members of society who are not members of the Church, Jews, Muslims, pagans, heretics are also excluded from the sharing of eternal life. Instead, they are consigned to the “everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels, unless they are joined to the Catholic Church before the end of their lives” (578).

Nearing the time of the high Middle Ages in Europe, tensions between Church and secular rulers—with each zealously guarding their ethos—continued. From the time of Pope Gelasius onward, the matrix of society steadily evolved toward a demarcation between members of the church (the clergy, prelates, etc.) and the laity (kings, knights, merchants, etc.). At this point, corporate Christian identity evolved into those educated in the theological theories of the faith as opposed to those who were the receptors of those teachings. Thus, the clergy were assigned a life of contemplation (sacred) (O'Donovan 261) in locations specifically designed for that purpose. The laity entered into the active life of business (secular) (261), conducting their activities outside of the sanctified spaces determined by Church authority. The perpetual preservation of sanctity of its places became one of the Church's leading preoccupations, and rituals evolved for the continued sanctification of its buildings, such as churches and chapels. Church authority also reinforced localized sanctification by adding sacred objects to be housed therein. The decrees of the Fourth Council of Constantinople of 869—870 is an example of the Church's concern for its sanctity and political autonomy in society. In this case the Council asserts its claim to independence from secular authority by stating that

the goods or privileges which belong to the churches of God as a result of long enduring custom and have been granted, whether in writing or not, by emperors of revered memory. . . must in no way be removed by force on the part of any secular person, or taken away by him on any pretext whatsoever. (Tanner, *Decrees* 180)

Such an infraction on the part of secular authority was considered by the Council sacrilegious and condemned as anathema (180).

Concern for separate places of secular activity from spiritual ones appears in the decrees from the Second Council of Lyons of 1274. In it are clearly defined policies concerning the

attitudes toward and usage of sacred places, particularly churches and cemeteries. These decrees appear to be in reaction against the general attitude that churches could be used for any form of gathering space by the community. The following decree is an example at making clear demarcations between secular and sacred places:

The consultations of universities and of any associations whatever must cease to be held in churches, so also must public speeches and parliaments. Idle and, even more, foul and profane talk must stop; chatter in all its forms must cease.

Everything, in short, that may disturb divine worship or offend the eyes of the divine majesty should be absolutely foreign to churches No more business is to be conducted in churches or their cemeteries, especially they are not to have the bustle of markets and public squares. All noise of secular courts must be stilled.

The laity are not to hold their trials in churches, more especially criminal cases.

(Tanner, *Decrees* 328)

The council also determined invalid any form of secular judgment that was passed in a sacred place, such as the church. Further attempts to produce a modicum of sanctity in the church setting can also be found in the decrees of the Council of Basel (1431 CE). In them a tone of strong censure is clear upon any and all who used the church or its cemeteries for “masked and theatrical comedies...dances...and banquets” (Tanner, *Decrees* 492). Economic sanctions, such as the withholding of ecclesial revenue for three months (492), were imposed on church administrators who ignored this decree.

With respect to the relics housed in these sacred places, many times these took the form of bones from saints. Fragments or whole skeletons were interred within the sacred interior of churches, cathedrals, or basilicas (Hamilton 204). As early as the Second Council of Nicaea in

787, the Council condemned any and all who rejected the ecclesial traditions of the Church by attempting to “secularize sacred objects and saintly monasteries” (Tanner, *Decrees* 137). This Council also reaffirmed the necessity for relics when consecrating a new church. Without relics, a church could not be considered wholly sanctified and the bishop performing the ritual was charged with “flouting the ecclesiastical traditions” (145) of the Church establishment.

The ecclesial power that the Church enjoyed from its inception waned during the late Middle Ages. In the fifteenth century, the Church “witnessed a great constitutional crisis” in its attempts to resolve the Great Schism that nearly divided western Christendom (Tanner, *The Councils* 64)³⁵. These councils also struggled to limit the growing powers of the papacy that had been developing since the eleventh century into a “papal monarchy and absolutism” (69). The council of Vienne (1311-12 CE) is considered an “outstanding example” (Tanner, *Decrees* 333) of European royal governments and their ability to control the outcome of ecclesial matters. The condemnation of the Templars is perhaps the most famous political manipulation by a secular ruler in the outcome of an ecumenical council. At this ecumenical council meeting,

the council fathers gave long and careful consideration to the case of the Templars [But,] in March 1312 Philip IV held a general assembly of his kingdom in Lyons, his object being to disturb and steamroller the minds of the council fathers and of the pope himself. Secret bargains had been made between Clement V and the envoys of Philip IV from 17 to 29 February 1312; the council fathers were not consulted. By this bargaining Philip obtained the condemnation of the Templars . . . The king of France made for Vienne on 20 March, and after two days, Clement

³⁵ Norman Tanner, *The Councils of the Church: A Short History*. (New York: Crossroad, 2001). See Introduction for an overview of the Great Schism. 1- 12.

V delivered to the commission of cardinals for approval the bull by which the order of Templars was suppressed. (334)

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, the ecumenical councils were forced to address more and more issues of moral corruption by its clerics, the Great Schism, and eradication of heresies. The Church not only found itself having to protect its sacred image from the encroachment of secular activities, it also had to place under control the growing secular behavior of its own clerical members. By the Council of Vienne (1311-12 CE) it became important to delineate specific public behavior acceptable to the maintenance of the Church's corporate sacred image. In Decree 8, the council laid out the following admonitions to those clerics who decided to embark, for example, on careers in the secular trade:

We strictly command local ordinaries to admonish by name three times clerics who publicly and personally engage in the butcher's trade or conduct taverns, that they cease to do so within a reasonable time to be fixed by the ordinary and never resume such trades. (364)

If they persisted in continuing their trade, these clerics lost their clerical privileges. Among other "in-house" concerns, the council also focused on limiting the range of civil lawsuits made by bishops, reiterated the appropriate attire for clerics to be worn in public settings, and created tighter regulations to tithes by religious houses. We should not be surprised by Chaucer's less-than-stellar depictions of the clerics in *The Canterbury Tales* when the council of Vienne forbade "monks all excess or irregularity with regard to clothes, food, drink, bedding and horses" (370).

As we can see from this historical background on Christian identity and society, the Church attempted throughout its history to keep itself detached from the rest of worldly affairs and at the same time establish for its members a corporate Christian identity that differentiated

them from those of other religions and cultures. This detachment was difficult and at times nearly impossible to maintain, particularly when individuals of the Church began to determine a Christian identity for themselves, especially when it was in contradiction to established orthodoxy. Ambiguity on a variety of theological and intellectual levels caused the Church a great measure of difficulty in the development of its image, its sacred spaces, and its corporate ideologies throughout the Middle Ages in Europe. These theopolitical issues that surrounded corporate Christian identity and society also drove the politics of power in medieval society between the Church and the secular authority. These issues formulated a complex and, at times, ambiguous corporate Christian identity that preoccupied poets and their audience. It is these discourses that we will discover in the literature of Marie de France, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Margery Kempe. In their literary art, we will discover complex and sophisticated discourse on the nature of corporate Christian identity shaped by the politics of theology, the reception by the lay writers, and their transmission of that discourse to their audience through their narratives.

CHAPTER 2.
THE CORPORATE *SANS* CHRISTIAN IDENTITY OF
KNIGHTHOOD IN THE *LAIS* OF MARIE DE FRANCE

The theopolitics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries between the royal government and the English Church produced lay literature that at its core examined identity from the perspective of the nobility. Knighthood and its ethos became in the Anglo-Norman romance the major theme of discussion. For Marie, who was a member of this class, creating poetry that concerned self-determination came naturally. This romance poet was writing at a time when Norman families continued to protect their exclusivity from other social groups in England (Rubin 389). This “ethnic” group, built upon Continental language and customs, needed literature that reflected their continual search for an identity that reinforced their unique position in English society. Unlike much of the literature in the romance proper that centered on knighthood and spirituality, Marie’s *Lais* remain unconcerned with the development and nourishment of the soul, its eventual journey and reunion with the Godhead. In fact, the *Lais* bypass the Church’s doctrines on the renunciation of earthly pleasures as part of the fallen realm of human nature.

Instead, Marie engaged with the theological doctrines by directing the discourse on identity toward more material concerns than spiritual ones. Withdrawing the deity from human affairs and experiences enabled Marie to focus the narrative arc of the *Lais* on a knightly world that the Anglo-Norman ruling class readily understood. For this reason, English Church authority was highly suspicious of the romance genre because of its focus on the material concerns of the ruling class. As far as the Church was concerned, such earthly matters placed the soul in jeopardy, and “the church was deeply suspicious of the world of romance, and sermons attacking

idle fables were a commonplace” (Barber 172). In fact, there is little in the *Lais* that can be considered “esoteric and mysterious” as Barber refers to the Grail legends (1) written during or shortly after Marie’s time. So, instead of creating poetry about *caritas*, where the love for others is the love for God, Marie examines a notion of material reconciliation in that love must be returned by another, that makes the lovers happy, or “in some other way prove advantageous” (Kent 239) to the lovers. These poetic narratives that Marie created offer a clear display of sexual activity in which ultimate joy comes from experiencing the bodies of the lovers. Instead of condemning concupiscence as a vice, as the Church teaches, Marie lifts up sexuality as a “cardinal virtue” (Bloch, *Feudal Society* 310).

Marie’s intellectual perception of secular life reflects a growing attitude toward jurisdictional concerns between the royal government and English Church authority. By the time Marie writes the *Lais* a clearly articulated conception of medieval society is taking shape. The intellectual differentiation between the secular and sacred spheres of society is solidifying to a noticeable degree in the literature of the period. Joseph Canning explains that during this time period, the “fundamental . . . way of looking at the world was a changed conception of nature: . . . a move from interpreting nature in purely religious and moral categories to seeking a physical explanation of it in terms of cause and effect” (110). Despite this growing acceptance toward organizing the world based on cause and effect, “God [continued to be] understood ultimately to stand behind nature” (110). Marie readily understood these changes in perception, which she clearly articulates in the first verse lines of the prologue to the *Lais*:

Ki Deus ad dune escience

E de parler bon’ eloquence

Ne s’en deit taisir ne celer,

Ainz se deit volunteers mustrer.
 [Whoever has received knowledge
 And eloquence in speech from God
 Should not be silent or secretive
 But demonstrate it willingly]³⁶

This growing shift in the perception on life, coupled with the decades-long Investiture Contest (Canning 89) between the ruling class and Church authority, is reflected in the *Lais* in that the Church doctrines and its sovereignty over Christian society are clearly marginalized and are referred to by the heroes and heroines only in a time of need or comfort. Specific references in the *Lais* to God and periodic mention of sacred places, such as an abbey or chapel, function as narrative elements of standard religious practices by the knightly class and do not constitute any discourse on spirituality (Bloch, *Feudal Society* 309-10). In contrast, the Grail legends, with an emphasis on liturgical rites (Barber 2), provided later poets a foundation upon which to explore spirituality and knighthood (Haug 260). We find no such liturgical appeal in the *Lais*, which may have been written some thirty years prior to the sudden concentrated interest in Grail legends by court poets. In the *Lais*, Marie focuses instead on the very political affairs of knighthood and the theme of love with its causes and effects on that class, and not of quests, crusade, or inner spirituality.

These chivalric concepts are readily left for Chrétien de Troyes to write about in his famous Grail stories, or not complete should he find difficulty in “its morality” (Barber 11). On account of conscience, Chrétien appears to have had trouble finishing the story of Lancelot and

³⁶ For translations of Marie’s *Lais* I am using Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante’s 1978 edition, *The Lais of Marie de France*.

Guinevere or even attempting to tackle the story of Tristan and Iseult (10-11). Marie had no such compunction. Indeed, where “the pleasures of the flesh” were concerned, “the knightly class [of Anglo-Norman society] appears to have been frankly realistic” (Bloch 308; *Feudal Society*), and the *Lais* are no exception in that they are filled with love, sex, and violence, and in most instances, the lovers meet with terrible ends. The *Lais* are extremely political in that through the experience of the flesh, these stories center on questions of civic duties and obligations of the ruling class in contrast to their personal needs and natural inclinations toward love. Given the theopolitical backdrop of the period, we should consider interpreting the *Lais* with their lack of sacred subject matter in favor of their preoccupation with the ruling class’s political ambitions and cultural anxieties that shaped their identity.

Marie de France was writing during a time when the “nobility appropriated to itself a literary language in which to articulate the crisis of its own changing status” (Bloch; *Anonymous Marie* 10). The insecurity of the Anglo-Norman knightly class found in the *Lais* reflects an overall political picture of medieval Europe in which there was an underlying fear of instability caused by what Robert Stein refers to as the “aristocratic diaspora,” a political phenomenon that covered most of the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries (5). Beginning after the death of Charlemagne, northern Europe was witnessing several centuries of shifting sands of political power among the rising ruling class, of which the “papacy was an enthusiastic participant” (Burns 368). Stein describes the origins of this developing insecurity as stemming from “marriages, work, or warfare” (5). The cross-pollination of customs and traditions through these activities, as well as cultural attitudes and uneven religious practices, brought about a concentrated sense of “displacement, relocation, migration, and cultural friction” (5) among the European nobility. In response, the development of the feudal system with its rigid hierarchy

afforded the ruling class a certain measure of security. By cultivating a culture of loyalty, rulers could in theory rely on a more predictable behavior of the vassals, who included the many bishops and other Church authorities possessing substantial landholdings all across Europe, including England, and exerting strong regional influence over the developing urban and rural areas.

The Church at this time was also working toward its own form of unifying and stabilizing Christian culture. Through its development of a scholastic system, the Church sought to determine doctrinal standards for a uniform Christian belief system that had not been thought of or debated upon prior to this time period. This was an unprecedented attempt by the Church to cast a wide net of a corporate Christian identity over Europe. The well-spring of mounting tensions between the ruling class and Church authority, especially during the lifetime of Charlemagne, was the political involvement of that class in the internal affairs of the Church and vice versa. The Investiture Contest in particular became a source of great anxiety for Church authority, especially the papacy. Traditionally, the ruling class funded and built sacred places of worship wherever necessary in Europe. By constructing anything from cathedrals to parish churches and from monasteries to family chapels, as well as a working infra-structure, such as roads and bridges to these places of worship, the nobility felt justified in their active engagement in the ecclesial affairs of these sacred places (Shopkow 80). In this way, the nobility influenced the nomination of an abbot, a priest, a canon lawyer who in turn supported the political interests of his secular patron. Many times these nominees were family members, sons and daughters, who did not have the political standing in their families to inherit title or lands (primogeniture), but were compelled to be more oath-bound to their families than to the Church. From the early twelfth century onward, Church authority worked to throw off the yoke of lay investiture in order

to create for itself a more autonomous theopolitical standing against the ruling class. The decrees of the Church's ecumenical councils attest to this growing sentiment. Already in the ninth century, tensions began to mount between the Church and the ruling class concerning the latter's active participation in synodal meetings. An ecumenical decree of the Fourth Council of Constantinople (869-870 CE) addressed this political problem as follows:

We refuse to listen to the offensive claim made by some ignorant people that a synod cannot be held in the absence of the civil authorities. The reason for this is that the sacred canons have never prescribed the presence of secular rulers at synods but only the presence of bishops. (Tanner, *Decrees* 179-80).

The concern for lay investiture by ecclesial authorities comes to light in the ecumenical council meeting of the Second Lateran Council of 1139 in which the council expressly forbade lay involvement in the appointments to ecclesial offices:

If anyone receives provostships, prebends or other ecclesiastical benefices from the hand of a lay person, let him be deprived of the benefice unworthily received. For the decrees of the holy fathers state that lay people, no matter how devout they may be, have no power of disposal over ecclesiastical property. (Tanner, *Decrees* 202).

Ecclesial proclamations such as these were not well received by royal authority. The murder of the Canterbury archbishop Thomas a Becket in England manifests the tensions over lay investiture, among other theopolitical issues, between the secular and sacred institutions in Christian society.

The *Lais* of Marie de France were developed during these times of theopolitical tensions. And so, we should ask ourselves how much or how little these *Lais* are about the theme of love

as the “supreme form of pleasure” (Bloch; *Anonymous Marie* 310); whether they really are about the human’s “natural drive to seek self-realization above all” (Kent 239); and whether or not the ultimate goal of the theme of love in the *Lais* is to express some form of resistance against Anglo-Norman law and the Church. When confronted with these issues, we must first address the categorization of the *Lais* because it is the categorization of these *Lais* upon which our perception and subsequent approach to their interpretation have been built. To say that these *Lais* belong to the courtly love lyric genre produces already a certain amount of ambiguity. If we were to define the *Lais* as part of this genre, we’d be more likely to say how they are *not* rather than how they *are* a part of this genre. The *Lais* are similar to the courtly love lyric genre in that love is the main theme, and the heroes and heroines are of aristocratic or noble status. But that is about where the similarities end. Some of the most important characteristics of the courtly love lyric, its music and its self-expression of love by the court poet toward the patroness, are absent. The following courtly love lyric, written shortly after the time of Marie, is a typical example of this genre:

I am all bereft of sense
Of the world’s bliss I am bare
Because of the lady who is crown
Of all who walk in bower. (qtd. Dronke 144)

The narrative structure of the *Lais*, which resembles more the chivalric poetry written by Chrétien de Troyes than the courtly love lyric, lends itself toward greater insight into the conditions and sensibilities of the heroes and heroines against the political backdrop of the feudal system. In contrast to the chivalric poetry, however, Marie is unconcerned with the “(re)-integration of the lovers into society, [or] in the (re)-establishing of a balance between love and

chivalry” (Burgess and Busby 27). The isolation of the lovers is central to the *Lais*. It is to this area that we should point our attention rather than to the treatment of love. The main thrust of the *Lais* is not about the consummation of love, but in the cause and effect of that consummation and its detrimental consequences on the structure of the feudal system. Taken as a whole, the *Lais* were intended as a handbook to be used by the ruling class for remembering and learning what it means to be a proper ruler and the dangers his rule faces when fealty is not cultivated and nurtured. Using the theme of love, Marie examines these secular concerns by exposing the strengths and weaknesses of the noble class with little exegetical interest in corporate Christian identity. The following, therefore, explores the *Lais* with these issues in mind. By analyzing the secular nature of the *Lais*, we discover the political concerns and anxieties of Anglo-Norman rulers that went far beyond the concerns of their spirituality.

Prologue

Marie de France belonged to a class of poets that understood the intellectual sophistication of her Anglo-Norman audience. She had inherited a courtly lyric culture that dates back to William IX of Aquitaine (d. 1127 CE). That culture was solely composed of a class of noblemen in their quest for finding aesthetic forms of expressing their knightly ethos. This culture flourished in southern France partly because there was less oversight by monastic authorities in the eleventh century than in the northern parts of France (Jaeger 177). This courtly culture, termed *curialitas*, thrived during a time of peace and prosperity in Provence, with the Church becoming deeply suspicious of its growing courtly activities. Many members of ecclesial authority of this time period looked upon the courtly culture as frivolous and abased. John of Salisbury’s sour comment on English courtly culture reveals the overall sentiment harbored by many in ecclesial authority:

Yet among all courtly fools, those who do harm most perniciously are those who are accustomed to glossing over their wretched frivolities under the pretext of honour and liberality, who move about in bright apparel, who feast splendidly, who often urge strangers to join them at the dinner table, who are courteous at home, benign when abroad, affable in speech, liberal in judgment, generous in treatment of kin and distinguished for the imitation of all virtues. (87)

John of Salisbury is so suspicious of the courtly culture that he compares it to the fountain of Salmacis: whoever drinks its waters becomes effeminate and is “deprived of the nobler sex” (90). It is clear from his animosity that court culture appeared a “breeding ground of corruption” (Jaeger 176). Thomas Walsingham, a Benedictine monk and chronicler during the reign of Richard II, continued to scorn the lifestyle of the royal court by dismissing the king’s courtiers “as more knights of Venus than of Bellona, more of the bedchamber than of the battle field” (Bennett 9). The sounding alarm of the Church against courtly culture pervaded all parts of Europe, but its message against the frivolities of courtly life remained ambiguous against its message of the “peace of God” and its attack against knights and their “listless and unwarriorlike ways” (Jaeger 193).

Needless to say, the courtly culture thrived for another two hundred years, producing the romance genre with its heroes and heroines and marvels. The poetry of the court was performed exclusively at gatherings of the noble and aristocratic class because the subject matter of these lyrics was “too refined to be appreciated by villeins,” which “naturally reinforced [their] sense of superiority” (Bloch, *Feudal Society* 308) over others, including the Church. Marie de France, like so many of the troubadours and trobairitz (Bogin 11) of her time, “composed for an audience of connoisseurs capable of appreciating [the] difficult forms [of the courtly love lyrics] and

complex rhymes, [and] capable of comparing a poet's compositions with those of his contemporaries and predecessors" (Cheyette 238). This was the age of scholasticism when many of the noble class, other members of the lower aristocracy, and the affluent merchant class became increasingly educated either in public schools, such as elementary, grammar schools, and the universities, or through the employment of capable tutors. This concentrated form of education brought with it a broader sense of the wider world for the nobility, the politics that drove it, and their awareness of how much Church authority sought to influence it.

As many troubadours and trobairitz came from the noble and aristocratic class, they were in a position to appreciate these kinds of political concerns and anxieties that shaped the world of the ruling class. As Walter Haug explains in his elegant study of early Germanic literature, "indeed all of them—disregarding the native oral tradition to which we have no immediate access—are dependent on it, at least indirectly" (Haug 7). As examples, in the French poetic tradition, we have accounts of Chretien de Troyes who "distances himself from the singers of the oral tradition" (Haug 188). Marie de France follows this tradition in that she draws attention to the fact that the *Lais* had been written down, a sign of compositional and rhetorical prowess on the part of that culture.³⁷ In the German tradition (with Wolfram von Eschenbach³⁸ as the exception), we have Hartmann von Aue and Gottfried von Strassburg, both of whom placed emphasis on formal education and learning in their poetry and were diligent in the disclosure of their sources (188). Whether or not Marie had any direct Latin learning, the compositional and

³⁷ Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, trans. *The Lais of Marie de France*. 2nd. (London: Penguin, 2003) 43. See the opening lines of the *lais* of Guigemar in that Marie states: "After these opening words I shall recount to you, just as it had been set down in writing, an adventure which happened in Brittany long ago."

³⁸ One cannot but help see Wolfram as a radical poet who was not afraid of innovation. We have a clear understanding of his position on education in his poetry, especially in *Willehalm*, in that the natural human faculties, like the whole of nature, are permeated by the spirit of God, and that for this reason all book-learning can be dispensed with. While Marie seems to acknowledge this kind of argument in her opening line of the prologue, that God is responsible for the gift of knowledge and eloquence, that is about as far as she seems to go because she places a great deal of emphasis on book-learning in subsequent verse lines of her Prologue as a way to dispel vice that is inherent in human nature.

rhetorical styles of her prologue and the *Lais* fall well within the Classical tradition of these poetic theories.

By introducing the *Lais* with a rhetorically refined prologue, Marie de France created a poetic framework that addressed the sophisticated tastes of her audience that was being shaped through this culture of scholasticism. Since there are two prologues, I will refer to them as the prologue proper and prologue minor. The prologue proper is fifty-six verse-lines long, in which Maries's intentions for the creation of the *Lais* are discussed, and the intended audience, the king, is introduced. The prologue minor is the short, twenty-six-line introduction to the lai of *Guigemar*. In the prologue proper, Marie delves into rhetorical discourse concerning the nature of poetry, her reasons for the use of the vernacular language in the creation of the *Lais*, and her hopes that these *Lais* will elevate her to fame.

The immediate concern for writing the *Lais* occupies the very same "question that generations of troubadours [and trobairitz] had explored: the nature of love and its political affects on the audience of the ruling class" (Cheyette 235). Politics, mostly secular, underlies these *Lais*, and in this Marie is as consistent as we find other past and contemporary court poets. Tradition, therefore, plays a key role in the development of these *Lais*. In fact, Marie places concerted emphasis on tradition, not only in the prologue proper, but by also considering herself an inheritor of this poetic material:

Oëz, seignurs, ke dit Marie,

Ki en sun tens pas ne s'oblie (*Guigemar* 6-7)

[Listen, my lords, to the words of Marie,

who does not forget her responsibilities when her turn comes.]

In the prologue minor, Marie offers her name to the intended audience as a means for connecting herself with the political poetic tradition of courtly love. In this way, she has secured for herself a place in history, an intention that she already announced in the prologue proper:

Pur ceo comencai a penser
 De aukune bone estoire faire
 E de latin en romaunz traire;
 Mais ne me fust guaires de pris:
 Itent s'en sunt altre entremis. (*Prologue* 28-32)
 [That's why I began to think
 about composing some good stories
 and translating from Latin to Romance;
 but that was not to bring me fame:
 too many others have done it.]

By attempting to “stand out from the crowd,” Marie secures a position in history by taking tradition and shaping it in new and different ways for her intended audience. Such innovative thinking at this time was not unusual. Marie de France's emphasis on invention was an important part of the twelfth-century Latin revival movement. Though not a close contemporary, Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109 CE) is an example of a group of intellectuals who were attempting to develop innovative ideas of their own without slavishly remaining linked to their sources.

Anselm was deeply interested in finding ways to understand God beyond all human comprehension. For his important works, such as the *Monlogion*, Anselm's chief source was St. Augustine of Hippo's *On the Trinity*. After having finished his treatise, G.R. Evans tells us that Anselm had sent the work to his mentor, Lanfranc, who was not quick on commenting on his

protégé's work. Apparently, not liking what he was reading, Lanfranc dragged his feet. But, after Anselm pressed his colleagues to intervene on his behalf, Lanfranc made it very clear that though Anselm's work was satisfactory, "it was inappropriate for him to be putting so much into his own words" (96). This little anecdote demonstrates how difficult it was for theologians and intellectual thinkers to compose innovative ideas against the rhetorical tradition of the Church, a problem that the institution faced in greater force during the later part of the medieval period. Similar independent thought and innovation can be found in Marie's work. This is not to say that she made it all up; but she rejected the Latin tradition in favor of her own language in order to explore a style of poetics that had more ready appeal to her noble audience concerned with political issues of conquest, cultural unity, and court intrigue, rather than contemplation on a corporate Christian identity.

Though there was an increasing rise in literacy among the ruling class, the court culture still placed a great deal of emphasis—indeed, giving it near sacral status—on oral traditions, such as the ritual-making of political oaths and oral instruction. Education and training were not left solely to the public schools as long as the place of the court still held tremendous influence on the cultural and political instruction of its royal members. On account of the oral nature of the court, poets whose patrons were rulers and others of high nobility were faced with the task of doing more than engagement in "complex and bravura rhyme schemes" (246) as simple forms of entertainment. These poetic structural devices were important for more political purposes. The sophisticated world of the poets certainly matched that of their patrons, and, as Frederic Cheyette explains, the poetry created encouraged the audience to draw themselves into the lyrics and "attentiveness above all to the ambient references these love songs made to the deepest issues of the political world in which their hearers lived" (246). Since the world of the court was the place

of apprenticeship for the next generation of rulers and noblemen, the poetry of these troubadours and trobairitz reminded the “youth and their parents . . . of their social lessons, not in preachments, but in entertainments” (246). The *Lais*’ constant reminder of their Breton heritage testifies to the need for a political connection with a temporal past by the ruling class. The innovative poetic devices we find in the *Lais* formed a secular didacticism that excluded the corporate Christian identity from being central to the *Lais* and the political life that these tales addressed.

We find this highly developing secular attitude outside of the courtly love lyric tradition near the time of Marie de France. Oddly enough we find evidence in the writings of an ecclesial authority, which encouraged the noble youth to listen to or read romances as serious forms of social and political *exempla*. It is doubtful that the audience would have believed these courtly lyrics as a “replica of reality” (238); instead, the audience would have accepted the poetry as “powerful reinforcement, served both to implant the proper ethos and to elaborate the code of behavior that made it possible” (238). Though Church authority had its suspicions concerning romance poetry, there were those within its ranks who believed in this theory of didactic instruction for the noble class. Thomasin von Zerclaere, an Italian canon lawyer, wrote the famous thirteenth-century *Der Welsche Gast*. While there is no definitive evidence concerning who Thomasin really was, there are historians who believe that he was attached to the cathedral of Aquileja, during the time of Wolfger von Erla and may have been the one who gifted a farmstead to the archdiocese upon his death. He wrote this conduct book for pious knights, good women, and wise priests. Thomasin wrote this work not out of some form of frivolous exercise, but out of necessity, since he saw what he believed to be a deterioration of Christian moral behavior in his day—that money swayed and held power over both great and small things and

that Christian virtues were left behind. His work is crucial in that it provides us with insight into an intellectual's thinking and theopolitical beliefs during the height of the courtly romantic period in Germany, which we can extend in some ways to the Anglo-Norman court upon whose patronage Marie de France depended. It also demonstrates that at least one Church official believed that secular writings offered better instruction on moral behavior than Church doctrine.

In the following passage of his conduct book, we come to learn of Thomasin's ideology about teaching the noble youth through courtly culture:

Swenn si von hove komen sint,
 So suln dan diu edeln kint
 Gedenken an schallen in ir muot:
 Also et hiute der riter guot
 Ze hove, ich wil michs vlizen hart, daz ich kome in sine vart.
 (*Welsche* 343-348)

[When they leave the court, the young nobles instead of complaining should remember: such and such a personage was at the court, and I should take extra care to become like him. Who does not pay attention to what he sees will not improve.]³⁹

In this short stanza we find validation for an emphasis on didacticism that is more bound up in court-life than in Church authority. With respect to the romance genre Thomasin draws attention to specific heroes and heroines as proper role models for his young audience. For the young noblemen, his list comprises King Arthur, (*Welsche* 1045-6), the heroic Charlemagne, and the virtuous Alexander, who provide these young men with outstanding instruction. While the noble

³⁹ My translation—any errors in this and subsequent translations of Middle High German are solely mine.

youth were encouraged to mimic the courtly behavior of Tristan, Segrimors, and Kalogrenant, the young noblewomen were to learn their virtues from Andromache, Queen Penelope, Oenone, Galjena, Blanscheflor, and Sordamor. Thomasin insists that even though not all the heroines on his list were queens, their noble virtues were still to be learned and followed (*Welsche* 1030-1040).

Likewise, Marie describes the secular didactic nature of the *Lais* to her royal audience as “granz biens,” meaning something greatly beneficial. She describes this beneficence with the metaphor of blossoms, a metaphor capitalized by the German literary term for this time period, the *Blutezeit*, the flowering. Indeed, Marie calls attention to this metaphor in her prologue when she says:

Quant uns granz biens est mult oiz,
 Dunc a primes est il fluriz,
 E quant loez est de plusurs,
 Dunc ad expandues ses flurs. (*Prologue* 5-8)
 [When a great good is widely heard of,
 then, and only then, does it bloom,
 and when that good is praised by many,
 it has spread its blossoms.]

The courtly culture is one of community, highly political and highly organized; hence, the plural metaphor of the blossom. It is not enough for proper instruction to be spread, but to be received in a certain way by the nobility as both Marie’s and Thomasin’s words imply. Such secular poetry forces the corporate Christian identity into the backdrop. The subject matter of the *Lais*

helps the audience to concentrate more on itself and its aristocratic identity than on spiritual matters.

So, what instruction does Marie refer to in her prologue? As the *Lais* reveal, the instruction is about “the language of power relations—of loyalty and faith, of treason and deceit—used in . . . clearly erotic contexts” (Cheyette 247). The political nature of body and place in the *Lais* will establish these dynamics for the audience. The deliberate acknowledgement of the king as recipient of these *Lais* clearly indicates Marie’s intention to instruct him and his court in the proper courtly etiquette of Anglo-Norman cultural identity. Sacral history gives way to temporal history when Marie ties contemporary Anglo-Norman culture to its Breton heritage. Consequently, she uses past events to examine present realities. By continuously describing the Breton culture as noble and refined, Marie is reminding the king and the knightly class that tradition plays a valuable part in the instruction of what it means to be a good nobleman, and, in order for him to attain fame, he should look to an historical past for proper instruction in courtly etiquette, diplomacy, and law. By focusing on the political and not biblical history, Marie has forged boundaries between the lay and corporate Christian identities for her audience. With her poetry, she offered her audience an opportunity to think deeply about itself outside of the teachings of Church doctrine, placing each hero and heroine in difficult and at times uncompromising political circumstances readily understood by the royal court. With each lai, Marie offers her Anglo-Norman audience the opportunity to contemplate its political role and ethos while living in the land that they had conquered.

The Lais

The twelve *Lais* that have been customarily attributed to Marie de France, including the prologue proper, are grouped together in the thirteenth-century Harley 978 manuscript. Marie de

France links the *Lais* metrically to the romance genre with her use of the octosyllabic rhyming couplet to tell the love story. Contemporary uses of this poetic metre can be found in Wace's *Roman de Brut*, in the poetry of Chrétien de Troyes, in the *romans antiques* (Ewert xxxii), and in a variety of courtly love lyrics. The *Lais* are short, and their subject matter has been customarily accepted as that of Celtic or Breton origin. The shortest of the *Lais* is *Chevrefoil* with 118 lines and the longest is *Eliduc* of 1184 lines. Marie is considered the first poet of the high Middle Ages to have "successfully composed" (Burgess and Brook 1) narrative *lais*, or what have been commonly referred to as Breton *lais*. The Breton *lai* has been considered a poem set to music and sung to an audience, and the story is typically about an "adventure of ancient origin" (Clifford 11). Scholars believe Marie's most important contribution to the development of the Breton *lai*, however, is to "emphasize the adventure, thereby creating a narrative poem which was to be recited or read rather than sung" (11-12). Her poetry was known by other poets during the late twelfth century and was popularly received at the Plantagenet court (Burgess and Busby 12). The precise dating of the *Lais* eludes scholars as the works of Alfred Ewert, Glyn Burgess, R. Howard Bloch, and Paula Clifford attest. But there seems to be ready agreement at placing the artistic development of the *Lais* in the late twelfth century, between 1160s and 1180s.⁴⁰

Though the *Lais* have been customarily considered part of the romance genre, Marie's other innovation, aside from compositional changes, has been in blending both chivalric and courtly elements of the romance genre into the creation of these *Lais*: As in the chivalric poetry and the courtly love lyric, the *Lais* are composed around the theme of love and stories from the past. They are addressed to the knightly class and deal with the problems of love within a rigid feudal political structure. Some of the more popular and more familiar chivalric poetry comes

⁴⁰ Paula Clifford, *Marie de France: Lais*, (London: Grant, 1982) 10. Glyn Burgess's *Marie de France*, Introduction, pg. vii.

from Chretien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, the anonymous poets of *Havelock the Dane* and *King Horn*, and the anonymous poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. These chivalric poems center on tests of spirituality, the quest, and personal experience. *Exempla* of chivalrous behavior of knights are also found in contemporary chronicles of the period. In the case of Arnold of Ardres, for example, who was born about the time that Marie was composing the *Lais*, he was described by his family's chronicler as a young man of action; he was never still; idleness was his enemy; there were battles and tournaments to fight; and honor and fame to win. These were the attributes of the chivalric knight that we find readily described in the chivalric poetry of the period (Keen 19-21). The subject matter of love plays not as large a role in these chivalric tales of action; if love does have some role to play, it becomes the lens under which the inner spirituality of the knight is examined and usually is in a form of testing the knight's fortitude as we find in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Unlike chivalric poetry, the adventure in the *Lais* is steeped in the emotion of love and the problems that arise for both lovers when engaged in such emotional turmoil. The heroes in these *Lais* are courtly men, described in settings of contemplation and leisure, such as Guigemar, or chivalric men of action, such as Eliduc. The lai of *Eliduc* is the only one of the twelve *Lais* that describes war in any specific detail, with Eliduc emerging victorious and at the service of a king. Aside from this lai, the knights and ladies are involved in more domestic settings, courtly affairs and intrigues.

The *Lais* also exhibit very little of the *mervellieux*, the marvels, which we find many times more prominent in the chivalric poetry than love. The *merveilleux* are employed by Marie as a literary mechanism that highlights the uncontrollable urges of natural love. It is above all political institutions of society and appears the mystery that cannot be adequately explained through logic or rhetorical tropes. In this instance, Marie is the omniscient narrator having the

power to move the characters from one unlikely place or event to another. Her use of the *merveilleux* is the power that brings the lovers together. In this way, the poet replaces the Divine entity that resolves the ills and metes out justice. As Ewert points out that

the *merveilleux* helps Marie to respond to the structural needs of the story, to the emotional needs of her protagonists and perhaps to her own feeling, at the time of writing these poems, that, when things were going badly wrong in the life of a deserving individual, society as it was constituted was incapable of offering solutions” (xxx).

Marie’s solution to this problem is to believe that “such human problems could after all be discovered within the framework of normal social activities, provided that effort and ingenuity on the part of the lovers were coupled with loyalty and commitment” (xxxi); therefore, in the *Lais*, love becomes the unpredictable and the uncontrollable threat that the courtly knight must face and overcome in some way. The adventure of chivalric poetry is transformed in the *Lais* as a journey through the emotion of love and its political consequences on society at large.

The courtly love lyrics, on the other hand, take these chivalric elements of the knight and examine the subject matter of love through the political lens of courtly culture. In the *Lais*, as in the courtly love lyrics, the knight is rarely far from home and his focus is bent more on the personal emotions he experiences toward his lady-love than on any form of self-realization. In the *Lais*, the hero-knight is a man of contemplation rather than of action, as the character Sir Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* demonstrates. It is upon the fabric of the courtly love lyric that Marie stretches her own story. Longer than the lyric but shorter than chivalric poetry, the *Lais* heightens the audience’s attention to the drama of love through the economy of

words and familiar domestic settings, and, more importantly, the cause and the effects of that love on the stability of feudal society.

As Cheyette argues, we must place the language of eroticism that we find in the *Lais*, as he found in the courtly love lyrics and elsewhere, in its proper historical context. The language of eroticism was a language that permeated all facets of public life. Cheyette effectively argues that the language of love is found as easily in an oath to a lord concerning a land conveyance as in the courtly love lyrics. The following is an example of such an oath: “I, Peter of Nébian, wishing to love you, William lord of Montpeillier, with true love, to serve you faithfully and to dwell in your grace and protection....” (233). This formal language of love and fidelity belonged to the regular rites of the noble and aristocratic class. It conveys a sense of continuity and political stability that both men could rely upon. For Peter of Nébian, it meant protection from his own enemies by someone more powerful than himself; and, for William, lord of Montpellier, it meant more resources in goods and manpower, thereby strengthening his own ability to influence the region that belonged to him and beyond.

On account of her attachment to a royal court, Marie was certainly aware of the language that formed these kinds of oaths of fidelity. And since she was addressing a highly refined and sophisticated audience, we can assume that love and fidelity will become major themes that are examined in the *Lais*. By producing in the *Lais* a backdrop formed out of a cultural ethos that heavily relied upon the strict adherence to laws and hierarchy, Marie considers the unpredictability of love and its ability to threaten the stability of such a cultural structure.

In the *Lais*, Marie argues that the unpredictability and uncontrollable nature of love can happen anywhere, at any time, and to anyone. Thus, love is presented as a “more spontaneous phenomenon than the love we frequently find in [other] romances” (Burgess and Busby 27). In

the lai of *Equitan*, Marie describes the uncontrollable urges of love in this way: “Such is the nature of love that no one under its sway can retain command over reason” (56). The adventures, unlike those described in chivalric poetry, are centered on the two lovers in a very tightly constructed, everyday world. Scenes of love and subsequent conflict are acted out in everyday places, such as a tower, a garden, or at a royal court. The *Lais* are not so elaborate in their description of events; in fact, they are all constructed around a “critical event or brief sequence of events” (26) with little or no poetic digressions. Very little adventure is connected with love and the outside world. When Marie allows the audience glimpses of the outside world, it is only because the love between the hero and heroine was stripped away and their transgression exposed to their peers.

The *Lais*’ focus on the incompatibility of love with knighthood makes them a handbook on the emotional dangers of love leading to the destruction of the feudal system. Violations of several important knightly virtues are discussed in their relation to love: breaches of fealty and oaths in particular. The knight’s faithfulness represents the foundation upon which chivalry was created. Without fealty and oaths, the noble class would lose its political power over society. Acting upon natural love raises all sorts of problems and obstacles to a system that has no mechanism in place for such a natural response and inclination between a man and a woman. Therefore, the love described in the *Lais* is not about the “glorification of love, and thus of woman, as a means of salvation” (Bloch; *Medieval Mysogyny* 177). Instead, love is revealed as a destabilizing force, not only to the male’s but also to the female’s political position in Anglo-Norman society. The *Lais* make it clear that the spontaneous emotion of love also threatens the heroine’s political standing and places her in a terrible compromising position between her loyalty to her family and to her lover or husband.

In the *Lais*, we enter into the Anglo-Norman world of knighthood that has preoccupied itself with its worldly status and affairs, its concerns for its political position in society, and its obligations and duties toward society. It is important to note that the Anglo-Norman warrior considered masculinity as perpetually intertwined with his political position in feudal society. In other words, for the Anglo-Norman, “bodies did matter” (van Eickels 97). The political success of an Anglo-Norman knight rested most importantly on his “physical integrity, sexual dominance and political power” (98). For a knight, the loss of manhood was inextricably bound up with the loss of social and political standing in his society. An example of this kind of knightly ethos is the character of the eunuch priest in the lai of *Guigemar*. This figure, which has the task of keeping the wife imprisoned in his lord’s tower, is described as having

les plus bas membres out perduz:
 autrement ne fust pas creüz (257-8)
 [lost his nether member
 or he wouldn’t have been trusted]

In this instance, the emasculated condition of the priest represents the Anglo-Norman belief that Church authority lacked those masculine qualities necessary for power and control over society. Therefore, the jealous husband of the lady had given her over to a marginalized and ineffectual representative of the religious class in his society.

Henry II is the epitome of Anglo-Norman masculinity. Though he was not considered a handsome man (Ashley 127), his unyielding energy when dealing with both his allies and his foes helped to forge an empire that extended from Ireland to Wales and well into France. After his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1151 CE, more land in France was under his control than under King Louis VII (126). Within a space of four years, from 1154 to 1158 CE, Henry

strengthened his political position as rightful ruler of England with the support of Pope Adrian IV; he brought leaders of the previous civil war to heel by destroying many of their strongholds; he invaded Wales and, later, brought Ireland under his control. Henry also negotiated with the king of Scotland for the return of Northumbria and Cumbria into his control.

During his marriage to Eleanor, Henry managed to father eight legitimate children and twelve illegitimate ones with five different women (125). During his reign, Henry was also busy negotiating political marriages all across Europe. The marriage between his son Henry and Margaret, the daughter of King Louis VII, is an exemplum of customary political marriage arrangements among the various royal courts. Both of these children were no more than two years old when they were pledged to one another (129). In the end, the political machinations of his wife and sons, Henry, John, and Richard, would be his downfall. He died at the age of fifty-six, shortly after a peace treaty with the French King Phillippe. Counted among the political and military supporters of his arch-rival were both his sons Richard and John.

As this short overview of Henry's political life illustrates, in order to be highly successful and politically powerful in Anglo-Norman society, the knight was keenly aware that the display of physical strength and a fully functioning male body brought about "social respect and political authority" (van Eickels 97). These "ideological representations of deeper cultural currents determined by material forces and interests" (Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny* 177) are in direct opposition to the Church's doctrines of the ideal of ascetic perfection. With the Anglo-Norman ethos of masculinity in mind, it becomes difficult to interpret the courtly eroticism found in the *Lais* to be "the most radical expression of the theology of renunciation as articulated by the church fathers" (176). When the Anglo-Norman knight was wholly preoccupied with the strength of his masculinity and prowess, we are hard-pressed to understand Anglo-Norman

society as it is shaped in the *Lais* without this knowledge. Given the theopolitical backdrop of the period, we should consider interpreting the *lais* and their lack of sacred subject matter in favor of the ruling class's preoccupation with their political ambitions and cultural anxieties.

The three basic qualities of Anglo-Norman masculinity—physical integrity, sexual dominance, and political power, or even the lack of these qualities—form the male characters in the *Lais*. These masculine qualities demonstrate the effects of love experienced by the hero for the heroine and vice versa. Physical integrity is bound up in each *lai* with the descriptions and actions of the knight. There are very few *lais*, if any, in which the hero is not described with positive attributes. In the Anglo-Norman culture to have physical integrity meant to be both physically sound and visually appealing. Even Bisclavret, who turns into a werewolf and hunts for his food in the forest, is described as handsome. Consequently, the *Lais*' heroes are described consistently in the superlative, such as *grant* or *plus bel* or *grant beauté*. The knight's physical integrity is also described in terms of action. In the *lai* of *Milun*, the hero's son is easily able to unseat him during competition (*Milun* 415-521). In the instance of this chance encounter between Milun and his son, there is the cultural understanding that physical integrity belongs to youth and those leading physically challenging lives. Every knight-hero who travels to other countries, seeking fame and fortune, competing in tournaments, or hunting, is described with perfect beauty and physical prowess.

By contrast, all male characters who have reached old age, or leading very sedentary lives, are described as jealous and overbearing, both of which are signs of weakness and insecurity. One example of this weak character is the old lord in the *lai* of *Guigemar*, who locked up his wife in a tower. He is described in the following manner: “gelus esteit a desmesure”

(*Guigemar* 213) [he was extremely jealous]. Following the description of the old lord as an excessively jealous man is the truism about old age and its lack of physical integrity:

Ke tut li veil seient gelus—

Mult hiet chascun kē il seit cous—

Tels [est] de eage le traspas. (*Guigemar* 215-7)

[All old folk are jealous;

every one of them hates the thought of being cuckolded,

such is the perversity of age]

Time, then, becomes the enemy of the Anglo-Norman knight. With time, the aging process of the body establishes a weak link in the chain mail of dominant masculinity in Anglo-Norman society. Without physical integrity, the knight struggles to maintain his political standing, forming a danger to himself and those who depend on him for stability and security in their livelihood. Primogeniture may have evolved as one solution to this problem. It assures political stability by producing a system of inheritance from the aging generation to the stronger one. The lais of *Milun* and *Yonec* both explore primogeniture in this form of assurance. In both instances, the hero-knight's physical integrity is symbolically transferred from himself to his son. At the end of the lai of *Milun*, the son holds the political power to grant the approval of a reunion between his father, Milun, and his mother. In *Yonec*, the son avenges his father's death by decapitating his step-father with his father's sword. In this instance the sword symbolizes the transfer of his father's knightly strength to Yonec. In this way, his father's physical integrity, sexual dominance, and political power aided him in destroying a bastardized lineage to which he had been wrongfully attached since birth. The actual beheading reinforces the attitude of strength

and power by the young and the demand for their rightful place in the political arena of Anglo-Norman society.

The heroines in the *Lais* are drawn only to these men of action and also possess physical integrity. Similar to the heroes, the heroines are described in superlatives of beauty and refinement. In the *lais* of *Guigemar*, *Equitan*, and *Lanval*, for example, the heroine is described each time as “bele.” Even if her beauty was not described, certain facial attributes continue to emphasize the heroine as the epitome of beauty. In these cases, the attention of the audience is drawn to the heroine’s face or facial features, such as sparkling eyes or a fine mouth. The heroine’s behavior is also associated with the physical integrity and sexual prowess of the hero: In *Guigemar*, the shyness of the lady matches the sexual inexperience of the hero; In *Equitan*, the king’s sexual and mature sophistication matches the lady’s sophisticated knowledge of court intrigues that lead them both to plot murder; In *Lanval*, the hero’s mercenary status at King Arthur’s court matches his lady’s alien existence outside of that courtly sphere; and, in *Bisclavret*, the hero’s dark secret of being a werewolf is matched by her own dark secrecy to steal his clothing that kept him in a perpetual bestial state and be rid of him in order to marry another knight.

Where there is physical integrity, there is also sexual dominance. A knight who possesses a sound body is, of course, sexually active. Sexual dominance ensured the continuation of the male line and, in theory, created stability for those under his rule and protection. In the *Lais*, Marie raises the rhetorical question as to whether or not love weakened the knight in both body and mind. When love enters into the relationship, in that moment of sexual awareness between the lovers, the physical integrity of the male deteriorates. In many of the *Lais*, the hero is initially described at the height of his physical and sexual prowess: He is beloved by all under his

protection; he is admired and feared by his enemies; he is generous with his wealth. The hero demonstrates publicly his physical integrity through competing in tournaments, hiring himself out as a mercenary, and participating in hunts. This kind of hero is represented in the *lais* of *Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Eliduc*, *Lanval*, *Bisclavret*, to name a few. In these opening scenes, love is not yet an encumbrance. It is not thought of by the hero, but, when love strikes, a kind of *de casibus* occurs, a fall from greatness. Suddenly, the knight's world shrinks from the larger social picture down to his own physical state and condition. In many cases, the hero experiences sleepless nights, shortness of breath, sorrow, pain, and has difficulty maintaining his sanity.

In the case of *Guigemar*, the hero is struck twice, once by his own arrow into his body and then symbolically into his heart. As a coming-of-age story, this *Lai* centers on the necessity of the hero to experience sexual awakening before becoming capable of experiencing the emotion of love. When the arrow strikes the youth during the hunt, he experiences a kind of emasculating affect. The moment he is wounded, *Guigemar* loses all ability to maintain control of his body and his horse as the arrow topples him to the ground. In this way, sexual awakening becomes a threat not only to his manhood, but also to his knighthood. Without two strong thighs, it is difficult for a knight to maintain his advantage above the battleground, for example. With such a wound he can easily wind up falling deep into the middle of a bloody fray. The wounding of *Guigemar*'s thigh is a metaphor for such a threat to his physical integrity as a knight. That the wound can be cured only by a woman also poses a threat to his physical integrity. It is revealing how sexual awareness becomes the weakening of his physical integrity. Aware of his weakness, *Guigemar* hides the wound from his comrades and leaves his own realm for parts unknown in search of the cure.

This kind of secrecy illustrates the insecurities felt by the ruling class when there appears any visible sign of weakening in the armor of a knight's masculinity. The moment Guigemar's physical integrity is compromised, the hero experiences changes in his vassals' attitudes toward him, especially when he refuses to listen to them concerning matters of public policy, such as marriage. Love not only damaged the physical integrity of his body, but also his mind. Without his lady love, Guigemar's refusal to marry in order to satisfy the demands of his vassals has effectively placed his realm in jeopardy. Emotion overrules reason when Guigemar lays siege to his enemy's castle and the surrounding town in order to rescue his lady from his enemy's grasp. But, Guigemar does not commit war on his own; he must enlist the help of his enemy's adversary, and between them both

Que tuz les affamt dedenz.

Le e chastel ad destruit e pris

E le seignur dedenz ocis. (*Guigemar* 878-80)

[he was able to starve everyone inside.

He captured and destroyed the castle,

killed its lord]

For the uncontrollable emotion of love, Guigemar effectively shifted the balance of power in that region. Up until that time, Marieduc was capable of defending his castle, but love was also his downfall in that he had refused to recognize the claims of one nobleman for the lady. For that, he faced severe retribution by Guigemar.

In this lai, the outcome of experiencing love and acting upon it caused tremendous devastation to the feudal system in that it effectively brought down a ruler, destroyed a town filled with men, women, and children, and though the lai remains silent on the aftermath of such

a siege, the audience may consider how easily civil war is set into motion in such an unstable region, producing severe political aftershocks to the surrounding areas. At the end of this lai, Marie tells her audience that

A grant joie s'amie en meine;

Ore ad trespassee sa peine. (881-2)

[Guigemar led away his mistress with great rejoicing;

all his pain was now at an end]

One might ask if Marie is posing a rhetorical question to her audience with these verse lines—whether there should be great rejoicing and whether the pain is truly gone: after all, Guigemar is riding off into the sunset with his lady-love, leaving death and destruction behind him.

In a world tightly bound up in the oath of fidelity, in which the language of love forms the foundation upon which the public oath is administered, we should consider the possibility that each lai explores the repercussions of these oaths when the language of love translates itself into the emotion of love. In the Anglo-Norman world, the oath of fidelity created a community. It created a political bond not only between the oath giver and the oath receiver, but also between all those who were attached to their respective households. These formations of communities were imperative in the Anglo-Norman world because “control of territory and success in warfare depended on their stability” (Cheyette 197). Moreover, these oaths were taken seriously because vassals not only swore themselves loyal in name, but “the oath taker names both himself and the person to whom he swears his faith by the wombs that gave them life” (189). In this way, the vassal swore his allegiance through the surety of his body, serving it up as protection for the body of his lord against his enemies. Swearing an oath of fealty instantly made the vassal a knight and brought publicly forward the surety of his name, his body, his lineage, his household,

his wealth, and certainly his physical integrity. Every aspect of his temporal being is served up to his lord. His soul or salvation of his soul is neither mentioned nor given as part of his surety.

The oath of fidelity has been complicated in the lai of *Guigemar* when the emotion of love is added to the language of love. Suddenly, the oath that the hero had sworn to his father and his own liege lord was forgotten. In fact, the emotion effectively stripped him of his identity. The young hero fell so into love “tut ad sun païis ublië” (*Guigemar* 382) [that he forgot his homeland]. Love struck Guigemar so thoroughly that it severed him from his own community and diminished his political standing within that community. Now in the grip of love, Guigemar forgets who he is, where he came from, and all those who depended upon him for security and stability. His vassals are left without a leader to fend for themselves. For the experience of love, Guigemar had abandoned his vassals and his knightly profession. In many ways this lai becomes the exemplum of the other lais in that the emotion of love when acted upon becomes the subversive threat to the stability of the feudal community. His oath of fidelity to the lady becomes a subversive act, done in secret, taking only their individuality into account and not their political standing within their respective communities. Since the lovers are placing their individuality above their political standing, the oath of fidelity toward each other places no consideration on the others who have relied on them for security and stability. In this way, the legality of this oath of love is called into question. If one acts upon such a subversive oath of love, what are the repercussions? In the case of Guigemar, the consequences are damaging. In the end, an entire community is destroyed: the king, his people, and along with them, their history. On account of the emotion of love such wholesale destruction was exercised, and a piece of the community was cut out, thereby effectively diminishing the integrity of its culture.

Are there instances in the *Lais* in which there is a positive outcome to the theme of love?

There are two *lais* in which Marie explores the possibility of love as a stabilizing rather than as a destructive force within the feudal community: *Le Fresne* and *Eliduc*. In each of these *lais*, the nobleman marries his true love without any detrimental effects on the feudal community or themselves. This satisfying conclusion is brought about in each case when the noblewoman's actions are designed with the political good of the community in mind. Marie describes this kind of political good as "leal trover" (Guigemar 493) [loyal love]. Specifically, she states that

Ki un en peot leal trover,
Mut le deit servir e amer
[E] estre a sun comandement. (*Guigemar* 493-5)
[If you can find a loyal love,
you should love and serve it faithfully,
be at its command.]

The emphasis on loyalty recalls for the audience the oaths of fidelity between the oath giver and the oath receiver. In these two *lais* we learn that love cannot be disconnected from the political attitude of loyalty: to love meant to be loyal, not only to the individual, but to the individual's political standing in society. The *lai* of *Le Fresne* is the story of a noble daughter, a twin, who is abandoned at childbirth in order to save her mother's honor. LeFresne grew up in the shadows of an abbey, raised like a niece to the abbess. Under her the tutelage, Le Fresne grew into a refined and educated young woman who caught the eye of a local young nobleman. As in all the *lais*, the illicit affair is kept secret until the young nobleman proposes that Le Fresne become his mistress. She consents, and they live happily, and very publicly, together until the vassals of the young nobleman pressure him to marry. Unlike Guigemar, this nobleman agrees with this request of his

vassals, and Le Fresne readily agrees with his decision without comment. In this lai, there is no sadness, no dissatisfaction with one's lot in life; but a woman who calmly and collectedly performs her duties as mistress until his marriage will make her obsolete in his household. In a twist of fate, the young woman that the nobleman must marry is Le Fresne's twin sister. In the end, Le Fresne's true identity is revealed and only then do the two lovers marry. The reward of marriage to the man she loves comes about because she readily understood her duty and her political position in relation to the young nobleman as much as he understood his duty to his vassals. In either case, both felt love for each other, but the love was tempered by their awareness of their station in society—he a knight and she a mistress. The outcome of this lai never reaches the devastating effects found in the lai of *Guigemar*, in which the lovers neither recognized nor acknowledged in any way their political position within their respective communities.

Understanding their political position in society enabled Le Fresne's father to publicly transfer his rights of her to the young nobleman, thereby sealing a legal bond between his household and the household of the young nobleman. In this lai, peace is the outcome, rather than destruction, because all the players in this scenario of love knew and understood the political underpinning of "leal trover."

In the lai of *Eliduc*, we find similar attitudes toward "leal trover," but under different circumstances. In this lai, Eliduc is already married. The hero voluntarily exiles himself from his homeland because he is charged, unfoundedly, with disloyalty to his king. By removing himself from the political sphere of his community, Eliduc assures the safety of his wife and his people. As a mercenary, Eliduc attaches himself to the household of another king in a distant country. There, he meets his true love. The longest of the *Lais*, its narrative space is used to explore the

psychological effects of the political dilemma that a knight experiences when confronted with his oath of fidelity and his feelings of love. The dilemma is centered on loyalty, and in that, Eliduc becomes torn:

Tut est murnes e trespensez,

Pur la bele est en esfrei,

La fille sun seignur le rei,

.....

Mut par se tient a entrepris

Que tant ad este al pais,

Que ne l'ad veue sovent

Quant ceo ot dit, si se repent:

De sa femme li remembra

E cum il li asseura

Que bone fei li portereit

E leaument se cuntendreit (*Eliduc* 314-2)

[He was gloomy and worried,

concerned about the lovely girl,

the daughter of his lord, the king,

.....

He thought it unfair

that he'd been so long in the country

and had not seen her often.

But when he said that, he was sorry;

for he remembered his wife
 and how he had assured her
 that he'd be faithful to her,
 that he'd conduct himself loyally]

The narrative progression of the poem reveals how heavily the pressure of disloyalty weighs on Eliduc and his struggles between the political honor owed to his wife and his personal feelings for the girl:

Mut se teneit a maubaili;
 Kar a sa femme aveit premis,
 Ainz qu'il turnast de sun pais,
 Que il n'amereit si li nun. (*Eliduc* 462-5)
 [but he considered himself unfortunate
 because, before he left his own country,
 he had promised his wife
 that he'd love no one but her]

Similar to the hero in the lai of *Guigemar*, Eliduc succumbs to his passion for the young girl and contrives the means to bring her back to his homeland. Only during the voyage does the young girl finally discover that Eliduc was already married. The news causes her such grief that she faints into a kind of coma, plunging Eliduc into great pain and grief. Eventually, his wife finds the young girl preserved in a mausoleum. When she sees her lying like death, the wife's grief for the young girl matches that of Eliduc. But, by a marvel, the girl is revived through the use of a magic flower. The love the young girl harbors for Eliduc is revealed to the wife who rejoices in the young girl's ardent protestations. The wife agrees to take the veil (go into a cloister) in order

for Eliduc to be free and marry his love. In both instances of *Le Fresne* and *Eliduc*, we come to understand that “leal trover” means selfless sacrifice and quiet duty, two most important characteristics of proper noble behavior that describes less Christian duty and more the preservation of the community. In both cases, sacrifice and duty led to very material rewards for the women. Le Fresne marries, becoming a leader of a secular community, while Eliduc’s wife becomes an abbess, a leader of a cloistered community.

As part of her rhetorical inquiry into the emotion of love and its political consequences, Marie also explores love and retribution against the lovers themselves. In two lais, love is the harbinger of punishment: *Equitan* and *Bisclavret*. Both cases remind the audience that the stability of a community rests upon the physical integrity, sexual dominance, and political power of its nobility. These qualities of knightly masculinity are threatened in these two lais and retribution against noble masculinity is swift and merciless. The lai of *Bisclavret* is the story of a nobleman who becomes a werewolf. When he is in his bestial state, he disappears for three days, hiding and hunting for his food in the forest. As both man and beast, Bisclavret symbolizes the nobleman who is made up of both natural and political conditions. When Bisclavret is naked, he is part of the law of nature; when he is dressed in his noble clothing, he becomes subject to his political standing and the laws that govern his community. Each time Bisclavret disappears the wife becomes harried and agitated. Finally, she presses him to reveal his reasons for the sudden disappearances. When Bisclavret resists telling her, she calls upon their love as both surety of her fidelity and incentive for breaking his secrecy. Bisclavret eventually gives in to his wife’s pleas and reveals his secret. His wife reacts almost violently against this revelation and immediately plots a way to be rid of her husband. She decides to steal his clothes and with her body as surety, she implores a neighboring knight who loved her from afar to take her as a mistress.

With his clothing stolen, Bisclavret is perpetually locked into his natural state. Stripped of his political connections and no security for his physical safety, he is without name and property, two important attributes for any successful Anglo-Norman nobleman. When Marie tells a truism to her audience about the nature of man, “Ceste beste ad entente e sen” (*Bisclavret* 157) [This beast is rational—he has a mind], she is elevating intellect over instinct and experience. The cultural attitude that education prevails over experience and that political laws form stability creates an environment in which justice best serves the well-being of the community. This lesson is learned when Bisclavret finds favor with the king and remains as a loyal companion in his royal court. As a beast, Bisclavret exhibits at the king’s court intelligence and unswerving loyalty—until he sees his wife. With swift and powerful execution, Bisclavret bites the nose off of his wife’s face.

In the lai of *Bisclavret*, Marie builds a scenario on the oath of fidelity and its betrayal. In Anglo-Norman culture, betraying one’s fealty, man or woman, constituted treason, and the penalties for such an act were severe. The stealing of the hero’s clothes forms this betrayal; it becomes a metaphor for the stealing of one’s political position in feudal society through the breaking of one’s oath. By hiding those emblems of political power, the wife threatens Bisclavret’s knightly standing in the community, and by giving away her body to another man, she effectively transfers her husband’s political rights to another nobleman. In this instance, Bisclavret’s wife uses her body as political surety, not only to betray her husband, but also everyone in her husband’s domain.

Given her political betrayal, Bisclavret finds himself justified in disfiguring his wife’s face, a punishment that was standard practice in Anglo-Norman society for infidelity. According to the canonical laws at this time period, a wife who betrayed her husband was marked as an

adulterer, and the penalty for such a sin was the slitting of the nose. The *Ecloga* of Pope Leo III expressly formulates punishments for a variety of sexual transgressions, including adultery and incest. In each of these cases the slitting of the nose was considered the appropriate punishment. The act of treason conducted by a nobleman brought about castration as a punishment for such a crime. In Anglo-Norman society, castration of the male genitals was considered the equivalency to a death sentence. Since male genitalia were regarded as part of a nobleman's physical integrity and bound up with his political position, they became a legitimate point of attack if a ruler felt betrayed. This form of punishment was exercised in order to reestablish authority and order. Therefore, castration became a public acknowledgement of a knight's "physical and political impotence" (van Eickels 97). Thus, in the lai of *Guigemar*, for example, love emasculates. By falling under the spell of love, the moment the hero forgets his position in society, he also loses his physical integrity. Love is a warning in the *Lais* to not allow emotion to rule over reason. It will make a knight forget his community, his vassals, his lineage and the history that made him a nobleman. In the lai of *Lanval*, when Queen Guinevere slanders Lanval's masculinity, he reacts nearly violently against her, making loudly his protestations that he did have a female lover.

The threat against masculinity also plays a large role in the lai of *Equitan*. This is the story of a king, who has reached the zenith of his power as he concentrates more on courtly life and the sport of hunting. During one of his frequent hunting trips, the king falls in love with his seneschal's wife, who eventually returns his love. In this lai, Marie places a great deal of emphasis on the vagrancies of love in this way:

Cil met[ent] lur vie en nu[n]cure

Que d'amur n'unt sen e mesure;

Tels est la mesure de amer

Que nul n'i deit resun garder. (*Equitan* 17-20)

[Whoever indulges in love without sense or moderation
recklessly endangers his life;
such is the nature of love
that no one involved with it can keep his head.]

Losing all sense and reason, the king and his lady-love plan the murder of her husband. Together they concoct a plot to kill the seneschal in a tub of boiling water. When the day arrives for the murderous deed, the two lovers dally together in the seneschal's bed. When they are found out by the seneschal, the king is startled and without thinking jumps into the tub and dies. The seneschal grabs his wife and dumps her unceremoniously after the king into the hot tub as well, and she also meets her fatal end. That this lai is overtly moralizing has been commented on elsewhere (Hanning 69); but we can also consider that the lai is not solely about "illicit love and its punishment" (69). Noblemen and mistresses were common, as the earlier explanation of Henry II's life attests. The problem that arises in this lai is that the lovers are discovered by the seneschal in his own bed. With this image of the lovers in another man's bed, Marie once again reinforces the Anglo-Norman attitude that the natural and political make-up of the knight are tightly intertwined. The seneschal does not bring down retribution upon the lovers because they are in love with each other, but because the king dared to exercise his physical and political prowess within the seneschal's own political territory.

The importance of the feudal relationship between lord and vassal cannot be underestimated as this scene in the lai of *Equitan* attests. With regard to the political dynamic between lord and vassal, Janet Coleman explains that the benefits and obligations were not one-sided. Instead, the feudal relationship was "a contract of life-long mutual consent between a lord

and vassal,” which meant that the “superior overlord could not require unconditional subservience from his *fideles*.” Because of the contractual nature of this relationship, “any reneging on either side had consequences, and hence resistance was legitimate if fidelity on either side was breached” (16). As early as the Carolingian period, this mutual relationship between lord and vassal was interpreted to include respect and privacy for members of each party’s household. Thus, if a lord “committed adultery with the wife of his vassal” (18), the vassal was within his rights to abandon his lord if he was able to prove that such a crime had been committed (17). The rage felt by the seneschal in the lai of *Equitan* is therefore unsurprising, and the death of Equitan and the seneschal’s wife become the reminder to the Anglo-Norman audience of what happens when fidelity is broken.

Since the male and female bodies are highly politically charged in the *Lais*, it stands to reason that the physical places in which these trysts occur are perceived by the courtly audience in the same way. As we are dealing with the matters of love, the bed becomes one of the most used literary motifs in the *Lais*. Of the twelve *Lais*, the motif of the bed appears in *Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Bisclavret*, *Lanval*, *Le Fresne*, *Laustic*, and *Yonec*. This place of sexual passion between the lovers represents the symbol of the knight’s physical integrity and sexual dominance. With the exception of the lai of *Bisclavret*, this literary motif serves as the place where a variety of forms of sexual activity manifests the Anglo-Norman attitude toward masculinity as it is coupled with political power. In *Guigemar* and *Lanval*, the bed serves as the place in which the heroes become sexually aware of their own masculinity; in *Equitan*, it becomes a place of betrayal in that the king exercises his sexual prowess in territory belonging to his vassal and not in his own; in *Le Fresne* and *Laustic*, the bed becomes the symbol for political unions in an attempt to form stable relations between the parties involved; in *Bisclavret*, it becomes the symbol of matured

masculinity in which the man knows both the bestial and civilized parts of himself; in *Yonec*, the bed becomes the place where love nourishes and strengthens the body, and, by extension, becomes a place of perfect fertility, in that the lady-love will give birth to the hero's son.

In noble circles the bed is a very public place around which the security of the entire community depends. The consummation of a marriage is visibly witnessed to ensure that the contract between the two communities becomes legally binding, along with the hopes that such a coupling will bring about children, especially a son. As R. Howard Bloch rightly points out, the "marriage represented a treaty . . . to be negotiated between families" (*Medieval Misogyny* 169), and these negotiations were carefully overseen by the legally representative members of each household involved. In the Anglo-Norman world of oath giving and oath taking, it was important to ensure that the proper marital ties brought about sought-after political power and stability. With these marriages came "a dowry, as security, or as a peace offering along with the towers and stone walls its members protected" (Cheyette 195). Visual verification of the marital contract was, therefore, imperative. In the lai of *Le Fresne*, the young heroine prepares the bed for her lover and his bride-to-be because she is aware of and accepts the political qualities of the bed:

Kar l'erceveke[s] i esteit

Pur eus beneistre and enseiner;

Kar c"afereit a sun mestier. (*Le Fresne* 405-8)

[The archbishop would be coming there

To bless the newlyweds in bed.

That was part of his duty]

In the lais of *Guigemar* and *Equitan*, on the other hand, access to the bed was restricted to outsiders. In the lady's chamber in which Guigemar was to recover from his wound, the bed was

hidden by a wide curtain, and King Equitan routinely forbade his seneschal from entering his bedchamber. By hiding the bed in these *Lais*, Marie shrouds the symbol of political security and stability in a cloak of mistrust and violence. In each lai in which the bed is not revealed in its public qualities, death is not far behind, either for the community, or for one or both of the lovers. To have the bed shrouded in such secrecy was nearly tantamount to treason because it impugned the rights of military, political, and social ties by the parties involved. Marie's appreciation of the dangers of secrecy is clear when she opens the prologue proper to the *Lais* with a proclamation that knowledge cannot remain hidden, but should be openly demonstrated: "Ne s'en deit taisir ne celer / ainz se deit volunters mustrer" (Prologue 3-4).

In these lais, in which the bed is symbolic of the political obligations and responsibilities of the ruling class, the lovers are attempting to control their own fate. Ignoring that standard customs and traditions, or their political position in feudal society, the lovers seek out, select, and accept each other without any outside influences. In this way, these lovers are ignoring the cultural fact that "oaths of fidelity were thus far more than individual contracts or even the markers of political and generational coming of age. They created, repaired, and remade communities" (Cheyette 195). In the lai of *Guigemar*, for example, after the two lovers meet and form an alliance with each other, the enclosure in which the lady is imprisoned becomes a place of escape. Suddenly, a place that had been felt as an oppressive prison for the lady is opened up with all kinds of activity of "entering and exiting, and of opening and closing" (Calabrese 83). But, the escape for the lady is deceiving in that she finds herself immediately bound up in the grasp of another king. Having left her political standing and her oath of fidelity behind with her husband, she becomes a kind of Greek Helena for which two valiant warriors will fight. In this instance, violence shapes the political tides in that region rather than diplomacy and negotiations.

Given the tragic outcome, it remains a question whether or not the lai of *Guigemar* “is a clear triumph for love and a defeat of the dogs of envy and espionage” (Calabrese 86). After all, at the end of the lai, the lady is still married to her husband.

The motif of the tower also plays a prominent role in the lais where political power and masculinity are concerned. Customarily, the tower has been described as a phallic symbol, associating the male with his sexual dominance over the female. In these lais, the tower is also a symbolic representation of the masculine qualities of the male. As the community depended on a strong leader, the nobleman was aware of the constant political threats against his masculinity. The moment he was perceived as weak presented a clear danger against himself and his feudal community. As van Eickels explains:

Effeminacy was the most severe charge that Norman chroniclers had at hand to denigrate the image of a king, duke, count or people. It was incurred by men who did not live up to any one of the general accepted standards of masculinity: a duke could be called ‘unmaly’ if he granted his wife the freedom to send and receive messages instead of exercising full control over her correspondence with her father. (96)

Van Eickels explains further that a nobleman who opted for negotiating peace instead of fighting war or enlisted the aide of the Franks rather than rely on the strength of his own warriors would have been looked upon as effeminate (96). A clear example of this latter issue is found in the lai of *Guigemar* when the hero enlists the aide of Marieduc’s enemies in order to fight his war against the king. Such a cultural attitude makes it once again difficult to look at this lai in a positive rather than in a negative light. In the lai of *Yonec* masculine superiority brings about the deterioration of the lady’s beauty. As in the lai of *Guigemar*, the young lady is locked in a tower

and is unable to socialize with anyone in the community. Feeling isolated and alone, she encounters a marvel: a man who comes to her as a hawk. The lai ends in tragedy because the love affair is found out by the husband who took measures in killing the lover in his hawk-like state.

The tightly controlled environment in which the lady finds herself represents the masculine insecurities of the knightly class in their bid for physical integrity, sexual dominance, and political power. Marie takes these political qualities of knighthood and describes them through the motif of the tower, with its high walls, glossy marble stones, and near-impenetrable interior. Only when the hero appears in the story with these seemingly masculine qualities do the towers give up their female inhabitants. But the consequences of these releases are bound up with the secrecy that created the relationships between the lovers. Clandestine meetings appear not to be the hallmark of a noble knight. Secret places imbued with secret dealings bring about terrible disruptions to the community. By delving into these areas of love, masculinity and fidelity, the *Lais* offer the noble audience literary space in which to examine these highly political issues that shaped their material world. For scholars the theme of love found in the *Lais* has been traditionally perceived as positive love and that the actions of the lovers are justified because the lovers are “batt[ling] for control of both space and of secrecy, with love, and life itself, at stake” (Calabrese 92). Given the historical and political context in which the *Lais* were created, perhaps we should consider that the *Lais* are not about love, but the entire feudal system of oaths. As the *Lais* reveal, the feudal system of fidelity was a strong, organized one, but also a very rigid one that when not properly cultivated and nurtured easily collapsed into wars, failed diplomacies, failed marriages, and court intrigues. A couple of historical events from the royal Angevin/Norman family aptly illustrate the fragility of the oath of fidelity. In the 1140s Geoffrey

of Anjou failed to support the claim of his wife, Mathilda, to the throne of England, and King Stephen disinherited his own son to the right of the English throne in favor of Mathilda's son, Henry II. The "grant biens" that Marie wished to teach her courtly audience remains ambiguous. It is uncertain as to whether she is criticizing or uplifting the feudal system of loyalty.

Whatever the purpose, however, it is clear from the *Lais* that intense preoccupation with temporal concerns overrode the need for the discovery of the Christian ideal by the ruling class of Anglo-Norman society. Marie creates these *lais* with no view toward Church authority or its teachings. The centrality of the *Lais* on the ethos of the Anglo-Norman ruling class created a monolithic viewpoint in the narrative arc that her aristocratic audience readily recognized as their world. Geoffrey Chaucer, on the other hand, was a poet of a different social class from that of Marie de France. His position was farther removed from the royal court, giving him a wider view of society and life. Thus, *The Canterbury Tales* represents many more voices of society, both the secular and sacred. With such a wider narrative view on human activity, Chaucer offers his audience, for debate and contemplation, greater complexities of the theopolitical relationship between corporate and lay Christian identities than we find in the *Lais* of Marie de France.

CHAPTER 3
THE AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF CORPORATE IDENTITY
IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

Geoffrey Chaucer was born during a time when many social and political events brought a sense of deep crisis and uncertainty about one's Christian identity in fourteenth-century English society. The rising concerns for authority and order and the search for answers to them made the second half of the fourteenth century become a time when "there emerged a noticeable trend towards a confrontation with political reality, and in particular questions of power" (Canning 135). Likewise, *The Canterbury Tales* examines the theopolitics that shaped authority and order, reflecting the increasingly vernacular-literate populace's concerns about feudal authority in a climate of trade, commerce, and wide-spread urban development. The theopolitics concerning jurisdiction over Christian society at this time were shaped by some of the most devastating historical events in English history: the Hundred Years War and the Black Death. The impact of these events caused, in part, the second half of the fourteenth century to become "a different world from that which went before" (135). In response, Chaucer's artistic development of *The Canterbury Tales* made each tale become a "play world, where values are tested, new modes of thought and perception are tried out, and established ideas are transformed" (Rhodes 7).

Chaucer describes the various social and political uncertainties in *The Canterbury Tales* through the creation of an unusual variety of characters set in their social, economic and religious zeal and in the tales that each character tells. All of these are artistically interwoven in order to

produce a picture of English society that was going through some tough social and political growing pains. Corporate Christian identity, which had played a decisive role in the development of selfhood, became more rigorously challenged by the laity. This climate of intellectual skepticism by the laity, coupled with the political uncertainties of the present and the future, produced literary ambiguity in Chaucer's use of language in these tales. Thus, the poet offers his audience a literary venue in which to discuss and debate the moral and ethical issues of the time (Rhodes ix) as it relates to identity. As a result, *The Canterbury Tales* reveals a "keen sense of political realities and consequently of the needs for compromise, for ambiguity, and for deflection" (Aers and Staley 180). The questions of uncertainty and the confrontation of theopolitical change already began in the late thirteenth century when society was on the verge of collapsing under the weight of "greed, corruption, and rottenness" (Cantor 488) as each estate failed to reach any idealistic achievements. The literature of the period, such as *Roman de la Rose*, reflects this growing cynical disappointment in both secular and sacred powers (488).

For the following two hundred years, Europe suffered from economic depression (Mursell 160), wars, and natural disasters, such as the 'the little ice age' and the Black Death. The Church, agriculture, the banking industry, and trade were struggling against collapse from the devastation that famine and pestilence had wreaked upon the population. Traditional estimations of the death toll from the plague have been about one-fourth to one-third of Europe's population. In some areas, including England, villages and towns became veritable ghost towns. The Black Death was so swift and lethal that the epidemic in England caused six million people to perish within a year (Alexander 2). The surviving records of the English dioceses indicate that an estimated "45 percent of all parish priests" died and nearly half again of that percentage "fled in order to escape infection" (3). This high loss of life and displacement among the English

ecclesial authority became one of the major causes for the intellectual “brain-drain” of the Church. When reviewing the official records of the dioceses, it becomes clear that the surviving members of English Church authority were deeply alarmed by the high rate of loss of life in its administrative and clerical hierarchy. With the deaths of so many thousands of clergy, there came a deep concern for the lack of clerical performance of duties toward the laity: worship services, funerary rites, confessions, land management, crop production—the list is endless. The term “clerical vacancies” cannot truly describe the conditions that existed in England at this time. The term “clerical vacuum” describes with more accuracy the dangerous situation that was rapidly developing within the administrative and clerical systems of the English Church. Consequently, surviving bishops were conducting ordinations at breath-taking speed. As an example, John Gynewell, bishop of Lincoln, “held several massive ordinations in his stricken diocese, with its nearly 1900 parish churches.” Over the summer months of 1349, Gynewell “filled over 600 vacant benefices.” Within a year that number had been raised to 1,350 appointments in his diocese alone (Alexander 4). We can only imagine how difficult it must have been to make any attempt at appointing highly qualified clergy for these posts—a feat difficult even in the best of years prior to the fourteenth century.

These figures from the diocese of Lincoln are but a fraction of the spiritual vacuum the Black Death had caused in so many other areas of England. The response to this pestilence also brought about changes in the distribution of peasant labor, which experienced a “mobilization of manpower” on an “unprecedented scale” (Bennett 6) everywhere on the Isle. The placement, replacement, and displacement of the overall workforce and leadership positions in both the secular and sacred institutions are two major factors that caused the changing attitudes toward one’s position and identity in society. John Canning explains that along with these movements, a

“fundamental shift in political thought” occurred (135). In fact, the shift in intellectual developments of both political thought and education were so pervasive that the medieval world in the second half of the fourteenth century became wholly different from that in the previous ones: Chivalric sensibilities gave way to a more realistic view of government (135). As a result, the romance genre quickly lost its intellectual platform among writers and poets for didactic and rhetorical debate, giving rise to more realistic descriptions of setting and character in narratives that centered on contemporary life and not on life of the past.

Aside from the severe repercussions of the Black Death, the theopolitical climate of this time period suffered from other social and political events. The overall failure of the Crusades, the Avignon papacy (1305-1378 CE), the Great Schism (1378-1415 CE), and corruption within the Church hierarchy (perhaps caused by the hasty appointments to vacancies made by bishops) describe the overall weakening of the Church’s internal mechanisms for social order and authority. The rapid momentum in the development of nation states (136) and the conciliar movement to curb papal power placed further pressure on the political presence of the papal monarchy in secular affairs. In many instances, the pope found himself more and more in the ineffectual position of political pawn rather than spiritual leader, especially in the papal office’s relationship with France. By the fourteenth century, the strength and prestige of Church power had weakened. The consolidation of theopolitical power during the papacy of Pope Innocent III, who had instigated the largest Church reform since Pope Gregory the Great, had come to an end. The Church in its attempt to regain some political power in secular matters had not seen such effective reform as that of Innocent III at any subsequent ecumenical council meetings, until the period of the Reformation (Swanson 2-3).

The terrible fate of the Knights Templar in the early fourteenth century reveals the growing political power of the secular kings and their influence on the papacy. The Church's internal mechanisms continued to weaken under the constant pressure of the heretical movements, sowing seeds of distrust among the laity and exposing corruption in the Church's administration. Reaction to these changes in the Church did not go unnoticed by the contemporary chroniclers. Thomas Walsingham, a monk of the Benedictine Abbey of St. Albans, whose *Chronica Maiora* is the most valuable chronicle to survive from late medieval England, made a few derisive remarks concerning the clergy and the so-called heretical movements in the following manner:

All these troubles⁴¹ happened in various parts of England Many thought they had happened because of the slackness of the archbishop and the other diocesan bishops, especially over the following matter, which they should have done something about, as the faith and the stability of the Christian religion depended on it. They had known very well that their sons, John Wyclif and his followers, were behaving shamefully, preaching as dogma of the perverse and damnable doctrine of Berregarius [of Tours] about the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ As a result even important people in their dioceses were following this heresy. . . . (149)

These theopolitical tensions between the clergy and the laity gave the Church such a decidedly dark reputation that by the

⁴¹ *The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham*, 1376 -1422, trans. David Preest. Rochester, (Boydell Press, 2005). Meaning leaders, such as Wat Tyler, Jack Straw, John Kirby, and others of the Peasant Revolt "who went berserk at Mildenhall and Bury St. Edmunds." (148)

Late Middle Ages anywhere from 10 to 25 percent of the population of Western Europe had effectively separated themselves from the Roman Catholic Church; they stopped paying tithes and other dues for church services and set up counterchurches. (Cantor 502)

The intellectual “brain-drain” left the Church with little more than the poorly educated and, in some instances, highly corrupt clergy to perform clerical duties and services to the laity, giving rise to the production of a swirl of pastoral care books, such as John Mirk’s *Liber Festial*.

Written in the vernacular, these pastoral care books offered the less-educated clergy a solid foundation in Church-sanctioned theological discourse and a set of sermons that matched the standard liturgical year. Given these times of political troubles for the Church, it is not a surprise to discover a satirical view of the clergy in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Weary from wars, famine, plague, and Church politics, many fourteenth-century poets shifted their art away from adventures, the fanciful and chivalric sensibilities, to a literature that more closely resembled these pressing social and political issues and couched them in familiar and realistic settings. In fact, the fourteenth-century poetry’s “lack of interest in fighting . . . serves to distinguish the best poetry of this period in England both from the heroic poetry of the Anglo-Saxons and from Middle English minstrel romance” (Burrow 95). The shift from heroic subject matter toward a “civilian or ‘chamber’ quality” (95) also reflects the growing bourgeois culture’s urban tastes and sensibilities. Chaucer’s poetry focuses on this bourgeois daily life: its politics, education, business, and religion. Thus, the sophisticated treatment of theopolitics in *The Canterbury Tales* found ready appeal with a vernacular-literate audience searching for answers to philosophical questions that it did not have to ask prior to the Black Death, such as order, authority, and identity.

Chaucer belonged to the laity who were asking these philosophical questions. This was a segment of society that had traditionally sought ways for achieving as closely as possible a monastic sanctity without having to give up their active lay life. The very wealthy who owned land and property typically donated at least a portion of it to a local monastery in order to live out their aging lives in the relative comfort and security behind monastic walls. As forms of penance, the nobility and the merchant class sent their children to monasteries or convents in which they received an education and a chance for advancement in an ecclesial career. Other penances for their sins were the annual pilgrimages, the building of private chapels, cathedrals, or parish churches, and they made regular tithing entries into their double-entry account books.

In his *Chronica Maiora*, Thomas Walsingham describes an incident that provides an example of the laity's growing skepticism toward Church authority at this time. It involves the penance of a knight named Laurence of St. Martin for his desecration of the Eucharist in this way: Having received the Host during Communion, the knight inexplicably escapes the church, hurries home, divides up the host into small pieces and consumes them with a meal of succulent oysters, onions and wine. When discovered by the priest and the knight's household, the knight's answer to this perceived sacrilege reveals a growing secular sentiment toward a material value of sacred objects. The knight "stoutly asserted that any bread in his own house was as valuable as that which he was glad to have eaten in such a manner" (*Chronica* 118). According to Walsingham, it took repeated admonishments by the bishop and several visits to the knight by a flock of clergy before he finally recanted his actions. As a nobleman, the knight's penance involved another building project for the community. For his "change of heart and hearing his humble confession the bishop ordered him as part of his repentance to erect a stone cross in a public place in Salisbury, on which was to be carved the full story of his action in all its details"

(118). Not only was the knight to be publicly humbled for his sacrilegious actions, he was also to be reminded of it “every Friday of his life.” On this day, he was ordered to make pilgrimage to the cross barefoot, bareheaded, and clothed in only a “vest and pants” and “make full confession of all that he had done” (118). As a supporter of the orthodoxy proscribed by the Church, Walingsham places the blame of such lay skepticism at the door of John Wycliffe.

The theopolitical conflict between Wycliffe and the English Church described by Walingsham is an example of the growing skepticism against Church authority by the laity and their public reactions and responses to that authority. Understanding this skeptical climate made Chaucer a “shrewd social and political analyst” (Staley 181). His long-standing career in the royal government, his many and varied governmental posts provided the poet opportunities to interact frequently with the various members of his society: from the peasant class to nobility and royalty and to foreigners. Moreover, his social and political positions enabled him to debate and explore “his own relationship as a poet to the social body and to its most invisible embodiments of authority and order” (180). Thus, Chaucer created in *The Canterbury Tales* literary space within which to explore the varied and complex theological issues that had an impact on his society, and the response to these is “deeply embedded in the language of his poetry” (Rhodes 169).

“The Prioress’s Tale” is a remarkable example of Chaucer’s theological prowess in that not only does the poet employ ascetic language in the telling of the tale, but he also assigns ascetic action to the little clergeon. Even though there are no religious tales that specifically focus on fraternal asceticism in *The Canterbury Tales* (Benson 3), affective lay piety did include ways to live in the secular realm of society without fully rejecting the material comforts life had to offer the bourgeois. There were the merchants, the newly arising civil servant professionals,

the various guild members, to name a few, who resided in these rapidly forming urban areas of medieval society. But to say that instead of religion, as Jim Rhodes believes, “surpressing some features of the tale to make it conform to moral argument,” analyzing the tales with overt religious and/or theological discourses in no way makes the tales “tangential” to the outcome of such analysis. Indeed, to do so assumes that Chaucer would have had a “unifying or overarching theological vision that ultimately binds all of the tales together.” Such a view would, in the end, situate *The Canterbury Tales* as, using Derek Pearsall’s terms, inorganic rather than organic. And though Chaucer “has initiated to defeat any attempt to privilege any tale or teller as voicing his own personal view” (Rhodes 169-70), he is still the author who “impersonates the pilgrim voices, much as each of those voices tell stories of impersonation—tales of characters who lie, deceive, delude, take one thing for another, or state-manage fictions of desire” (Lerer 244). Thus, Chaucer effectively draws back the authorial voice from *The Canterbury Tales* in favor of “allowing each individual pilgrim to speak for him- or herself.” The dialogism that the withdrawal of a moral narrator invokes empowered Chaucer’s contemporary readers to actively engage these tales with a religious autonomy that applies to our various literary approaches of analysis, “leaving us with a multiplicity of discourses” (Rhodes 169-70). In his discussion of the Retraction, Nicholas Watson put forward the premise that “the key in dealing with Chaucer’s religiosity lies in avoiding an all-or-nothing approach.” Instead, *The Canterbury Tales* reflects on the inconsistencies of corporate Christian identity, with its distinct “division of expectation in . . . thought about education, purity and zeal, not only of priests . . . , but also of the members of the laity” (76).

Indeed, Chaucer wrote during the age of mysticism. This era was an unprecedented age in which the laity sought to acquire a much more effective practice of spirituality than the merit-

based system the Church promoted. Fourteenth-century mysticism was more individualistic, less corporate than previously practiced and accepted, and its pathos-centered theology appealed to many of the laity and Church members. When we think of the spirituality of the Middle Ages in general, we are inclined to think of it with fourteenth and fifteenth mysticism and affective piety in mind—a spirituality that surpassed the scholastic theological influences of the previous two centuries and, before that, the influences of the early Church fathers and their monastic ideology. Mystical theology with its emphasis on individual experience is represented by the writings of Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, and the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. Of the lay writers, we should include to this list John Gower's *vox clamantis*, as well as those writings of the laity who had enjoyed little or no public education, but their spirituality was no less as intense as in the literature of those previously mentioned. To this list belongs Margery Kempe, whose religious fervor acts as an exemplum of those members of the laity who received no scholastic training in theology, yet demonstrates an intense religious fervor that is more appealing in spontaneity of feeling than excursus of reason.

The mystical intensity of these texts serves to illuminate the practice of asceticism in theory and in reality. Generally speaking, asceticism was a form of practiced piety highly prized by the Church since the early days of the Desert Fathers who had performed severe acts of physical discipline in relative isolation for the sake of the soul. Centuries later, those who practiced asceticism in their active lay lives resisted enclosure and isolation from the community at large. The open display of asceticism by the laity in the later medieval period brought to the attention of the community what had been traditionally deemed extremely personal and that is the need to have one's faith publicly affirmed. This form of mystical practice by the laity mainly developed from the twelfth century onward. By the fourteenth century, however, lay asceticism

evolved into an affective piety that “re-imagined the role of spiritual love.” It became as powerful, or more so, than the traditional bodily “self-discipline ...could never achieve” (Watson 78). Affective piety from this point forward also included reimagining Christ closer toward his humanity. As a result, affective piety “affirms a human nature [shared] with the incarnate God” (78). As a consequence, the development of a burning spiritual love as the foundation for lay affective piety elevated “feeling over knowledge.” (79). This difference between *sapientia* and *scientia* formed the theopolitical tensions between Church authority and the laity during Chaucer’s time, giving rise toward an unprecedented number of heresies that the Church was forced to address. That is not to say that heresy did not exist prior to the fourteenth century. Heresy, a response against orthodoxy, was always a part of the developing fabric of the Church. The forming of policy and responses against policy are inherent in any institution, especially those that govern communities (Russell 1). In Church history, however, when corporate Christian identity developed and a concentrated effort in the education of clergy began during the scholastic period, the “definitions of orthodox doctrine were tightened and enforced” by a “new class of literate clerks,” which in turn “also sharpened definitions of what was unacceptable” (Brown 56). This was the purview of the canon lawyer and the canon law that defined a standard language of heresy during these later centuries.

The doctrinal difference between the heresies of the early Church and those of the medieval Church lies in the gradual shift of “emphasis from the more intellectual heresies . . . to the more social heresies of the Middle Ages” (Russell 9). Intellectual heresies of the early Church especially included the debate concerning the dual natures of Christ. The Arian, Nestorian, and the Monophysite heresies had established a variety of doctrines concerning Christ’s divinity and humanity outside of the established orthodox belief in that the Father, Son,

and Holy Spirit were one God. Throughout the Middle Ages, orthodoxy was not so much the problem, especially since doctrines and preaching practices were continuously being shaped and reshaped during times of contention between members of ecclesial authority. Religious practices in the early Middle Ages were ambiguous and never clear-cut as theologians debated, refined, and reformed the theories of every facet of Catholicism. The most central issue for the late Middle Ages was concerning Christian behavior and the *level* of “unmediated doctrinal, and especially scriptural, knowledge to a wider audience” (Brown 56). The growing wealth of the merchant class, for example, allowed them access to various levels of education. They became vernacularly literate, which brought about a desire for more self-determination, including an acceptable balance between *scientia* and *sapientia* in the rigors of active lay life.

The tension between *scientia* and *sapientia* is one of the major themes explored in most, if not all, of *The Canterbury Tales*. “The Prioress’s Tale,” in which the little clergeon is more interested in his devotion to the Virgin Mary than to his scholastic studies, provides Chaucer an opportunity to offer his audience an opportunity to debate affective piety and its effects on the active lay life. In the instance of the little clergeon, his intense devotion to the Virgin Mary translates into a rejection of the secular part of Christian society that through education offered and supported a variety of material comforts: better shelter, better food, a higher social status in society, future security. With each benefit that *scientia* offers, however, brings with it the dangers of vice: gluttony, sloth, greed, lust, envy, pride or vanity. Unlike a martyr, such as St. Cecilia, the little clergeon is not being forced to give up a Christian way of life by the power of a pagan government. Christianity is ubiquitous. It has seeped into every aspect of medieval life. But there is a resistance in this tale: the little clergeon is giving up *scientia* in favor of *sapientia*. He is also not giving up the lay life for an isolated cell. He is fully engaged in his affective piety

in the public setting. Thus his martyred, heroic status comes about on account of the triumph of feeling over reason in the public environment.

The discourse concerning *scientia* and *sapientia* arose out of the differences between the scholastic tradition and this newly forming mystical tradition. Steven Ozment explains that the largest difference between these two schools of thought is that the latter believed “the reasons of the heart were closer to God than the speculations of the mind.” Since the heart is central to the mystical experience, it follows then that the mystical tradition believed God to be not just the “highest truth,” but the “highest good.” In the mystical experience, love reaches “farther than reason,” allowing the mind to “transcend its natural limitations” (74). In “The Prioress’s Tale,” Chaucer makes much of the heart motif in that the boy’s intense spirituality resides in his heart, and evil resides in the heart of the Jews. Similar to the little clergeon, in the instances of Chaucer’s heroines, Custance, Griselda, and Cecilia, unfettered love allows for each of these characters to transcend the limitations of material existence and its vice-like nature. In the case of Cecilia, she returns to God; Custance returns to Rome, the holy seat of Christianity; Griselda returns to her rightful identity as mother and wife and is restored once again above all of the members of her community. The theme of love in each of these tales is different in purpose: mystical, ecclesial, and communal, respectively. Consequently, Chaucer offers no resolution to the audience about which love is the greatest, or which heart is the purest; but in each of these tales, whether secular or sacred, the reward for unfettered loyal love, or as Marie called it “leal trover,” is great.

As varied as Chaucer’s tales are in narrative, genre, and purpose, there is also varied treatment of theopolitical themes. In some tales, the discourse is far more overt than in others. These decidedly overt concerns in the tales coincide with the very public debates on the subject

of Christian identity in society. Derek Pearsall has attempted to categorize *The Canterbury Tales* by various religious intensities. Pearsall names eight tales that he considers to be the religious group in *The Canterbury Tales*. Among them he counts “The Prioress’s Tale,” “The Second Nun’s Tale,” “The Man of Law’s Tale,” “The Clerk’s Tale.” This religious group addresses the complexities and ambiguities of spirituality rather than provide the audience with some standard form of practical morality. Of the eight, the metaphysical qualities of these four tales are elevated by Chaucer’s use of the stately rhyme royal. Outside of these four tales, Chaucer uses this rhyme scheme in no other tale. That is not to say that the rhyme royal cannot be found in his other poetry: It was used to create *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example; but when Chaucer used rhyme royal, the audience became aware of the high seriousness in subject matter. Even in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the transcendental nature of this narrative allowed for the use of this elegant rhyme scheme.

“The Prioress’s Tale” and “The Second Nun’s Tale” rank as the top two of the religious tales in that they tell the stories of saint’s legends and these saints’ single-minded purpose toward achieving transcendence. These two tales move toward what has been traditionally called the *passio sancti*, which means that the tales center on the theme of death, the manner of death, and the sanctification of that death. In both cases, there is an attempt to achieve pious sublimity through an excessive use of pathos in order to move an audience to tears, a spiritual practice highly prized by mystical devotees as public acknowledgement for reaching the ultimate level of sanctity in the material world. The difference between these two tales is that little Hugh of Lincoln of the “The Prioress’s Tale” is not a Church-sanctioned saint. In this way, the two tales sit on opposite sides of the spiritual coin: one narrative is built on universal sanctity while the other narrative is built on regional sanctity. Even so, the religious features and qualities of the

little clergeon, along with the manner of his death, reflect several characteristics found in the popular saints' lives, martyr stories, and Marian Tales.

In these transcendental tales told by the Prioress and the Second Nun, Chaucer paints a clear picture of the theopolitical groups that represent the tripartite structure of Christian society: profane, secular, and sacred. In "The Prioress's Tale" these groups are characterized by their political standing in society and in specific locations. The profane group comprises the marginalized, the disenfranchised. They are those that have been rejected by Christian society and are represented in the tale by the Jews. Their position in society is clearly marked by ghetto walls that surround their living space. At no time do these characters enter into either secular or sacred spaces of the city. The secular group is represented by those who engage in the active life. They are represented by the widow and her son. Chaucer's descriptions of the widow and her young son produce a pathos appeal that engages the emotions of the audience more intensely. The secular is also represented by two powerful institutions: education and law. Both of these institutions are central to social order in secular society. The sacred group is represented by those leading the contemplative life, the abbot and the monks. The next group of religious tales is the "The Man of Law's Tale," "The Clerk's Tale," and "The Physician's Tale." These three tales address constancy in virtue and piety, and center on moral didacticism with little interest on transcendental discourse. The next group consists of "The Tale of Melibee" and "The Parson's Tale." They are Chaucer's prose tales. Drawn from sources on moral and penitential instruction, these last two tales of the religious group fall under the ecclesial category of pastoral care.

Even though Derek Pearsall's categorization of the religious tales reveals "Chaucer is as much a poet of faith as of comedy" (Benson 2), his categorization of religious tales also indicates the poet's strong sense of differentiation in theological discourse and spiritual education. These

various differences in Christian activity point toward many memorable characters of *The Canterbury Tales* who exhibit a highly nuanced understanding of both mystical and scholastic theologies of the late-fourteenth century English Church. Of the twenty-four tales, eleven tales are told by characters representing various Church offices or are employed by the Church in some administrative capacity: the friar, summoner, clerk, pardoner, prioress, monk, nun's priest, nun, a canon's yeoman, manciple, and parson. Of those who hold secular professions, scholars have considered three other tales that contain religious themes and moral instruction: "The Physician's Tale," "The Man of Law's Tale," and "The Tale of Melibee" (Pearsal 244-5; Benson 1-4). These pilgrims "speak freely and at great length on theological or biblical topics" (Rhodes ix). For this reason, in some circles of scholars, Chaucer is considered to be orthodox in his religious beliefs. Orthodoxy, however, does not necessarily mean a monolithic perception of Christianity in these tales, or the literary treatment of corporate Christian identity. Instead, the opposite is the case when Chaucer complicates theological discourse with the political and intellectual realities of his time.

The intellectual debate on the politics of theology, for example, begins early in *The Canterbury Tales*. We can say that the "General Prologue" is his thesis statement to that effect. The ambivalence, the ambiguity of the Christian belief system that cannot be found in the discourse of the *Lais*, is methodically raised in the "General Prologue." Beginning the pilgrimage at the Tabard Inn and ending it at the Canterbury Cathedral certainly provokes a standard interpretation of pilgrimage, the journeying from the material to the immaterial world with a hope for salvation. Indeed, James Simpson observes that Chaucer's use of places is a "sharp awareness of the relations of small places to larger places, and . . . of relatively insignificant places to places of powerful cultural resonance" (55). But, Chaucer conducts usage of place to

place in more complex multi-layered ways than simply small places to large ones, such as a boat to a distant land; or a tomb inside the walls of an abbey; or a hut inside a community; or a Jewish ghetto inside Christian society. Chaucer employs places, such as these, as manifestations of secular or sacred power and their ambiguous jurisdictions over identity and society.

In *The Canterbury Tales* the many places described represent important areas of knowledge and order: education, law, and the Church. In “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” there is the royal court and the queen who sends an errant knight on a quest to find the answer to the question of what women want most. In “The Prioress’s Tale,” the little clergeon leaves home and goes each day to school to learn grammar and rhetoric. Custance, in “The Man of Law’s Tale,” leaves Rome, the seat of Christianity, to marry a pagan prince in Syria. And, then there is patient Griselda. Her story perhaps represents best Simpson’s observation concerning the relationship of power between the small and the large. In “The Clerk’s Tale,” the duke marries a young woman out of the humblest hut in his lands. She enters his grand mansion, bears his children, and maintains his household. When Griselda marries the duke she is instantly elevated above the people in the community. When she is sent back to her father, however, she is once again lowered beneath them. As these examples demonstrate, the character leaves but eventually returns to the center of power: the knight returns to the queen’s court, after years of adventure and misadventure; Custance returns to Rome; each day the little clergeon reluctantly leaves home and goes back to school; and Griselda is returned to the duke’s home where she is reunited with her children who are also signs of her husband’s perpetual power.

Chaucer also employs these places of power as literary motifs of vice and virtue, reflecting what Staley has observed as the compromise, the ambiguity, and the deflection of the secular and sacred realms of society. Already in the “General Prologue” this message becomes

known to the audience in the locations of the Tabard Inn and the Canterbury Cathedral. The first is recognizable as a dark den of vice and the second a gilded reliquary of virtue. Every activity in the Inn is contrasted with the activities in the Cathedral. The Inn is a fitting gathering place to begin a pilgrimage for Christians whose souls are weighed down by sin. It is the vessel into which all vice flows. Its location is set in the secular area of society; but not in London, the center of commerce, politics, and business. Instead, the Inn is located on the south side of the Thames River, away from the standard activities of merchant life. David Wallace describes Southwark as a place for “messy and marginal trades such as lime-burning, tanning, dyeing, brewing, inn-keeping, and prostitution . . . ; criminals fleeing London courts and aliens working around London trade regulations found a home here” (157). The marginalized, the dispossessed lived in a location unrecognized by organized secular authority, such as London. Similar to the ghetto in “The Prioress’s Tale,” the Tabard Inn is located away from the conventional activities of the City proper, giving rise to the barrier between it and “good Christian” society, the Thames River. At the beginning of “The Pardoner’s Tale,” the description of the tavern as the “develes temple” (PT 470) can be applied to the Tabard Inn. This secular place becomes the metaphor for the devil’s lair in which humanity is in captivity and in a perpetual “state of sin” (Marx 24). The description of activities in the tavern calls the audience’s attention to associations with lechery, gluttony, gambling, and swearing. These associations are qualities of *sapientia*. They satisfy bodily pleasures and comforts, allowing for a full experience of material existence through the senses. Eating, drinking, singing, dancing are activities that distract the Christian from engaging in the more intensely personal relationship with God. Thus, the tavern in “The Pardoner’s Tale” is also associated with sickness and death. The three revelers who patronize the tavern are described with such sinful qualities as lying, cheating, stealing, betrayal, greed and murder. In

the end, they die, killing each other for coveting a sack full of gold. The Canterbury Cathedral, on the other hand, becomes the gathering place of love, charity, and humility. In the first eighteen verse-lines of the “General Prologue,” Chaucer paints an harmonious picture of the pilgrims and nature. They are lured to Canterbury Cathedral not by *sapientia*, but by *scientia*—the knowledge that they are following a basic truism of Christian doctrine: the path toward their salvation is in the cleansing of their soul through holiness.

This dichotomy between places as manifestations of vice and virtue is found in other Canterbury tales. “The Prioress’s Tale” has already been mentioned in relation to *scientia* and *sapientia*. In this tale, however, Chaucer also draws on locations to create similar parallels between vice and virtue. The Tabard Inn and the Canterbury Cathedral of the “General Prologue” become in this tale the Jewish ghetto and the abbey. As in the first lines of the “General Prologue,” Chaucer also paints this tale with a broad poetic brush, first describing the greater world, in this instance, Asia. Then he narrows the audience’s focus to a city in Asia and then again to the Jewish Ghetto. Chaucer describes this place as one of “foule usure and lucre of vileynye” (PT 1681). Since Jewish culture rejected the message of the Messiah, for that reason it finds itself imprisoned behind the walls built by Christian society. Because we are dealing with a different culture, the Ghetto is not associated with the devil’s temple; instead, the Jewish body becomes the vessel into which the devil can pour his malice and evil. Chaucer describes the Jew in this manner: “Oure firste foo, the serpent Sathanas, / That hath in Jues herte his waspes nest” (PT 558-9). In this way, the Jews become the ready pawns of the devil to do his bidding by killing the little clergeon. In this community the Christians go to the abbey for spiritual healing. Thus, after the murder of the little clergeon, the Christians believed it imperative to carry him back to the sacred ground of the abbey in order to save his soul.

Chaucer complicates these literary motifs of the secular, sacred, and profane by drawing attention to the theopolitics surrounding the doctrines of vice and virtue. The Canterbury Cathedral with its famous saint, Thomas a Becket, for example, not only imagines for the audience the concept of virtue, but also brings to the audience's attention the realities of the politics between the secular and sacred institutions that govern Christian society. The Canterbury Cathedral is one of the most famous and revered holy sites in England. At Canterbury, as at many famous cathedrals, such as Salisbury, Wells, and Shrewsbury, the building itself becomes the place in which a pilgrim can annually purge sins committed over that time. One form of penance was to make monetary contributions for the construction and maintenance of these sacred buildings. In another way, the interior of these sacred sites became for the pilgrim the metaphorical place of purgatory (Rhodes 183), a place where the pilgrim could cleanse his or her soul of its spiritual sickness.

Chaucer implies the virtuous purpose of this sacred site in the familiar and enchanting opening lines of the "General Prologue." It begins with a broad, cosmic stroke, describing one of the most fundamental theological doctrines on salvation: "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote" (GP 1-3). With these opening lines, Chaucer recalls for Christians the blood of Christ that was shed for humankind so as to bring all of humanity spiritual life after death; it recalls the water of baptism as it, too, brings spiritual life after death. As with Marie de France, Chaucer takes great care in developing this truism at the very beginning of the narrative framework as a rhetorical method for building his credibility as a Christian poet with the audience. The prologue then moves from this truism to narrow on the description of the pilgrims who benefit from salvation as they wander about the known world in search of sacred sites for the forgiveness of their sins. From here, the picture narrows further to a

specific sacred site, the Canterbury Cathedral in which is located the final resting place of Saint Thomas a Becket.

The natural landscape described here draws on the Classical tradition of the “image of a landscape offered by nature as a refuge from reality” (Pearsall and Salter 9). The abundant details of this edenic scene produce for the audience a sense of Christian perfection that comes from the satisfaction in knowing that salvation can be offered and accepted by those who believe in the Christian ideal. It also produces for the audience a sense of hope in that by going on pilgrimage, a symbol of the journey the soul takes from the secular world to the sacred world, there is a chance for spiritual healing in this world before judgment is passed in the next. Chaucer’s poetic language in these opening lines describes a distinct harmony between the sacred and secular realms of Christian society, producing a seemingly monolithic image of corporate Christian identity, as the pilgrims embark on their quest for spiritual healing. The solution to this healing is the final destination of the designated holy site of a saint who through an exemplary life found a direct path to heaven.

Chaucer’s choice of holy site for the pilgrimage, however, complicates the audience’s conception of corporate Christian identity. The poet could have chosen any number of famous holy sites as the final destination for his literary pilgrims—places of equally tremendous healing power, such as the holy well of Saint Wenefrede in Wales or her reliquary at Shrewsbury Abbey. He chose instead Canterbury Cathedral, the place where the most notorious and controversial event of English Church’s theopolitics occurred, an event that reverberated throughout medieval Europe for its audacity and heinous execution: the murder of St. Thomas a Becket. This sensational holy site as the final destination for his pilgrims encourages the audience to pause and consider the event in relation to the holy make-up of the Cathedral setting. When the

Cathedral's descriptions of spiritual healing and cleansing are paired with this historical event, when the sacred ideal and secular realities are blended together, this motif suddenly becomes an ambiguous site that provokes the audience to question the definition of Christian identity. By selecting this location, Chaucer exposes the reality of political power as the true origin of the Cathedral's elevated holiness.

In Canterbury Cathedral, Thomas a Becket was murdered not so much for the unswerving defense of his faith as described in many saints' lives, but on account of a political move that went awry by Henry II. The king's famous frustrated outburst had sent four vassals to Canterbury who were determined to bring securely under secular control the office of the archbishop. In very public places, the archbishop had continuously opposed the king's claim of royal jurisdiction over English Church authority. This resistance eventually brought about a deep rift between the secular and sacred institutions ending with the archbishop's murder. Thus, the Canterbury Cathedral becomes a symbolic question concerning secular and sacred institutional interests. Thomas a Becket's martyrdom translates, therefore, from the Christian ideal of moral and ethical perfection of sainthood to a championship of Church authority and its political interests over secular authority.

There are few holy sites in which the dubious morals and ethics of theopolitics come together as at this sacred site. Some might make the case that the murder of St. Wenefrede, for example, as described in her saint's life, might also be no more or no less as politically charged than the murder of St. Thomas. Granted, the elevation to sainthood rested on the event of a violent act by another Christian, but St. Wenefrede's murder was conducted for private rather than for public gain. No frustrated public declaration was made by the young prince who had beheaded her; and his intentions for killing her were far more personal than those of the knights

who had killed St. Thomas, in that this young prince intended to rape Wenefrede in order to satisfy his lusts instead of appeasing a king's anger in an attempt to bring political peace to England. Unlike Wenefrede, Thomas a Becket held the powerful position of archbishop, representing as such the spiritual *and* the corporate aspects of the Church. By selecting this holy site as the final destination for his pilgrims fraught with such violent theopolitics, Chaucer effectively reminds his audience not only of the Cathedral's spiritual nature, but also of its "eventmental character" (Lees and Overing 5), thereby highlighting the Cathedral's problematic position in both the secular and sacred spheres of late medieval English society. Thus, the entire concept of holiness is called into question.

During Chaucer's time politics and not holiness determined the elevation of individuals to sainthood by the Church. Saint Thomas a Becket is one of the most famous and most overtly political saints of England. The translation of his bones from an unassuming crypt into the splendor of a bejeweled and gold-encrusted shrine in 1220 CE was celebrated with all the pomp and circumstance of a Roman emperor's. Delegates from as far as Hungary came to the ceremony. King Henry III and other nobility were there, as well as "hordes of pilgrims" (Reames 118). For the then archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, the saint was his role model and patron. His determination to elevate public recognition of this saint to national distinction succeeded well past Chaucer's lifetime until the Protestant reforming period during the reign of Edward VI. As a symbol of English Anglican power, Edward VI had Becket's bejeweled shrine obliterated, the saint's bones burned, and the offerings from generations of pilgrims were subsumed into this Protestant king's coffers. The saint's name was equally stricken from the liturgical books, "or cut out of books entirely" (120). As a part of this tumultuous Church history, St. Thomas can be considered the theopolitical exemplum that existed between the

secular and sacred realms of society during the late medieval English period and after the Reformation.

Consequently, as a literary motif, the Canterbury Cathedral, along with the murder of Thomas a Becket, becomes in the “General Prologue” a manifestation of the long uneasy theopolitical relationship that existed between English *sacerdotium* and *regnum*. The literary destination of his shrine by the pilgrims then is not simply a reminder to the audience of Christian orthodoxy, it also represents the theopolitical matters of jurisdiction central to the contestation between the martyr and Henry II. The Constitutions of Clarendon specifically stated that an individual was to be brought before both secular and ecclesial courts for infractions against specific laws that were answerable in each. St. Thomas, however, resisted the Constitutions because he believed that secular jurisdiction was encroaching too much on the sacred in that “they professed the king to be the head of the Church and its ultimate decision maker” (Hayes 73). The political pressure for the king to become the head of the English Church had already begun with William the Conqueror and his various decrees in an attempt to gain control over the English Church. Eventually, this political move was fulfilled by Henry VIII and effectively executed during the subsequent reign of Edward VI.

Chaucer’s selection of St. Thomas’s shrine as the final destination for his pilgrim characters, therefore, offers his audience an opportunity to reflect on and confront the multifaceted relationship between the secular and sacred authority of society. It must be noted here that according to the legend, Thomas was murdered by the sword stroke that severed the crown of his head from the rest of his body. In the chronicles that describe his murder, especially that of Edward Grim, a monk who was an eye-witness to the murder, three assailants attacked Thomas by aiming for his head. On one level the destruction of Thomas’s head can be considered an

attempt to destroy his soul as there was the general belief that the head contained the soul (Hayes 77). On another symbolic level, the head in Church doctrine became also the metaphor that invoked leadership, sanctity, and dominance over the rest of the “body of believers” of the Church.

Other Canterbury tales, such as in “The Prioress’s Tale,” the doctrinal dynamic between head and body is metaphorically represented in the figure of the widow and the appearance of Christ as her spiritual guide. In medieval thought the head is masculine and the body feminine. From St. Jerome onward this dynamic continued to be interpreted in this way: “that a wife not ‘subject to her head’ or husband commits a crime or blasphemy as great as that committed by a man who fails to be ‘subject to Christ’” (Blamires 27). As a Christian, the widow in this tale is not only subject to Church orthodoxy, but since she is not subject to a man in the material world, she becomes subject to the next male figure in the divine hierarchy: Jesus Christ. On account of this doctrine, it would have been theologically incongruous for Chaucer to have had the Virgin Mary divinely inspire the mother to look for her son in the pit rather than Christ who had guided her there himself. In the instance of Thomas a Becket, the consecration of an archbishop’s head was the political symbolic gesture that transformed the individual into the leader of the community of believers, becoming the representative of Christ on earth as head of the Church, and possessing dominant power over the Church’s belief system, rituals, and rites. This gruesome attack on St. Thomas’s head by the king’s loyal followers implies the symbolic destruction of these three aspects of ecclesial power.

Indeed, in Grim’s account, both of these theological beliefs are clearly stated when St. Thomas offered his body to the assailants “so that he might preserve his head—that is his soul and the body church” (qtd. in Hayes 77). The murder of St. Thomas by the secular arm of society

produces for Chaucer's audience the unsettling knowledge that despite the theoretical dominance of the Church over the entire community, where jurisdiction over society is concerned, the secular power continued to remain the stronger and the more dominant. As the organic symbol of the Canterbury Cathedral, St. Thomas' murder became the moment the Church itself was symbolically destroyed. The reaction against this heinous event was particularly swift by Church authority, which had canonized Thomas within three years of his death. In order to bring about political stability, the assailants were sent on Crusade to the Holy Land, and Henry II, in part, "contributed some 60,000 gold pieces to the defense of Jerusalem" (Hayes 92) as penance for this murder.

This historical event involving Henry II and the Church reveals an invisible theopolitical line between the secular and sacred realms that neither can cross. The Cordant of Avranches laid to rest, at least for awhile, the theopolitical matters that had continuously plagued the relationship between the English throne and the English Church. At this time, the king, among other conciliations, finally recognized the Church's authority of its ecclesial jurisdiction over clerical matters, criminal or otherwise, not affecting the secular nature of society. And yet, by the late fourteenth century some members of ecclesial authority continued to elevate the king to the position as the head of the social body. John Arnold explains that in a 1373 sermon, Thomas Brinton used the body metaphor to represent the political levels of the important members of English society. In this way, despite the theopolitical resolutions made by the Cordant, the bishop continued the traditional hierarchy of the king's position remaining above all of Christian society:

Heads are kings, princes and prelates; eyes are wise judges and true counsellors,
ears are the religious; the tongue good doctors; knights are the right hand, ready to

defend; merchants and faithful workmen on the left; citizens and townsfolk are the heart, placed as it were in the middle; the feet are farmers and labourers, as it were supporting the whole body firmly. (qtd. in Arnold 125).

In this hierarchical description, Brinton placed the religious office third, below the jurisdiction of the secular government and its legal institution. In “The Prioress’s Tale,” the sacred realm of society also falls beneath the jurisdiction of secular law. In the tale, the Christians do not summon the abbot first after the discovery of the little clergeon’s body, but the provost who passes secular judgment over the Jews and convicts them for the murder. It is clear from these historical and literary instances that though the high offices of the Church (the papacy and the archbishoprics) might have seen themselves as the “head” of Christian society, the theopolitical reality was decidedly different. The lower ranks of the ecclesial hierarchy especially felt a definite amount of fealty toward the royal throne and the ancient customs of loyalty that it demanded. In the “General Prologue,” this part of English history becomes an accute reminder to the audience of the complex nature and relationship between church and royal authority and the struggle for dominance over society (Hayes 91).

As the theopolitical layer of the Canterbury Cathedral has offered some valuable insight into the complex nature of late fourteenth century English society, its sacred and secular ideals and realities, Chaucer further describes these ambiguities through his use of poetic language. Where language is concerned, Chaucer relies on the rhetorical tradition of the Latin Church. Is it so perplexing that Chaucer, who has repeatedly demonstrated poetic prowess in his use of rhyme royal for the religious tales, for example, can suddenly seem boring or incapable of poetic art in other tales, such as the “The Monk’s Tale” or “The Tale of Melibee”? The traditional modes of rhetoric that have served the development of pastoral care and devotional literature for several

centuries serve Chaucer here well. In particular, the plain style of rhetoric allows for a lesser sophistication of speech- and sermon-making. If each character is a unique individual as Jim Rhoades argues, so then must also be the character's speech. A case in point is James Simpson's discussion of Chaucer's "The Tale of Melibee" in which Simpson summarizes it as if he were describing the qualities of devotional literature: "*Melibee* is designed for instruction; requires private reading for full absorption; is written in an abstract, philosophical prose; precisely cites a range of classical, biblical, and later medieval *auctoritates*; and tells a fundamentally anti-chivalric story" (*Reform* 302). It is clear then that Chaucer matches language with narrative purpose to character. In this case, a plain style of language, prose construction, and a philosophical underpinning to the tale all meant to mirror the construction of devotional literature familiar to his audience.

One of the most ambiguous uses of poetic language by Chaucer concerning theopolitics, especially where secular and sacred ideals and reality are concerned, is found in "The Friar's Tale." One of the most innovative, controversial minds of the medieval period with regard to sin and its relation to the body and soul was Peter Abelard. His flamboyant lifestyle aside, Abelard was a twelfth-century powerhouse of a logician (Swanson 13) whose innovative arguments influenced future logicians for several decades after his death. His contributions to the ethical conception of sin and its impact on the body and soul are found in two of his writings: *Ethica* or *Scito te ipsum* and *Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian* or *Collationes*. For the most part, Abelard developed what Dawn Hayes termed a "theory of intentionality" (Hayes 7). One of the most thought-provoking arguments of the time was that the body itself was incapable of sinning. The cause of sin was the individual's *consent* to be in contempt of God. This meant that a person did not have to physically commit a wrong to have sinned. According to

Abelard, the person sinned when consenting to the wrong, dwelling on the wrong, and having no intention for resisting the wrong. Some of Abelard's questions concerning intentionality were these: If sin is committed through consent, then does the wrong action of the individual make the sin greater? If sin is committed by consent, how do Church authorities know when an action is committed because of sin? Chaucer explores these kinds of questions in "The Friar's Tale." An example that best illustrates this complicated literary juggling act is in Chaucer's use of the words 'entente' and 'repent.' Both of these words eventually cause the Summoner great distress when making a contract with the Devil becomes his downfall literally to hell in *both* body and soul.

The *Middle English Dictionary* offers multiple meanings for the words "entente" and "repent," and interestingly the meanings are divided under categories, such as law or theology. From a secular standpoint, the word "repent" can mean, among other things, to regret an action or to change one's mind. In the area of theology, it also means to feel sorry for a sin. The word "entente" also carries multiple meanings under a variety of categories. As amply discussed in Passon's 1968 article it can mean a plan or wish or desire. Because of their multiple layers of meanings, made more complex because they encompass very abstract theological thought, these words become in "The Friar's Tale" extremely ambiguous and the audience must take care in the interpretation of these words in relation to context. Ultimately, interpreting the meaning of 'entente' and 'repent' remains unresolved on account of the senses' limitations in processing only the material world. Abelard argues an individual can never know the full intent of another individual (both body and mind) because only God and the Devil can see through the body and into the dark. Indeed, Abelard describes the demon in *Ethica* as a capable force that understands the material aspects of human life:

By their subtle talent as much as by their long experience they are certainly experts in the nature of things and for this are called demons, that is, knowledgeable; they know the natural powers of things by which human weakness may easily be stirred to lust or to other impulses. (qtd. in Luscombe 37)

In “The Friar’s Tale,” Chaucer highlights this demon’s knowledge of human weakness when he meets the Summoner for the first time. After they introduce each other, the demon immediately creates an atmosphere of camaraderie and a tempting offer that he knew found ready appeal to the greedy nature of his riding partner:

Depardieux, quod this yemon, deere brother,
 Thou art a bailly, and I am another.
 I am unknowen as in this contree;
 Of thy aqueyntance I wolde praye thee,
 And eek of Bretherhede, if that you leste.
 I have gold and silver in my cheste;
 If that thee happe to comen in oure shire,
 Al shal be thyn, right as thou wold desire. (FrT 1394-1400)

These few lines reveal Chaucer’s poetic subtlety with language in that the Summoner understands only the literal meaning of the demon’s promise of friendship; but there is an underlying meaning that comes to full exposure when the demon reveals his true nature to the Summoner. This little exchange between the Summoner and the demon alerts the audience to the slippery usage of language.

Given that Chaucer has been recognized for his “verbal dexterity,” it stands to reason that the words “entente” and “repente” in the tale will carry *both* their secular and sacred meanings,

offering another layer of complexity that helps us to appreciate more clearly what he writes as “art.” The best example of ambiguity is the verbal sparring between the old woman and the Summoner in which the old woman demands that the Summoner repent: “The devel . . . so fecche him er he deye, And panne and al, but he wol him repente” (Mann 268). The Summoner replies: “Nay, . . . that is nat min entente, . . . for to repente me / For anything that I have had of thee” (268). If this interchange carries their dual layers of meaning, then we can look at entente and repent from the moral standpoint: The old woman warns the Summoner that if he regrets his sin, he can save himself from damnation. In response the Summoner argues that it’s not his intention at all to regret his sin. And, because of his refusal to repent, it “makes him liable to damnation” (Passon 170). But when the secular layer of meaning to the interchange is added, it becomes more interesting. Instead of the old woman cursing the Summoner his sinful ways, she is cursing him because he refuses to change (repent) his mind about taking one of her possessions for a crime she did not commit. The Summoner’s reply then becomes his refusal to change his plan of action (entente) that has lucratively worked very well for him in the past and that he does not regret (repent) ever having taken anything from her. Reading this passage with these dual layers of meaning in mind recalls Abelard’s debate concerning physical action and intention and whether one or both causes sin. In the end, this ambiguity between secular and sacred meaning of these two words resolves itself when the demon takes *both* the body (the concrete) and soul (the abstract) of the Summoner to hell.

Chaucer also plays with language in the sound it makes as a way to confront the ambiguities of power between secular and sacred authority. The silencing of sound and language is a recurring theme represented by the slitting of the throat in two of the religious tales: “The Prioress’s Tale” and “The Second Nun’s Tale.” In “The Prioress’s Tale,” sound plays a key role

in the murder of the little clergeon. When the boy wanders through the Jewish Ghetto, he sings his song of devotion to the Virgin Mary. In this instance, the sound of his singing is only heard by the Jews and the demon. But, when his throat is cut, the sound of the little clergeon's voice continues. Because of this miracle, everyone in the city can hear him, drawing Christians to the ghetto, at which time the heinous crime is discovered, and the boy's body is rescued from the pit.

The slitting of the throat, and in more severe cases beheadings, is not uncommon in sacred literature, such as saints' lives or devotional literature. When the head, the seat of reason and the soul, is nearly severed, or completely severed, from the body that is the seat of feeling, we can conclude this violent action as a symbolic severing of the material being from the immaterial. But when the Virgin Mary places the seed on the little clergeon's tongue, the Eucharistic motif acts as that which binds the boy's mind and soul together with his center of feeling, thereby allowing the singing to miraculously continue. Why does the Virgin Mary place a seed on the boy's tongue? According to Church doctrine, the Virgin Mary's position in the hierarchy of the cosmic body has been described metaphorically as the neck, the part that connects the head to the body. In this way, the seed becomes associated with the Virgin Mary's divine position who "signifies the penultimate summit of the body; she is the 'neck' of the Christian body'" (Blamires 20). As the protector of the neck, the Virgin Mary places a grain upon the little clergeon's tongue in order to keep his soul contained within his body until he is discovered by the Christian community. Thus, the little clergeon is able to continue singing until his body is found and carried into the sacred confines of the abbey, away from the profane location of the ghetto.

The slitting of the little clergeon's throat reveals the discourse on the concept of power and authority. It is clear in this tale that the Christian community wields both sacred and secular

power over its disenfranchised cultures, such as the Jewish community. In the case of the martyrdom of Thomas a Becket, we have an instance of the secular arm wielding power over the sacred, albeit of short duration since his martyrdom symbolically raised him above all of society. The theopolitical repercussions to secular authority were immense in that the king paid a hefty sum into the Church coffers. The king's political influence over the English Church, at least for a time, was greatly diminished. This power struggle between secular and sacred authorities was visually represented at the cathedral of Chartres in France where the stone statue of St. Thomas stands in his episcopal finery over the kneeling Henry II. With his head thrown back and his mouth wide open, the king's throat is pierced by the cozier held in St. Thomas's hand. The visual affirmation of sacred power over the secular is further emphasized in that Thomas's gaze is directed toward heaven, but the king's gaze is fixed on the figure of the archbishop saint. One scholar believes that this statue of St. Thomas "is the representation of the saint's triumph through martyrdom over the angry words which brought about his death" (qtd. in Hayes 87).

The silencing of sound and language through the destruction of the throat in some ways is not an unusual literary motif, as we see in the previously described visual artwork at the cathedral in Chartres. The attack on the throat as a literary motif in these religious tales is in recognition of the power of language that can persuade, convert, or expose. In reviewing the legends of the martyrs of Christian Antiquity, such as those of Cecilia, Lucy, Cyrilla, Saturus, Crescens, the slitting of the throat appears to be a general practice for those failing to conform to Roman law. Having their throats slit, these early Christians were restrained from speaking and spreading their message in their attempt to convert Romans to Christians. In the saint's lives of the high Middle Ages, several saints were murdered through either the slitting of the throat or beheading: William of Rochester and St. Wenefrede of Holywell, for example. In these instances

the slitting of the throat keeps the heinous act of murder quiet and the shame of the murderer remains a secret. In “The Prioress’s Tale,” the slitting of the little clergeon’s throat lacks this typical pattern of a saint’s life or a martyr’s legend, however. His story is far more political in that the heinous crime centers on exposing this shameful act by the disenfranchised rather than being a story about a religious conversion of the Jews. Prior to the boy’s murder, his song is heard only by a small group of Jews. But, after his throat is slit, his song is miraculously amplified and heard by everyone in the Christian community. When the boy is taken out of the pit, he stops singing, but continues when he has entered the sacred ground of the abbey. Only when the grain that the Virgin Mary planted upon his tongue is removed, the little clergeon’s voice is perpetually silenced. Only then does his soul elevate toward heaven. The only sound in the abbey is when the boy “yaf up the goost ful softly” (PrT 672).

This political tenor of religious poetry was not uncommon in the late-fourteenth century. The rise in the “increasing invocation of specifically political saints” was in correlation to the rise in nationalistic feeling in England (Swanson 99). This means, especially in England, that a political veneer becomes a part of Christian identity. The developing cult of St. George as the national hero is testament to the blending of politics with spirituality. The stories of these late-medieval English saints differed greatly from earlier saints in that their deaths served more toward political ends than toward serving as exemplars of piety and the Christian ideal. The little clergeon falls into this latter category in that his death came at the hands of the Jews, a reviled culture, who became more and more disenfranchised as their fortunes greatly diminished during the Crusader period. Left with no monetary leverage, the Jewish populace never completely recovered their earlier social or political status. The representation of the disenfranchised Jews in Chaucer’s tale also calls to mind the internal, intellectual conflict that began with the

establishment of orthodox mendicant orders by Pope Innocent III. The active suspicions and open distrust cultivated by the monastic culture against these fraternal orders appear in the various literatures of the period: chronicles, poetic literature, ecclesial registries, and so forth. One event as described by Thomas Walsingham contains the heinous qualities of violence we find in “The Prioress’s Tale,” except that the targeted group is members of the mendicant order and not the Jews:

In the same year three mendicant cut-throats kidnapped three citizens’ small sons from the town of Lynn and mutilated them, as was their practice. They gouged out the eyes of one of them, broke the back of another and also cut out the tongues of these two. But the third was treated more leniently by his captor and allowed the use of his tongue. ..the father of the third lad, . . . came to the place where the mendicants were. When the lad saw him, he recognised his father and began to cry out, ‘ here is my father.’ The father . . . snatched him . . . and immediately got them arrested. They confessed their crime and were strung up. (301)

Unlike the traditional saints who understood and saw their deaths clearly coming, the little clergeon was murdered in secret. It is true that in some saints’ lives, such as Saint Wenefrede’s, in which the murder was conducted in private, the saint still saw her death coming at the hands of her attacker. Not so the little clergeon who blissfully sings his devotional song to the Virgin Mary as he passes through the Jewish ghetto. After the murder, his body is tossed into a privy, a fate that neither Sts. Cecilia nor Wenefrede experienced. In these instances, the murders were committed in open areas so that the bodies were more readily found by their respective communities. The little clergeon, on the other hand, had to sing miraculously and be heard by the Christian community in order to be found. The movement of the little clergeon’s

body from the ghetto to the abbey once again reinforces a public display of sanctity of one who had been martyred by a political group.

With the boy's image, the vehicle of the Christian ideal in this tale, Chaucer creates once again a problematic picture of Christian identity in that the boy's spiritual actions are those of the mystical movement, having little relation to standard Christian practices that have been traditionally determined by the scholastic tradition. In the late-medieval period, many victims of violence were small children rather than the adult characters found in the traditional lives of saints and martyrs. Since mystical theology is about feeling rather than knowledge, however, the child, his resistance to education, becomes the symbol of the individual who follows the heart rather than standard theological merit-based teachings, pushing forward the argument about which theological teachings form proper Christian identity. In both the cases of Sts. Cecilia and Wenefrede, their stories reveal that they received proper theological instruction—particularly in the instance of Saint Cecilia who instructs and converts both her husband and his brother to Christianity. Mystical theology, on the other hand, is understood as a practice requiring little theological instruction. So, little, in fact, that the symbol of such perfect mysticism in Chaucer's *Canterbury tales* is the seven-year old clergeon of "The Prioress's Tale." Indeed, mystical thought rather than the scholastic is reinforced by the Prioress's character when she announces to the pilgrimage party that she is but a child.

Chaucer infuses the character of the Prioress with highly ambiguous, theopolitical qualities, an infusion that has been the source of much critical debate. Scholars have typically viewed the relationship between the Prioress's cultured character and the violent tale she tells as "ironic but irresolvable" (Frank 229). The portrait of her character, as Seth Lerer explains, "challenges the idea of mere description, either physical or moral" and that her character is based

not on physical “features, but on words” (248). When we are confronted with the Prioress we can assume that Chaucer infused as much theopolitical ambiguity in the description of her character as we find in the other characters. The description of her having slightly vain, delicate and genteel manners, and being a woman of great feeling toward small things is a sign of her being as much a part of secular society as the sacred. Chaucer’s description of her character is in direct contradiction of arguments set forth by many Church leaders, such as Augustine of Hippo, Gelasius, Innocent III, and Jean Gerson, who repeatedly encouraged the separation of church and royal authority, producing unambiguous definitions of sanctity that could never appeal to the active lay life and were difficult at best for official Church members, such as the Prioress, to follow. The wearing of jewelry, the enjoyment of her meals, and her fastidiousness toward cleanliness and appearance makes her character a combination of vice and virtue, illustrating the ambiguous nature of a corporate Christian identity.

Historically, the Prioress’s very profession is one cause for this ambiguity. The late-medieval prioress is a position of diplomacy, finesse, and pious, yet political appeal. Taking nun’s vows was considered a career move for those women with ambition, especially those women of the ruling class (Dyas 107). We will never know if Chaucer’s prioress had been placed in a convent from childhood by her family, or if she entered on her own at some formal stage of her life. Her story is silent on this subject, but there is documented evidence that women of the upper classes did take the veil of their own accord later in life as it afforded them great prestige within this religious milieu. The duties of the prioress made her position in society ambiguous at best because the responsibilities to her community were made up of both secular and sacred interests. She was an estate manager; but she was also a mother superior charged with both the spiritual and the physical well-being of her convent; a mistress of education; a source of alms for

the poor and healing methods for the sick. A prioress actively sought patronage for her convent and oversaw the upkeep of its facilities. The Prioress's demeanor in the tale, therefore, may not be as incongruous as has been argued; the ambiguity is in whether or not she reflects the Christian ideal of sanctity. The gentle, cultivated aire about her are reminiscent of those from the Anglo-Norman ruling class who, as we found in Marie's *Lais*, entered the monastic life during various times of their lives for various purposes. Martyrology, Hagiography, and Marian Tales were all sources of violent stories out of which moral instruction was received, which makes the Prioress's tale fit well within the preached homilies and saints' lives to the laity.

The ambiguous picture of the Prioress, however, does not end here. As previously mentioned, this is a time in which there also developed an intellectual divide among the theologians where spirituality and scholastic theological practices were concerned. As mentioned above, Chaucer is writing during a time of spiritual transition within the Church itself. We cannot underestimate the influence of the mystical movement at this time and on Chaucer's discourse on the subject through the Prioress's character and the tale she tells. When we read the Prioress and her tale we should consider her a follower of this evolving spiritual movement as previously described. The spiritual movement was not solely for the laity. Many scholastically trained theologians and other members of ecclesial authority followed this practice. By the end of the fourteenth century, theologians were becoming more and more disillusioned by scholastic theories with "its excesses and limitations" (Ozment 73). The mystical practice is reminiscent of the early Church, when the Church Fathers, such as Ambrose and Augustine, began looking back to the Pre-Constantine period of the Church as a means for finding the answer to unity and truth. So, too, did the theologians of this period look back to "patristic and monastic ideals in an effort to revive traditional religious life both within and beyond the universities" (73). The mystical

movement, to which the influential Jean Gerson and Nicholas of Clermanges belonged, looked inward toward the heart for answers to religious questions rather than the traditional outward view of the mind. Since the mystical movement believed in an inward approach to experiencing God, it was seen as “more democratic” in that anyone could become “experts in mystical theology” (74). Thus, the little clergeon becomes the “poster child” for the democratization of spirituality in that the individual can determine one’s Christian identity and level of spiritual intensity rather than adherence to established Church doctrine.

The qualities of the Prioress also prove an indication toward a self-determination of spirituality. That she describes herself as a child in the prologue is already an indication that she favors the practice of mystical theology rather than scholastic theological training. Since the movement believed that feelings and experience democratizes, this means that anyone in society, including women, can elevate him- or herself to this practice without the benefit of a university education. Through this discussion it is clear why the mystical movement became so very attractive to many medieval women, particularly those of Margery Kempe’s status, for example. With little public education, such as university training, the mystical movement gave these women a venue in which they could truly become equals in their spiritual experiences to those of men, when, in theory, the Church was already teaching equalities of the soul, but not the body, in their sermons (Tkacz 55-6).

The specific language used to describe the Prioress helps to raise awareness of the mystical tradition: “She was so charitable and so pitous / She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous / Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde” (GP 143-4) In some ways, there is no logic to this reaction by the Prioress for a creature that ruins grain, crops, and pasture lands. The tears she sheds for small, insignificant things alerts the audience, however, to the experience of

sapientia, or the personal experience. When Chaucer associates the Prioress with small things, such as a child or animal, the audience can come to understand that the tale will center on a discourse concerning mystical theology and its consequences when practiced in the active lay life. The hero of the story is a small boy who does small, personal things, such as go to school; he prays to the statue of the Virgin Mary and sings his devotion to her. And, that is all. The boy is not an image of any political or public significance to the society in which he lives. We know not his name; he conducts no heroic feats of strength or valor. He converts no one to Christianity; nor does he uphold his Christian faith or its ideals against others as in the case of Saint Cecilia or Saint Wenefrede. He belongs to the most humble of social classes in that his mother is a widow, also a woman of very little political consequence. Chaucer uses words of insignificance, such as ‘litel’ and smale,’ to describe the boy and his world. The word ‘litel’ is also associated with the Christian school (495), a book for learning (516), space (604), body (682), and time (686) The word ‘litel’ is used twelve times, the number of the twelve apostles who had lived their lives outside of society, in poverty, and in devotion to Christ. And though there is so much insignificance in this story, its strong pathos appeal lures the audience into *feeling* the personal experience of the little clergeon’s devotion, the mother’s pain of loss, and the victory of defeat over the devil by the transcendence of the little boy’s soul. Viewed in this way, mystical theology appears a passive spiritual exercise, internal and relative to the individual, and devoid of merit-based action.

Unlike “The Tale of Melibee” with its logos-centric plot construction, a construction that St. Augustine would have admired and applauded, the Prioress centers her tale on *sapientia*, the mode of feeling. This means that the heart plays a much greater role in the practice of mystical theology than scholastic reason because, for the mystic, the soul resides in the heart, not the

head. This icon is used in the tale with such pathos appeal that it must invoke a mystical response of tears by the audience. The Prioress is preaching to the group of pilgrims; given her high ecclesial position in her convent, she would have thought nothing of it; but as a possible member of the mystical movement, her preaching contains doctrines that are personal and deeply felt through experience and emotion only and not through reason. Unlike readers of “The Pardoner’s Tale” or “The Parson’s Tale,” the audience will find no moral or scholastic reasoning in “The Prioress’s Tale,” only a heart-felt truism that God is of the “highest good” and not the “highest truth” as Marie de France propounded in the prologue to the *Lais*.

Consequently, when analyzing *The Canterbury Tales*, we are analyzing a literary pilgrimage by Chaucer himself, in his quest to debate and find answers to very difficult theopolitical questions concerning the corporate and lay identities that had created an atmosphere of ambiguity for Christians in late-fourteenth century English society. Since the formation of corporate Christian identity is a difficult one, particularly when we take into account the historical and theopolitical climate of the time period, we can agree with Staley’s assessment that *The Canterbury Tales* is fragmented. The ambiguous layers of sacred and secular meanings to locations and characters indicate Chaucer’s preoccupation with the uncertainty of authority by the secular and sacred order of his society. *The Canterbury Tales* as a literary representation of society is further fragmented in voice, appeal, narrative, genre, and a host of other rhetorical, compositional, and literary methodologies. *The Canterbury Tales* mirrors the fragmented shape of Chaucer’s society in which various theopolitical theories battled for dominance over the right of jurisdiction. The level of understanding and reaction to these theories by the members of medieval society, however, creates a pluralistic society that Augustine could not have envisioned in *City of God*, with both the secular and sacred institutions jostling for the political right and

power of authority and order over all of society. *The Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's poetic response to these theopolitical attempts, and, because of its fragmented nature, we will be unable to find, as Jim Rhodes rightly puts it, any over-arching solution to medieval society's preoccupation with identity as seen by the poet through the portrayal of his pilgrims and the tales they tell. We must then come to the conclusion that in his literary quest for theopolitical answers, Chaucer found no solutions himself and leaves it up to us, the audience, to continue the quest for answers to the shaping of the ideal, well-ordered society.

Margery Kempe, on the other hand, felt no such anxieties. In her book, Kempe makes it clear how and what kind of Christian identity is the ideal for the common good. Her persuasive argument in the book reveals fragmented reactions toward her pursuit of that identity. Kempe's narrative audience clearly reflects the growing discontent with Church authority and orthodoxy on one side and great animosity toward self-determination of identity on the other. This constant tension between the need to adhere to orthodoxy and the innate need in search of selfhood forms the center of the theopolitical issues that Kempe addresses and will be further discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4
MENDICANT CULTURE AND CORPORATE IDENTITY
IN *THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE*

One of the most neglected narratives concerning the theopolitical debate on the development of Christian identity in late medieval England is *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Margery Kempe lived in England after the “Benedictine monopoly” on religious matters collapsed all across Europe. This collapse of the monastic ideal coincided with the rapid “expansion of western society,” particularly the urban environment at least since the time of Chaucer, which resulted in a “new life of diversity and opportunity” (Southern 240) for the laity. The development of towns and trade and the growing number of literate laity brought new challenges to the Church’s pastoral responsibilities (Thomson 119) within these newly developing urban areas. In England, the marked movement of the clergy, whose “career aspirations and the role of crown service” coincided, made possible the near-complete “laicization of the lower echelons” of Church offices by 1500 CE (Swanson 121-2). Between the filling of Church posts by the laity and the fraternal religious movement that filled the pastoral void in the urban environment, the theopolitical climate in England offered the lay person with enough motivation to explore identity within various religious settings outside the monastic ideal. English church life at this time included “a variety of patterns of religious activity,” such as “local shrines, side chapels and chantries, private chapels belonging to the gentry, hermitages, and centres catering for seasonal works . . . all increased the number of options open to local laypeople” (Mursell 164). *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a testament to the variety of religious movements and practices that formed the sacred aspect of her society. The clerical, fraternal,

monastic, and lay ideals are all represented within its pages. Therefore, when we read Kempe's book, we discover a very complex picture of fifteenth-century English society and the multitude of theopolitical discourses concerning identity that interested the various religious branches of the Church and the laity alike.

Since its publication in the early-twentieth century much of the scholarly debate about the *Book* has unfortunately centered on its historical facts and accuracy rather than on its narrative and rhetorical discourses concerning the description of one woman's journey toward the achievement of spiritual identity (Phillips 25). When we engage the *Book* for these purposes, we should focus not only on *what* Kempe and her amanuenses write, but *how* they convey theological discourses through narrative so that we can examine her efforts to connect with her contemporary lay audience for the purpose of nurturing their spiritual development. Such critical consideration makes *The Book of Margery Kempe* become one of the few surviving prereformation spiritual texts to offer us insight into the doctrinal debates concerning identity from the perspective of the laity in England.⁴² Marea Mitchell has summed up the last several decades of modern scholarship on the *Book* as follows:

The elision of the book with Kempe has . . . resulted in a tendency to take the book at face value, to treat it as if it were factual or a realist text. Taking Kempe at the book's word has been a consistent theme throughout seventy years of criticism . . . The debate [since then] has shifted from orthodoxy to transgression but the facticity of the book is still implicitly or explicitly assumed. Both approaches

⁴² Anthony Goodman argues that our understanding of spirituality in late-medieval England is "deeply impoverished . . . as a consequence of the enormous destruction of religious texts during the Reformation". *Margery Kempe and Her World*. (Longman, 2002) 2.

assume that the *Book* is realist in mode and pay little attention to it as project and propaganda, as literary and rhetorical . . . (86)

Barry Windeatt has also made the observation concerning scholarly attitudes toward the *Book* that “in an appropriately postmodern spirit, much modern writing about [it] ignores the centre for the margins, averting its gaze from what its author might have regarded her text as being centrally concerned to put on record: Her lifetime of conversations with Christ” (*Companion* 7). For some scholars the lack of concentration on the *Book*’s content has led literary interpretations to focus on a variety of subjects, such as the author Kempe’s state of mind, without the benefit of contextualizing her writing within the larger corpus of contemporary devotional literature.⁴³ A. C. Spearing’s psychological profiling of Kempe is such an example when he states that “much of [the book] is about the inner life of a woman engrossed in fantasies about other peoples’ images of her, and then it comes to us through the filter of a male ecclesiastic’s writing” (632), while Brad Herzog calls Kempe “insane, due to what most experts characterize as post-partum psychosis” (67). Lastly, Susan Colon has described Kempe’s quest for sanctity as compulsive and “spectacularly unconventional” (283).

The scholarly community has been at this literary crossroad before, becoming singularly focused on a particular theoretical paradigm at the expense of another.⁴⁴ Expanding the critical repertoire around Kempe to include analysis of the rhetorical and narrative features of her book

⁴³ See also Raymond Powell’s “Margery Kempe: An Exemplar of Late Medieval English Piety.” *The Catholic Historical Review*. 89:1 (Jan. 2003) 1-23. In this article, Powell makes the following overall assessment concerning scholarly criticism of the *Book* based on an historical orientation in this way: “Those who reject the *Book* do so because it does not fit the twentieth-century standard of medieval mysticism created by scholars from the works of Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross. Those who admire Kempe do so by an anachronistic (and often unconvincing) discovery of feminist virtues in her story. In either instance, modern scholars do Margery Kempe a disservice by ignoring the context in which she wrote. An ahistorical twentieth- or twenty-first century reading may indeed leave the impression of an hysteric, a feminist heroine, or a brilliant social commentator”(2).

⁴⁴ In the instance of the aftermath of J. R. R. Tolkien’s passionate argument in 1936 to pull *Beowulf* from the confines of an historical orientation, we have since witnessed whole new schools of thought from subsequent generations of scholars who have nurtured and broadened our understanding and aesthetic appreciation of *Beowulf* as literature in the English language. We should do so much for *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

can undoubtedly shed further light on lay attitudes toward late-medieval practices of religion and theological discourse on identity. In this way, there is no need for concern with “high seriousness, or beauty, or the imagination” (Allen vii) as it might or might not have been applied to the development of the *Book*. Instead, criticism can evaluate the text based on “its permanence and its value...in branches other than aesthetics or psychology” (vii). In his discussion on postmodernism and medieval literature, Paul Strohm observes of the *Book* that if there is a “disjunction” in the unfolding of Kempe’s story, it should be embraced and its unsettling nature explored. Any “attempt to contain Margery Kempe’s inherent excessiveness within the categories of the saint, . . . does intrinsic violence to the special properties of her existence” (152) and also to that of her society. By focusing on the narrative features of the *Book*, we can better position the analysis of it within the larger theological context so that Kempe becomes less the anomaly and more another voice in the multitude of growing lay voices seeking a finite articulation of the perfect Christian identity in secular society (Powell 3).

The following focuses, therefore, on a compositional orientation of the *Book* rather than the conventional historical or psychological orientation that has characterized the tenor of scholarship since the 1980s. The particularly significant narrative features of the *Book* are its homiletic construct, the very important theme of poverty, and Kempe’s attempts to describe herself existing more outside of the world rather than living in it. It is worth analyzing these features when in pursuit of the *Book*’s doctrinal advocacy as they reveal a deep commitment to a particular style of spirituality that found growing popularity among Kempe’s merchant class: the mendicant culture. Despite Fleming’s cautions that it is difficult to determine “exclusively” mendicant practices in literary texts (371), it is important to study Kempe’s work in relation to the mendicant culture as a whole since it permeated every aspect of medieval life. From the friars

as advisors in the royal courts, to teachers and preachers in the universities, to confessors at the parish churches, mendicant thought became the many interwoven threads in the fabric of late-medieval intellectual life and became attractive to many of the laity who had determined the religious practices of the cloistered monastic lifestyle inconceivable. *The Book of Margery Kempe* offers tremendous intellectual and theological insight into the mindset of one who had believed in this lifestyle to such a degree as to spend an inordinate amount of time and energy in the writing of an entire book about it. To that end, approaching the narrative qualities and characteristics of her book enables us to witness the intellectual pursuit of mendicant experience as the foundation for her search of the perfect Christian identity.

Margery Kempe was born into a theopolitical climate when “as the power of the order in the Christian community increased, so did a deepening contemplative tradition on the opposite side” (Russell 72). Rejecting the search for God through the exercises of human reason as they had been set forth in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century scholastic tradition, the growing lay contemplative movement focused its energies on finding God through more personal, inner experiences that in some cases circumvented the orthodoxy of the Church. Part of Geoffrey Chaucer’s discourse found in “The Prioress’s Tale,” for example, centers on mystical theology and the difficulties of its expression in secular society. Because of the dangers that personal experience can bring to the nature of religious expressions, heresy was more prevalent in this period than Church authority had had to confront and address in its earlier history (Leff 1-4). Jean Gerson, an eminent figure of Church authority whose writings influenced theological thought for several centuries, anticipated some political obstacles should there have been an acceptance of religious pluralism by Church authority. In his *On Church Power*, Gerson is clear that “church power” is “the clergy” and “not the whole company of believers or its individual

members” (O’Donovan 518). The tense encounters between Church authority and the laity that Kempe describes in the *Book* are illustrative of this political perception between the Church and the various movements of lay contemplatives.

The Church’s response to the laity’s growing interest in personal spiritual experience precipitated a growth industry in the production of religious texts. Many religious texts were translated from the Latin or French, and as these were intended for the proper channeling of lay piety, the English Church, for example, went “to some lengths to ensure that only texts of unimpeachable orthodoxy [were made available], . . . carefully revising or diluting material where necessary (Mursell 167). Despite some of these Church initiatives in its efforts to continue a corporate Christian identity, the growth of lay spirituality through their entrance into Church offices, the development of guilds and confraternities, as well as intellectual skepticism of Church authority by the laity, brought about a continued yearning for the self-determination of identity outside the confines of Church authority. During Kempe’s time, the Continent “witnessed a wide diversity of experiments in religious life such as beguinages and other groups of lay people living together under a common rule.” The laity in England, however, preferred the solitary way of life (175). The lives of Richard Rolle and Julian of Norwich, as well as of Margery Kempe, are examples of this religious trend in that culture. But, as Kempe’s life reveals, solitary did not necessarily mean enclosed. Some like Julian of Norwich entered into cells for the rest of their lives, but there were those like Margery Kempe who considered solitary to mean no physical contact, such as sexual intercourse, with others.

The need to conduct life by the laity, as Kempe’s life demonstrates, could not “involve flight from the world, but engagement with it,” and to be “accessible to every Christian, clerk and layman alike” (Lawrence 17). Thus, the *vita apostolica* became an enormously popular

religious way of life for the laity since the twelfth century. Its greatest attraction was that it “offered an ideal of sanctity and a programme that could be realized without abandoning marriage and secular responsibilities” (17). Many confraternities that promoted this religious way of life, such as the Waldesians and the Humiliati in the thirteenth century to the Hussites and Modern Devotionalists in the fifteenth, became the greatest cause of Church concern for its authority in that these groups preached without the proper licenses and attempted to translate biblical texts without sanctioned guidance, both issues remaining a source of contention well into Kempe’s time between the laity and the Church.

The fraternal orders of the Franciscans and the Dominicans also fed this theopolitical fire, especially when urbanites redirected their wealth into those coffers. These fraternal orders were attractive to many of Kempe’s status, seeking a balance between the theoretical veneer of corporate Christian identity and the lived experiences of personal affective piety. With their official papal protection and their carefully engineered contemplative lifestyle for a secular world, the mendicant culture blended well with the active lifestyle that many urbanites were unwilling to give up (Pollard 223). Their popularity and their papal privileges caused a continual rift between the mendicant orders and the episcopate that believed it their right to determine legal jurisdiction over these orders and their activities within the urban environments.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, mendicant influence pervaded all aspects of medieval life. Unlike those of the clergy, the mendicant sermon had made an “irresistible impact upon congregations which contained significant numbers of literate merchants and professional people, long starved of pulpit oratory” (Lawrence 121). In fact, successful mendicant preachers of this time period were accosted on the

⁴⁵ This debate will become central to the “development of western political thought” in which the “conceptual framework of monarchical authority and power was permanently altered.” Thus, “by shifting the discussion from ‘rights’ of subjects to the origins of jurisdiction and political authority, mendicant theologians cleared the way for an irresistible emphasis upon the all-encompassing and pervasive authority of the prince,” which “removed a difficult obstacle of medieval constitutional thought to absolute monarchy” (Burns 453).

streets of the village or town in similar ways as today's movie stars or rock stars are accosted by their fans. Writings of medieval contemporaries describe how these preachers had to slip away in the dead of night before they could be prevented from leaving town by the enthusiastic laity. Jacques de Vitry, for example, explains how Fouques de Neuilly needed a new cassock each day, "to replace the one torn by crowds who came from distant countries to hear the holy man and share with him some of his sanctified possessions" (Roberts 45). Their message of active spiritual participation clearly resonated with the urban dwellers "hungry for guidance in personal religion," and it was a "hopeful" one of salvation that greatly contrasted with the "pessimism of the traditional monastic spirituality." This optimistic message encouraged an evangelical attitude to develop that could be practiced without foregoing the active lay life, while the mendicant way of life also drew many into their ranks (Lawrence 121-2).

In Kempe's town of King's Lynn⁴⁶ we can see this theopolitical climate in the very fabric of her urban experience, for the geography of King's Lynn reflects this fifteenth-century theopolitical climate in which the canon, mendicant, and clerical cultures were heavily represented. The geographic layout of the town offers a symbolic representation of the relationship between the mendicant orders, the parish clergy and the town-dwellers. It reveals how socially-centered the mendicant culture became in Lynn, a town that had an active trade agenda with the European Continent, especially Germany, as opposed to the parish clergy. A fifteenth-century citizen could wander literally through the heart of the town—Listergate and Fynnes Lane—and find within nearly a stone's throw from each other the Augustinian, Dominican, Franciscan, and the Carmelite friaries (Goodman xv). Only at the periphery will we find the chapels and churches of St. Nicholas, St. James, All Saints, and St. Margaret. And so,

⁴⁶ It has been estimated that during Kempe's lifetime, the population of King's Lynn was about 4,600. See Goodman, Anthony. *Margery Kempe and Her World*. (Longman, 2002) 15.

friary-life and not corporate church-life was at the center of this town. The mendicant orders provided the community of Lynn with high-quality and varied education, especially given the amount of wealth the townsfolk enjoyed from their successful industry in trade during Kempe's lifetime (15-21). Extensive access to the educational systems through the various friaries at Lynn caused "learning and books [to become] part and parcel of religious life within the town" (Parker 66).

In King's Lynn every secular and religious order was represented, offering the citizens varied options of education for their young. The Carmelite Friar Aleyn, for example, belonged to a mendicant order that followed severe poverty and was dedicated to the education of the "unschooled of society" (66). The friaries of both the Dominicans and the Franciscans offered "schools of grammar, logic, philosophy, and theology" (Orme 263). Not every friary in every province of late-medieval England offered such extensive education; but, it has been documented that the Dominican friary at Lynn conducted a center of philosophy, of which one of Kempe's confessors must have been a member. The Augustinian friary at Lynn offered the teaching of grammar and theology. Historical records indicate that in 1446 there were sixteen students in attendance at that friary. The Carmelites also offered similar educational opportunities, as well as the teaching of children "their letters and further studies" (265). As far as the monastic and clerical spiritual representation at King's Lynn was concerned, the Benedictine priory that was based at St. Margaret's was "a celebrated cathedral school to which continental scholars journeyed" (Parker 66), and St. John's chapel, part of the parish church at Lynn, was a location for educating the members of the Guild of Young Clerks of Lynn (65).

Given this cultural context, we should not wonder at the richness of mendicant influence on *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The religious channels of Kempe's various mendicant

confessors throughout her lifetime form the very basis for her affective piety and deep devotion to Christ's humanity and His passion. The *Book* describes several meetings and interactions by Kempe with various members of mendicant orders: Aleyn of Lynn, a Carmelite doctor of divinity and William Southfield, a Carmelite friar; and her main confessor a Dominican anchorite appear to be the principal influences on Kempe in the formation of the *Book*. Kempe's pilgrimages to various places in the Middle East and England as they are described in the *Book* were maintained by many mendicant orders: The Holy Sepulchre by the Franciscan order; St. Mary's in Lester was a foundation of the Augustinian canons; the Abbey of Denny in Cambridge was a Franciscan foundation for nuns. To reiterate the religious literature of which Kempe had exposure, St. Bonaventure was a Franciscan friar; Richard Rolle, an English mystic; St. Bridget of Sweden, a visionary and mystic; Walter Hilton, an Augustinian canon and mystic; St. Elizabeth of Hungary, a follower of the Franciscan Rule throughout her adult life; and Mary of Oignies, a mystic and prophetess. By introducing the audience to these various avenues that were influenced and controlled by mendicant ideology, Kempe raised her audience's awareness to a society clearly moving toward a direction of apostolic practices. In order to build her ethos, Kempe had to focus the audience's attention on this shifting ideology in order to highlight a better way of life with less monastic and clerical involvement.

This narrative purpose of the *Book* is crucial for understanding her society that had been built on a centralization of Church authority that "generated machinery to assist the regulation of religion, but could not itself dictate what the faith was" (Swanson 51). The *Book's* Kempe represents the many who questioned the episcopal and parochial systems of determining corporate Christian identity. The negative descriptions of Church authorities clearly point toward such an unfavorable attitude. In Chapter 45, for example, the men in Bishop of Worcester's

household wore clothes “al-to-raggyd and al-to-daggyd,” (*MK* 3600), which Kemp probably meant as a quick jab at the bishops and their excessive “fiscalism” (Ozment 211). By the fifteenth century, ecclesial authority had found very creative ways for assessing fees from their clergy and the laity in order to swell the Church’s coffers. Ozment explains that “bishops regularly fined or exacted fees from clergy who came late to their appointments . . . ; from mass priests absent from their duties; [or] from clergy desiring to celebrate the sacraments on portable altars—apparently a tax on mendicants who assisted the secular clergy during peak religious seasons” (212). Bishops also imposed fees on those who committed crimes against Church authorities, slapped concubinage fees on the clergy, as well as for the baptism of their illegitimate children (212). Kempe’s aversion toward money, and the accumulation of wealth in general, stems in part out of this knowledge of a system that was rapidly finding resistance from both the clergy and laity alike, forming another argument for an apostolic way of life devoid of any fiscal considerations.

The *Book* was created through a collaborative effort between real historical figures, Margery Kempe and her amanuensis. Given the mistrust between the episcopal authority and the mendicant orders, Kempe’s employment of male scribes is an attempt to create the orthodox veneer necessary for her revelations and visions to become widely accepted (Voaden 112-3) by the townspeople of King’s Lynn who had access to multiple avenues for spiritual fulfillment in their town. We do not know how much or how little the scribes that Kempe employed were rhetorically or compositionally involved, or whether or not certain events as described in the *Book* were actually experienced by Kempe. Windeatt describes the issue of authority in this way:

There has . . . been a tendency to cherry-pick episodes from the *Book* to provide illustration for particular arguments about the nature of belief and devotion or the

role and experiences of women, with no acknowledgement of the ways in which representation of the episodes that the *Book* presents may well be dictated more by considerations of genre and discourse than by what ‘actually’ happened, or by ‘real events at all. (xviii)

Whether or not the events related are relevant to the discussion concerning Kempe’s affective piety were factual or derived from lived experience, we can say that the events she chose to include in the *Book* are by the very fact of their inclusion directly illustrative of Kempe’s repulsed attitude against the theopolitical climate of her time.

The compositional style of the *Book* has been admirably laid out in a succinct and informative essay by Cheryl Glenn. In “Reexamining the Book of Margery Kempe”: A Rhetoric of Autobiography,” Glenn positions Kempe’s *dialogism* between the implied author and the narrator. Given the intended audience, it is useful to position her dialogism between the narrator Kempe and her implied audience. Steeped in mendicant culture and its education, the *Book* becomes a formal *apologia pauperum*, a defense of poverty, rather than strictly a spiritual autobiography.⁴⁷ With each description of her mystical and secular experiences, the *Book*’s focus on the reactions of the narrative audience persuades the lay audience to conduct more self-examination exercises on a life of piety and poverty in a material world than elevating Kempe to sainthood. Following the Horatian tradition that poetry belongs to rhetoric (Scholes 140), which means medieval narratives were considered both didactic and rhetorical, the *Book* educates and attempts to sway its audience away from corporeal matters by highlighting its failings and weaknesses through an elevation of Kempe’s form of *vita apostolica*. Looking at a few

⁴⁷ In his introduction to *The Flowering of Mysticism* (Crossroad) 1998, Bernard McGinn has described this category as “spiritual ‘diaries’” (20), which may be worth more consideration than the formal category in which Kempe’s *Book* has been placed.

examples, we can see how the *Book's* content persuades the urban laity away from their path of materialism and toward a spiritual lifestyle modeled on mendicant custom.

In the narrative structure of the *Book*, we can discover Kempe's uses of the homiletic style that was very familiar even to those whose education was limited to grammar or tutorial instruction, rather than formal scholastic training at the universities. The usage of homiletic qualities to create poetry or prose narratives, such as mystical texts, is not unusual. Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale" is an example of the use of homiletic preaching methods for the creation of this tale. The tale's structure follows the standard homiletic format: introduction of the theme, formal address to the audience, the story or anecdote, the moral of the story and its relation to vice or virtue. Unlike the scholastic sermon model, the homily lends itself well to storytelling because, by its very nature, it was designed for the dissemination of moral standards and the "sacramental life of the church, particularly on penance and the Eucharist" (McGinn 10), to a broader audience outside of the scholastic environment.

The homily is considered the oldest sermon form; its origins can, of course, be traced well back into Christian Antiquity. Its composition style is usually described as the "smooth and simple" method (Spencer 232), making it nearly undetectable to the unpracticed eye when reading mystical prose or poetry, such as in the *Book*. The homily's free-form construction and expository language easily masks complex doctrinal points. This strength of the homily model made it more easily adaptable to a variety of writing styles already familiar to the laity, such as moral, humor, historical, travel, classical myths and marvels, natural history, and the fantastical (239). These narrative features of the homily border at times on the unreal or fantastic, and were further "enlivened. . . by touches of local colour and a contemporary setting" (Owst 155). The

Book of Margery Kempe was written in this homiletic tradition. Within its pages, the homiletic tone and language “[serve] to highlight the homely, colloquial favor of the *Book*” (Triggs 12).

An attempt at infusing it with epic-like qualities can also be detected. In the classical epic tradition “only to the select few, chosen by divine will, do [the gods] show themselves” (Calasso 5). And so, in the medieval Christian tradition it was the mystics who became privy to God in his “fullness.” The epic quality of the *Book* begins with the prologue and then moves *in medias res*—in the midst not simply of things, however, but of divine things. The narrative description of Kempe’s journey in the *Book* centers on spiritual meaning and not on any given historical sequence of things, events, or even time. To do so would have placed too great an emphasis on material existence, history and time, and thereby diminished the purity of the spiritual relationship between her and God. In this manner, the content of the *Book* concerns itself not with temporal, materialistic matters. The royal government, the Church, and social class play small roles in the *Book*’s narrative, and only when these served to highlight the false spirituality that the mendicant culture wished to reform.

Kempe begins her narrative with a homiletic introduction that follows the better-known ones found in John Mirk’s *Liber Festial*. This collection was highly popular and circulated widely among preachers and devotees alike. We can turn to Mirk’s homily collection, not as a source for the *Book*’s homiletic features, but in it we will find an exemplum of the sinful woman refusing to confess and her subsequent redemption by a vision of Christ. The *De Dominica in Quadragesima. Sermo Brevis* is worth quoting at length in order to consider the narrative borrowings in the *Book*:

For thus I rede of a woman that had don an horrybull synne, and myght neuer, for schame, schryue hyr therof. And oft, when ho come to schryf, shows yn purpose

forto haue ben schryuen; but euer the fend put such a schame yn hur hert, that scho had neuer grace to clanse hur therofe. Then, on a nyght, as scho lay yn hur bed, and thought moch on that synne, Ihusu Crist come to hur and sayde: ‘My doghtyr, why wol thou not schew me thy hert, and schryue the of that synne that thou lyse yn?’ ‘Lord,’ quode scho, ‘I may not, for schame.’ Then sayde crist: ‘Schew me thy hond’; and toke hur hond, and put hit ynto hys side, and sayde, and drogh hit all bloody out: ‘Be thou no more aschamed to opyn thy hert to me, then I am to opon my side to the.’ Then was this woman agrysed of the blod, and wold haue weschyn hit away; but sho might not, be no way, tyll scho had schryuen hur of that synne. Then, when scho was schryuen, anon the hond was clene as that othyr. Thus God dothe grace yn esy demyng. (90).

The narrative event in Chapter one of Kempe’s *Book* follows this homiletic sermon, and, for comparison and further consideration, it is worth quoting it here, as well:

And than sche for hyr gostly fadyr, for sche had a thing in conscyens which she had nevyr schewyd befor that tyme in alle hyr lyf. For sche was evyr lettyd be hyr enmy, the devel, evyrmor seyng to hyr whyl sche was in good heele hir nedyd no confessyon, but don penawns be hirself aloone, and all schuld be foryovyn, for God is mercyful. And therfor this creatur [...] wold not schewyn it in confession. (MK 180-8)

At this point Kempe continues to recall and describe in detail her ordeal with the devils:

...as sche lay aloone and hir kepars wer fro hir, owyr mercyful Lord Crist Jhesu, evyr to be trostyde [...] aperyde to hys creatur which had forsakyn hym in lyknesse of a manl, most semly, most bewtyvows, and most amiable that evyr might be

seen with mannys eye, clad in a mantyl of purpyl sylke, syttyng upon hir beddys syde, lokyng upon hir wyth so blyssyd a chere [...] seyd to hir thes wordys:

‘Dowtyr, why has thow forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevyr the?’ (MK 224-32)

In the previous excerpt from Mirk’s *Festial*, the elements and qualities of this conventional homiletic structure used to describe Kempe’s ordeal in the *Book* are clear; but more importantly, certain details have been omitted or altered in order for the event’s message to become consistent with Kempe’s apostolic practices. In Mirk’s homily, the story urges a cleansing of the soul through confession; Kempe’s story, however, emphasizes a direct relationship with Christ. In this way the message of Mirk’s homily changes from a confessional message, strongly emphasizing the power of Church authority, to one built directly on belief and trust between herself and Christ. In this narrative, Kempe is not coerced into showing her heart or confess her deepest sin to a church-authorized confessor. The description of this event places great emphasis on the direct conversation with Christ to be enough to cleanse her soul and mind, and restore her back to physical and emotional health.

It is no accident that a homily similar to Mirk’s *Quadragesima* could have been used as the *exemplum* for this event in Kempe’s *Book*. The *Quadragesia* belonged to the Lenten season of the liturgical year; unlike the season of Advent, this holy season becomes a time for fasting and the annual confession of sins by the laity. The compilation of homilies focuses on themes of Christ’s temptation in the wilderness; they also teach “abstinence, . . . patience, humility, and purity of heart” (Heffernan and Matter 31). Thus, Lent became a time when the lay person was to focus on the “battle with the forces of evil” (32), as well as on corporeal and spiritual existence. In the *Book*, there is a clear understanding of these mystical ideas: Kempe’s struggles against the devil that had kept her from confessing her sin and coerced her into feeling strength and health

through corporeality rather than through spirituality, which led her into the pit of hell until she was released from that torment by the visitation of Christ. From the very beginning of the *Book*, Kempe establishes the fundamental ideology of mendicant culture: in order to be in a relationship with Christ, there can be no intermediary. This message is the thesis statement of her entire book. Every event and action that follows this first-related experience describes Kempe existing in isolation, separate from Church authority. Consequently, as a representative of mendicant culture, tensions and conflicts arise between herself and the multiple groups with which she comes into contact: neighbors, Church authorities, aristocracy, leaders of communities, pilgrims.

Therefore, the *Book* challenges and continues to challenge a lay audience to think deeply and carefully about its own cultivation of spiritual piety. It offers not only a guide to *vita apostolica* in the secular environment, but also warns against the dangers and threats to apostolic piety posed by other members of the laity and Church authority. In chapter 13, for example, Kempe is in a church at Canterbury, surrounded by disbelief and mistrust from monks, priests, and laymen, all of whom despised her public wailing. Her pious action and their responses against it caused her husband such embarrassment that he left the church, acting as if he did not know her (13:857-62). Having been abandoned by her husband, Kempe suddenly becomes subject to the monks' impromptu inquest. A senior member of the monastic community interrogates Kempe on her knowledge of orthodox religious instruction (13:864-9). Her recitation of Scripture, however, provoked a heated response from the monk: "I wold thow wer closyd in an hows of ston, that ther schuld no man speke wyth the" (13:870-1). Kempe has an equally heated response for the monk in that she demanded he support God's servants and amend his ways (13:872-3).

It is clear from this exchange that Church authority, represented here by the monk, continued to impose a clear policy on matters of religious instruction, in that the standard question, what does a lay person know about God, should have precipitated the standard catechismal answer from Kempe. Her response, however, having arisen out of the textual authority of the Bible, caused the monk's desire for her imprisonment, thereby making her effectively disappear from the active lay life. Kempe, on the other hand, voices her disappointment in the monk's behavior, believing that as a servant of God, she had the authority to know and understand the biblical text as part of her religious experience. In this instance, explicit faith clashes with implicit faith. Church authority through the licensing of its clergy continued to control the interpretation of that holy text for the laity. Kempe's resistance against Church authority that had caused her husband to abandon her becomes the metaphor for the laity who continued to accept their Christian identity as it was dictated by the Church rather than discover their spirituality on their own.

The *Book's* advocacy of *vita apostolica*, therefore, forces her contemporary Christian audience to confront its own spiritual paucity and asks the rhetorical question that underlies the narrative: how far is one willing to go for the faith? In answer to this question, the *Book's* narrative is full of rhetorical situations, some of which, such as the previous example, are decidedly uncomfortable to contemplate as many of the narrative audiences in the *Book* resist following a life of piety and poverty by publicly condemning her behavior in favor of worldly pleasures. At another level, rhetorical debate on the spiritual merits of *vita apostolica* in secular society occurs repeatedly between Kempe and other narrative characters, such as her husband. These rhetorical situations are difficult to detect. Unlike classical dialogues found in Plato or the dialogues of Boethius in *Consolation of Philosophy*, the rhetorical situations can only be

discovered through the careful consideration of the homiletic features of the *Book*. Its application of familiar characters, local events, and colloquial language reveals the rhetorical purpose of directly addressing those living in Lynn. Another example, the following scene, a seemingly naïve conversation between Kempe and her husband, is perhaps the most profound rhetorically in the *Book* as it reveals to a lay audience the heart of mendicant thought and *vita apostolica*:

It befel upon a Fryday on Mydsomyr Evyn in rygth hot wedyr, as this creatur was komying fro-Yorke-ward, beryng a botel with bere in hir hand and hir husband a cake in hys bosom, he askyd hys wyfe this qwestyon:

“Margery, yf her come a man with a swerd and wold smyte of myn hed les than I schulde comown kindly with you as I have do befor, seyth me trewth of yowr consciens—for ye sey ye wyl not lye—whethyr wold ye suffyr myn hed to be smet of, er ellys suffyr me to medele with you ayen as I dede sumtyme?”

“Alas, ser,’ sche seyde, ‘why meve ye this mater and have we ben chast this viii wekys?’

‘For I wyl wethe the trewth of yowr hert.’

And than sche seyde with gret sorwe:

“For soothe I had levar se yow be slayn than we schuld turne ayen to owyr unclennesse.”

And he seyde ayen: “Ye arn no good wife.”(MK 708-22)

When we engage in the interpretation of such a scene, consideration of the devotional and spiritual purpose of the narrative in relation to mendicant ideology helps to illuminate the *Book’s* didactic message. The question Kempe’s husband poses rests on complex Christian moral and ethical grounds forming the rhetorical question for the audience: which is more important,

material or immaterial existence? the secular or the sacred? For apostolic Margery, though there is a tone of regret, the answer to her husband's question is clear; for the audience whose spiritual practices were shaped and fashioned through more corporate forms of piety, i.e. clerical authority, perhaps not so. It is the clarity of her answer, however crass as it seems to modern sensibilities, that elevates Kempe's piety above that of her lay audience. The success of this rhetorical elevation rests on the audience learning this point: where spirituality is concerned, the only spirituality of any value is the apostolic one. Following *vita apostolica* means to be above episcopal authority and rediscover the teachings of the early Church.

John's strong reaction and harsh reply illustrates the Christian dilemma in secular society, illuminating the lay audience's natural resistance against following religious practices that were totally devoid of material matters. Thus, this dialogue affirms Kempe's apostolic piety and negates John's secular spirituality. Her answer and John's quick response against it expose the material weaknesses of the lay audience's continual need for the desires of corporeality and its lack of what the *Book* considers the proper spiritual commitment to Christ. In this context, Kempe's answer is not heartless or arrogant; instead, her answer formulates a challenge to each member of her society—to look into the heart for answers to spirituality. This dialogue, then, teaches the lay audience about the debt owed, and the heavy price to be paid, in order to rend the veil between the secular and sacred realms of society; only then can there become a universal society ruled by Christ and by no other.

In order to create balance and rhythm in the *Book*, the use of parallelisms also brings about a spiritual awareness concerning the differences between the stark paucity of the material world and the fertile rewards found in the immaterial. The *Book* describes events that continuously move in and out of the earthly and otherworldly realms of existence. Some of the

most notable are Kempe's rejection of any sexual relations with her husband, while yearning for an intimate relationship between herself and the Divine; Kempe dresses herself in the most flashy clothing (the sign of a prostitute) and then rejects these for a simple white garment (the sign of a virgin); Kempe describes the devils that plague her soul and the beauty of the white beings of angels that float about, defying all the laws of nature; She also describes her attendance to the poor and sick and her attendance to the Virgin Mary and the Baby Jesus; Kempe describes the beauty of celestial music that stayed with her for nearly twenty-five years and the terrible melody she could not bear when she spoke of Christ's passion; there were those in the *Book* who believed that she was touched by God and there were those who believed her a heretic; there were the carrying and dressing of the effigy of Christ in a reliquary and his actual appearances to Kempe; and finally, there were times when she believed in her visions and there were those times when she doubted.

These oppositions are best explained by Carolyn Dinshaw who states that Kempe is revealed as a woman "both deeply situated in and profoundly *out* of her time" (222). The debate concerning sacred reality and profane appearances manifests itself in these narrative plot constructions of the *Book* in order to stimulate prayerful contemplation as well as deep self-examination of wants, behaviors and needs, and to ask the question about whether or not the laity is searching to satisfy those needs in the proper realm of existence. The *Book's* answer to lay audience's spiritual dilemma is to embrace the *vita apostolica*. Within the pages of the *Book*, the laity is encouraged to abandon their material needs in favor of the wandering life of the mendicant. Each event in the *Book*, each debate and discussion, asked, demanded, and answered are all designed to heighten the lay audience's awareness of their own spiritual paucity as long as

material wants and needs, as well as clerical authority, established their religious, structured activities.

For all of these narrative and rhetorical reasons, it is necessary to forgo the categorization of the *Book* as a spiritual autobiography in the conventional sense of the genre. The importance of the story rests on its rhetorically persuasive attempts to guide the laity toward a closer spiritual reconciliation among the members of society and Christ that leaders from Pope Innocent III onward had deemed a continual weakness in the corporate construct of the Church. By enabling the laity to learn about and experience *vita apostolica* and its concentration on other-worldly matters, the *Book* formulates the answer to this spiritual paucity: a universal spiritual reconciliation between the believer and Christ built upon the premise of the theme of poverty. The practiced form of poverty by the apostolics came from the basic tenet in Catholicism that initially formulated the cloistered monastic ideology and later more heavily amplified in the mendicant culture. The mendicant orders themselves were built upon this premise in that “personal and corporate poverty were the initial ideal” for these orders (McMillan 12). For the Franciscans, the central premise of poverty found its expression in the story of Jesus admonishing the rich man to give up his worldly goods (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Matt. 19:21-30). After the first *Rule* which established feudal fealty to the Roman pope and his successors, the second *Rule* addressed entrance into the Franciscan order by giving up their worldly possessions, “that they should go and sell all that belongs to them and endeavor to give it to the poor” (McMillan 69). The theme of poverty is so pervasive in the Franciscan *Rules* that it can be discovered even in the rules for mending the clothing worn by the friars: “All the friars are to wear poor clothes and they can use pieces of sackcloth and other material to mend them, with God’s blessing” (69). Given that these mendicant orders existed in little cloistered space,

the *Rules* established a distinct “communitarian ethos” (Burns 588) in an attempt to form the ideal life of poverty within the urban setting.

The most important ideological difference between the monastic and mendicant cultures where poverty was concerned was in the definition of the apostolic lifestyle. Mendicant thought, laid out in St. Bonaventure’s *Defence of the Mendicants*, or *apologia pauperum*, emphasized “a theology of Christ’s obedient suffering, powerlessness, and dereliction,” forming the belief in the “apostolic missionary journeys commissioned by Christ” (O’Donovan 236). For the cloistered monastic culture, poverty also meant living without personal possession, but in the sharing of all things in common among the brethren of their order (235-6). For the mendicant orders this holding of possessions in common, corporate property, fell far short in practicing the ideal of impoverishment—there had to be a component to the definition of poverty that included a condition of “destitution.” This form of poverty—to be without possessions and completely destitute—resembled more closely the life of Christ than the theological interpretations of monastic and clerical authorities (236). Steven Ozment explains the purpose of the apostolic lifestyle as it was understood by the mendicant culture in this way: “. . . : The Waldesian, Beguine, and Franciscan movements were born of the desire “naked to follow the naked Christ . . .” (116).

This concept of poverty had a tremendous impact on the spiritual development of those like Kempe living in the urban centers of England. Her class was rapidly acquiring wealth and property traditionally assigned to the aristocracy. As political influence in these urban centers shifted into the hands of the merchant class, the accumulation of wealth was also shifting from moveable goods to an accumulation of money. At this time period, the minting of money was conducted on a massive scale (Burns 607), along with individuals taking advantage of

opportunities to buy private property which had been traditionally conferred through inheritance. The political and economic climate before the Black Death was a “commercial revolution [that] produced a market economy centered on towns; and the agriculture which was still the main activity of medieval men and women became organized for that economy” (608). After the Black Death, a feudal way of life that had encompassed rural, communal ideas were exchanged for the more personal needs and tastes of the urban dwellers. The fraternal orders understood well the anxieties that the accumulation of wealth brought upon the merchant class. Consequently, the language of the market-place permeated several mendicant sermons, while other sermons described Christ as the “good merchant” and the devil as the “bad merchant” (D’Avary 208-11).

With the formulation of lay piety, reaction against the accumulation of wealth was growing among the merchant class to which Kempe belonged. The concern for avarice brought about the first organized mendicant reaction in the figure of Francis of Assisi. The son of a cloth merchant, Francis created an ideology of poverty that struck at the heart of merchant capitalism. His *Rules* rejected all “ties with the commercial system of the world” (Burns 632). For Francis those who accumulated money and property for personal gain and comfort were blinded by avarice. Satire aside, Chaucer focuses the attention of his audience on this dangerous vice in “The Pardoner’s Tale,” in which three young men find death on account of their greed for gold. Preaching toward the apostolic ideal began almost immediately after the fraternal orders came into existence. The sermons from Pierre de Reims (d. 1247 CE), for example, centered on the lives of the apostles, their preaching, and their “exercise of virtues” (D’Avray 44-6). Such a message appealed to Kempe and many others of her social class. The *Book*’s theme of poverty, like Kempe’s described actions and attitudes, attests to her acceptance of this apostolic ideology.

Her slow slide into destitution is an important narrative arc formulated through deliberate associational sequence of events in the *Book*.

The story from wealth to destitution begins with Kempe at the height of her domestic power: She was married, had children, possessed the keys to the inventory of her wealth, and owned two businesses. In chapter two, Kempe's descent into destitution begins with the loss of her businesses. Then, she disassociates herself from intimate relations with her husband. By chapter ten, Kempe begins her wandering life, another form of disassociation from her political and social position with the community of Lynn. During this time of spiritual pilgrimage, Kempe is continuously abandoned by other pilgrims, forcing her into a position of complete isolation from the lay community. Kempe's only companion during these times of wandering is God. By the time she reaches Rome in chapter 38, Kempe is literally without political or social status, has no forms of possession—nothing to trade in exchange for the very most basic needs and comforts—and resorts to begging for food to survive. Throughout these chapters the *Book* focuses on the paucity of material existence and the suppression of other-worldly reality by those who seek self-fulfilling pleasures in corporeality instead of mendicant spirituality. On account of such paucity by those who reject apostolic practices, their reality sharply contrasts with Kempe's, a contrast so negative that even modern audiences experience it and react to it by exploring this disturbing negotiation between the narrative's reality and Kempe's ideology through the discipline of psychology for the better part of the twentieth century.

In Chapter 35 of the *Book*, Kempe's apostolic piety achieves a spiritual union with Christ and through that spiritual union, Kempe is gifted with transcendental rewards:

Sumtyme sche felt swet smellys with hir nose; it wer swetta, hir thowt, than evyr
was ony swet erdly thing that sche smellyd befor. . . Sumtyme sche herd with hir

bodily erys sweche sowndys and melodiis that sche myth not wel heryn what a man seyde to hir in that tyme. . Thes sowndys and melodiis had sche herd. . .specialy whan sche was in devowt prayer. . .sche sey with hir bodily eyne many white thyngys flying al abowte hir on every side, . . . it weryn ryth sotyl and comfortabyl, and the brygtare that the sunne schyned, the bettyr sche myth se hem. . . also owr Lord yaf hir another tokne. . . that was a flawme of fyre, wonder hoot and delectabyl and ryth comfortabyl, nowt wasting but evyr incresyng. . .
(*MK* 2865-95)

This passage affirms the kind of spiritual rewards granted to apostolics who align themselves with a life of absolute poverty, and the lay audience bears witness to the possibility that “rather than adapt religious life to lay conditions,” one can “live a lay life religiously” (Mursell 237). Contrasting this message of spiritual reconciliation between a lay person and Christ through apostolic practices is the event described in Chapter 30 when Kempe meets a woman on the road to Rome. As part of her pilgrimage to Rome, the woman, who was surely of the aristocratic class, carried with her a reliquary that housed an effigy of Christ. At each town, the woman took the effigy out of the reliquary and gave it to the town’s women for them to hold and dress:

And thei wold puttyn schirtys thereupon and kyssyn it as thei it had been God hymselfe. And whan the creatur sey the worship and the reverens that thei dedyn to the ymage, sche was takyn with swet devocyon and swet meditacyons, that sche wept with gret sobbyng and lowed crying. . .and sche thanked God for-as-mech as sche saw thes creaturys han so gret feyth in that sche sey with hir bodily eye lych as sche had befor with hir gostly eye. (*MK* 2526-35)

Though the women properly exhibited their faith in their actions, these same actions also reveal a spiritual inability to see beyond the façade of the effigy. Following apostolic practices, the *Book's* description of this instance elevates Kempe's spiritual experience beyond these women's exceedingly limited spiritual abilities. In secular society, Christo-centric religious activities went beyond corporate rites of mass, feasts, communal processional activities to a more individualistic expression of faith. However, according to the *Book* these forms of spiritual, orthodox experiences were limited only to what they could see and touch materially, and what they prayed for centered on that materiality. Medieval invocations to the saints, for example, involved the restoration of corporeality in some way. R. N. Swanson summarizes the satisfaction of spiritual needs of medieval secular society as follows:

Not surprisingly, most miracles concerned healing: the insane restored, the blind and deaf recovering their faculties, the resuscitation of people presumed dead (especially children). But there were others. Animals were also healed, and lost possessions recovered—including stolen church goods . . . (291)

For the laity, the orthodox tradition allowed a perception to develop that the “power of . . . sanctity was closely linked to their physical reality, and to the objects associated with them which were somehow felt to trap their spiritual force” (Ozment 290). Consequently, the laity actively associated, engaged, and interacted with relics and icons because of the close resemblance to their own material existence. Through this process of materialization, sanctity became a tangible thing more easily understood and experienced through the limitations of the bodily senses by the laity. In the *Book*, on the other hand, Kempe experienced both the material and immaterial through her apostolic acts which shaped her affective response and served as the spiritual medium between both of these realms of Christian existence.

The *Book's* description of Kempe's self-determined spirituality and self-regulation of that spirituality mark the well-spring of much contentious reaction against her by the narrative's various audiences. Her "personal contact with God, negating the need for ecclesiastical mediation, was dangerous not just to priestly power, but to society as a whole" (Swanson 286). On numerous occasions, Kempe's described encounters with hostility from the laity and various members of Church authority concerning her deep devotional commitment to *vita apostolica* raises the ideological question concerning mendicant cultural influence in secular society. The hostility exhibited by Church authority stems from her circumventing the mediation of properly trained clergy. The hostility drawn from the laity stems from their suspicions concerning her 'odd' behavior in public and the intensity of her devotion; it also stems from her wholesale rejection of the very social class that continued to aspire to a level of power in various social, political, and religious areas of their lives. The merchant class was known for its desires to reach the pinnacle of aristocratic power. This aspiration was clearly present in their manner of dress, the creation of heraldry, education, political positions in government, their accumulation of wealth and status, etc. Kempe, like St. Frances, literally walked away from this class's aspirations of political, economic and social status, wandering about the urban centers of England like a mendicant friar, telling stories, and interacting with women of her class in an attempt to convert them to *vita apostolica*.

Kempe's form of ideal Christian piety in the *Book* establishes the heart of the contention of doctrinal power between Church authority and the apostolic laity who willingly followed a less-restrictive formulation of spirituality in the sense that it remained outside of episcopal authority. Given that Kempe was so heavily influenced by mendicant culture as described in the *Book*, it stands to reason that her communication with the laity concerning *vita apostolica* would

frame itself in these hostile reactions by the laity and Church authority alike. This culture of apostolic poverty, steeped in the “evangelical ideal” (McGinn 6) and rejected wholesale the commercial pursuits of the merchant class, saw its mission in the Gospel of Luke (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Lk. 10:1-12) to send forth “disciples to preach without ‘purse, or wallet, or sandals’” (6). *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a manifestation of the theopolitical tensions between Church authority and the apostolic laity. The Church’s position in its refusal to share various ideological, political, and economic controls with the mendicant orders underscores Kempe’s narrative. When we read *The Book of Margery Kempe*, we should, therefore, take into account these theopolitical tensions between episcopal and mendicant authorities, and her loyalties to apostolic practices.

CONCLUSION

When we interpret the medieval literature of lay writers, much of the scholarly discussion in the past few decades has centered for the most part either on the tone of dissent or on an exegetical analysis of the narrative. It has been my intention in the previous chapters to suggest another possibility for interpretation: that these lay writers felt empowered to create their art as a venue for debating corporate Christian identity with their respective audiences. While Church authority has been consistent with its message on how to be a good Christian, the message, as R. N. Swanson argues, concerning the definition of faith remained, as many lay writings attest, unclear throughout the medieval period. Throughout the later medieval period, theologians and canon lawyers appeared to have been more preoccupied with defining and regulating Christian behavior than with a determination of faith beyond the confines of catechism and other institutional instructions. The narratives of Marie de France, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Margery Kempe reveal an artistic commitment toward raising this theopolitical discourse with their respective audiences. The burning question in their literature seems to be whether or not individual faith can coincide with the Church's definition of corporate Christian identity. The concept of the individual, which played a "perceptible [role] in canonist developments" (O'Donovan 394-5) of the twelfth century and beyond might have been an intellectual current that afforded these lay writers with opportunities to openly explore in their art the inconstancies of individual faith with corporate Christian identity. Theological interests in the "individual natural right" and "corporational rights," along with the conciliar movement to curb papal

authority during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, must have also contributed toward this intellectual urge to debate individual faith and corporate Christian identity by the laity.

These distinctive voices and their different approaches toward corporate Christian identity should continue to remind us that the medieval period was varied and complex. Situating the narratives of these lay writers within the theopolitical climate of their time makes it clear that there was a high level of debate about the question concerning the possibility for a reconciliation between individual faith and corporate Christian identity. The English writers and poets of the later medieval period grappled with the concept of corporate Christian identity and attempted to illuminate for their audience the complexities and contradictions inherent between it and the proclamatory and pedagogical methodologies of Church authority in relation to individual faith. The very idea of implicit and explicit faith is called into question when we discover in the literature of these three lay writers their acute understanding of sophisticated and complicated theological discourse on identity. In the past we have assumed that theological theory and discourse remained inaccessible to those not belonging within the purview of clerical and monastic authority, especially women who had no benefit of a public education. But, when we begin to analyze the theopolitical discourses in these narratives, we must come to the conclusion that we really do not know how these lay writers obtained such sophisticated knowledge of theological discourse without the supposed benefit of a university education; their writings make it clear, however, that they certainly had access to theological knowledge beyond the standard instruction of catechism and weekly sermons. Studying the education system more closely in order to determine the amount of theological instruction promoted in the medieval school system below the university level should help to resolve some of this issue.

Conducting critical analysis of the narratives of Marie de France, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Margery Kemp within the theopolitical climate of their time, therefore, brings alive in their literary art a multitude of narrative voices that have hardly been heard before. On the eve of the Reformation, Kempe's book, for example, is a record of these many voices vying for the legitimization of their definitions of individual faith in relation to corporate Christian identity. Indeed, "the road to the Reformation was paved both by unprecedented abuse [of Church authority] and a long-unsatisfied popular religious yearning" (Ozment 211) by many Christians who were struggling to accept the Church's credibility in matters of faith and identity. Kempe's book describes the many religious interest groups, all of which, including Kempe, are clamoring for the right to define Christian identity and through that identity, the matters of faith. There are the laity following Church orthodoxy; the mendicant orders and their loyalties to the universal authority of the papacy; Church authority, itself wrapped in the robes of the bishops whose responsibility was to ensure the standard catechismal instruction of the laity; the many pilgrims and those occupying the lesser offices of the Church. There were also those that the narrative of Kempe represented—the ones who cultivated a deep interrelationship with Christ, which she argues as the epitome of faith, while continuing their active lay lives. Consequently, Kempe's narrative offers us an historically unique opportunity to witness these multi-vocal interest groups seeking control over the definition of Christian identity, either within or without Church authority.

If we shift our attention away from the conventional understanding of dissent or the exegetical interpretation of medieval narratives, we can focus more readily on the persuasive and rhetorical development of their arguments concerning the varied conceptions of faith and the reception of corporate Christian identity. Within this context, the *Lais* of Marie de France

demonstrate that corporate Christian identity was not well received by the Anglo-Norman nobility. The interests of the nobility rested on the temporal affairs of life, along with its rewards and punishments. Church authority, on the other hand, continually considered temporal life sinful and unproductive. This irresolvable division between the temporal and the otherworldly brought about the constant theopolitical tensions between the royal and Church authorities. In *The Misery of the Human Condition*, written by Lotario dei Segni, who later became Pope Innocent III, we discover the ultimate perception on material life by one of the highest members of Church authority during the historical period under discussion:

From birth to death . . . men and women are simply “vile.” Conceived in the “stench of lust” and formed in the “filthiest sperm,” we spend our earthly days in misery, toil, and degradation. Racked by envy and greed, tortured by vanity and rage, depleted by gluttony, sloth, and lust, we are forever trapped in the webs of our seven deadly sins, ensnared by our own iniquity. The effort to escape is futile.
(McMahon 140)

Reaction to such a renunciation of the world and its lusts brought about a tremendous amount of resistance by the Anglo-Norman nobility. As a conquering culture, their preoccupation with identity was a simultaneous yearning for a cultural connection with their Continental heritage and the affirmation of their governing position. Since the nobility considered Church policies inadequate for addressing their active lay life, they concentrated on creating a secular ethos in literature that tied them to their French past and developed a set of civil laws that enabled them to govern a conquered people. The negative definition of temporal life by Church authority must have also inspired Geoffrey Chaucer to look rhetorically at his world through the eyes of the Church. The pilgrims found in *The Canterbury Tales* were born out of this intellectual

experiment. When we read the tales, it becomes immediately clear that while Chaucer describes in many cases the standard practices of Christianity, there remains no clear definition of faith *per se*. Thus, the debate between what it means to have faith and the practice of it in the active lay life becomes the question in his tales that remains unanswered.

The debate between corporate Christian identity and individual faith produced in these lay narratives the richly diverse voices that we have come to love and appreciate. Each of these lay voices that either supported or rejected corporate Christian identity thus bears closer scrutiny—a scrutiny that enables us to come closer to the larger question of faith (not religious practices) and its definition as a significant piece of the complicated theopolitical puzzle of English society. If we wish to engage with these many lay voices in their pursuit of identity, we should include in the interpretations of their literature the theopolitical climate of their time, thereby providing us with a much wider view of medieval English society and its varied pursuits toward a reconciliation or rejection of corporate Christian identity in the pursuit of an active lay life.

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