The Dissertation Committee for Cathryn Marie Meyer certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

PRODUCING THE MIDDLE ENGLISH CORPUS:

CONFESSION AND MEDIEVAL BODIES

Committee:

_____
Elizabeth Scala, Co-Supervisor

_____
Marjorie Curry Woods, Co-Supervisor

_____
Thomas Cable

_____
Geraldine Heng

_____
Guy Raffa

PRODUCING THE MIDDLE ENGLISH CORPUS:

CONFESSION AND MEDIEVAL BODIES

by

Cathryn Marie Meyer, B.A.; M.A.

Dissertation

Presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of

the University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2006

For my sister,

Camille, "a great reader"

PREFACE

The real mystery is this strange need. Why can't we just hide it and shut up? Why do we have to blab? Why do human beings need to confess? Maybe, if you don't have that secret confession, you don't have a poem— don't even have a story. Don't have a writer. (Ted Hughes, 1995)

In *Producing the Middle English Corpus: Confession and Medieval Bodies*, I argue that confessional discourse played an important role in the creation of the Middle English canon. I show how late-medieval literature employs the discursive strategies of confession in innovative yet often unrecognized ways. My dissertation explores confession as a form or structure organizing four late-medieval texts: John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. I find that in these medieval texts confession functions as a discourse for producing truth and for constructing or inventing textualized bodies. Therefore, in part, I approach confession through the popular medieval analogy of a "the body" to "the book" and thereby consider how confession works to represent "truth" via the figure of a Christian body divided between inner and outer space. In each of the four texts I discuss, memorable bodies emerge as effects of confessional discourse: the *senex amans* in the *Confessio*; the suffering women of the *Legend*; the chaste body of Margery Kempe; and Cresseid's leprous body in the *Testament*. These problematic bodies all bear out the difficulties and frequent failures of confessional representation. Ultimately, during a period of institutional collapse and social, religious, and political upheaval, I demonstrate that *desire*—for truth, renewal of faith, recuperation of the fallen body, stability, closure—underlies the need to confess.

My project intervenes in two distinct but overlapping critical narratives. On one hand, my goal has been to further our understanding of literary confession more generally. Therefore, I bring attention to the contributions that Middle English authors have made to a mode of literature that has and continues to have great cultural relevance. These contributions are often obscured or ignored by scholars who conceive of the self-conscious and self-reflexive confessional voice as a modern articulation. At the same time, I have sought to modify how we as medievalists approach confession. Most often seen as a hegemonic didactic discourse that exists on the margins of the medieval canon, confession, I argue, resides within the canonical texts such as those that I examine.

My dissertation focuses upon texts written after the 1380s, yet, in chapter one, I begin my story of confession, as so many others have, with the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. In the years following the Fourth Lateran, the Church outlined the finer points of penitential law in Latin texts known as summas for confessors.[1] Vernacular manuals for lay audiences surface by the mid-thirteenth century, and texts such as the Anglo-Norman *Manuel des Peches* and the French *Somme le Roi*, written circa 1250 and 1279 respectively, teach sinners how and what to confess.[2] In circa 1303, Robert Mannyng of

---

[1] Thomas Tentler argues that five years after the Fourth Lateran Council Raymond of Peñaforte began writing his *Summa de casibus poenitentiae*—the first of the genre of summas for confessors. See "The Summa for Confessors as an Instrument of Social Control" in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: J. Brill, 1974), 104, 103-26.

[2] Written in England by an Anglo-Norman author, the *Manuel des Peches* was composed sometime between 1250 and 1270 and is extant in twenty-four manuscripts. The *Somme le Roi* was compiled at the request of King Phillip III of France by his Dominican confessor, Lorens d'Orleans. The *Somme le Roi* was extremely popular and widely circulated—it was translated into several languages (German, Portuguese, Irish,

Brunne composes the first English version of genre, *Handlyng Synne*, a Middle English verse translation of *Manuel des Peches*.[3] During the fourteenth century, the variety of vernacular confession manuals available to lay readers multiplied exponentially. The immense popularity of these manuals evidence how confessional discourse profits and proliferates through text. Despite sacramental confession's insistence upon orality, the discourse is transmitted via a culture of ardent textuality. Confessional discourse saturated medieval culture and was, subsequently, absorbed into its literature. The discourse's reliance on rhetorical strategies of invention helps facilitate this ready absorption of confessional truth-telling into secular fiction. Ultimately, confession cannot escape the text and, in turn, late medieval texts cannot seem to escape confessional discourse.

Two medieval critics have at length shown how didactic confession manuals and the religious practice of confession influenced medieval literature: Mary Braswell and

Scandinavian, Provencal, Italian, Catalan, Flemish, and English) and there are seventy-nine extant manuscripts.

[3] *Handlyng Synne*, a verse translation of the *Manuel des Peches* by Robert Mannyng of Brunne, was composed circa 1303 and is extant in nine complete manuscripts. Although not as popular as the *Manuel des Peches*, Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* has the distinction of being the first English version in its genre. The early Middle English guide for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse*, which I discuss in chapter one, was written sometime in the twelfth century after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and before both the *Manuel des Peches* and *Handlyng Synne*, but, unlike these texts, it is not expressly a confession manual despite containing chapters on confession and penance. For a catalogue of vernacular confession manuals, see Albert, Hartung, ed., *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*. Vol. 7 (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1986).

Jerry Root.[4] Braswell argues that confession creates a vocabulary in English for describing interiority; she shows how Gower and Chaucer use this language for the development of character—in particular the character of the sinner. Published fourteen years after Braswell's study, Root's book applies a Foucauldian approach to medieval confession, and ideas first raised by Braswell receive a fruitful theoretical overhaul. Instead of characterization, Root discusses "subjectivity." But rather than providing a history of the subject, he offers an analysis of "the conditions that make it possible for a *self* to appear as the subject of discourse."[5] He argues, for example, that confessional discourse makes it possible for Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*'s *Tale* to become a tale about its teller. The term "subjectivity," by which he indicates the constructedness of the *self*, problematizes the assumption that a person in confessing recovers a stable, unified, and pre-discursive identity.

Subjectivity acknowledges a lack of control but not a lack of *agency*. Michel Foucault insists that "subjectification" includes "those processes of self-formation in which the person is active" rather than "in a passive and constrained position."[6] At the same time, however, the "subject," is not a stable and fixed point of reference but a

---

[4] Braswell's book—*The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages* (East Brunswick: Associated University Press, 1983)—is the only published book-length study of the relationship between confession and Middle English literature. See, also, Jerry Root, '*Space to Speke': The Confessional Subject in Medieval Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997). Root offers a comparative analysis and he includes chapters on Latin (Augustine and Abelard), French (Jean de Meun), and Spanish (Juan Ruiz) texts as well as a chapter on Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*.

[5] Root, '*Space to Speke': The Confessional Subject*, 2.

[6] *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 11.

"continually shifting vector" of forces.[7] As Marshall Leicester explains, it is "common nowadays, not only in linguistics but also in deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and certain varieties of social theory, to avoid expressions like *self, person*, and *living character* and to replace them with the term *subject*":[8]

> In modern theory the subject is not conceived as a substantial thing, like a rock, but as a position in a larger structure, a site through which various forces pass. The example I have already used is the grammatical subject, a place in discourse governed from outside by the rules of language; but the psychoanalytic subject, as a location of unconscious desire, and the social subject, as an institutional construct—a role, a status, a member of a class—are equally important.[9]

Confession, it should be noted, evokes all of the "forces" that Leicester names. Most obviously, the rules of language govern confessional speech and thus produce a grammatical subject. Thus, at the same time that a sinner is subjected to the law of confession, she is also both made a grammatical subject of which various sinful actions may be predicated. Confession manuals, moreover, call for an inquiry into a sinner's occupation, class, gender, and age. For example, merchants are more likely to suffer from covetousness while women are singled out as especially susceptible to the sin of vanity. Ultimately, we find that the various forces of grammar, unconscious desire, and society all pass through the site of the confessional subject.

The prevailing critical chronology of the "self" attributes the capacity for subjectivity, self-consciousness, and self-fashioning to modern rather than pre-modern

---

[7] H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the* Canterbury Tales (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 14. Leicester's emphasis.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

cultures. Root observes that "the shift in modern critical language from self to subject

has not necessarily brought about any critical rethinking of old assumptions about the

chronological development of these notions."[10] Although several prominent scholars

working from within varied theoretical paradigms have argued for medieval subjectivity,

I would offer that nevertheless there exists among medieval critics a certain resistance to

the term and its interpretative consequences.[11] Furthermore, I find that because of its

close association with didacticism and religion, critics often render confessional

discourse virtually theory-proof. Therefore, critics, such as Root, have with good reason

focused on confession's construction of the medieval "subject" and on confession's

contribution to the development of self-conscious literary characters. For my part, I

accept that confession produces subjectivity; a theory of the "subject" underlies my entire

dissertation and, especially, chapter two's discussion of Gower's *Confessio*.[12] That being

---

[10] Root, '*Space to Speke*'*: The Confessional Subject*, 2.

[11] See Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self*; Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); David Aers, "A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the 'History of the Subject,'" in *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992); John Ganim, "Chaucer, Boccaccio, Confession, and Subjectivity," in *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales: New Essays on an Old Question*, ed. Leonard Koff and Brenda Schildgen, (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000), 128-48.

[12] I also accept the advantages of substituting the "subject" for more humanist expressions such as "self" and "person." I find, however, that it is awkward to avoid the term "self" altogether. Therefore, when I refer to the "self," it can be assumed that I evoke it in a Foucauldian sense. In Foucault's work, the "self" and the "subject" are not categorically opposed and the term "subject" does not necessarily replace the "self" as it does in Leicester's definition of subjectivity. It is a given that for Foucault, the "self" is discursively produced. For Leicester the two terms (self and subject) reflect different

said, an explication of medieval subjectivity, although a worthy undertaking, is not my principle objective. Instead, I am interested in how confession produces texts and textualized bodies.

With the exception of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, which is my first example, none of the other texts I discuss have been read as confessional discourse.[13] Frequently when confession or penance enters into critical analyses of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Woman,* Kempe's *Book of Margery Kempe*, or Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, its orthodox parameters are taken entirely for granted. In this respect, confession functions as an un-theorized historical phenomenon. Therefore, ten years after Root's work, my dissertation proposes another timely theoretical intervention. Whereas both Braswell and Root focus primarily on issues of character, I am most interested in the narrative forms and structures taken by confession and the textual effects generated by these structures. Throughout, I pursue a question raised by Jeremy Tambling in his recent study of confession from late antiquity to the post-modern. Tambling asks how confession's "demand to speak is related to the production of narrative, and what forms of narrative has [that demand] entailed?"[14] In considering these questions, I look first at several didactic confession manuals and then at late-medieval literary confessions. Confession materializes as a flexible and varied discursive mode, and I have found no single set of

ideologies, and the substitution of terms is, as he implies, a critical convention that registers our awareness that the subject is neither stable nor entirely in control.

[13] A caveat: Jeremy Tambling considers *The Book of Margery Kempe* very briefly in his wide-ranging study of confession, subjectivity, and sexuality. Because his consideration is so short, it is more suggestive than anything. See *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 59-63.

[14] Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject*, 3.

generic characteristics that define this mode. Nevertheless, issues of representation

emerge as fundamental to the discourse, and if we accept that that confession is "one of

the central modes of self-representation available in late-medieval England," we must ask

what selves or, in Foucault's terminology, subjects does confession represent? How does

this mode work to both shape and represent the "subject"?[15] What textual structures does

confession assume in order to perform its representational labor?

Confessors and confessants face an acute interpretative dilemma, because, as

Tambling points out, "Christianity locates truth in the inward parts, not inscribed on the

body and not publicly demonstrable."[16] For confessors this dilemma largely manifests

itself as a problem of knowing—how to know what is really true and how to know when

the penitent is speaking sincerely. For the confessants, however, the challenge is both to

know and represent. Before they can represent their sins to the confessor, they must

know what thoughts and deeds are considered sinful and, furthermore, they must

remember what sins they have committed.   Given the centrality of, what we would call,

epistemology to confessional discourse, I have in this dissertation selected texts that

foreground problems of knowing, representing, and interpreting.

In Gower's *Confessio*, Venus demands that the character of Amans ("the one

loving") represent himself to her. By asking, "What art thou, Sone?" she demands to

---

[15] Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject*, 396. Confession is not a genre, but
instead, as Patterson implies, it is more accurately a "mode." For a discussion of the
differences between genre and mode, see Alistair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An
Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,
1982).

[16] Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject*, 40.

know not who he is, but what he is. Her question seeks nature rather than name. Consequently, Venus summons her priest Genius and requires that Amans be shriven; he must tell the priest all his thought and work. Likewise, Chaucer's *Legend* places representational demands upon its protagonist. In the *Legend*, the God of Love calls the poet a "worm" and a "foo," and through his performance of penance, the poet must prove that he is not a heretic. In both texts a hermeneutics of suspicion prevails—Venus suspects that Amans is feigning his love-sickness and the God of Love suspects that the poet is a heretic. Suspicions, likewise, abound in Margery Kempe's prose narrative. The *Book* underscores the polarizing response generated by her visionary claims; both priests and laypeople respond to Kempe's mysticism with incredulity and distrust Correspondingly, Kempe, conscious of the possibility of demonic possession, experiences great self-doubt. In Henryson's *Testament*, the narrator's suspicions about Cresseid are proven true when she confesses to "lustis lecherous." In this last text, confession, cast in legal terms, eliminates the need for interpretation. Cresseid's avowal proves what the narrator and reader already suspects, and there is no doubt that Cresseid receives her "end due."

As the texts I discuss become more invested in closure, my dissertation charts a progressively hostile attitude towards the hermeneutic work of confession. In many ways, Henryson belongs in the company of Gower and Chaucer, but I have instead placed the *Testament* after Kempe because of the text's relative disinterestedness in questions of epistemology or the nuances of "entente." Form follows function, and Henryson's poem provides an epilogue to Chaucer's as well as my dissertation—it concludes both a story

and an unstable body. Through this particular order of progress, I ascribe to Gower (often labeled "moral") and his text a liberality and a playful inventiveness usually reserved for his contemporary, Chaucer. Because the *Confessio* resembles didactic confession manuals, critics typically assume that poem's motivations are likewise didactic and orthodox. I argue, however, that in the compendious *Confessio* we see confessional discourse at its most productive and expansive. The *Confessio*'s penitential frame generates exemplary stories and, in turn, these exempla provoke Amans to narrate his subjective experience. In this way, Amans emblematizes how in the fourteenth century confession became one of the principle means available to medieval writers for the expression of subjective experience and, consequently, the shaping or inventing of new truths.

The fourteenth century also witnessed institutional collapse and social, religious, and political upheaval. During this period of instability, some scholars suggest that there arose a "crisis of truth," and, indeed, throughout the late Middle Ages, we see authors struggling with the meaning of the word, "truth."[17] We see evidence for such a struggle in the Prologue to the *Legend*, which is, I argue, on many levels about proof and faith and the ambivalences of "truth." In the Prologue, Chaucer's return to the dream vision genre makes explicit the intersections of truth and fiction and different epistemologies of knowing—experience and books, "reality" and dream. The poet-persona begins by asking whether or not one can know, for example, "[t]hat ther ys joy in hevene and peyne

---

[17] See Laurence de Looze, *Pseudo-Autobiography in the Fourteenth Century* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997) and Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

in helle" when there is "none dwellyng in this contree / That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe" (2, 5-6). The *Legend* employs a penitential poetic in its game of truth-making—a game that twins the "trouthe" of women to the "trouthe" of the poet. Because determining the "truth" or authenticity of an individual's thoughts, words, and deeds is the governing principle of medieval penance, we find that confessional texts such as the *Legend* exhibit a *desire for truth*.

In the texts I study, the simultaneous desire of the speaker/confessant to conceal truth and the listener/confessor's desire to know that truth creates necessary dramatic tension. Narrative tension thus coalesces in literary confession around a quest for truth. Hence, Foucault observes that there occurs a "metamorphosis" wherein "we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted and heard, centered on the heroic or marvelous narration of 'trials' of bravery and sainthood, to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between words, a truth which the very form of confession holds out like a shimmering mirage."[18] Confession turns the ordinary individual into a site of contestation, and, consequently, he or she finds truth not only *outside* oneself but also *inside* oneself. Foucault's statement implies a shift from hagiography to autobiography, from the drama of others to the drama of the self. Yet I will show that medieval texts trouble such a clear delineation between stories of others and the story of oneself. In all of the texts I consider there is no such thing as simple self-narration. Instead there exist problematic layers of intertextuality and complex narrative

---

[18] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 59.

mediation. I would offer that, rather than accidental to the discourse, this intertextuality

and mediation characterizes medieval literature's contribution to literary confession.

Throughout, I approach confession as a *discourse* and apply to the confessional

situation Foucault's theories of power, knowledge, and "subjectification." I supplement

Foucault with the work of Judith Butler whose theories of gender, identity, and

performance offer me a way of thinking about confession as a performance and also

about the role of the body within confession. Whereas Foucault assumes that confessional

discourse extracts "truth" from bodies, I suggest that confession actually produces

textualized bodies that are required to perform lack—bodies that are required to represent

via their surfaces an invisible truth. Hence, my dissertation's overarching thesis that

confession helps produce the Middle English corpus—that confession produces both

authors and stories. Moreover, as a feminist revision of Foucault's work, Butler's work

points towards possible intersections between the performance of confession and the

performance of gender. Because they attempt to present the bodies of "good" women,

this issue of gender as performance figures most prominently in Chaucer's *Legend* and

Kempe's *Book*. In other ways, gender recurs as the subtext of my dissertation through

my focus on the female body as discursively produced by confessional narrative. For

Gower's Amans, the female body provides the absent object of desire, and, in the *Legend*,

the paradigmatic ideal woman, Alceste commands the poet to write penitentially about

legendary women; similarly, both the *Book* and the *Testament* produce the suffering

bodies of female confessants. Although critics frequently conceive of confession as a

gender-neutral discourse, I would suggest that the study of confessional discourse has implications for the study of gender.

Medieval confession is a discourse that has the effect of producing dualistic bodies and also polarized response. In Chaucer's *Legend*, for instance, critics have responded to the poem's penitential structure with an "either/or" analysis: either the poet is being sincere or he is being ironic. What critics of the poem have failed to realize, however, is that these responses are an effect of the poem's penitential structure. In this chapter and elsewhere, I have found psychoanalytic criticism helpful for its consideration of confessional texts and subjects as locations of unconscious desire that are never completely controlled by their author. Furthermore, L. O. Aranye Fradenburg's insights into the operations sacrifical desire provide us with a way of thinking about confession and penance in terms of pleasure and enjoyment. Thus, in reading the *Legend*, I employ an explicitly psychoanalytic approach that considers the poet's penance as a strategy of his desire. In this manner, I disrupt the poem's either/or paradigm; by stepping to the side of such binary structures, I call into question problematic assumptions about authorial agency.

The most recent studies on confession more generally—by Jeremy Tambling, Denis Foster, and Peter Brooks—all employ psychoanalytic theory to some degree in order to address the complicated motives of confessional narrative. Tambling includes a chapter on Margery Kempe in his trans-historical study and Elizabeth Scala has profitably explored repression in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Yet no book-length treatment of medieval confession that considers the topic through the lens of

psychoanalytic theory has ever been published. I believe that a great deal of overlap exists between psychoanalytic and historicist and philosophical approaches to confession. Hence, I do not find these different methodological approaches to be as fundamentally opposed to one another as they are typically represented as being.   For example, I draw extensively upon the work of both Russell Peck and Kathryn Lynch who work within a philosophical tradition, and I find that psychoanalysis and philosophy are asking related epistemological and psychological questions. Finally, as I continue to rethink and reshape this dissertation project as a book, my goal is no less that the delineation of a new theory of medieval confession—a theory that I believe is long overdue.

In my first chapter, I outline the theoretical and historical background of confession and argue for the mutual authenticating relationship between body and text in medieval confession. Confession produces bodies that are deeply inward and divided between inner and outer space—between the invisible and visible. The interrogative strategies of confessional discourse are meant to make known secret truths that would otherwise remain hidden within the body. Yet these strategies are shown to dovetail with the inventional strategies of rhetoric. In this way, we find literary techniques inside of confession and confession inside of Middle English literature.

John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* provides a logical transition from my discussion in chapter one of medieval confession manuals to my analysis of medieval literature beginning in chapter two. In part, Gower's poem models itself upon didactic confession manuals, and, as I mentioned, among the texts that I discuss in my dissertation it is the only one that explicitly deploys the terminology of confession. Extending the work of

Elizabeth Scala, Peter Nicholson, and Russell Peck, I show in this second chapter how

confession is an inventive or productive discourse and I apply a new approach to the

poem's problematic ending. Upending the presumption that the body produces texts, I

show how the aged body of the *senex amans*, which appears at the poem's conclusion, is

instead a fiction produced by and through the confession.

Gower and Chaucer are friends, and Chaucer is writing the *Legend of Good

Women* at the same time that Gower is writing the *Confessio Amantis*. Both texts are

story collections and although this superficial relationship has been noted, the fact that, in

both poems, storytelling evolves out of confessional discourse has been completely

overlooked. In my third chapter on the *Legend of Good Women*, I shift my emphasis

from Gower's dramatization of confessional speech to Chaucer's dramatization of

penance. My reading provides a way of understanding the poet's willingness to perform

penance and why his penitential performance takes the public narrative form that it does.

Like the *Confessio*, the *Legend* challenges the critical perception of confession as a

hegemonic discourse that produces either absolute submission or heroic subversion.

Psychoanalysis provides a way of reading "penitence" not as constraint upon desire but

as a strategy of it, and, in the *Legend*, as a way of reading the poem's gender strategies as

compensatory.

This issue of gender provides the transition to chapter four. The fifteenth-century

prose narrative, *The Book of Margery Kempe* shows a woman obsessed with confessing.

Kempe's compulsion to confess is, I argue, coextensive with her desire to narrate her

story and thus authenticate her mystical feelings and penitential manner of living. The

xx

oppositional structures of confession that I emphasize throughout my dissertation enable me here to show that Kempe's desire to confess is linked to her need to produce a chaste and closed *corpus* rather than to her need for forgiveness. As a confession, the *Book* shows Kempe's frustrated desire for union with the divine and her endless and repetitive hermeneutic work. I end this chapter by suggesting that Kempe longs for, yet fails to achieve, closure.

My fifth and final chapter on Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* emphasizes closure and continues the previous chapter's theme of unsatisfied desire. Most obviously, Henryson's poem attempts to provide a more satisfying end to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. To provide readers with proper closure, the *Testament* must revisit and reopen a problematic and unstable "subject." The poem's move to tragic denouement derives its seeming authority not from confession as a religious discourse but as a legal one. Henryson's use of legal language furthers a male fantasy of spent desire and objective truth. Again, as we have throughout, we see this truth—Cresseid's unequivocal guilt— established upon the body. Cresseid's leprous body substantiates her guilt, and her confession allows the narrator to enjoy her suffering without feeling guilty himself.

PRODUCING THE MIDDLE ENGLISH CORPUS:

CONFESSION AND MEDIEVAL BODIES

Cathryn Marie Meyer, Ph.D.
The University of Texas at Austin, 2006

Supervisors: Elizabeth Scala and Marjorie Curry Woods

In *Producing the Middle English Corpus: Confession and Medieval Bodies*, I suggest that confessional discourse played an important role in creating the Middle English canon. I show how late-medieval literature employs the discursive strategies of confession in innovative yet often unrecognized ways. My dissertation explores confession as a form or structure organizing four late-medieval texts: John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. I find that in these medieval texts confession functions as a discourse for producing truth and for constructing or inventing textualized bodies. Therefore, in part, I approach confession through the popular medieval analogy of a "the body" to "the book" and thereby consider how confession works to represent "truth" via the figure of a Christian body divided between inner and outer space. In each of the four texts I discuss, memorable bodies emerge as effects of confessional discourse: the *senex amans* in the *Confessio*; the suffering women of the *Legend*; the chaste body of Margery Kempe; and Cresseid's leprous body in the

Testament. These problematic bodies all bear out the difficulties and frequent failures of confessional representation. Ultimately, during a period of institutional collapse and social, religious, and political upheaval, I demonstrate that *desire*—for truth, renewal of faith, recuperation of the fallen body, stability, closure—underlies the need to confess.

I approach confession as a *discourse* and apply to the confessional situation Michel Foucault's theories of power, knowledge, and "subjectification." I supplement Foucault with both psychoanalytic theory and work of Judith Butler whose theories of gender, identity, and performance offer a way of thinking about confession as a performance and also about the role of the body within confession. Whereas Foucault assumes that confessional discourse extracts "truth" from bodies, I suggest that confession actually produces *textualized bodies* that are required to perform lack—bodies that are required to represent via their surfaces an invisible truth. Hence, my dissertation's overarching thesis that confessional discourse contributes to the production of the Middle English corpus—that confession produces both authors and stories.

CONTENTS

Chapter One

Confession: Producing the Medieval Corpus

Admittedly, the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 serves as a problematic point of

origin for any discussion of medieval confession. The council's twenty-first canon,

Omnis utriusque sexus, did not, as has often been suggested, invent sacramental

confession or even private penance.[1] Indeed, Canon 21 "did no more than confirm earlier

legislation and custom."[2] *Omnis utriusque sexus* merely reinforces pre-existing

legislation requiring all Christians to confess at least once a year to their own priests:

"Omnis utriusque sexus fidelis, postquam ad annos discretionis pervenerit, omnia sua

solus peccata confiteatur fideliter, saltem semel in anno proprio sacerdoti" ("All the

faithful of either sex, after they have reached the age of discernment, should individually

confess all their sins in a faithful to their own priest once a year.")[3] Moreover, for all the

importance ascribed to it, Canon 21 is remarkably brief and it informs Christians of their

---

[1] While a number of historians have interpreted Canon 21 as the pivotal shift
from the Early Church's practice of public expiation to the late-medieval practice of
private penance, Karma Lochrie notes that "after the sixth century most of Europe had
systems of private penance" (*Covert Operations*: *The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*
[Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998], 27).

[2] *Catholic Encyclopedia,* Vol. 9, *s.v.* "Lateran Councils," (New York: Robert
Appleton Co., 1907-12).

[3] All citations of the Fourth Lateran Council's legislation are taken from *Decrees
of the Ecumenical Councils: Nicea I to Lateran V*, ed. and trans. Norman Tanner
(Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 244. I use Tanner's translation of
the Latin throughout.

confessional obligation in simple terms.[4] While the first half of the canon is directed

towards the laity, the later half advises the clergy about their role in the process:

"Sacerdos autem sit discretus et cautus, ut more periti medici superinfundant vinum et

oleum vulneribus sauciati" (The priest, moreover, shall be discreet and cautious, so that

in the manner of the skillful physician he may pour wine and oil upon the wounds of the

injured"). By advising discretion and caution, Canon 21 signals an approach to sin that is

decidedly subjective.[5] Just as a physician treats physical illness, a priest is directed to

---

[4] In its entirety, Canon 21 reads as follows: "Every Christian of either sex, after attaining years of discretion, shall faithfully confess all his sins to his own priest at least once a year, and shall endeavor according to his ability to fulfill the penance enjoined him, reverently receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist at least at Easter, unless perchance, on the advice of his own priest, for some reasonable cause, he determines to abstain for a time from receiving it. Otherwise he shall both be withheld from entrance to the church while he lives and be deprived of Christian burial when he dies. Wherefore this salutary enactment shall be frequently published in the churches lest anyone assume a veil of excuse in the blindness of ignorance. But if anyone for a right reason wished to confess his sins to a priest who is not his own, he shall first ask and obtain permission form his own priest, since otherwise the other priest cannot loose or bind him. The priest, moreover, shall be discreet and cautious, so that in the manner of the skillful physician he may pour wine and oil upon the wounds of the injured, diligently searching out all the circumstances both of the sinner and of the sin, that from these he may prudently understand what manner of advice he ought to offer him and what sort of remedy he ought to apply, employing various measures in order to heal the sick. Further, he is to give earnest heed that he does not in any wise betray the sinner by word or sign or in any other way; but if he needs more prudent advice he shall seek this cautiously without divulging of the person, since we decree that he who shall presume to reveal a sin made known to him in the adjunction of penance, is not only to be deposed from the priestly office but also to be thrust into a strict monastery to do perpetual penance."

[5] In this way, Canon 21 clearly distinguishes itself from the penitential tariffs that had been used in England between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Penitential tariffs functioned more in the manner of objective law; they assigned specific punishments or penances to specific crimes. The "Penitentials" refer to Anglo-Saxon books that assign penances or tariffs (e.g. 7 years of fasting on bread and water) to specific sins. See, for example, John T. McNeill and Helen M. Gamer, eds., *Medieval Handbook of Penance* (New York: Octagon Books Inc., 1965). See also Pierre Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials:*

inquire about the circumstances of the sinner and the sin so that he may offer the

appropriate advice and remedy: "diligenter inquirens et peccatoris circumstantias et

peccati, per quas prudenter intelligat, quale illi consilium debeat exhibere et cuiusmodi

remedium adhibere" ("diligently searching out all the circumstances both of the sinner

and of the sin, that from these he may prudently understand what manner of advice he

ought to offer him and what sort of remedy he ought to apply"). However, this more

discerning process of searching out sin does not originate with the Fourth Lateran

Council. Robert of Flamborough's *Liber Poenitentialis* (c. 1210), for example, likewise

advocates an inquisitorial approach that proceeds obliquely, cautiously, and treats each

sinner's case as unique.[6] Canon 21 only summarizes and codifies a theology of sin and

confession already in place before 1215.

If the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 neither invented the sacrament of

confession nor originated a new theology of sin, why begin with its legislation?

Convened by Pope Innocent III, the council is perhaps most important for the ideological

context in which it rhetorically situates confession. Generally speaking, the council

worked to consolidate Church power on both the local and universal levels. The

council's seventy-one canons provide a virtual anthology of the medieval Church's

---

The Development of a Sexual Code (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984). Late
medieval texts, however, make very little of the difference between "penance" and
"confession" and often use the terms interchangeably.

[6] Robert of Flamborough, *Liber Poenitentialis*, ed. J. J. Francis Firth (Toronto:
Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1971). See also Mary Braswell's excellent
analysis of this text in *The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the
Literature of the English Middle Ages* (East Brunswick: Associated University Press,
1983).

3

spiritual and political ambitions. The first canon institutes a new profession of Catholic

faith, the last canon declares a new holy war and, in between, lie the minutiae of pastoral

care: church discipline, clerical mores, episcopal elections, taxes, canonical suites,

matrimony, tithes, and simony. Many of its canons, such as Canon 21, elaborate upon the

priest's active role in his parishioners' spiritual care. As Leonard E. Boyle explains, this

"sensitivity" to pastoral care "has no parallel in previous councils" and "in putting its

stamp on a century or so of innovation and practice the council changed the face of the

pastoral care."[7] Certainly, the council put its stamp on confession, but rather than isolate

Canon 21, as many scholars have, from the Fourth Lateran's larger ideological project, I

want to discuss confession in the context of several other pieces of the council's

legislation including canons on heretics, Jews, and infidels to chart the ideological

context of confession.

    We should note the rhetorical the way that the Fourth Lateran imagines

Christendom as a metaphorical "body" (*Corpus Christianorum*) and thus how it works to

define that body's boundaries—what is inside and what is outside. When Innocent III

announced the council in 1213, he stated that its goals were "to eradicate vices and to

plant virtues, to correct faults and to reform morals, to remove heresies and to strengthen

faith, to settle discords and to establish peace, to get rid of oppression and foster liberty,

to induce princes and Christian people to come to the aid and succour of the Holy Land."[8]

---

[7] Leonard E. Boyle, O.P., "The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology," in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville: Tennessee Press, 1985), 31.

[8] qtd. and trans. in Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical* Councils, 227.

Here Innocent III sets forth a series of antithetical concepts (vice and virtue, heresy and faith, disorder and peace) by which he actively divides Christendom between heterodoxy and orthodoxy. In the manner of these oppositional imaginings, the exteriors and interiors of Christendom maintain each another through categorical difference. Often more of a symbolic than real threat, the council's legislation clearly establishes infidels and heretics as signifiers of otherness and exteriority. In this way, the council performs the Church's ideological work of self-fashioning. This fashioning of the Christian faithful as both a collective body and as individuated bodies occurs at the expense of a marginalized 'other'.

The final of the council's constitutions, Canon seventy-one, "Expeditio pro recuperanda Terra sancta" demonstrates that the symbolic instrumentality of the crusade lay in its ability to unify economic and military forces within Christendom against a collective enemy in the East. The Holy Land or *Terra sancta* resides at the heart of the crusade's cultural imagination. Although situated geographically far outside the local borders of the Western Church, the Holy Land serves as the figurative center of the faith. Yet, problematically, the Holy Land defies conquest or control and suffers repeated violation from infidels. Its borders and, therefore, the borders of the *Corpus Christianorum* are unsubstantiated and threaten to collapse. Norman Tanner observes that, in all probability, "disasters" in the Holy Land provoked Innocent III to summon the Fourth Lateran Council, but that "he also used the crusade as an instrument of ecclesiastical administration, combined with reform of the church, namely in a fierce war

5

against heretics which he thought would restore ecclesiastical society.[9] Essentially, the

church projects a problem of the "inside" onto the "outside." Hardly a novel strategy,

Innocent III sets out to restore harmony to ecclesiastical society by waging war against

infidels. Christians are called by the council to war against infidels both in the East and

at home in the West.

Most evidently, the canons pertaining to Jews—the religious infidels who live

amongst and thus dangerously mix with the faithful—maintain and cultivate difference.

Respectively, Canons 67, 68, 69, and 70 denounce the usury of Jews, dictate that Jews

should be distinguished from Christians in their dress, exclude Jews from holding public

offices, and outline laws governing converts to Christianity among the Jews. Canon

sixty-eight, "Ut Iudaei discernantur a christianis in habitu," addresses the Church's fears

of miscegenation and sexual intimacy between Christians and Jews by declaring that a

difference of dress should distinguish Jews or Saracens from Christians:

> In nonnullis provinciis a christianis Iudaeos seu Saracenos habitus
> distinguit diversitas, sed in quibusdam sic quaedam inolevit confusio, ut
> nulla differentia discernantur. Unde contingit interdum, quod per errorem
> christiani Iudaeorum seu Saracenorum et Iudaei seu Saraceni
> christianorum mulieribus commisceantur. Ne igitur tam damnatae
> commixtionis excessus per velamentum erroris…statuimus ut tales
> utriusque sexus in omni christianorum provincia et omni tempore,
> qualite habitus publice ab allis populis distinguantur.

> [A difference of dress distinguishes Jews or Saracens from Christians in
> some provinces, but in others a certain confusion has developed so that
> they are indistinguishable. Whence it sometimes happens that by mistake
> Christians join with Jewish or Saracen women, and Jews or Saracens with
> Christian women. In order that the offence of such a damnable mixing
> may not spread further…we decree that such persons of either sex, in

---

[9] Norman Tanner, ed. and trans., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 227.

6

every Christian province and at all times, are to be distinguishable in public from other people by the character of their dress.][10]

Dress becomes the demarcation of otherwise indistinguishable ("nulla differentia") Jewish and Saracen bodies that threaten to contaminate Christian blood through somatic border violations ("damnatai commixtionis").[11] By requiring Jews and Saracens (Muslims) to distinguish themselves with their dress, the Church visibly marks their bodies as *outside* the true faith and thus outside *Corpus Christianorum*. Furthermore, by dressing themselves in compliance with the law, these infidels actively partake in the formation of themselves as 'other.'

In contrast to this imagined sexual contamination, Canon sixty-seven, "De usuris Iudaeorum" describes another type of toxic intimacy: the economic interdependence of Jews and Christians. The Church fears that Jews, by extorting oppressive and excessive interest, will exhaust the resources of Christians. If necessary, the Church threatens to compel forcibly Christians to abstain from commerce with Jews. Subsequent to the Fourth Lateran's legislation, there emerged in England a series of statutes that "took [the] policing, marking, and scrutiny of Jewish activity and bodies to extraordinary lengths."[12] Geraldine Heng observes that such laws attempt to ratify a stable Christian identity:

> Even as these prohibitions advertise the fears of religious authority, they also tellingly announce English Christian dependence on, and intimacy with, English Jews—a commingling in private and public life that

---

[10] Tanner, ed. and trans., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 265-6.

[11] It is interesting to note how the canon portrays the vulnerable and female body as channeling racial and religious pollution. Canon 68 suggests that infidel women lure Christian men to "damnable mixing" and vice versa.

[12] Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 88.

7

disturbed the racial project of stable, known, and separate identities within England's borders.[13]

Heng's remarks are equally applicable to the Fourth Lateran's prohibitions that sought to stabilize Christian identity from the inside out, from its center to its farthest borders. It is not a coincidence that the practice of medieval confession develops concurrently with the Church's strategic policing of alien bodies. While Confession helps produce the true Christian body, the canons discussed above produce the bodies of those who are racially and religiously other. Marginalized and on the margins, Saracens and Jews function to stabilize Christendom as the center of faith. The council's legislation against Jews and infidels appear superficially different than its pastoral constitutions legislating confession, preaching, matrimony, and so forth, but, I offer, they in fact operate by the exact same strategy. The council emphasizes issues of institutional fashioning and representation. By instituting a new profession of faith, the Church declares its universal beliefs. People such as Jews and Muslims who are outside the Catholic faith and opposed to its beliefs must mark themselves accordingly. Likewise, by codifying the practice of confession, the council demands that Christians represent themselves to their parish priests. In so doing, Christians profess both their sins and their knowledge of Church doctrine. Yet fear and suspicion of misrepresentation, deliberate or otherwise, underlie these constitutions. Because appearances deceive, Jews and Saracens are easily confused with Christians. Without sartorial laws, it is difficult to discern ("discernantur") who is a true believer and who is not. In this regard, heretics prove even more problematic than infidels.

---

[13] Ibid.

Within the heart of Christendom, the Church feared the spread of heresy that, like an invisible contagion, could multiply and pass unseen from one diseased Christian to another. Saracens and Jews threatened to contaminate the *Corpus Christianorum* through physical proximity, sexual and economic intimacy, and, in certain cases, a lack of discernable difference. Heretics, on the other hand, are abominations of the Christian body itself. Canon three condemns heretics: "condemnantes universos haereticos quibuscumque nominibus censeantur, facies quidem habentes diversas, sed caudas adinvicem colligatas" ("We condemn all heretics, whatever names they go under. They have different faces but their tails are tied together").[14] Again, we observe the problem of confusion. Heretics go under many names and different faces, and except for their metaphorical tails ("caudas"), they have no common characteristics by which to identify them. Ultimately, the accusation of heresy becomes an umbrella for all socially and sexually deviant behavior; it ties together the "tails" of deviancy—with its many different faces—under one common name. The canon expresses anxiety that heretics are being harbored or secreted within Christian communities, and so it counsels vigilance among laypeople and requires them to report any suspicious activity to their local clergy. Once suspected, heretics can prove their innocence through an appropriate purgation ("congrua purgatione") or the ritual cleansing of confession and the profession of faith. While the Church was anxious to produce the bodies of Jews and Saracens as religious and racially other, Christian heretics were ultimately subject to inquisitorial procedures that aimed to expose the truth ensconced within their deformed bodies. One of Innocent III's stated

---

[14] Tanner, ed. and trans., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 233.

objectives in the Fourth Lateran was "to remove heresy and to strengthen faith," and, as a discourse for the production of truth, the sacrament of confession quickly became the first line of defense against the rise of dissidence among the rank and file. Fearing that heretical beliefs were being cloaked under the guise of orthodox faith, the Church used confession in order to penetrate any deception or pretense.

At the same time that the Fourth Lateran confirms confessional techniques for the discernment of guilt and truth, it was legislating against accusatory procedures in criminal justice and trials by ordeal. Prior to 1215, the trial by ordeal (proofs by water and hot iron) had received the Church's implicit sanction, and clergy presided over the trials by blessing the purgation. Canon eighteen, "De iudicio sanguinis et duelli clericis interdicto," forbids clerical involvement in both duels and "purgationi aquae ferventis vel frigidae seu ferri candentis" ("purgation by ordeal of boiling or cold water").[15] This canon marked "the beginning of the end of ordeals in European law."[16] As with confession, Canon 18 against ordeals merely confirms earlier reforms and sentiments. Yet brought together in the same document at the same, these two pieces of legislation (Canon 21 and 18) record an important shift in Western history. Michel Foucualt interprets this shift with respect to the production of truth: "Since the Middle Ages at least, Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely

---

[15] Ibid., 244.

[16] John Baldwin, "Intellectual Preparation for the Canon of 1215 Against Ordeals," *Speculum* 36 (1961): 615.

on for the production of truth."[17] The decline in accusatory procedures and the

abandonment of tests of guilt (or trial by ordeal) directly corresponds with the

ascendancy of confessional techniques and refinement of methods of interrogation and

inquest. The effect of which is, Foucualt argues, that "[t]he truthful confession was

inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization of power."[18] The way in

which confession produces truth and individualizes power has a dramatic effect upon

Christian bodies and medieval texts.

<center>II</center>

By bringing attention to the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215's larger ideological

project, I have shown how the council was engaged in disciplining and fashioning the

macrocosmic *Corpus Christianorum* as well as the microcosmic bodies of *fidelis* and

infidelis. I want to shift now away from my discussion of the council's legislation in

order to consider its consequences and, specifically, the consequences of Canon 21. In

terms of religious culture, the most immediate effect of the council was that it "provided

the parochial priest with a responsibility vis-à-vis his parishioners which he never had

had in an explicit fashion before this."[19] Arguably, after 1215, confession became the

parish priest's most important responsibility. Such grave responsibilities required

preparation, and, subsequently, Canon 21 inspired a proliferation of clerical and lay

---

[17] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 58.

[18] Ibid., 58-9.

[19] Boyle, "The Fourth Lateran Council," 31.

instructional manuals in Latin and the vernacular—manuals that would prepare both

priest and penitent for the annual requirement of confession while simultaneously

providing a doctrinal education.[20] Sacramental confession provided one vehicle for

instruction, and preaching—a "momentous and radical innovation in the religious life of

the Western Church"—provided another.[21] Both preaching and confession created the

need for supporting materials: collections of sermons and sermon exempla, books of

vices and virtues, expositions of the Ten Commandments, the seven sacraments, the

Creed, and the seven deadly sins. In this way, the religious and spiritual culture

promoted by the Fourth Lateran Council, in turn, cultivated medieval textual culture and,

in particular, the rise of vernacularity.

　　　The abundance of didactic confession literature spawned by the Fourth Lateran's

legislation points to one of the most importance ramifications of Canon 21. Through the

council's regulation and codification, confession acquires the status of *discourse*.

Confession makes the local souls and bodies of the Christian faithful the objects of

---

[20] Boyle writes that "[w]ithin fifty years of the council there was a profusion of episcopal or synodal constitutions all over Europe and a remarkable array of manuals of confession, *summae* of moral teaching, expositions of the Ten Commandments, compendia of vices and virtues, collections of sermons and sermon exempla, and general manuals of pastoral care, in Latin and in various vernaculars" ("The Fourth Lateran Council," 31). Likewise, Rita Copeland claims that *Omnis utriusque sexus* is "indisputably the most important factor in the rise of the industry of Latin and vernacular instruction on the doctrines of penance and the mechanics of confession." See Marjorie Curry Woods and Rita Copeland, "Classroom and Confession," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 390.

[21] James Brundage, "Sin, Crime, and the Pleasures of the Flesh: The Medieval Church Judges Sexual Offences," in *The Medieval World*, ed. Peter Linehan and Janet L.Nelson (New York: Routledge, 2001), 303.

rigorous clerical-maintenance and equally rigorous self-care. After 1215, parish priests

assumed the monumental responsibility of caring for and educating their parishioners,

but, at the same time, laypeople were encouraged to take a more active role in their faith.

Vernacular confession manuals teach a sinner how to scrutinize and, subsequently,

represent her own thoughts and deeds. This literature, as Jerry Root puts it, "'constructs'

the medieval subject by drawing in very explicit terms an outline of the self that one must

present to the priest."[22] He further argues that this literature shows "that the subject, the

self of confession, is also a construction."[23] Despite the persistent assumption that

subjectivity was untenable in the supposed orthodox homogeneity of the medieval world,

Root's clearly advocates for the existence of medieval subjects and demonstrates how

confessional discourse produces subjectivity. As the medieval period's privileged

discourse of the self, confession enacts a "mode of objectification of the subject" by

which a person actively participates in their self-formation or the turning of themselves

into "subjects."[24] As such, we find that the cultivation of individuality and the self-

representation so often associated with confessional discourse occur not in opposition to

authority and power but in conjunction with it.

Confession's demand to speak produces narrative. Through narrative a sinner

attempts to categorize, exteriorize, and objectify her innermost thoughts and feelings. On

one hand, such self-examination serves to discipline the medieval subject. On the other

---

[22] Jerry Root, *'Space to Speke': The Confessional Subject in Medieval Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 3.

[23] Ibid.

[24] *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 7-11.

hand, however, Foucault makes clear that although confession unfolds within a matrix of

power, it offers distinct benefits and pleasures for the confessant:

> The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is
> also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a
> power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or
> virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the
> authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and
> intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile; and
> finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external
> consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who
> articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of
> his wrongs, liberates him and promises him salvation.[25]

All of the literary texts I study reproduce this "ritual of discourse" as Foucault describes

it. In each text, a confessant speaks in the presence of a partner who does far more than

listen impartially. This relationship between a confessant and his/her "partner" calls into

question the motives for narrative. A confessant may confess in order merely to please or

placate her confessor/judge but often the reasons are more complex. The promises of

confession—redemption, purification, liberation—often ensure a sinner's compliance

with its demands. Moreover, the desire for truth appears as the chief motive for

confessional narrative. As Jeremy Tambling puts it, confession produces "a self that is

marked by the desire to show that it possesses truth."[26] This desire to prove that one

possesses truth motivates a confessant's storytelling. The confessant is not, however, the

final authority on her truth—the confessor/judge determines whether or not what she says

is true or false.

---

[25] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* 61-2.

[26] Jeremy Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 40.

Confession's production of truth requires hermeneutic work. The sinner *authors* her "text" and the confessor interprets and judges it. Confession's reliance upon language creates this need for interpretation. The need for interpretation is also a function of how "Christianity locates truth in the inward parts, not inscribed on the body and not publicly demonstrable."[27] Such a relationship between truth and the body is not necessarily an essential fact of a nature but the product of historical circumstances. Extending Foucault's observations about the implications of confession's inquisitorial procedures, Tambling concludes that the end of accusatory ordeals transforms the place of the body in the prosecution of crimes and thus in the discernment of truth:

> [W]hat is at stake is more the question of the function of the body in relation to the quest for truth. In the older accusatory form of trial by ordeal, the body is the site for testing guilt or innocence: the body yields its own answer to the demand for truth and it is an answer independent of what the prisoner may say. The emphasis is shifted in 1215; an inquisitorial procedure changes the body's role.[28]

As in confession, the evidence offered by the body in trial by ordeal requires interpretation, but the difference is that the body answers to the truth independently of what the accused might say. In trial by ordeal, it is presumed that the body does not lie. Yet confession seeks to take the body out of the equation, to move beyond, or within, corporeal limits. Confession seems to treat body's visible and material exterior as an impediment to the discovery of inner truth. In this way, confession subscribes to the classic binary opposition between "inner" and "outer" that Judith Butler argues

---

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., 39.

"stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject."[29] Just as the macrocosmic *Corpus Christianorum* stabilizes and consolidates the coherent Christian subject by maintaining a binary distinction between *fideles* and *infideles*, likewise confession maps "inner" and "outer" space onto the microcosmic body of the penitent.

Because, in confession, the soul rather than the body is the primary "subject" of consideration, didactic confession manuals address the body only indirectly or metaphorically. Nevertheless, confessing bodies are represented as intrinsically chaotic and potentially traitorous; they are fragmented and divided between inner and outer space or soul and body. How, I ask, does this mapping of the penitential body affect the narrative of truth produced by confession? As Foucault suggested, confession extracts truth and places it "in between words," and as such confession holds out truth like "a shimmering mirage."[30] In my consideration of didactic confession manuals, this metaphor of a "mirage" proves fitting. The manuals describe confession as process by which the sinner can access and represent the truth hidden within her body. Yet, as a sinner extracts truth, a translation occurs and truth exchanges a body of flesh for a body of words. Ultimately, the linguistic or textualized body produced by confession shows itself to be as problematic as the confessant's "real body."

---

[29] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 170-71. According to Butler, the duality of "inner" and "outer" space should be questioned. Her analysis poses some critical questions for the study of bodies and truth. She asks, "[f]rom what strategic position in public discourse and for what reasons has the trope of interiority and the disjunctive binary or inner/outer taken hold? In what language is 'inner space' figured?…How does a body figure on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden depth" (171).

[30] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 59.

16

Repeatedly, medieval confession manuals constitute a sinner's speech as truthful and sincere when she expresses herself nakedly, openly, and clearly. Confessional demands are for plain speech, and therefore words should plainly represent a sinner's truth rather than adorn or obfuscate it. "Confessors have no principle by which to deal with ornamentation," observes Tambling.[31] Ornamentation of any type signals artifice, literariness, and textuality, and, for their part, confession manuals emphasize orality. A sinner absolutely must confess by way of her mouth. The Church requires a confession to be spoken rather than written, and the early fourteenth-century manual, *Handlyng Synne* offers the following justification for this requirement: "We handyl synne euery day / Yn wrde & dede al þat we may. / Lytyl or mochyl synne we do: / Þe fende & oure flesshe tysyn vs þar to…/ A nouþer handlyng þer shulde be / Wyþ shryfte of mouþe to clense þe" (ll. 89-98).[32] Because sinners handle sin everyday in word and deed, in order to be cleansed they must likewise handle it with confession of mouth ("wyþ shrfyfe of mouþe"). This notion that one *handles* sin is especially suggestive: "To handle" is to hold, manage, and even touch sin.[33] Therefore, such handling of sin implies that the sinner acquires mastery over sin and by extension over the fiend and the flesh that cause her to transgress. Yet, at the same time, this *touching* of sin makes linguistic confession essentially experiential and corporeal. A similar metaphoric mingling of speech with

---

[31] Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject*, 40.

[32] Robert Mannyng of Brunne, *Handlyng Synne*, ed. Idelle Sullens (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Early Renaissance Text and Studies, 1983).

[33] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989, *s.v.* "handle," (v.[1]); 1(a): "To subject to the action of the hand or hands: in earlier use, esp., to touch or feel with the hands, to pass the hand over, stroke with the hand; later, to take hold of, turn over, etc., in the hand, to employ the hand on or about."

touch occurs in the early thirteenth-century guide for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse*: "Lif ant death" is in "tunge honden," and "Hawse witeth wel his muth, he witeth his sawle" (II.304-6).[34] Life and death rests in the tongue's hands, and whoever guards well his mouth, guards his soul. The mouth serves as the instrument of confessional telling and thus of salvation but also as a potential site of entry for sin into the body.

An "open" space, the mouth defies and deconstructs confession's portrayal of the body as split between interior and exterior and, as such, it reveals confession's simultaneous desire for a body closed to sin yet open to examination. In the Middle English manual, *Clensyng of Mannes Soule* (c. 1382) the image of an open mouth figures prominently throughout the text. Penitents are advised "to heeldiþ out tofore þe preest in goddis stide by open speche of þe mouþe. Þe synne þat is so priuyli hid in þe herte" (5).[35] Sin lay secretly hidden ("priuyli hid") in the heart, and the mouth and its *open* speech provides the means of accessing one's heart—of extracting sin, of pulling it from inside the body to without. Just as the sinner's speech is open, so is her body made open to scrutiny by confession. This emphasis upon the mouth has the effect of obscuring confession's reliance upon language for the production of truth. As in the earlier trials by

---

[34] All quotation and translation are taken from *Ancrene Wisse*, Middle English Texts, ed. Robert Hasenfratz. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000). The text consists of eight parts and part five treats confession.

[35] Walter Everett, "A Critical Edition of the Confession Section of the *Clensyng of Mannes Soule*," (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1974), 30. Everett's edition does not use continuous line numbering, so I have used his pagination in my citations of the text. The *Clensyng* takes as its organizing principle confession's three essential components: contrition, confession, and penance.

ordeal, the body in confession "yields its own answer to the demand for truth."[36] The

Ancrene Wisse graphically illustrates this yielding of the body in its discussion of the sin

of flattery:

> Thus thes false fikeleres ablendeth the ham her[c]nith, as ich ear seide, ant
> wriheth hare fulthe, thet ha hit ne mahe stinken, ant thet is hare muchel
> unselhthe. For yef ha hit stunken, ham walde wleatie ther-with, ant eornen
> to schrift ant speowen hit ut ther, ant schunien hit th'refter. (II.457-461)

> [Thus these false flatterers blind [those] who listen to them, as I said
> before, and cover their filth, so that they cannot smell it, and that is to their
> great misery. For if they smelled it, [it] would disgust them on that
> account, and [they would] run to confession and spew it out there, and
> shun it after that.]

This passage contains two very important points: language—in this case, the words of

false flatterers—conceals and covers the filth of sin, while, in contrast, confession is akin

to vomiting: an involuntary and visceral response to spiritual pollution. In asserting that

confession is a spontaneous and sincere overflow, the author tries to deny that "medieval

confession is a craft, a skill that can be learned."[37] Furthermore, *Ancrene Wisse* envisions

confession not as a careful weighing of conscience or a linguistic event, but as expulsion

and revulsion, a corporeal experience that returns us full circle to the problematic

relationship between literal and linguistic bodies.

Rather than vilifying or transcending the body, the confessional speech-act at

times performs like a body. In William de Montibus's mnemonic Latin poem, *Peniteas*

---

[36] Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject*, 39.

[37] Jerry Root, '*Space to Speke': The Confessional Subject*, 3.

19

Cito, the penitent's words are closely allied with her body.[38] Indeed, confession seems to

adopt the materiality or *presence* of a body to convey immateriality or *absence*. The

poem describes "what kind of thing confession ought to be": **"**Vera sit, integra sit, et sit

confession munda. / Sit cita, firma, frequens, humilis, spontanea, nuda, / Propria, discreta,

lacrimosa, morose, fidelis" (21-23); (The confession should be true, complete, clean,

quick, strong, frequent, humble, spontaneous, naked, proper, discrete, tearful, morose and

faithful).[39] Rather than characterizing a speech-act, the qualities set forth by the *Peniteas*

Cito configure the penitent's body and mannerisms in the performance of confessing.

Yet neither this poem nor other confession manuals call for a performance in the

theatrical sense.[40] Instead they imply that a sinner's word should somehow act out her

inner feelings. "The simplicity of the utterance," Karma Lochrie contends,

"demands…that the confession focus on the sin itself, not the story; the humility, purity,

and faithfulness are all properties governing the confessant's disposition, intention, and

truthfulness."[41] Rather than governing the surface exteriors of the body, the qualities of

---

[38] According to Marjorie Curry Woods, "the popularity of [the *Peniteas Cito*] all over Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was extraordinary" and it is "the first confessional treatise written in verse" (Marjorie Curry Woods and Rita Copeland, "Classroom and Confession"), 385.

[39] William de Montibus, "Peniteas Cito Peccator," in *William De Montibus: The Schools and the Literature of Pastoral Care*, ed. Joseph Goering. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1992), 107-138. Translation from Latin is my own.

[40] This being said, it is hard to imagine how qualities such as "humble," "spontaneous," "tearful," and "morose" can convey the "thing confession ought to be" by words alone. And although performance is certainly not called for and most likely frowned upon, we can imagine how certain bodily gestures might compliment the confessant's words—for example, downcast eyes, a bowed head, a kneeling posture, folded hands, quivering lips, and so forth.

[41] Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, 37.

confession, as defined by the *Peniteas Cito*, govern the interiors of the body: the

confessant's disposition and intention. Furthermore, the simplicity or plainness of the

sinner's utterance, as Lochrie points out, is designed to proscribe storytelling.

Nevertheless, this plainness manifests itself as a particular narrative form or rhetorical

style—a style that denies its own artificiality.

In general, confession manuals attempt to limit speech. Confession demands

speech but that speech should be neither excessive nor overly explicit. The *Ancrene*

Wisse, for example, explains that the sinner's confession should be "naketliche i-maket"

or made naked-like and should "nawt bisamplet feire, ne hendeliche i-smaket, ah schulen

the wordes beon i-schawet after the werkes" (V.199-200).   Her sins should neither be

explained away pleasantly nor graciously adorned, but the words must be shown

according to the acts. Ideally, the sinner's words should maintain a one-to-one

correspondence with the actions of the body: the words should plainly reflect or

represent, rather than adorn or elaborate. However, when a sinner confesses nakedly, she

should confess her sins clearly but not crudely. Therefore, at the same time that the

author demands nakedness, he encourages euphemistic invention. The *Ancrene Wisse*

continues:

> Do awei the totagges. Unwrih the ant sei, "Sire—Godes are!—ich am a
> ful stodmeare, a stinkinde hore." Yef thi fa a ful nome ant cleope thi sunne
> fule. Make hit i schrift sterot-naket—thet is, ne hel thu na-with of al thet
> lith ther-abuten, thah to fule me mei seggen. Me ne thearf nawt nempnin
> thet fule dede bi his ahne fule nome, ne the schendfule limes bi hare ahne
> nome—inoh is to seggen swat hate the hali schrift-feader witerliche
> understonde hweate tu wulle meanen. (V.206-11)

> [Put away the trimmings. Unmask yourself and say, "Sir—God's
> grace!—I am a foul stud mare, a stinking whore." Give thy foe a foul

21

> name and call thy sin foul. Make it stark-naked in confession—that is, do
> not conceal any bit of all which lies near it, though one can speak too
> foully. But it is not necessary to name that foul deed by its own foul
> name, nor the shameful limbs by their own name—it is enough to speak so
> that the holy confessor may understand clearly what you want to bemoan.]

A naked confession requires the anchoress to do away with the trimmings or "tottages" in order to *unmask* herself as a foul stud-mare and stinking whore. Yet at the same time she is advised against the explicit naming of deeds and limbs. Thus, the author reveals his discomfort with language, dilating upon a linguistic foulness that threatens to get out of hand; the delights or erotics of naming put both the penitent and confessor at risk. The author's exclamatory style is hyperbolic and sexualized, suggesting the mutual implication of power and pleasure. He demands exposure ("Unwrih the") or "naked" speech, but, at the same time, he demands that the "shameful limbs" be concealed. Ultimately, his advocacy of metaphor or "linguistic modesty" reveals the thin line between the literal and the literary in confession.

In the *Ancrene Wisse*, the vitriolic fixation upon nakedness highlights not only confessional demands for plain speech but also the text's ambivalent treatment of women and its structural and philosophical reliance on the idea of bodily enclosure. This text makes apparent that all confessing bodies are not created equal. Feminist scholars have demonstrated that medieval assumptions about female inferiority shaped the female body as a "vessel pervious to forces outside its control, and especially susceptible to occupation by the devil," as fundamentally porous, permeable, and penetrable.[42] Hence, Elizabeth Robertson claims that "the *Ancrene Wisse*'s peculiar style…was shaped by its

---

[42] Gregory Gross, "Secrecy and Confession in Late Medieval Narrative: Gender, Sexuality, and the Rhetorical Subject," (PhD diss., Brown University, 1994), 115.

22

author's culturally determined assumptions about women" and, I would add, women's bodies in particular.[43] Robertson concludes that "for a man, the process of overcoming sin does not mean denying his maleness; whereas, for a woman, the process involves overcoming what is considered to be her femaleness, her corporeality. For a woman, all sins, even pride, are associated with her body."[44] The form and content of the *Ancrene Wisse* produce a template of the "true" female body. The text visualizes the anchoress's body in architectonic terms and, therefore, as synonymous with her literal enclosure or anchorhold. As subjects, finally, women are coterminous with their bodies. Because didactic confession manuals almost always assume a male penitent, the *Ancrene Wisse* provides a rare look at the convergence of bodies, truth, and gender in medieval confession.

Medieval confession, I argue, provides a grammar of truth, interiority, and linguistic transparency that is frequently expressed through the trope of nakedness.[45] Like the *Ancrene Wisse*, the *Clensyng of Mannes Soule* states its requirements for a naked confession but in less colorful terms. The author writes that confession must be naked because "a man schal not make hi confession bi a mesaunger ne bi no letter: but bi specke of his owne mouþ / Also bi no gay wordis or teemes to hide his synne vnder fair colouris"

---

[43] Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 44.

[44] Ibid., 61.

[45] Karma Lochrie's recent assessment of confession manuals concurs with my conclusions. Lochrie writes that "all [confession manuals] stress the importance of confessing *openliche*, *clyerliche*, and *nakedliche* (openly, clearly, and nakedly), neither holding anything back, nor falsifying one's sins, nor obfuscating the nature of one's guilt" (*Covert Operations*, 38).

(30). Here again the figure of the mouth recurs as the author registers suspicion of language, artifice, and narrative. As we have seen, the mouth provides the primary means of mediating a sinner's experience of sin, but the author of the *Clensyng* further implies that the mouth's orality provides some assurance against rhetoric and textuality—against the "letter." Yet, in making such demands for naked speech, confessional discourse manifests problematic assumptions about the transparency of language. A naked confession suggests that language can be pared down and unnecessary elaborations or accretions can be stripped away until all that remains is the essence or heart of the matter. Similarly, the late twelfth-century theologian, Peter the Cantor attests to such paring down or stripping when he defines confession as an act by which "we confess to priests by mouth of our sins nakedly ("nude"), openly ("aperte"), and stripped of skin ("excoriate") with all their circumstances," and he goes on to advise, "that sin not be garbed in robes but revealed to the confessor as it was done."[46] As Peter's metaphor illustrates, the literal text that expresses sin *as it was done* is characterized in terms of a naked and excoriated body. The expectation of a strict correspondence between a sinner's words and her acts evidences a fantasy of presence that seeks to deny the treachery of language.

There emerges a resemblance between the "real" body and what might be called the "body of confession"—both simultaneously concealing and revealing an inner truth. Just as the soul resides within the body, the truth of the confessant's words, deeds, and

---

[46] qtd. in John Baldwin, "From the Ordeal to Confession: In Search of Lay Religion in Early Thirteenth Century France," in *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, ed. Peter Biller and A. J. Minnis (Woodbridge: Suffolk, York Medieval Press, 1998), 202.

desires reside within the text produced by confession.   Confession shows the body's

potential to conceal sin, but through the naked and open confession, a sinner's authentic

"self" will be revealed. We see that confessional truth when extracted from body is

necessarily placed *in between words*, which, however "naked," only repeats the problems

confession seeks to mitigate. The idea of a "naked" text is founded on the assumption or

fantasy that orality means presence/sincerity where textuality entails absence/artifice. As

I turn in the following chapters to dealing with literary confessions, a critical paradox

emerges: written confessions such as those offered by Gower, Chaucer, Kempe, and

Henryson necessarily attempt to operate both within and against confessional discourse's

assumption that artifice, in any form, functions as an impediment to the recovering of

truth.

<center>III</center>

The immense popularity of confessional manuals for lay audiences is consistent

with the rise in lay piety, literacy, private book ownership, and the growing industry of

professional (rather than clerical) book production that has been chronicled elsewhere by

historians.[47] Inevitably, these didactic texts shaped the experience of confessional

practice, and thus despite its orality/aurality, confessional discourse was promulgated by

a fiercely textual culture.   This textual culture provided the discursive means by which

sinners could categorize and schematize their experience, sensation, and emotion under

extensive rubrics such as the Ten Commandments, five senses, seven deadly sins and so

---

[47] See, for example, Christopher de Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*
(Boston: D.R. Godine, 1986).

<center>25</center>

forth. Moreover, the author of *Clensyng of Mannes Soule* claims that "menye men and wymmen desire to haue a foorme of confession. Þerfore y wole tell ȝou oo foorme of confession to *comprehende alle synnes* in declaring openly þe spicis of þe seuene deedly synnes" (64; my emphasis). He suggests that there is both demand and need for confessional formula. The organizing principle of the seven deadly sins with all its subcategories or species offers an interpretive model par excellance. [48] Confession promises to comprehend all sin, and all human experience: every word, deed, or desire of the human body. In this way, the discourse's capacity for organizing and (re)producing the interiors and exteriors of Christian bodies was immense

Ultimately, confession manuals claim to provide sinners with a methodology whereby they can access and express the truth they find, but also *invent*, within themselves. It is confession's capacity for invention rather than strict representation that the idea of a "naked confession" seems so anxious to address. This latent anxiety, I propose, stems from the discourse's reliance upon inventional strategies borrowed from classical rhetoric. Despite the limitations placed on speech, confession manuals also call for completeness. A sinner's confession should not only be naked but also complete, whole, or full. A complete confession addresses all of the "circumstances" of sin. The rhetorical scheme of "circumstances" and the "attributes" of persons (characterization) and things (actions/acts/reactions)—who, what, where, with whom, how often, why, in what way, when—were used by classical orators for the invention of topics, characters,

---

[48] See, for example, Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature* (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1952; Rpt., 1967).

and arguments.[49] D.W. Robertson, Marjorie Curry Woods, and Rita Copeland all

demonstrate how penitential literature employs the rhetorical devices of attributes and

circumstances.[50] Evidence for the dovetailing of confession and rhetoric can be found in

the *Peniteas Cito*. The "circumstances" appear in the poem under the rubric of "What a

full confession ought to be:" "Omnia peccata plangat contrition uera, / Scrutans etates,

sensus, loca, tempora, membra;" ("Let true confession mourn all sins, examining times of

life, senses, regions, times, the members of the body.")[51] As in rhetoric, these

"circumstances" work to establish context. A confessor needs to understand fully the

nature and extent of the sinner's guilt before assigning her penance, and the

circumstances could either mitigate the sin or exacerbate it.

An avowal of sin serves as only the beginning of a full confession. The confessor

demands to know more: where the sin took place, with whom, at what time of day, and so

forth. This protracted solicitation of detail, however, cultivates storytelling. According

to Woods, the circumstances "generate a full picture of the condition of the sinner and

severity of the sin" and Copeland argues that they "provide the penitent with an

'inventional' system for investigating the conscience and narrativizing sin."[52] These

rhetorical strategies supply confession with the capacity for *inventing* and *constructing*

---

[49] The "circumstances" and "attributes" are outlined by Cicero in his rhetorical treatise, *De inventione* (which literally translates as "of invention").

[50] D. W. Robertson, "A Note on the Classical Origin of 'Circumstances' in the Medieval Confessional," *Studies in Philology* 43 (1946): 6-14; Marjorie Curry Woods and Rita Copeland, "Classroom and Confession," 376-406.

[51] Montibus, "Peniteas Cito Peccator," ll. 14-15.

[52] Woods and Copeland, "Classroom and Confession," 387, 395.

fictional subjects that appear and behave incredibly lifelike. Furthermore, confession uses this rhetorical system for treating "the social subject, as an institutional construct—a role, status, a member of a class."[53] Instructional manuals prompt confessors to modify their interrogation of sin to fit a particular sinner's class, sex, age, and occupation. In Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, for example, we find that confession helps invent the "subject" of the Amans, who plays the role of the lover. I begin my study of literary confession with Gower, in part, because the *Confessio* most explicitly illustrates confessional discourse's productive and inventional properties.

Despite being a discourse for the production of truth, confession enabled new fictive gestures. I follow Jerry Root and Mary Braswell in concluding that these manuals, which promote a style of plain speech and offer hermeneutic and narrativizing strategies, provide a critical link between the religious practice of confession and the literary confessions I discuss in the remainder of my study. Root contends that the "literature of the fourteenth century converts the rules and regulations of confession to the production of literary character," and, more specifically, Braswell argues that confession produces the character of the medieval sinner in Richardian literature.[54] Furthering their observations, I consider how confession's demand to speak produced new narrative forms and how these forms were used by medieval authors to produce new subjective truths.

---

[53] H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the* Canterbury Tales (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 14.

[54] Jerry Root, '*Space to Speke': The Confessional Subject*, 4.

28

Several scholars have observed that the fourteenth-century witnessed a "crisis of truth."[55] It was a period of "epistemological upheaval" predicated, in part, upon the "breakdown of neat patterns of order and authority" and throughout there is "the new awareness…of the power of literature to shape, and not merely innocently express, truth."[56] It is suggestive to consider how confession, which was designed by Church as an interrogative tool for determining a sinner's truth, might ironically have helped to engender this crisis. Likewise, vernacular literacy and confession's encouragement of vernacular speech may very well have played a role in the period's epistemological upheaval. Confession had the effect of granting ordinary people's lives and experiences a degree of importance and fostering personal narration. Chaucer, Gower, Kempe, and Henryson all somewhat anxiously explore subjective experience as the newly minted grounds of *auctoritas*. Each of these authors uses confession differently (and, in the case, of Kempe perhaps unconsciously), but, during a period of crisis, they all adapt the discourse to important ethical, aesthetic, ontological, and, especially, epistemological questions.

---

[55] See, for example, Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

[56] Laurence de Looze, *Pseudo-Autobiography in the Fourteenth Century* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 14.

Chapter Two
Desiring Truth: Confession, Subjectivity, and the Body
in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*

If the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 is a problematic point of origin for my

project as a whole, John Gower's compendious Middle English poem, the *Confessio*

Amantis offers in some ways an equally problematic point of departure for my study of

literary confession. By taking the seven deadly sins as its frame narrative, its relationship

to confessional discourse appears obvious. But it is precisely the poem's apparent

didacticism that has posed a challenge for many critics. Gower's modeling of the poem

upon medieval confession manuals (such as those discussed in chapter one) combined

with his assignation as "moral Gower" has caused many critics to discount the poem's

inventiveness. In the Prologue, however, Gower declares his ambition to embrace a new

"stile" of writing. He subjects himself to the forces of change and reinvention. Rather

than being incidental, or even opposed, to the poem's penitential frame, I would suggest

that Gower's desire for innovation is entirely consistent with it. The poem evinces

confessional discourse's inherent capacity for invention and fictionalization.

Furthermore, in the *Confessio*, Gower writes for the first time in his native vernacular,

English. He explicitly aligns himself with the "common voice" and forgoes the position

of narrative exteriority and objectivity that characterized his earlier Latin and French

works.[1] Very appropriately, then, Gower aligns vernacular writing with confessional

---

[1] Analogously, Robert F. Yeager suggests that Gower's use of English "seems to
indicated Gower's sense of his native language as appropriately a 'median tongue,'
neither as lofty as Latin nor as courtly as French—the mode rather of frank parlance and

speech, and he reworks the conventional story of "lust"—a thing "noght so strange/

Which every kinde hath upon honde" (1.10-11)— from the limited perspective of Amans,

a man who is entirely *subject* to love.[2] Ostensibly, Amans's "lust" or desire motivates

the poem's narrative but underlying this one man's desire is the universal desire for

truth—a truth promised by the poem's confession but, in the end, never fully realized.

In the Prologue, Gower observes the world around him in a condition of crisis and

division. Men are divided against one another, and corruption plagues "the state," "the

church," and "the commons." The poet yearns for ages past when "Of mannes herte the

corage / Was schewed thanne in the visage; / the word was lich to the conceite / Withoute

semblant of deceite" (P.111-114). He declares his utopian wish for a world without

deceit. The Prologue thus portrays a society suffering from a "crisis of truth." From this

macrocosmic view of disharmony, we shift in Book One to a microcosm of discontent:

Amans. The poet changes from social commentary to the subject of love and exchanges

the exterior and omniscient position of complaint that he occupies throughout the

Prologue for the myopic perspective of a lover. "No longer claiming the authoritative but

exposed position of a conduit of divine Truth," this metamorphosis of the poet-persona

---

consequently well suited for a poem ostensibly a secular confession" ("English, Latin,
and Text as 'Other': the Page as Sign in the Work of John Gower," *Text* 3 [1987]: 256).

[2] All quotations are from G. C. Maccaulay's authoritative edition, *The Complete
Works of John Gower*, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900-01). The *Confessio
Amantis* appears in vols. 2 and 3.

"signals [Gower's] reinvention of the poetic voice."[3] From the margins of the page, the

Latin glosses record the poet's transformation:

> Hic quasi in persona aliorum, quos amor alligat, fingens se auctor esse Amantem, varias eorum passions variss huius libri distincctionibus per singular scribere proponit.

> [From here on the author, feigning himself to be a lover, as if in the person of those other whom Love constrains, intends to write about their various passions one by one in various sections of the book.][4]

The poet-persona, John Gower imbeds himself within the fictional confession in order to

write "as if in the person" of another. But to what extent does this "feigning"

compromise the poet's ability to speak truthfully, and how does the *Confessio* implicate

confessional discourse in its earnest game of truth- and fiction-making?

In the *Confessio Amantis*, confessional discourse functions as a generative

"middel weie," compulsively producing fictional bodies and texts (P.17-19). As such, the

poem illustrates confession's inventional properties and demonstrates Gower's awareness

of literature's capacity to shape, rather than simply reflect "truth." While I will situate

the *Confessio* in relationship to the religious discourse of confession, I will emphasize its

narrative and discursive aspects rather than focusing upon confession as a moral

institution. Frequently, the *Confessio*'s penitential "frame" has been seen as an apparatus

---

[3] Simon Meecham-Jones, "The Poet as Subject: Literary Self-consciousness in Gower's *Confessio* Amantis," in *Betraying Our Selves: Forms of Self-Representation in Early Modern English Texts*, ed. Henk Dragstra, Sheila Ottway, and Helen Wilcox (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 20.

[4] Marginal note at Book One, l. 294. The Latin *fingens* can have all the following meanings: to shape, fashion, form and mould but also to imagine, conceive, feign, invent or fabricate. I translate "fingens" as "feigning," but Andrew Galloway translates it as "fashioning." See Russell Peck, ed., *Confessio Amantis, Vol. 1* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 304.

of doctrinal orthodoxy that Gower either operates entirely within or strains against. In this way, we see the polarizing effects of confessional discourse. In the following chapter, I want to resist such polarization by proposing that the poem's penitential structure is integral to how it simultaneously produces *and* destabilizes meaning, subjectivity, and "truth." Consequently, I am less interested the morality or amorality of Gower or his writing and more interested in how confession negotiates between desire and truth, "lust" and "lore."

The poem's apparent morality has had a disabling effect upon critics. While an understanding of sacramental confession necessarily informs our reading of the *Confessio*, this historical institution has, at times, governed and circumscribed our assessment of the confession's function within the poem. Such moralizing governance occurs, for example, when Gerald Kinneavy parallels the *Confessio* to the late-medieval, English confession manual, *Handlyng Synne*. While his analysis illuminates the explicit connections between Gower's poem and the tradition of vernacular confession manuals, Kinneavy's comparison results in a problematically limited reading:

> [T]he lover's plight is but a device—a rhetorical tool to get at the meat of the work: 'the ethical basis of God's universe'…this moral center has been established by the penitential tradition. The basis of both the tradition and the poem is the Christian standard of rational behavior.[5]

Kinneavy professes to reveal the *Confessio*'s "truth" from which the "lover's plight," as mere artifice or "device," is unceremoniously excluded. In this way, the penitential tradition orients the poem around a "moral center" and rejects any potential readings that

---

[5] Gerald Kinneavy, "Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the Penitentials," *Chaucer Review* 19 (1984): 158-9.

do not take the "Christian standard of rational behavior" as their basis. The presence of confession, according to Kinneavy, demands morality.

Alternatively, other critics have concluded that the penitential frame supplies the ornamental "device" superfluous to the poem's real meaning. For example, Simon Meecham-Jones argues that the rigorous "schema of the Seven Deadly Sins" guarantees "the moral orthodoxy of the poem" so as to allow Gower the freedom to present "serious moral problems with a degree of flippancy or disengagement."[6] He assumes that the confessional schema imposes doctrinaire orthodoxy, and thus Meecham-Jones' attributes the poem's self-conscious fictionality to Gower's authorial presence. The effect of this attribution is to narrow the poem's diversity of voices and desires to the univocal John Gower. Consequently, Meecham-Jones falls into an autobiographical fallacy in which the poem records Gower's consciously rendered poetic intent. He asserts that "[a]lthough the stories are within the fabric of the poem as exempla by Genius, the reader never forgets that they are ultimately the work of Gower himself, the sum of his observation and reading on the subject of love."[7] The reader never forgets, or perhaps never *should*, forget the author behind the text controlling and limiting its meaning. The authorial presence comes to the fore explicitly as Meecham-Jones concludes that the poem is in a

---

[6] Meecham-Jones, "The Poet as Subject," 19. Meecham-Jones argues that Gower uses the "autobiographical mode" as the means "to construct a validation of his own work" (15). Although confession is arguably the medieval period's most prevalent and accessible "autobiographical mode," Meecham-Jones fails to recognize confession's applicability to his argument. The absence of confession proves especially conspicuous because he produces a veritable litany of possible autobiographical models, including a Biblical tradition of spiritual autobiography (e.g. the Book of Job, The Book of Jonah, the Prophetic Books, the psalms, the writings of St. Paul).

[7] Ibid., 21.

sense Gower's confession, "an apologia for the poet's having devoted his life to study."[8] In the end, Meecham-Jones' argument for the poem as Gower's personal apologia remains unsatisfactory because it reduces the poem's multiplicities to an expression of the historical author's desire for validation—it continually returns to a person or presence outside the text.

To a great extent, the *Confessio's* discursive complexity derives from the poem's multiple and competing voices—Amans, Genius, Venus, and the poet-narrator—and from the poem's multiple and competing textual parts—Prologue, confession, exempla, Latin glosses, and Epilogue. The elaborate bilingual reading apparatus emphasizes textuality, while, at the same time, the confessional dialogue between Amans and Genius creates the illusion of orality. Moreover, the structure of the poem establishes varying states of interiority and exteriority. Amans's confession consists of exemplary tales bracketed by dialogue between Genius and Amans; this dialogue is further bracketed by Latin poetic head notes and marginalia. Because the marginalia supply the outermost "voice" of the text and because they assume an ostensibly objective and scholarly stance, critics sometimes construe these marginalia as evidence for Gower's authoritative presence within the poem. Paul Strohm suggests, that the glosses "have a crucial role in reminding us of the *presence* of Gower the Poet as distinct from the obviously limited view-point of Amans."[9] Where I find a remarkable indeterminacy between Amans, the

---

[8] Ibid., 23.

[9] Paul Strohm, "A Note on Gower's Persona," in *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in its Contexts, 700-1600*, ed. Mary Carruthers and Elizabeth Kirk (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1982), 296, my emphasis.

poet-persona, and the historical John Gower, Strohm argues for obvious distinctions. He

applies to the *Confessio* E. Talbot Donaldson's "threefold scheme" for describing the

interplay of voices in the *Canterbury Tales* as Chaucer the Pilgrim, Chaucer the Poet, and

historical Chaucer.[10] By this logic, "Gower as Amans" acts as the equivalent of "Chaucer

the Pilgrim," and "Gower the Poet," Strohm writes, maintains a carefully drawn

"distinction between himself and his persona."[11] This neat delineation of voice and

persona, however, proves both problematic and untenable. Finally, such a schema speaks

more to the critic's desire for access to Gower's unified meaning than it does to poem's

operations.[12]

Such critical investment in maintaining sharp distinctions, precisely where the

text resists such clarity, suggests the reader's desire for interpretive control and a desire

for "truth." Ultimately, Donaldson's "threefold scheme" returns us again to the problem

of an autobiographical fallacy and the presumption that an author's conscious intent can

be recovered by the masterful critic. In analogous terms, Marshall Leicester disputes

Donaldson's schema for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. He claims that such a schema

reveals an underlying interpretive fantasy, but that the *General Prologue* "deliberately

and calculatedly denies" the reader a "sense of knowing where we are and with whom we

---

[10] See E. T. Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," *PMLA* 69 (1954): 928-36.

[11] Strohm, "A Note on Gower's Persona," 296.

[12] In a similar vein, Elizabeth Scala notes that "while critics invest their arguments in this distinction [between the poet and Amans], the *Confessio* itself emphasizes the blurriness of any lines that could be drawn" (*Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England* [New York: Palgrave, 2002], 162).

are dealing."[13] In the *Confessio*, we are similarly denied any surety of knowing. We

cannot be sure that we are dealing in the Latin marginalia with the voice of Gower. Nor

can we can be sure where the characters, Amans and Genius begin and the poet ends.

Indeed, the *Confessio* stalls readers with its "multiplicity and ambivalence," and through

its cacophony of voices, the poem explicitly articulates the challenges of guaranteeing

meaning and undermines any certain distinctions between truth and fiction.[14]

The recurrent manifestation of autobiographical fallacy in the reception to the

Confessio is, I argue, one textual effect of the poem's confessional discourse. A similar

effect occurs in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, where likewise the author appears as

a character within the text itself. This is not to say that autobiographical fallacies only

emerge in texts that are confessional, but, the penitential "I" produced by confession

seems to promise especially "unmediated access" to the author or speaker's "unified,

coherent, and authentic desires."[15] The critical desire for this access reflects of how

confession promises to deliver truth. Yet any claims to unity, coherence, and authenticity

are problematized by the *Confessio*. The poet's impersonation of the lover—"quasi in

persona aliorum"—immediately registers the poem's self-conscious fictionality. At the

same time, rather than merely writing *about* the lover, the poet chooses to write *in the

person of* the lover. Because it confuses the distinction between the fictional "I" and the

---

[13] H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the* Canterbury Tales (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 386.

[14] Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 159.

[15] Patricia Clare Ingham, "Psychoanalytic Criticism," in *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Steve Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 466.

fictional 'other,' the *Confessio*'s claims to access are fraught. Therefore, rather than assuming that the *Confessio* emerges as the product of stable "self," who exercises complete control over the text's multiple discourse, I contend that a theory of subjectivity best accounts for poem's ambivalences. Confession, whatever its promises, is inherently inventive. Therefore, the entire poem and its multiple "subjects," textual bodies, and voices are produced by and through confession's demand to speak.

By better understanding the discursive operations of the confessional mode, I argue that we can resist the autobiographical fallacy and can avoid flattening the *Confessio*'s complexity. The confessional mode creates an unstable narrative space that straddles past and present: a space that simultaneously evokes introspection, retrospection, and production. As a speech-act, confessional utterance resembles the "liar paradox" in which the "I" speaking the words "I am lying" can never be the same as the "I" being spoken.[16] Elucidating the parallels between this paradox and the medieval sacrament of penance, Gregory Roper writes:

> The penitent discovers a self by trying on another's (the handbook's) language, traits, and description. But in that very moment of discovering oneself, one sets that self aside. The penitent displaces the old "I" of his past sins into the role of a sinner, comes to understand the significance of his old life, and thus gains a new self.[17]

Essentially, Roper describes a process that produces (rather than expresses or reveals) medieval subjectivity: a process by which a sinner is made "subject" to the discipline and

---

[16] Kathryn Lynch discusses the "liar's paradox" in *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000). See especially pp. 114-5.

[17] Gregory Roper, "*Pearl*, Penitence, and the Recovery of the Self," *Chaucer Review* 28 (1993): 168.

language of sacramental penance. That is, a sinner is both made a grammatical subject of which various sinful actions may be predicated, *and* she is subjected to the religious law of institutional confession and all the self-scrutiny that it demands. During the transitional process of confession, the sinner's "self" (in Roper's terminology) proves to be divided and constructed rather than unified and natural.

Yet, I argue, the confessant is not the only divided subject produced by confessional discourse. In his psychoanalytic analysis of modern literary confession, Denis Foster posits that confessional narrative occurs "between two substantial, unsettled subjects."[18] His remarks seem especially applicable to the *Confessio*'s enactment of a dialogue between the "subjects," Amans and Genius, both of whom, I argue, are upset and "unsettled" by the confession. According to Foster, by "calling on the listeners' need to understand," the confessant/speaker evokes in the listener "a sense of loss that is experienced as a desire for truth"—that is, the confessant "can unsettle the listener's sense of self-possession."[19]   Foster's analysis helps to explain how Amans's confession and the *Confessio*, as a whole, affects its readers. Justifiably, critics have observed that the *Confessio*—both in the manner of rhetoric and in the manner of confession manuals—attempts to provoke its readers to response and action.[20] By considering the role of the listener/reader, Foster declares that "the meaning of a work cannot be found

---

[18] Denis Foster, *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3.

[19] Ibid.

[20] See, for example, William Robbins, "Romance, Exemplum, and the Subject of the *Confessio Amantis*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 19 (1997): 180-1.

within its own boundaries."[21] Indeed, quite literally and figuratively the meaning of the

Confessio exceeds its own boundaries as the confession spills over onto the margins of

the manuscript page.[22] With its dramatic intertextuality—its repeated transgressions of

discursive, linguistic, and generic borders— the *Confessio* refuses to offer its readers

either closure or a stable "subject."

II

Whereas most critics either disregard the poem's penitential frame as irrelevant

artifice or, alternatively, treat it as enforcing the didacticism of the poem (and of "moral

Gower"), in my own analysis I extend the work of two critics, Elizabeth Scala and Peter

Nicholson, who allow for confession's narrative function as productive rather than

didactic. Nicholson points out that the "whole framework of fictionalized moralizing has

received little attention from the commentators on the poem."[23] One problem in

particular has been how to treat meaningfully the penitential frame together with

Genius's *exempla*. Nicholson fruitfully addresses this problem by discussing how

Amans's presence allows "Gower to shift the emphasis from purely abstract moralizing

---

[21] Foster, *Confession and Complicity*, 1.

[22] For recent discussion of Gower's manuscript apparatus, see Siân Echard, "Glossing Gower: In Latin, in English, and *in absentia*: The Case of Bodleian Ashmole 35" in *Revisioning Gower*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1998), 237-57; "Pre-Texts: Tables of Contents and the Reading of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Medium Aevum* 66 (1997): 270-87; Robert F. Yeager, "English, Latin, and Text as 'Other.'

[23] Peter Nicholson, "The 'Confession' in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Studia Neophilologica* 58 (1986): 193.

to the difficulties of the individual sinner's real experience."[24] The result is a different

type of mores than that provided by Gower's *Mirour de l'Omme* and the *Vox

Clamantis*—a "morality of human love," which is presented obliquely and requires the

listener's (both Amans's and the reader's) active engagement in order to produce

meaning. Nicholson's reading of the frame and exempla together demonstrates the call

and response between Amans and Genius and how one subject unsettles the other's sense

of truth. Frequently, Amans redefines Genius's lessons to fit his own experience. This

process of redefinition, I suggest, might also be considered as type of mediation

occurring between past and present and between Amans's fantasies and Genius's

fantastic stories.[25] Such mediation appears central to the way confessional discourse

works to produce subjective truth and how medieval literary confession, in particular,

troubles a clear delineation between the stories of others and the story of oneself.

     In the *Confessio*, fantasy functions to craft the poem's "subjects," and fantasy, we

might say, is the search for presence beyond absence.[26] Repeatedly, the poem

demonstrates the power of the imagination (*ingenium*) to fabricate or formulate "reality"

---

[24] Ibid.

[25] Russell Peck's description of the interplay between Amans and Genius as a
"phenomenology of make believe" is suggestive here: "Amans will respond to Genius's
stories with glimpses into the ways he views himself, glimpses which are quite wonderful
fantasies in themselves that are answered with Genius's equally fantastic stories, brought
with a fresh warp from the past, as the two weave together a politics of make-believe"
("The Phenomenology of Make Believe in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Studies in
Philology* 91 [1994]: 258).

[26] In her discussion of "sovereign fantasies," Patricia Clare Ingham writes that
"*fantasy* signifies both (as often in the colloquial sense) utopian hopes for imagining a
different world and (as often in psychoanalytic use) the *jouissance* (enjoyment) that
surfaces through desire" (*Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of
Britain* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001], 7).

and "truth."[27] Genius warns in Book Five that lovers "thurgh here oghne fantasie / Thei fallen into Jealousie." Overcome by jealousy, lovers are like a ship that has "tobroke his cable" and with every wind is "muable" (5.441-4). When overtaken by a covetous paranoia, a lover turns "The lust of loves duete" into "strif" (5.488-9). A lover, feverish with jealousy, follows his beloved everywhere with his eyes. His constant surveillance and suspicion causes her to change her behavior: "Sche not what thing is for the beste, / Bot liveth out of all reste; / For what as evere him liste sein, / Sche dar noght speke a word ayein" (5.503-6). She dares not oppose her jealous lover's paranoid fantasies; whatever he says, she agrees with. Thus, fantasy has the capacity to alter reality. As Genius puts it, jealousy is a "fieverous maladie / Which caused is of fantasie" (5.588-9) and which works "Thurgh feigned enformacion" of the lover's "ymaginacion" (5.93-4). The lover imagines discord and, consequently, brings such discord into being. Yet, Genius's illustrative exemplum contradicts his moralizing. The Tale of Venus and Vulcan describes Vulcan's suspicion of Venus's fidelity; but, rather than "feigned information," Vulcan's jealousy proves well-founded. Nevertheless, when Vulcan asks for reparations, the gods rebuke him. From this tale, Genius advises that if "such a happ

---

[27] Winthrop Wetherbee writes that "Twelfth-century thought on imagination tends to fall into two main categories": "One…tends to consider imagination as intimately bound up with the influence of the natural *motus* which activate cosmic and human nature. Imagination expresses our impulse to realize, to possess, or to participate in what we naturally desire and thereby give expression to the *ingenium*, or natural bent, of our nature, which is ultimately orientated toward harmonious participation in the natural order. Twelfth-century spirituality, on the other hand, tends to emphasize the psychological process of imagining and its role in our institutions of spiritual reality, its power to abstract from the external world images which, by their beauty, intricacy, or variety, enable us to form a notion of the richness of the divine." ("The Theme of Imagination in Medieval Poetry and the Allegorical Figure 'Genius,'" *Medievalia et Humanistica* 7 [1976]: 46).

of love asterte," a lover should "feigne" as though "he wiste it noght" because if he lets it

"overpasse, / The sclaundre schal be wel the lasse" (5.707-11). Rather than suffering

slander, lover should feign ignorance instead. Genius, in effect, simultaneously

denounces and recommends "feigning," and thus we are hard-pressed to discern his

position on fantasy. Because fantasy alters "reality" for both good and evil, the poem

constitutes the imagination as a neutral faculty that is not in itself intrinsically moral or

immoral. As such, the fantasies produced by the imagination are not so much as

categorically opposed to truth as constitutive of it.

As we see in the proliferation of Genius's "fantastic stories" and Amans's

fantasies, confession maintains a fine line between the disclosure of truth and the

invention of fiction. Indeed, Scala points out that "like the contradictory actions of the

institution of confession as mandated by the Church, the *Confessio* asks its readers to

accept and deny the powers of fiction in the very notion of moralization."[28] The poem's

repeated discussion of *feigning* registers the fine line between truth and fiction. The

poem clearly ties the author's fiction-making to the lover/sinner's potential feigning.

Therefore, Scala emphasizes Gower's creation of a "distinctly literary, secular

confession" through which confession's inherent powers of fictionalization—its "process

of production"—are put into effect, making "reader and writer complicit in the dangers

and rewards the poem offers."[29] These reflections on confession's "inherent powers of

fictionalization" concur with my assessment of the dovetailing of rhetoric and confession.

---

[28] Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 156.

[29] Ibid., 143 and 166

43

Moreover, by stating that the *Confessio* offers both rewards and danger, Scala implies that confessional discourse functions, in part, as a seduction—that it plays upon its reader's conscious and unconscious desires. Building upon such observations, I want to turn now to the Tale of Mundus and Paulina. Told by Genius in order to explicate the sin of pride—The Tale of Mudus and Paulina dramatizes in miniature the *Confessio*'s concerns with confessional discourse, feigning, seduction, and secrecy. It highlights both the rewards and dangers of confession and it showcases the inherent power of the discourse to shape "truth" instead of merely representing it. To my knowledge the importance of this tale—as a confession within a confession—has not previously been explored.

<div align="center">III</div>

The Tale of Mundus and Paulina appears in Book One as the only tale in the entire *Confessio* that features the sacrament of confession. The tale serves as the first exemplum of the Seven Deadly Sins—an illustration of the sin of pride and, specifically, of hypocrisy and deceit in love. Genius defines a hypocrite as "A man which feigneth conscience / As thogh it were al innocence / Withoute, and is noght so withinne" (1.595-6). Amans quickly declares his innocence. He maintains that he has not been a hypocrite because his "corage" has been even sicker than his "visage;" his interior ("withinne") and exterior ("withoute") have been in harmony, and he is interiorly as low and humble as his appearance suggests. Indeed, Amans appears to be without ego and pride, so Genius's illustration of a Mundus, a successful but corrupt lover who intrepidly pursues sexual

<div align="center">44</div>

satisfaction, seems hardly necessary. But, as Nicholson points out, "this is the only tale

in Book I about a man who is overcome just as Amans is, and like Amans, Mundus

typifies an essential frailty of human nature, that innate susceptibility to love."[30] In turn,

the fiction of the poem rests upon this universally human condition—the susceptibility to

love. In the characters of Mundus (the world) and Paulina, the tale entwines the

seductions and desires of worldly love with the divine. The tale addresses innate human

"frailty" and the capacity for deceit, but it ends happily. In the end, justice is dispensed

and truth is restored.

The temple of Isis serves as a locus of institutional corruption in the Tale of

Mundus and Paulina. The temple's two priests are drawn by Mundus into a plot of deceit

by "weie of schrifte":

> This lord [Mundus], which wolde his thonk pourchace,
> To ech of hem yaf thanne a yifte,
> And spak so that be weie of schrifte
> He drowh hem unto his covine,
> To helpe and schape how he Pauline
> After his lust deceive myghte. (1.816-821)

The two corrupt priests fare badly in Genius's telling. Mundus easily procures the

priests' loyalty for the price of an unspecified "yifte." The priests "here trowthes bothe

plyhte" (1.822) to aid and abet Mundus in achieving "al his entente" (1.825). The

ambiguity and irony of "trowthe" plighted to such a deceptive purpose—the seduction of

Paulina—draws explicit attention to the fine line between truth and falsity. The priests

keep their troth to Mundus's scheme but in doing so they violate the troth/truth of their

spiritual office. Unlike in Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*, the "weie of schrifte" serves

---

[30] Nicholson, "The 'Confession' in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," 197.

Mundus not as the "way of grace" but as a way of seducing Paulina and thereby obtaining another type of grace altogether. As an unstable discursive space, confession is shown to promote the articulation of desire and its transference between unsettled subjects.

Like the *Confessio*'s middle way, the "weie of schrifte" in the Tale of Mundus and Paulina combines "lore" and "lust," and, consequently, confessors and confessant alike become conspirators in the dangers and rewards of desire. Mundus "spak" and "drowh" the priests "unto his covine, / To helpe and schape how he Pauline/ After his lust deceive myghte" (1.819-820). Through confessional speech, the priests are seduced by Mundus; they are drawn into his desire and subsequently help "schape" his plot. Genius's choice of this tale even suggests the transference of desire between himself and Amans.[31] The priests of Isis perform for Mundus precisely what Amans wishes Genius would do for him. In this way, the lines between a confessor's "lore" and a confessant's "lust" are shown to be indistinct, and it becomes hard to tell where one originates and the other leaves off. Unsurprisingly, then, we see the priests of Isis putting their authority and "lore" to work for the cause of Mundus's "lust." After Mundus learns that Paulina cannot be swayed by gold or gifts, the priests "feignende an hevenely message" (1.834) and, thereby, use her faith as the "mede" or bribe.

Mundus provides an example of a man whose reason has been compromised by all-powerful love. But, likewise, Paulina is compromised by her extreme love for the god, Anubus. Paulina "was *decieved*" because the priests "hadden wel *conceived* / that sche was of gret holinesse" (1.830-1, my emphasis). The close proximity of "deceive"

---

[31] As Scala points out, "Mundus's deceit and desire [is] less a lesson of Genius's than a projection of Amans's own" (*Absent Narratives*, 148).

46

and "conceive," which share the same Latin root, *capere* ("to take, seize, hold"), suggests

the violent (mis)appropriation of knowledge. Aware of Paulina's susceptibility to love,

the priests flatter her:

> Of him [Anubus] schalt take avisioun.
> For upon thi condicioun,
> The which is chaste and ful of faith,
> Such pris, as he ous tolde, he leith,
> That he wol stonde of thin acord. (1.845-49)

With its language of sex ("he leith," "wol stonde") and pregnancy ("conceived," "thy

condicioun,"), this passage anticipates a false annunciation. The priests claim that she

will receive "avisioun" of Anubus and that the god only waits for her "acord" or consent.

Paulina's *vision*, however, is distorted; the priests have reflected back to her an image

that perfectly *accords* with her own inner desires. Thus, Genius tells us that Paulina

"Glad was hire innocence tho / Of such wordes as sche herde" (1.852-3). Paulina's

"innocence" cuts two ways here: on one hand, she is literally innocent enough to be

deceived by the priests' story, but, on the other hand, her innocence is glad of or affirmed

by the words she hears. Her "oghne wille" (1.951) or desire for virtue helps accomplish

Mundus's plot. Paulina is seduced by the longing—the "hope" of being "fulfild of alle

holiness" (1.895)—which the priests' tale produces in her.

Although the tale is not overtly critical of classical religion or of Paulina's

devotion to Anubus, it does present Paulina's predicament as a parody of Christian

religion and "lore." The fiction of Anubus' selection of the "chaste" Paulina to be the

mother of his son who will be "himself a godd also" (1.921) and whom "al the world

schal have in mynde / The worschipe of that ilke Sone" (1.918-919) parodies the "true"

47

story of Mary and Jesus and, thus, blurs the lines between truth and fiction.[32] The corrupt

priests of Isis make a mockery of the Annunciation, and they manipulate Paulina's proper

yearning for union with divine into a union with "the world."[33] Genius, however, does

not condemn Paulina by making her especially prideful at her selection by Anubus.[34] She

is humble and receives her husband's blessings beforehand. The tale's emphasis then is

upon the priests' deceitful maneuverings, which defile their spiritual office and the sacred

space of the temple of Isis. Mundus' plot is entirely taken over by the priests, who are

uncommonly eager to see the deed done. As servants of Eros, they rather than Genius are

the poem's true priests of Venus. Nevertheless, the inevitable parallels between Genius

and priests of Isis pose a problem for the reader. Does the tale's moralizing target the

institution of confession, the corruption of priests, or both?

---

[32] The underlying humor in this passage was well established in medieval culture by contemporary drama's depiction of the comic Joseph as a cuckold figure who doubts Mary's virginity. See, for example, "Joseph's Troubles about Mary" in *York Mystery Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle and Pamela King (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). Of course, a similar joke occurs in Chaucer's *Miller Tale* where an elderly carpenter is cukolded by his young wife.

[33] As a corollary, Georgiana Donavin argues that the desire of Mary for Jesus illustrates "the human union with the divine" and the stories of virtuous women such as Peronelle in the Tale of Three Questions show how incestuous passions can be transformed into a proper "yearning for human salvation" (*Incest Narratives and Structures of Gower's Confessio Amantis* [Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 1993], 51-63).

[34] Kurt Olsson points out that "Genius has left out the boasts of her counterparts in tradition: the Paulina of Josephus' *Antiquities* (18.3.4), the foolish Madonna Lisetta da Ca' Quirino of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (4.2), and the Olympias of Gower's later story of Nectanabus (6.1789-2366) all, to some degree, have an exaggerated sense of self-worth, and they easily succumb to the blandishments of the a pretender-god or angel" (*John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the Confessio Amantis* [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992], 74).

As it should be, Mundus's confession operates as a profession of desire, but instead of being cleansed spiritually of his sinful lust and reformed, he profits materially through confession's privacy. Analogously, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the story of Paolo and Francesca illustrates how shared reading and the privacy of *tête-à- tête* discourse can arouse desire. For this reason, the Church feared the potential intimacy that might spring up between confessor and confessant as well as the desire that might be produced by the explicit discussion of sin.[35] The defining feature of Mundus's confession to the priests of Isis is its occurrence "in prive place" (1.818), and secrecy or "prive" comes to characterize Mundus's entire plot throughout the tale. The scene of Paulina's seduction, for example, is articulated as follows:

> And al withinne *in prive place*
> A softe bedd of large space
> Thei hadde mad and encourtined
> Wher sche was afterward *engined*.
> Bot sche, which al honour supposeth,
> The false Prestes thanne *opposeth*
> And axeth by what observance
> Sche myhte most to the plesance
> Of godd that nyhtes reule kepe. (1. 875-883, my emphasis)

The priests lay a soft trap in a "prive place" where Paulina is "engined" or entrapped. "Engin" or "*ingenium*" suggests that the priests use imagination—theirs and Paulina's— to trap her. With artfulness, the priests craft a space wherein Paulina supposes that she

---

[35] As Karma Lochrie, in her Foucauldian analysis of confessional secrecy, puts it, "[c]onfession necessarily ventured this area of pleasure—of thinking about sin—through the act of verbalization, but this pleasure is one of the secrets and paradoxes of confessional logic" (*Covert Operations*: *The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998], 40). See also Lochrie's discussion of how confession "brings the 'risk of corruption' to the priest in the form of pleasure in the talk of sins" (36).

will be honored rather than dishonored. But the "place" is not what it seems and neither are the false priests.

We learn that the plot's secrecy seems to obligate confession and vice versa. As Paulina "opposeth" or questions the priests, we are reminded of Amans's confession. Genius tells Amans, "Thi schrifte to *oppose* and hiere / My sone, I am assigned hiere" (1.233-4), and Genius's speech is typically marked in the marginal apparatus as "opponit confessor."[36] Here Paulina acts the part of the confessor by questioning the priests. Yet rather than discerning truth, her query furthers the plot's dangerous "plesance." She does not adequately question the plausibility of the situation but instead accepts the priests's facade of supposed honor. In their deceitfulness, the priests of Isis make a mockery of their own religious "rule" and violate the sacred space of the temple, where they have been ordained "To reule and to ministre there / After the lawe which was tho" (1.808-9). Likewise, in a perversion of confession, Paulina's questions how she might "of godd that nyhtes reule kepe" (1.883). Of course, the "reule" which Paulina must "kepe" is *opposed* to the self-rule espoused by Genius, as the false priests involve her in actions that literally "oppose" her "honour." In this way and in the very terms so centrally important to the creation of his own confession literary discourse, Genius presents confession and deception as two different, but mutually contaminating, oppositional forms of speech. Whereas in confession the priest opposes a sinner's willful self-belief in order to initiate honest self-examination and the process of relinquishing a false-identity for a true one, deception opposes itself to the discovery of truth by masquerading *as* truth—one desires

---

[36] See Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 146.

to reveal truth while the other desires to conceal it. Karma Lochrie argues that "[i]f confession presumes the interrogator's will to know the sinner's secret through complicated protocols of decipherment and disclosure, it equally presumes the confessant's *will to conceal* at the same time that he is telling."[37]   Yet in the topsy-turvy world of the Tale of Mundus and Paulina, the "will to conceal" belongs to the false priests, who act as hypocritical confessors and shroud their deeds in secrecy much as they "encourtined" the "softe bedd" upon which Paulina is, finally, ensnared. The curtains round the bed conceal the sinful deeds that occur there, but Genius's "lore" has the effect of throwing open the curtains of the priests' "prive place" to reveal openly Mundus's "lust."

Ultimately, Paulina and the "ymage" of Isis carry the taint of the deception born from Mundus's secret confession of desire, and this taint can only be cleansed by the openness of a sequence of public confessions that draw the tale towards a just end. After visiting Paulina in the guise of Anubus, Mundus withdraws "prively," but Paulina returns home openly by the public "strete" (1.930-8). The priests' "will to conceal," however, cannot counter the pleasure that Mundus takes in the telling of his deeds. When he meets Paulina on the street, he compulsively confesses. As Lochrie says of gossip and confession, "both 'thrive in secret'" and "both types of discourse are irrepressible even as they insist upon secrecy and containment."[38] Ultimately, the secret will out, and Mundus confronts Paulina in public with his knowledge of her *privete*:

---

[37] Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, 36-7.

[38] Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, 56.

> Bot I of his [Anubus] grace have so poursuied,
> That I was mad his lietuenant:
> Forthi be weie of covenant
> Fro this day forth I am al thin,
> And I the like to be myn,
> That stant upon thin oghne wille. (1.946-951)

Mundus seems to mock Paulina's faith and service to Anubus with his own "pursuit" of carnal "grace," and he seeks to make her complicit in his sin and its pleasure by evoking Paulina's "oghne wille." Yet here, in contrast to the "heavenly message" delivered by the priests, Paulina "herde his tale and bar it still" (1.952). This news—another false annunciation—coming as it does after the sexual encounter through which she hoped to conceive the child of Anubus, reveals a stillbirth: she "bar it still." Her stillness also suggests silence. Paulina does not answer Mundus, and thus she refuses his discourse of pleasure. Instead, she returns home to her own "chambre" and bed where she weeps and cries.

Paulina had hoped to "achieve" a divine union and conception—to be "fulfild of alle holiness" (1.895)—but Genius tells the listener "sche hath failed, as I gesse" (1.896). Her devotion to Isis, goddess of childbirth, bears only the fruit of bitter deception and defilement. Paulina's *stillness* illustrates how, in the end, the rampant play of will and desire fostered by secrecy and false confession comes to naught. Where earlier Mundus, who "all untrowthe meneth, / With blinde tales so hire ladde" (1.926-7), now suddenly the darkness is lifted and Paulina *perceives* the truth; she says,

> "…O derke ypocrisie,
> Through whos dissimilacion
> Of fals ymaginacion
> I am thus wickedly deceived!
> Bot that I have it *aperceived*

52

I thonke unto the goddes alle;
For thogh it ones be befalle
It schal nevere eft whil that I live
And thilke avou to godd I yive. (1.957-964, my emphasis)

Paulina blames neither Mundus nor the priests of Isis but instead the "dissimilacion / Of fals ymaginacion," and, consequently, Russell Peck says that the tale "underscores the point that innocence can be corrupted only by thought, not the hypocritical conniver."[39] Genius emphasizes Paulina's agency and, therefore, her power. Paulina's identity is destabilized—she loses her self-possession—when confronted or opposed by Mundus on the street, yet having "aperceived" the truth of her rape, I offer that she transforms innocence into experience and takes hold of (*capere*) herself again. She finds a lesson in her loss, and once fooled, Paulina swears she will never be fooled again. Unlike Lucrece, whose story echoes in hers, Paulina steers her "tale" towards a redemption found in life rather than death.

In the end, it is Paulina who demonstrates a state of proper confessional shame and remorse; she "wepende," and "Hire faire face and al desteigneth / With wofull teres of hire ye" (1.967-8). Paulina's physical appearance signifies her interior pain, and she does not conceal what has happened but tells her husband the "soothe of al the hole tale" (1.981). She swoons "in hire speche ded and pale" (1.982), and her husband "uphield" her in "hise armes faste" (1.984-5)—she is literally and metaphorically "upheld'" by her husband who "ofte swor his oth / That he was with hire…nothing wroth" (1.985-6). The tale moves swiftly towards its resolution and the husband's vengeance but not before Paulina is "sette ferst" in "reste" (1.998). The community's justice is then meted out by

---

[39] Peck, "Introduction," *Confessio Amantis, Vol. 1*, 32.

the emperor. This public assignment of blame and responsibility again recalls the

language of confession. The emperor puts the priests "into question" (1.1015), and they

could "noght a word" of the accusation "refuse" (1.1015). Nevertheless, they try to

"excuse" (1.1016) themselves by laying the blame upon Mundus. Their "will to

conceal," however, is answered by the common voice of the "conseil," which decrees:

> That whan men wolden vertu seke,
> Men scholde it in the Prestes finde;
> Here ordre is of so hyh a kinde
> For thei be Duistres of the weie:
> Forthi, if eny man forsueie
> Thurgh hem, thei, be noght excusable. (1.125-9)

Priests are the "duistres" or "guides" of the "way," and these false priests have led both

Mundus and Paulina "astray." Yet important to the tale and absolutely central to the

figuration of the entire poem designed as a confession, they have, specifically, perverted

confession—the way to grace—into the means of obtaining union with "the world"

instead of the divine.

The sacrament of confession bears no truth if the priests be false; instead of a true

sacrament it becomes a treacherous paradox, an amoral space between revelation and

concealment, a treacherous "middel weie" between "lust" and "lore" both inside this tale

and beyond its narrative confines as well. The Tale of Mundus and Paulina shows the

dangers and rewards of a secret discourse that gives expression to lust. For their

perversity, the priests are condemned "So that the *prive* tricherie / Hid under fals

Ipocrisie / Was thanne *al openliche schewed*" (1.1033-35, my emphasis). Finally, the

tale's "covert operations" are openly exposed and the community is cleansed of all

pollution, and the temple of Isis is purified:

> The temple of thilke horrible dede,
> Thei thoghten purge, and thilke ymage,
> Whos cause was the pelrinage,
> Thei drowen out and als so faste
> Fer into Tibre thei it caste
> Where the Rivere it hath defied:
> And thus the temple purified,
> They have of thilke horrible Sinne,
> Which of that time do therinne. (1.1038-1046)

Sin taints not only the individuals involved but the entire community and even the place in which "therinne" the sin is done. The "ymage" of Isis thus comes to represent the idolatry of desire and the hypocrisy of religion. The false priests are executed, Mundus is exiled, and the "ymage," which was the "cause" of it all, is cast in the river. Although the tale closes with a moral about the power of love, the mental image that lingers in the listener/reader's mind is that toppled "ymage" of Isis, a false idol.

This lingering image has been registered critically, as when Winthrop Wetherbee argues that Genius renders Paulina's faith "utterly invisible" at the end and that the desecration of the "ymage" of Isis "is a symbolic re-enactment of the rape of Paulina herself."[40] Throughout the entire tale, however, the brunt of Genius's criticism is directed not at religious faith in general, but at religious hypocrisy and hypocrites—at those who manipulate religious rule and law to their own corrupt ends. The "ymage" of Isis is, by the tale's end, an empty one because the community has experienced the way in which a symbol of transcendence might become subject to human manipulation and perversion. The image—already desecrated by the two priests—is cast into river in order

---

[40] Wintrhop Wetherbee, "Genius and Interpretation," in *Magister Regis: Studies in Honor of Robert Earl Kaske*, ed. Arthur Groos (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 254.

to signify the community's purification and renewal. Furthermore, Genius imbues

Paulina with wisdom; she desires and finds "truth," albeit in an unexpected place. She

experiences personal growth as she is transformed from a static "idol" of desire to a

thinking subject with explicit agency: "It schal nevere eft whil that I live / And thilke

avou to godd I yive" (1.963-4). She does not lose faith or blame her god but takes

responsibility for her own actions. Therefore, rather than a reenactment of Paulina's

rape, I argue that the toppled image of Isis, provides a suggestive counterpart to perhaps

the most memorable image in the *Confessio* and one that has been imaged in some

miniatures in the poem's manuscripts: the body of John Gower as *senex amans* in Book

Eight.[41]

IV

The Tale of Mundus and Paulina problematizes the relationship between virtue

and sin, honesty and hypocrisy, and reflects the poem's anxiety about the paradoxical

space of confession. As Elizabeth Allen says, "Gower is often apt to create situations in

which the proximity of virtue to sin risks profound moral confusion."[42] Amans's

confession is just such a situation where Gower muddies rather than clarifies the "moral

waters." The toppling of the "ymage" of Isis is penitential; it cleanses the community of

sin and puts a temporary end to "moral confusion." The tale focuses on the recuperation

---

[41] For a discussion of these manuscript images, see J. A. Burrow, "The Portrayal of Amans in *Confessio Amantis*," in *Gower's* Confessio Amantis*: Responses and Reassessments*, ed. Alastair Minnis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983).

[42] Elizabeth Allen, "Gower answers Chaucer: Constance and the Trouble With Reading," *EHL* 63 (1997): 629.

of "truth" by Paulina and her community, and its optimistic ending represents truth as objective and thus publicly verifiable. Similarly, the conclusion of *Confessio* offers readers a seemingly objective and demonstrable "truth"—the truth of old age. As one body supplants another, this image of old age functions to topple the figure of Amans. The materialization of John Gower's aged body at the end of Book Eight attempts to constrain the poem's proliferation of fantasy and fiction. This body, however, is a problematic gesture towards closure and ultimately an unsuccessful guarantor of the poem's meaning. As another "fiction" produced by and through the confession—the *senex amans* endeavors to satisfy the desires of Amans and, likewise, the desires of the reader. To suggest that this body is a "fiction" is not to deny its potency—that it represents the "truth" of mortality. Rather I want to show how, as in medieval confession manuals, a textualized body is made to speak the truth and how the figure of the body attempts to circumscribe the pleasures of confessional speech.

As the confessional dialogue gives way to the poem endgame, Venus reappears to assert order and control. The poem resorts to a dream vision and a "wonder mirrour," wherein Amans/John Gower finds represented the "truth" of his elderly self. The body produced by this mirror has the effect of distrupting Amans's fantasies; the lack of pleasure that he takes in the "outwith" of his body revises his perception of himself and, consequently, revises the reader's interpretation of the poem. Ultimately, by asking readers to both accept and deny the powers of fiction, the confession enacts contradictory actions and, seemingly, these contractions seemingly can be resolved only by resorting to the pre-discursive body and the objective truth that that body promises to confer. The

body offers itself as the realization of *presence* that Amans and the reader have been searching for and thus the end of the poem's fantastic stories and Amans's fantasies. In this way, the lover's aged body is central to the poem's confession and the work it is able to do even if only retroactively.

Many critics assume that the poem's confession should function as the curative for the lover's willfully subjective behavior and his self-delusional fiction, and that through his confession the lover should relinquish his private desires in order to pursue the common good. Amans's "cure," however, is affected less by his confession itself and more by his final prayer to Venus and her consequent mercy. Moreover, the poem's resolution hinges upon a *deus ex machina*—a mirror that reveals to "John Gower" his elderly body and, hence, his unfitness for love. Thus, Michael Cherniss complains that the confession "fails" to effect a transformation, and that the "manner in which Gower finally resolves Amans's problem seems…arbitrary and unsatisfactory—either a trick played upon the reader or else a retreat from Gower's own articulated belief in man's moral responsibilities."[43] Yet although the confession itself does not effect Amans's transformation, the *senex amans* is a product of the confession's desire for truth. The concluding gesture toward the body is a penitential one that attempts to stabilize the poem's "truth" upon what is tangible and concrete. Importantly, this unambiguous "end" is demanded by the confessant, Amans, who struggles for something real, for a literal presence rather than a figure of his imagination.

---

[43] Michael Cherniss, *Boethian Apocalypse: Studies in Middle English Vision Poetry* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 116.

It is apparent throughout the eight books of confessional dialogue that Amans is most interested in advice that might lead to the consummation of his desires—to his fantasy becoming a reality and absence becoming presence. He is hungry for a taste of his lady, but his desire is never realized. Instead, he continually must fast and "mai no fode gete" (6.701). He has all the "woldes" and "wisshes" he could desire but they have neither "fielinge" nor "tast" (6.924, 926). Here, Amans clearly knows the difference between fantasy and reality and he hungers after tangible satisfaction. He wants something that he can literally feel and touch. In the end, however, Amans confronts the "reality" of a less desirable body than his lady's. By denying pleasure or "lust," John Gower's aged form promises an embodiment of truth. In seeming contrast to the moment in which the poet-persona takes on the role of the lover ("as if in the person of"), the appearance of the *senex amans* in the mirror claims to be a moment in which pretense and fiction are relinquished for reality. Yet, I suggest, this supposed "revelation" merely prompts another textual impersonation. This time the poet takes on the role of a lover constrained by age.

The existence of the mirror in which John Gower sees himself as an old man suggests that truth is objective, and that perhaps the truth of the lover's age has always resided in the text.[44] This "fact" of old age comes as an abrupt realization. After eight books of disembodied confessional discourse in which the lover's "real" body has not figured at all, the Lover's *and* the reader's sudden confrontation with the body is a summed up in a mere ten lines:

---

[44] Indeed, this is Donald Schueler's argument in "The Age of the Lover in Gower's *Confessio Amantis,*" *Medium Aevum* 36 (1967): 152-8

> Wherinne anon myn hertes yhe
> I caste, and sih my colour fade,
> Myn yhen dymme and al unglade,
> my chiekes thinne, and al my face
> with Elde I myhte se deface.
> So riveled and so wo besein,
> That ther was nothing full ne plein,
> I syh also myn heres hore.
> My will was tho te se no more
> Outwith, for ther was no pleasance. (8.2825-33)

The portrait of the Lover's agedness emerges grammatically through verbs of negation: his color fades, his eyes dim, his cheeks thin, and his features are tainted "with Elde." As we read, the lover ages right before our eyes, illustrating how "Gower addresses Truth by exploring False."[45] The adjectives ("riveled," "ne plein," and "hore") and verbs ("fade," "dymme," "thinne," and "deface") tell us what the lover is at the same time they tell us what he is not—what he has lost Hence, the figure of old age or the *senex amans* functions to disrupt and distort the poem's narrative, and, *opposed* by this body, both John Gower and the reader are made to confront the fiction and fantasy of what has preceded this end.

The latter half of Book Eight in many ways suggests a return to the "real" world. Beginning with Amans's direct epistolary complaint to Venus on his own behalf and the subsequent unmasking of Amans as John Gower, the confessional dialogue is abandoned for the poem's end game. John Gower regains his narratorial voice and beneath a tree, he supplicates himself before Venus and prays for her grace. He says,

> Sche caste hire chiere upon my face,
> And as it were halvinge a game
> Sche axeth me what is mi name.

---

[45] Peck, "Phenomenology of Make Believe," 256.

"Ma dame," I seide, "John Gower." (8.2315-21)

This scene recalls the beginning of Book One and the prelude to the lover's confession, where, in the month of May in "the wode amiddes" (1.112), the love-sick Amans prays to Venus for some pity on his "maladie" (1.128). Yet it is important to bear in mind that this *naturalistic* setting is entirely a literary convention of Courtly Love and, thus, when the lover emerges from the confession and finds himself back "under a tre," he has merely moved from one fiction to another. Moreover, the fiction of Amans, which was so explicitly assumed in Book One is not so easily discarded, and the poem's ending collapses rather than clarifies the distinction between the characters of Amans and John Gower, and between the poet-persona and historical poet. As part poet-persona and part Amans, the *senex amans* figure seems to mediate this distinction.

Nevertheless, the *naturalness* of John Gower's old body is asserted by the poem and taken for granted by many critics. The body's presence negates the lover's prior desires and functions to recall John Gower to the natural realm of human limitation. As Venus prepares to "sett" the lover "for a final ende," a Latin epigram likewise prepares the reader:

> Non estates opus gelidis hirsuta capillis,
> Cum calor abcessit, equiperabit hiems;
> Sicut habet Mayus non dat natura Decembri,
> Nec poterit compar floribus esse lutum;
> Sic neque decrepita senium iuvenile voluptas
> Floret in obsequium, quod Venus ipsa petit.
> Conveniens igitur foret, vt quos cana senectus
> Attigit, vlterius corpora casta colant.
> (8. 2377)
>
> [Winter, hairy with icy locks, is not equal to summer's work, when its heat has receded. Nature does not give to December just as May has, nor can

61

clay compare to flowers; and thus old men's lust does not flower in youthful compliance, as Venus herself demands. It would be appropriate, therefore, for those whom white old age touches henceforth to cultivate chaste bodies.][46]

In this metaphorical garden of life, those who are old are advised "corpora casta colant"—to "cultivate chaste bodies." Finally, then, both John Gower and the reader are called to "tend" to the body's purity. Age is a final and inevitable constraint to acting upon one's desire, and Amans's confessed struggle for love has been "against Nature" (8.2339)—against the rule of the body. He is, therefore, advised by Venus to remember that he is old and is recalled back to his body from the world of imaginative fantasy. As he "clepe[s]" or calls his "wittes" "hom ayein" (8.2861-2), he relinquishes "unwise fantasie" (8.2866) and is made "sobre and hol ynowh" (8.2879). The striving for love that has defined his persona throughout is relinquished and Love's constraint is replaced with the *reality* of the body's constraint. And, ultimately, I would argue, this body attempts to contain not only the lover's inappropriate and excess desires but the poem's confessional fictions. This belief, however, that he has been made whole by the confession is a bigger lie or fiction than his improper fantasies of love.

Through his use of inner vision—his "hertes yhe"—John Gower demonstrates the amendment of his sense of sight, and with, this *in*sight, he finds he takes no pleasure in his body, which is wrinkled and "so wo besein"—it is "nothing full ne plein." The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives one definition of "plein" as "smooth, even; free from roughness or unevenness of surface" and, thus, a lack of smoothness is yet another sign

---

[46] Translation by Andrew Galloway in Peck, ed., *Confessio Amantis, Vol. 1*, 256.

of the lover's haggard countenance.[47] Yet Gower uses the adjective "plein" seventy-three

times in the *Confessio* and about fifty-five of these uses are in the context of telling the

"plein" truth and, therefore, are meant as "open, clear to the senses or mind; evident,

manifest, obvious; easily distinguishable or recognizable."[48] Thus, I would suggest that

the use of "plein" here contradicts the obviousness of the lover's appearance; his face or

body is *nothing* "full" and *not* "plein." Rather than being fixed and transparent, the

lover's body conveys an excess of meaning and demands to be read as an "unsettled"

text. Although Venus declares this body as natural and presents its features as

incontrovertible evidence of "truth," there is the suggestion that this body is more than it

seems.

Amans's metamorphosis into "John Gower" is not the recuperation of the lover's

"natural self" and "natural body" so much as it is the substitution of one fiction for

another—a fiction that attempts to clarify the moral confusion of the confession. And, as

Allen explains, "Amans' frustration with Genius's failure to establish a coherent set of

rules about love conduct (or, for that matter, about social conduct of any sort) mirrors our

own, if the scholarly struggles to define what happens at the end of the *Confessio* is any

indication."[49] Throughout his confession, Amans wants exempla that "apply directly to

himself" and that "offer a pointed didactic message;" he wants to know unequivocally

---

[47] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989, *s.v.* "plain," (a. and adv.); 2(a): "Smooth, even; free from roughness or unevenness of surface."

[48] Ibid., *s.v.* "plain," (a. and adv.); 4: "Open, clear to the senses or mind; evident, manifest, obvious; easily distinguishable or recognizable." See J. D. Pickles and J. L. Dawson, eds., *A Concordance to John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1987).

[49] Allen, "Gower Answers Chaucer," 640.

"What is my beste, as for an ende" (8.2059). Critics have displayed versions of this

desire as well. Ultimately, the "end" which Amans confronts is the same "end" that

every human must face. As a penitential reminder of death, the figure of the *senex amans*

opposes both the lover's and the reader's self-possession. In the face of this loss of self-

possession, John Gower and the reader both cling to the body as a "fixed," "final,"

"clear," and "unarguable image." [50] Yet the repeated association of the body with

nature's cycle of death and renewal reminds us that the body is not static. This body, so

obviously ravaged by the passing of time, is a tricky guarantor of the poem's final

meaning.

In an almost complete disavowal of this body, Amans's confession focuses

explicitly upon the sinner's subjective experience and the "interior" workings his mind—

his thoughts and motivations for acting as he does. In Book Five, as I previously

discussed, we learn about the power of the lover's imagination to shape reality; "thrugh

feigned enformacion of his ymaginacion" (5.593-4) the paranoid and jealous lover turns

love into distrust and affects "reality" by influencing his lady's behavior. Yet the obverse

is true as well, because images exterior to the body (seen, heard, *and* read) impress

themselves upon the imagination. Using philosophy to describe the *Confessio*'s

epistemology, Peck argues that "[i]f there is such thing as a medieval poetic, it is

intrinsically bound up in their theories of perception and the relative interiority of

representation."[51] When the John Gower perceives in the mirror that he is old, he revises

---

[50] Andrea Schutz, "Absent and Present Images: Mirrors and Mirroring in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Chaucer Review* 34 (1999): 109.

[51] Peck, "Phenomenology of Make Believe," 253.

his sense of self and the appearance of his body through his "hertes yhe": a spiritual

rather than physical vision. This vision posits a complex and mutually authenticating

relationship between the interior and exterior of the body. Moreover, I want to suggest,

this body is meant to be read not as "truth" itself but as *truer*—still a lie but a closer

approximation to the truth than what preceded it. There are, after all, many mirrors in the

Confessio, and none of them reveals "truth" with absolute clarity; Genius has warned

"The mirour scheweth in his kinde / As he hadded the world withinne, / And is in soth

nothing therinne," (3.1076-8) because mirrors, like the imagination, can produce an

illusory reflection.[52] This body is not, then, the authoritative *presence* of the poet

renouncing fiction entirely or even "a retreat from Gower's own articulated belief in

man's moral responsibilities." Instead, like the penitential "bedis blake" (8.2959) given

to John Gower by Venus, the body promises some small degree of "repose" amidst the

world's instability and moral confusion.

V

Scholarly response to the *Confessio*'s conclusion and the surprise appearance of

the *senex amans* registers frustration and outright disgruntlement. This climatic

revelation of the lover's age and his unfitness for love is made all the more dramatic by

---

[52] See Peck's footnote to this text in *Confessio Amantis, Vol. 2*, ed. Russell Peck,
(Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 365. And Schutz acknowledges that
although in "classical sources, the mirror tends to reflect the truth of the matter…[f]or the
Middle Ages the metaphor is complicated by the addition of biblical and patristic usage
which holds that a mirror reflects what should be (or actually is not) as well as what is"
("Absent and Present Images,"109). Consequently, the mirror can be a manifestation of
desire: a desire for *what should be*.

Gower's use of the confessional mode, and Kurt Olsson observes that it is the nature of confession's disputation, "that we, like one of the interlocutors in the fiction, may undergo shocks of recognition."[53] Yet while the Lover describes experiencing something akin to acceptance and recognition as he looks into the mirror, the reader experiences only the shock of *mis*recognition. Unlike the fictional lover who consoles himself by drawing into his remembrance "olde daies passed" (8.2835), the reader experiences the alienation of unknowing.

Exemplifying the reader's desire to restore his sense of interpretive control and surety of knowing, Donald Schueler writes that "the agedness of the Lover is expressed explicitly and implicitly throughout the *Confessio Amantis*, not just at its conclusion."[54] With this claim Schueler suggests that the "truth" of the lover's body has always resided in the text, and he uses that body to assert the continuity of Gower's "real" identity with his fictitious one:

> All of the passages quoted point to the fact that the narrator is no longer 'freisshe' and 'lusti'. If they are said in passing, and if they are never followed by the Lover's direct admission of his own advanced age, it is because Gower, with good reason, was aware that his contemporary audience would identify the Lover's age with him own, just as they would identify the Lover's 'moral' tone of voice at the beginning of the work with Gower's customary literary voice.[55]

Schueler's argument in many ways echoes the lover's reaction to the mirror and John Gower's recuperation and revising of the "self" to correspond with "the fact" of the body: "A wonder Mirour forto holde, / In which sche [Venus] bad me to beholde / And taken

---

[53] Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion*, 228.

[54] Schueler, "The Age of the Lover," 152.

[55] Ibid., 154-5.

hiede of that I syhe" (8.2821-3). The critical moves, made by Schueler, reflect his need

to ground the poem's many voices and contradictory propositions in both the author's

"real" body and his poetic corpus. His argument functions to restore authoritative truth

and presence to the poem. J.A. Burrow offers a different version of critical

disenchantment, when he asserts that "if the poet does not actually cheat" by making the

lover old "he comes very near cheating."[56] Whereas Schuler's interpretation emphasizes

a continuity of meaning, Burrow registers discontinuity; the game that Gower plays has

established rules and he breaks those rules much to Burrow's personal disappointment.

The poet, however, first changes his poetic "rule" or style at the outset of Book One.

Moreover, he intends to speak of love which is "noght so strange" (1.10) and "which

there can noman him reule / For loves lawe is out of reule" (1.17-18). Because no man

can rule love, the poet implies that, likewise, his poem will inevitably transgress its own

boundaries.

Despite this apparent lawlessness of love and the poet's acquiescence to it, Genius

introduces Amans to the seven deadly sins as rules to live and love by. Therefore, when

scholars discuss the *Confessio* in terms of "rules" (regardless of whether the poem is

embracing or rejecting them) their readings are typically a product of the poem's

penitential frame.[57] But the "way" of confession, as we saw in the Tale of Mundus and

---

[56] Burrow, "The Portrayal of Amans," 14.

[57] Anne Middleton says that as "public poetry" the *Confessio*'s voice "frequently strain[s] against the formal frameworks that it adopted from earlier didactic genres" ("The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," *Speculum* 53 [1978]: 94-114; rpt. in *Medieval English Poetry*, ed. Stephanie Trigg [London: Longman, 1993], 25). In contrast, Meecham-Jones argues that "the schema of Seven Deadly Sins" acts to guarantee "the moral orthodoxy of the poem" ("The Poet as Subject," 19).

Paulina, is itself a transgressive and ungovernable means to producing truth and meaning

discursively. Thus, at the end of that tale, Genius advises Amans, "men scholde noght /

To lihtly lieve al that thei hiere" (1.1062-3). This warning seems especially poignant

coming as it does after a tale of priestly deception and confessional betrayal; the poem

implies that all voices—even authoritative ones such as Genius's—are not to be trusted.

Thus, we recall Genius's explication of the sense of hearing and his stories of

enchantment: The Tale of Ulysses and the Tale of Aspidis. Genius's focus in the Tale of

Ulysses is to reveal or disrupt the enchantment of the Sirens, which are "monstres" of a

"wonder kynde" (1.484-5), luring unsuspecting sailors to their deaths through beautiful

"visage" and "wommanysshe vois" that is "[l]ik to the melodie of hevene" (1.494-5).

Olsson accurately surmises that Genius is "most concerned with the 'reality' beneath

appearance" and, moreover, that the real threat posed by the Sirens "does not lie in what

is perceived, or the seeming 'melodie of hevene,' but in the perception itself, including

the imagination and recreation whereby the lover makes the song appear heavenly."[58]

For his part, Genius champions the wisdom and governance of Ulysses, who devises a

solution to the problem and stops up the ears of his crew so that "his Ere for no lust to

caste" (1.521)—the men's ears are kept from "casting" for lust. Genius would have

Amans govern himself and his ears in the manner of Ulysses, but he also commands

Amans to listen:

> Whereof, my sone, in remembrance
> Thou myht ensample taken hiere
> As I have told, and what thou hiere
> Be wel war, and yif no credence,

---

[58] Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion*, 66.

>Bot if thou se more evidence.
>(1.530-4)

The rhyme riche of "heire" and "hiere" [*here* and *hear*] draws attention to Genius's tale-telling—his own words of enchantment whereby vice may be confused with virtue and truth with falsity.

Although Amans is continually being told to be wary of hypocrisy and false appearances, he is never told how he might discern the difference between truth and fiction. The confession systematically compromises the distinctions between fantasy and reality, and, from the beginning, it is represented as a fantastic enterprise—a "wonder hap" (1.67). The confession does not take place within a dream vision per se, but Olsson reminds us of the more figurative and philosophical reach of the genre's applicability to Gower's poem when he writes that "the lover though 'awake,' does not know he lives in a dream."[59] Even if we accept that Genius's purpose is to rouse Amans' from this "waking dream," we would do well to remember that Genius, like Ulysses, is an enchanter.[60] Perhaps Genius "is never entirely an evil charmer who lures Amans, a good man, from faith and grace," as the two priests of Isis lead Paulina astray, but he would steer Amans through a perilous path of "lust" and narrative pleasure.[61] And, indeed, we might see such passage through enchantment *as* the very subject of the *Confessio*.

---

[59] Ibid., 47. Moreover, Kathryn Lynch places Gower's *Confessio Amantis* in the high medieval dream vision tradition. See *The High Medieval Dream Vision* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

[60] As Scala points outs, Ulysses is "traditionally a deceiver, a maker of fictions, the very essence of 'faiterye'" and "his inconstant language was responsible for the fall of Troy" (*Absent Narratives*, 166).

[61] Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion*, 68.

Both lover and reader alike are led by Genius through this passage of

enchantment, but what kind of "guide" is Genius? Much is made of Genius's

"limitations" as a confessor—his divided loyalties to Venus and the priesthood. As a

priest of Venus, Genius is a "subject" who does not originate or fully control his position.

Instead, he is a subject of literature, a site through which the various forces of courtly

love, moral didacticism, politics and ethics intersect and often awkwardly co-exist. Yet

within his subject positions as both priest and devotee of Venus, he can assert his *will* and

agency. Therefore, just prior to the confession proper, Genius expresses his intention to

depart from his "common use" and to improvise:

> Of Venus, whos condicioun
> I moste folwe, as I am holde.
> For I with love am al withholde,
> So that the lasse I am to wyte,
> Thogh I ne conne bot a lyte
> Of othre thinges that ben wise:
> I am noght tawht in such a wise;
> For it is noght my comun us
> To speke of vices and vertus,
> Bot al of love and of his lore,
> For Venus bokes of nomore
> Me techen nowther text ne glose.
> Bot for als moche as I suppose
> I sit a prest to be wel thewed,
> And schame it is if he be lewed,
> Of my Presthode after the forme
> I wol thi shrifte so enforme. (1.260-76)

Genius clearly identifies himself as *subject* to Venus: he "moste" follow as he is "holde"

and "withholde" her. Genius's learning and experience is limited by what Venus has

allowed; he speaks only of love because Venus "bokes" or records in books "of nomore."

Both what Genius knows and who he is evolve from books such as the *Roman de la Rose*.

Yet Genius takes his identity as "priest" seriously and his conscience (or perhaps his pride) seems to demand that he "enforme" Amans's "shrifte" with instruction on the vices and virtues. None of this leads us to expect mastery on the part of Genius as confessor; he seems no more the guarantor of the confession's meaning any more than Amans does. Thus, Genius is neither consistent nor stable but an "unsettled" subject whose self-possession is challenged by the process of confession. Furthermore, as the confessor, Genius does not occupy a position of objectivity outside the discourse, but is—like Amans—a product of the confession's fictionalizing. In this way, it is possible to explore how Amans and Genius are both enchanters (producers of fiction) *and* enchantments (products of fiction).

At the beginning of Book One, when Venus asks Amans "What are thou, Sone?" she does not ask *who* he is, but *what* he is—her question seeks a condition rather than name. Having cast off his authorial identity, John Gower does not adopt the guise of a specific personage but, instead, a set of passions proper to lovers. Whereas, the name "John Gower" has acquired meaning (including the epithet "moral") through the sum of his life's work, Amans is a blank slate yet to be inscribed. Amans is, in his own words, a "Caitif" to love. As such a slave to love, he is clearly a subjected being. When the confession gets underway, Amans asks Genius to his "shrifte oppose / From point to point" so that "nothing be left behinde" (1.225-7). Clearly, Amans fears that he will be forgetful, but in truth Amans has neither a past nor a present except that which is invented by way of the confession. At the end of the *Confessio* when John Gower is revealed to be an old man, it is taken as proof that Amans had forgotten himself as in

keeping with the Boethian tradition of *consolatio*, but such a notion of forgetting suggests that there is an essential self that can be faithfully known and returned to. [62] Such is Peck's position when he argues that "confession is remembering:" "Memory provides the key to Amans' restoration. It is the means of reclaiming his forgotten, natural self in order that he may be released from its fantastic substitute."[63] At the beginning of Book One, however, the "subject" of Amans has yet to be produced by the confession. Therefore, rather than having forgot, we might say that he literally does not yet know who or what he is.

The question of who and what Amans *is* troubles the confession from beginning to end, and at the very end, Genius claims to understand Amans, saying, "I have wel herd and understonde, / Mi, sone, al that thou hast me seid" (8.2067-8). Genius advises Amans to "withdraw" from love and turn to the law of reason. But Amans disputes Genius's understanding saying, "Mi wo to you is bot a game, / That fielen noght of that I fiele" (8.2152-3). Amans emphasizes the isolation and self-absorption of his subjective experience. Throughout, Amans has tried to understand Genius's stories in order to obtain his goal. For Amans, possessing his Lady—an idealized and transcendent object of desire—would be akin to finally possessing "truth"; she promises to satisfy his lack by ending his division and estrangement. Amans's attempt at wooing his lady matches the confession as a narrative of seduction and desire, and Genius's desire for truth, as enacted

---

[62] See Nicholson, "The 'Confession' in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," and Peck, "Introduction," *Confessio Amantis,* ed. Russell Peck, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

[63] Peck, "Introduction," *Confessio Amantis,* xvi.

by confessional dialogue, parallels Amans's lust for his lady. Similarly, like the confessor, the reader of a confessional narrative becomes thoroughly complicit in the pursuit of, and desire for, Amans's truth and, by extension, the truth of the poem.

Mid-point through Book Eight, the confessional dialogue gives way to Amans's narration and direct address to the reader. In this way, the reader's potential role as "confessor" becomes apparent. Yet readers are also persuaded to perform their own self-evaluation and interpretation. Many scholars thus argue that the *Confessio* evokes reader-response participation—that by drawing the reader into the poem's fictions, the poem seduces the reader to pursue their own "truth." According to Peck, "Gower conjures old tales as [a] means of wooing an audience towards confessional re-assessment."[64] Likewise, William Robbins claims that "Gower is not primarily concerned to *represent* the subjectivity of a character but rather to *provoke* the subjectivity of the reader."[65] Recalling that confessional discourse unfolds within a relationship and that one does not confess without the presence of a partner, we find that the reader supplies Aman's with a virtual partner. As partner in poem's confession, the reader is called upon to respond. Thus, Foster argues, we can read confession as "a mode by which people enter into the discourse of their culture, where they step beyond reiteration of stories and into interpretation."[66] Rather than "incidental narrative" within the institutions of religion and fiction, confession provides an important technique of fictive production and a medium of interpretation. More than binding Genius's tales together, the confession supplies the

---

[64] Peck, "Introduction," *Confessio Amantis, Vol. 1*, 6.

[65] Robbins, "Romance, Exemplum, and the Subject," 180-1.

[66] Foster, *Confession and Complicity*, 7.

mode by which Genius, John Gower, and the reader "step beyond reiteration of stories and into interpretation." We see, for example, how John Gower becomes at the end both author and reader of his text. John Gower craves Genius's absolution and receives it, but he tells us that Genius "woldne nought abide" and be either his "lief" or his "loth" and, thus, he "was left with outen helpe" (8.1948-51). Therefore, he vows his "entente" to "[u]ppon the point that y am schryve / I thenke bidde whil y live" (8.2968-70). He promises to pray upon "the point" and to continue the process of confessional interpretation while he lives. The existence of the *Confessio* offers the evidence of the poet's continued confessional meditation.

The confession does not provide a pre-given set of rules and determinants by which to read the poem. Instead, confessional discourse functions to produce the poem and all its multiple subjects, not just the "moral" ones. Memory is, indeed, key to confession, but it does not function to *restore* the past or a previous *natural* self so much as it remakes and reinterprets some new "matiere" (P.6). Instead of erecting a static idol of a final truth, I argue that the image of aged body holds out an unstable reminder of life's transience: a reminder of the impossibility of *possessing* the unequivocal "truth" of one's self. The image of the body inspires the poet's initial revision and remembering, but, ultimately, he finds his text—his *corpus*—upon which he promises to pray continually. The *Confessio*, however, proffers an equally elusive and problematic *body*. Even as the poem makes a "feigned acceptance of the stability and efficacy of authoritative truth," its material and textual composition compulsively proliferates voice

74

and meaning.[67]   The figure of Genius, as feigned authority, offers one example, and others include the poem's Latin academic apparatus (hexameter headings, speaker tags, and glosses) and the *presence* of the poet's body. Nevertheless, the *Confessio* self-consciously prefaces and performs concerns about narrative reliability and instability, and "while on many levels appearing to stand for truth and order, the poem partakes of the world's inevitable disorder."[68] Yet the poem never promised and certainly never delivers unified meaning or truth. It does, however leave the reader with the open-ended hermeneutic challenge of taking the way, "That of the lasse or of the more" (P.20), between lust and lore. Because the *Confessio* explicitly articulates the challenges of guaranteeing meaning, the lover's confession is not a hermeneutically sealed narrative providing the reader with unambiguous closure and meaning, but a space of proliferating fantasies, desires, bodies, and subjectivities.

Whereas, the *Confessio* emphasizes the inventional capacity of confessional speech, in the next chapter I turn to Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and its dramatization of penitential performance. Chaucer and Gower were friends, and Gower was writing the *Confessio* at the same time that Chaucer was writing his *Legend*.[69] John Fisher notes that around 1385 "in the *Confessio Amantis* and in the *Legend of Good*

---

[67] Patricia Batchelor, "Feigned Truth and Exemplary Method in the *Confessio Amantis*," in *Re-Visioning Gower*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1998), 15.

[68] Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xviii.

[69] As Robert Worth Frank puts it, Gower and Chaucer were "doing exactly the same thing at almost precisely the same moment" ("The *Legend of Good Women*: Some Implications," rpt. in *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems*, ed. William A. Quinn [New York: Garland Publishing, 1999], 306).

Women, Gower and Chaucer returned to parallel love visions used as frames for collections of stories."[70] Fisher further observes that Gower's "impulse for treating the conventions of courtly love in a religious context in *Confessio Amantis*" appears related to the "overt religious coloring of the *Legend of Good Women*."[71] Nevertheless, despite such observed similarities, critics have to a great extent overlooked how in both poem's confessional discourse *produces* storytelling rather than merely *frames* it.

In both the *Confessio* and the *Legend*, confession functions as a privileged discourse for the production of truth, and, in turn, the confessional subject's need or desire for truth generates textualized bodies. In the *Confessio*, the *senex amans* serves as the final fictive body engendered by the poem's confession. Paradoxically, this body—which is also a text—attempts to circumscribe the pleasures of narrative and satisfy desire by offering the pretense of an extra-discursive reality. This self-denying, penitential body of the *senex amans* anticipates my discussion of penitential satisfaction and sacrificial desire in the following chapter. Unlike the *Confessio Amantis*, Chaucer's *Legend* has never before been read systematically as a literary penance. Indeed, whereas confession seems an appropriate subject for "moral Gower" to undertake, the "religious coloring" of the *Legend* produces varying degrees of anxiety in its readers. Yet perhaps such anxiety is a textual effect of a poem that is in a way all about the agony of the critical condition, all about the lacking and desiring of "truth."

---

[70] John H. Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1965), 208.

[71] Ibid., 235.

Chapter Three

A Shimmering Mirage: The Performance of Penitence
in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*

In criticism, the *Legend of Good Women* has been dealt with differently (and perhaps more appreciatively) than has the *Confessio Amantis*, and consequently the poem's "religious coloring" often has been read as ironic and superficial. Yet rather than merely topical, penance in the *Legend*, as in the *Confessio*, structures the poet's relationship to the God of Love and informs the poem's discourse of truth and "entente. Reading the *Legend* in penitential terms explains much of the poem's anomalies, and, I will argue, explains why criticism on the poem repeatedly invokes a vocabulary of *intention*.

Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* has frequently been implicated in a debate about authorial intention, in particular whether or not Chaucer intends the *Legend* to be read ironically and, thus, whether or not his praise of "good women" is sincere or insincere.[1] Such a debate is hardly surprising given the terms set forth by the poem itself.

---

[1] For summary and analysis of the poem's irony, see, for example, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," *JEGP* 82 (1983): 11-31 and Catherine Sanok "Reading Hagiographically: The *Legend of Good Women* and its Feminine Audience," *Exemplaria* 13 (2001): 323-54. The vocabulary of Chaucer's intent appears, most obviously, in the sustained critical debate over the poem's relationship to the medieval antifeminist tradition via its participation in the *querelle des femmes*. Tuttle Hansen identifies John Lydgate as "the earliest reader to record his belief that the *Legend of Good Women* does not offer straightforward praise of women"—that Chaucer intends the poem to be read ironically. And in spite of "continued arguments against ironic readings," Tuttle Hansen observes that the notion of Chaucer's irony persists ("Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator," 12).

In the Prologue, the poet's dream vision becomes a nightmare of accusation and interrogation in which his "entente" is questioned. The poet encounters the wrathful judgment of the God of Love and, finally, is accused of heresy. Perceiving himself thus betrayed, the God of Love demands recompense: "If that thou lyve, thou shalt repenten this / So cruelly that it shal wel be sene!" (F.339-40). [2] Love's wrath is tempered, however, by the timely intervention of Alceste, who proposes that the poet acted in ignorance rather than malice—without ill intent. Nevertheless, the Prologue culminates in the assignment of a penance as the poet is ordered to make "yer by yere" a "glorious legende / Of goode wymmen" (F.481-4, G.471-4). Hence, the God of Love's desire for visible (as it "shal wel be sene") repentance is met by the poem itself. In this way, the *Legend* as penance promises to resolve the Prologue's crisis of "entente" by offering the God of Love, as evidence of the poet's interior feelings, his professed innocence, sincerity, and orthodoxy. With a view towards more fully explaining the *Legend*'s engagement with issues of intention and representation, I will argue that penitential discourse informs and organizes the entire poem. Because the poet's penitential performance directly affects his treatment of good women, I will offer an approach that facilitates our reading of the Prologue and legends together. Penance, neither incidental

---

[2] In the F version of the Prologue, the poet never wakes from his dream-vision, and, thus, both his reading and writing of good women occur within the dream. In contrast, the last two lines of the G version are as follows: "And with that word, of slep I gan awake, / And ryght thus on my Legende gan I make" (G.544-5). All quotations from Chaucer's works are taken from the *Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) and are noted parenthetically. In most citations of the Prologue, I quote from the F version and where possible give the corresponding line numbers in the G version.

nor simply a false surface under which lies an ironic truth, determines the very terms with which we debate the poem's (and Chaucer's) intended meaning.

A beginning rather than an end in itself, the Prologue introduces the *Legend* as the poet's literary, penitential performance. In reading the poem as a penance, I explicitly undertake what has been implied by many critics of the poem.[3] The *Legend*'s indebtedness to a medieval discourse of repentance yields important insight into the poem's sacrificial and recuperative desires and into the desires of contemporary criticism. The legends are so marked by the spectacle of female suffering—suicide, rape, violence, and abandonment—that we need to ask why this suffering features prominently within the poet's penitential writing. As an act of penance, the *Legend* establishes a particularly fraught relationship between the poet and the female martyrs who are the subjects of his telling. Rather than asking if the poet (or Chaucer) intends his audience to read the legends as true or false, sincere or ironic, and how we might know the difference, we should instead ask what the poet's knowledge of good women *does for* him and what it *does to* the textualized bodies of the women he claims to rescue. I would contend that the sacrifice of female martyrs imbues the poet's performance with a certain pathos, which

---

[3] Rita Copeland, for example, argues that the poet wrote the *Legend* "under orders from a higher authority, to rectify the moral error of his earlier works" (*Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 187). Similarly, Florence Percival defines the poem as a "palinode" and characterizes this classical convention as a recantation "performed in atonement for the "sin of writing ill of women," (*Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* [Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998], 155), and Peter Allen likewise labels the poem a palinode, which "is an author's literary confession of sins and declaration of a desire to change" ("Reading Chaucer's Good Women," *Chaucer Review* 21 [1987]: 425).

demonstrates that his heart is in the right place.[4] Thus, we can see these women as

martyred for the poet's cause as well as the cause of love. Indeed, they function to

mediate and represent the poet's "penitence" and help facilitate his recuperation from the

loss and division caused by sin.   The women of the *Legend* embody pain and loss and in

so doing facilitate the poet's recovery of a stable self. When read in this way, we might

see the *Legend* as a text that "unconsciously acknowledges the affective responsibility

(and thus power) that women…bear for sacrificial men."[5] The poem's gender strategies

then emerge as compensatory gestures of a poet who suffers from lack.

As a heterogeneous tale collection unified around the theme of "goode

wymmen…that weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves" (F.484-5, G.474-5), the *Legend*

often provokes incredulity among readers who chafe at its expressed moral and the poet's

seeming obsequiousness—his subjection to authority. Yet, the poet's adoption of a

---

[4] Analogously, R. Barton Palmer ("Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*: The Narrator's Tale," in *New Readings of Chaucer's Poetry*, ed. Robert Benson and Susan Ridyard [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003]) reads the *Legend* as a "penitential fiction" that chronicles the "efforts of a harassed and troubled performing self" (191, 194). He concludes that the legends are as much, if not more, about "the character of the accused and harried male" than they are about "the character of the female saints" (183, 193). In particular, Palmer observes the similarities between Guillaume de Machaut's *Lai de plour* and the *Legend*. He argues the following: "The 'I' in the *Lai de plour* is fictionally feminine, but the reader is encouraged to penetrate beneath this female voice to hear and judge how sincere and repentant the male author is. Thus Machaut shifts the traditional rhetoric of such a text, making readers attend less to its affecting expression of emotion and more to its performance, to the efforts of a poet aiming to achieve a particular effect" (190). Palmer finds that the "effect" of the *Legend* is slightly different than that of the *Lai de plour* because the "I" of the poet is displaced by the voice of the narrator. I disagree, holding that, in both Machaut and Chaucer, the reader "is encouraged to penetrate beneath" the *Legend*'s narrative and the female voices contained within in order to "judge how sincere and repentant the male author is" (190).

[5] Patricia Clare Ingham, "Psychoanalytic Criticism," in *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Steve Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 472.

submissive penitential posture initiates a process by which he will recover his self-mastery. In the last two lines of the F Prologue, the poet says "with that word my bokes gan I take, / And ryght thus on my Legende gan I make" (F.578-9). The poet translates classical "bokes" into vernacular, hagiographic "legende," and as a penance, the poem engages this translation on a level that is simultaneously personal and public. The stories of good women function to translate the ineffable—the poet's feelings—into material evidence. "Translation," according to Rita Copeland, "is always, in one way or another, an act of appropriation," and through the workings of a penitential ideology that combines proof with punishment, the poet demonstrates his proper feeling by appropriating both the stories and the pain of women.[6] The losses incurred by the *Legend*'s victimized women suggest the ways in which gender difference can be pressed into service "for the psychic mastery of the (male) subject" and, therefore, we find that the poet's penitential writing serves to masculinize rather than emasculate him.

Tropes of authorial intention and sincerity pervade scholarship on the *Legend* and augment the popular interpretation of the poem as satire or comedy. More than claiming to tell us what Chaucer *really* meant, the "satiric approach" frequently speculates about how Chaucer *feels*, and how he feels about women especially. This, I would suggest, is a masterful and masculine approach to the poem and one which mirrors the male poet-narrator's own masterful appropriation of female emotion.[7] Furthermore, satiric readings

---

[6] Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, 186.

[7] This combination of feeling and masculinity may seem counterintuitive given that typically "feelings" are understood to feminize, but Marjorie Curry Woods' work on the rhetorical writing exercises completed by schoolboys in the medieval classroom suggests that writing about women and as women is a masculine/masterful act. Such

of the poem assume that penance serves as a constraint upon the poet's "true" desire. In

order to problematize such critical assumptions, in this chapter, I turn more emphatically

to the insights of psychoanalysis. Approaching the poem in this way, the poet's penance

emerges not as a constraint upon the poet's desire but as strategy of it. The *Legend*

underscores the poet's desire not only to rescue and redeem "good women" but also his

desire to regain a state of innocence and be redeemed himself. As L. O. Aranye

Frandenburg points out, "[f]rom the standpoint of psychoanalysis, the distinction between

self-rescue and the rescue of the other is impossible to sustain absolutely" and, moreover,

"[t]he subject wants to redress the lack it fears in the other, and wants to redress the lack

it fears in itself."[8] In the *Legend*, the poet employs penance as his particular mode of

self-rescue.[9] The way in which both the Prologue and the legends conflate the poet's

---

writing did not feminize the boys (as feminist theory might suggest) but instead further
masculinizes them. As Woods puts it, "rather than encouraging an understanding of and
empathy with 'real' women, such nostalgic feelings may have furthered male bonding
and gender differentiation among adults" ("Boys Will be Women: Musings on Classroom
Nostalgia and the Chaucerian Audience(s)," in *Speaking Images: Essays in Honor of V.A.
Kolve* [Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 2001], 146).

[8] L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism,
Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 29. In her recent analysis
of the *Legend*, Fradenburg reads the poet's (self)rescue not, as I do, in terms of
penitential discourse but in terms of chivalric discourse. She concludes that the poet
succeeds (or at least he believes that he has succeeded) in redeeming good women: "*The
Legend of Good Women* fantasizes that good women, despite their suffering, have really
been rescued, worthy of their textual resurrection because of their capacity for sacrifice"
(*Sacrifice Your Love*, 196). In contrast, I take a less optimistic view of the poet's
condition and argue that he fails to rescue either himself or the women and he knows that
he fails.

[9] For Fradenburg such self-rescue is an ethical discourse, which "proposes to
repair the fault in man's being through acts of (self)rescue ('subjectivation') in which
'one is called upon to take oneself as an object of knowledge and a field of action, so as
to transform, correct, and purify oneself, and find salvation'" (*Sacrifice Your Love*, 177).

"trouthe" with the "trouthe" of women evinces the impossibility of sustaining any distinction between self-rescue and the rescue of the other.

In exploring the theological and thus psychological implications of the poem's use of repentance, I emphasize the "efforts of a harassed and troubled performing self."[10] There emerges a marked difference between the Prologue and Chaucer's previous dream visions, where his poets partake in dream-events with a degree of passivity and critical detachment. In the *House of Fame*, for instance, the poet-dreamer observes from a distance the supplicants to the goddess Fama, and in *The Book of the Duchess*, the poet's dream focuses upon the Black Knight's grief rather than his own hinted at love-sickness. However, in *The Legend of Good Women*, the God of Love's caustic taunting draws the poet from his role as observer to become a main actor in the dream's unfolding drama. In the *Legend*, the poet "takes himself as an object of knowledge and a field of action."[11] Conceived as a character, the poet becomes his own subject as he performs penitence. Ostensibly, the Prologue debates the "truth of womanhood," but quickly any distinction between the "truth" of women and the poet's own truthfulness is collapsed—the debate over the poet's "entente" displaces the debate over the faithfulness or faithlessness of women. Significantly, we find this same displacement in criticism of the *Legend*. The question is rarely whether or not the legends succeed in vindicating women, but rather does Chaucer *intend* for the tales to succeed or fail? Therefore, critics have often dismissed the poet's stated intentions and endeavored instead to recover Chaucer's "true"

---

[10]   Palmer, "The Narrator's Tale," 194.

[11]   Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 177.

83

meaning. The *Legend* thus encodes a secret truth that is only revealed through masterful

critical reading. In this way, the parallels between the interpretive priorities of the critic

(including my own) and that of the medieval confessor emerge more sharply.

Both critic and confessor occupy the position of interrogator, whose "will to know

the sinner's [or poet's] secret through complicated protocols of decipherment and

disclosure…equally presumes the confessant's *will* to *conceal* at the same time he is

telling."[12] The presumption of concealment is most evident in, although certainly not

limited to, ironic or comic readings of the poem. Recently, Catherine Sanok has explored

the implications of reading the *Legend* ironically; she argues that a satiric approach has

the effect of disregarding any alternative and, particularly, "irony-proof" traditions

provided by the poem's association with hagiography. Sanok explains that the "reception

of the *Legend* as a satire has been shaped by the hermeneutic priorities of medieval

antifeminism":[13]

> The reading of poem as satire, which has prevailed in the last twenty
> years, often relies on the idea of two audiences, a female audience duped
> by the poem, perhaps even flattered by its central conceit, and a more
> sophisticated (male) audience whose greater access to the literary
> traditions on which Chaucer draws gives them privileged insight into the
> poem's "real" meaning.[14]

This critical discussion surely points to the over-determined role of gender in the poem,

but also to the issue of interpretative power or control—who is in "the know" and who is

being duped. The object of the poem's satire has been variously identified as women, the

---

[12] Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations*: *The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 36-7.

[13] Sanok, "Reading Hagiographically," 347.

[14] Ibid., 330-1.

God of Love or Cupid, the poet, as well as the antifeminist tradition itself.[15] All such

arguments point to the Chaucer's authorial control as the originator of the poem's irony.[16]

Just as in the *Confessio Amantis*, the *Legend*'s penitential discourse produces a fictional

"I" that makes especially strong claims for access to an authoring and authorizing

presence who stands outside the poem and guarantees its meaning. Yet by treating irony

as an inevitable structural consequence of the *Legend*'s penitential poetic, we might avoid

the limitations of such an autobiographical fallacy and fantasy.

The particulars of poetic-making are aligned in the *Legend* with the language of

medieval repentance. Unlike Gower's emphasis upon confessional speech and dialogue

in the *Confessio Amantis*, Chaucer's *Legend* emphasizes the recuperative operations of

penance. Hence, the poem develops what I call a "penitential poetic." This term makes

clear the mutually delimiting registers of poetry and penitence. The poem deploys a

paradigm of truth-making that—in imitation of the manuals defining penance like the

Parson's Tale— is simultaneously retrospective, introspective, and productive. Through

this process of poetic truth-making, the penitential poet tries faithfully to represent

himself to his audience. The poem addresses the critical issue of representation: the

representation of the subject to itself and to others. In this respect, I agree with Kellie

---

[15] See, for example, Tuttle Hansen, "Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator."

[16] Whether sincere or ironic, most readings suggest that Chaucer consciously renders his poetic "entente" and that this "entente" can be recovered by the critic. The insights offered by psychoanalysis, however, suggest otherwise. In an introduction to such a psychoanalytic critique of Chaucer that works especially well in terms of the Legend's narrating persona (as it also does for the persona of Amans in Gower's *Confessio*), Ingham explains that the first-person pronoun—the 'I'—"silently claims a fiction that it can never deliver: to give us unmediated access to Chaucer's unified, coherent, and authentic desires" ("Psychoanalytic Criticism," 466).

Robertson, who examines the Prologue's "procedures of self justification"; she proposes that Chaucer's appointment, during the late 1380s, to the commission of the peace in Kent informs the Prologue's preoccupation with judgment, identity, and intention: "The forensic work of the peace commission demanded that laborers narrate their work in an unambivalent and legible fashion; if this narration was unconvincing, laborers were branded as recalcitrant or 'rebellious.'"[17] Yet Robertson suggests that "Chaucer's self imagining…goes beyond mere autobiographical referentiality":

> [T]his experience [on the commission] provided a matrix for a dilation on a number of social and ethical questions which Chaucer found most pressing: the relative values of truth and falsity; the dangers attendant on poetic work as vernacular "makyng"; the problem of justifying one's labor before various forms of authority.[18]

Chaucer's interest in truth, falsity, and "unambivalent" self-justification is certainly relevant to his juridical activity as Robertson claims, but the problems of self-representation and the suspicions caused by the gap between intention and action (or contrition and satisfaction) are even more manifest when one approaches the poem from the penitential angle.

Ironic readings of the poem are produced when we read the poet's (at times Chaucer's) "real" intentions or desires as subversive. However, psychoanalysis critique of the unified "self" suggests that Chaucer's "entente" cannot be recovered by the critic. Applying such an understanding to poem, I seek to shift our interpretive paradigm and avoid the current critical impasse wherein the poem is read as either ironic or sincere.

---

[17] Kellie Robertson, "Laboring in the God of Love's Garden: Chaucer's Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002): 126.

[18] Ibid.

Viewing the *Legend* through the lens of penitential discourse, I examine the poet's performance not as a disingenuous game calculated to produce irony, but as a strategy of desire. As Fradenburg has demonstrated, the *Legend* displays the workings of "sacrificial desire." By elucidating the linkage between ethics and desire, the moral sense and pleasure, Fradenburg argues that sacrifice and duty "rather than restraining desire…are forms taken by desire."[19] Building upon her analysis of the *Legend* as an illustration of chivalric sacrifice, I suggest an alternative (and ultimately complimentary) reading to that offered by Fradenburg. I assert that the legends might be read as a form of penitential sacrifice and that the poet's willing submission to the God of Love's demand for visible repentance shows his sacrificial desire. As a penance, the poem foregrounds the difficulty of representing and discerning "truth," and the legends portray not only "the impossibility of absolute rescue" but also the impossibility of objective representation.[20] The poet attempts to represent his "truth" and the "truth" of women through narrative, but in the end he is betrayed by his own language just as the good women are betrayed by the words of treacherous men.

II

The Prologue, I contend, is structured as "penitence" in more literal terms than has been previously recognized and the situation of the penitent and confessor is much worse than either the poet or the God of Love realizes. Moreover, such an understanding

---

[19] Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 7.

[20] Ibid., 196

of the legend via the form of penance unites prologue and stories. I approach the

Prologue not as a separate text but as an introduction to the legends. The poet's dream

vision supplies the immediate cause or reasons for his making of the *Legend*. Those

reasons, as expressed by Alceste, are twofold: to do "penance" for his "trespas" (F.479-

80, G.469-70) and to make "yer by yere" a "glorious legende / Of goode wymmen"

(F.481-4, 471.4).[21] As Alceste uses the term, Penance, seems to refer to the punishment

or satisfaction that comprises the final component of the three-part "sacrament of

penance" (and which is preceded by the heart's contrition and the mouth's confession).[22]

Yet, within medieval theology, "penance" refers both to the works performed in

atonement for sin and also the attitude with which a sinner executes his penance.[23]

---

[21] Robertson states that "the Prologue's legalese encourages us to understand the repeated use of the term 'trespass' in its specific juridical sense—a violation of civil law—rather than in its more general sense of wrong or sinful behavior" ("Laboring in the God of Love's Garden," 128). She explains that this is also true of the poem's use of "penance," which is used "in its juridical, not theological sense" (128, fn. 32). Yet we need not privilege the juridical meanings of 'trespas' and 'penaunce' at the expense of the theological; the two are hardly mutually exclusive and in all likelihood both meanings would have registered simultaneously with a medieval audience. Moreover, we should recall that the poet's "penance" offers a corrective for the *moral* rather than *legal* failings of Chaucer's earlier work.

[22] Quite frequently in both medieval and modern parlance, "penance" is used interchangeably with "confession" to describe the sacrament in is entirety: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Just as often, however, penance refers to the third part of the sacrament: satisfaction.   Thus, Chaucer's Parson says, "Now shaltow understande what is bihovely and necessarie to verrary parfit Penitence. And this stant on three thynges:/ Contricioun of Herte, Confessioun of Mouth, and Satisfacioun" (*Parson's Tale*, 106-7).

[23] Before the Reformation there exists no clear distinction between "being penitent" and "doing penance." Thus, of the word's possible Middle English connotations, two, in particular, seem most appropriate to the *Legend*'s use: "penance" as an act or deed such as "to do penance" and, more abstractly, a state of physical, emotional, and psychological suffering. See the *Middle English Dictionary*, *s.v.* "penaunce," (n.); 1(b): "the third part of the sacrament of penance, satisfaction; the act of

Indeed, when the God of Love threatens that the poet "shalt repenten this / So cruelly that it shal wel be sene!" (F.339-40), he refers to a mental and emotional state of repentance. The God of Love craves the poet's remorse or contrition. In order to complete his "penance" satisfactorily, the poet must be careful of both what he says and how he says it. The God of Love's interest in the poet's emotions, in addition to his deeds, indicates that the poet's penance (and, consequently, the legends) will function as a performance.

The *Parson's Tale* provides us with an excellent notion of Chaucer's understanding of medieval "penitence" as a performative utterance.[24] "Penitence" is, of course, the name that Chaucer's Parson gives to the sacrament of confession, and, according to the Parson, "penitence" provides the "wey" to God and salvation. The Parson's "way" is not a path laid down before the pilgrim's feet (it is not, for example the road to Canterbury) but is instead a productive and inventive discursive space. This metaphorical space suggests the instrumentality of penitence, and the Parson offers his fellow pilgrims an instrument for producing their own penitential tales. Yet it also seems to be the case that the Parson provides a method for producing and performing emotion—in particular the emotion of contrition. Whereas the term *confession* implicitly emphasizes speech and the term *penance* emphasizes deeds, "penitence" evokes an emotional state. In the *Parson's Tale*, penitence provides an instrument of lament: it is

---

reparation or satisfaction assigned by a confessor to a penitent"; 1(d): don (beren, drien, driven, performen) "to do penance, carry out one's penance, undergo penance"; 5(a): "Pain, suffering; affliction, hardship; also a distasteful task or duty; also hunger pangs."

[24] For a relevant and recent look at Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*, see Derrick G. Pitard, "Sowing Difficulty: *The Parson's Tale*, Vernacular Commentary, and the Nature of Chaucerian Dissent," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 299-330.

"the pleynynge of man for the gilt that he hath doon"; it is also a promise never to sin

again, to "namoore to do any thyng for which hym oghte to pleyne." In this way, we

might consider the sinner's confessional speech-act as an explicit performative utterance.

When the sinner confesses, he does not merely describe reality but he alters it. The

sinner alters or transforms himself. As Michel Foucault puts it, confession is a "ritual of

discourse" in which "the expression alone, independently of its external consequences,

produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems,

and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him and promises him

salvation."[25] Yet I want to suggest that there are "intrinsic modifications" produced by

confession even prior to those effects mentioned by Foucault.

Does contrition precede confession or vice versa? I raise this question in order to

point out how the Parson gives primacy to feeling as the impetus for both confessional

speech and penitential action, and how the Parson locates the feeling of contrition in the

body's privileged interior spaces. For example, the Parson, using the language of natural

production, explicates the three-part process of penitence—contrition, confession, and

satisfaction—as a progressive externalization of inner feeling. He uses the organic

metaphor of the tree with its roots, branches, and leaves. The "roote" or root of the tree is

"Contricioun, that hidth hym in the herte of hym that is verrary repentaunt" (112).

Contrition, he says, hides in the heart just as "the roote of a tree hydeth hym in the erthe"

(112). And from this root "spryngeth a stalke that bereth braunches and leves of

---

[25] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans., Robert Hurley. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 62.

90

Confessioun, and fruyt of Satisfacioun" (113). It is by this fruit that men may know the tree and "nat by the roote that is hyd in the herte of man, ne by the braunces, ne by the leves of Confessioun" (114). Although hidden, contrition acts as the principal step towards repentance. Yet this intangible state can only be known or represented by its effects: the fruit of satisfaction that grows upon the branches and leaves of confession. In this way, the penitent's satisfaction seems almost to produce her remorse rather than vice versa; the very existence of fruit suggests that one's contrition and confession are true.

The question foregrounded by the *Parson's Tale* and, indeed, by medieval confession manuals more generally is how to demonstrate sufficiently that "intrinsic modifications" have occurred in one's soul. Contrition or remorse proves problematic, because although fundamental to the process of penitence, contrition is the hidden feeling of the heart—it is felt but cannot be seen. The Parson further asserts that it is not enough for a sinner to feel sorry for what he or she has done. Instead, the penitent must continue to perform "goode werkes" or else "his repentance may nat availle" (87). Thus, "penitence" comprises both a lament for sin and corresponding works that prove the authenticity of one's lament or remorse. Clearly the problems of representation are at issue here, but to push on the idea of the constructedness of emotions further, we might say that what we are really dealing with is *presentation*—the bringing of emotion into being or presence. As one implication of this presentation and performance of penitential emotion, I will argue that the legends attempt to bring into being the poet's remorse. Through the textualized bodies of women, the poet endeavors to make his "truth" plainly present.

Through his reading and writing about female suffering, the *Legend*'s poet hopes

to satisfy the God of Love by cultivating a sacrificial fruit; by narrating stories of female

sacrifice, he not only produces good works but he performs his lament or remorse. The

poet's need for remorse (without which "his repentance may nat availle") reflects the

importance that medieval penance placed, more generally, upon a sinner's psychology—

his or her thoughts, desires, and motives.[26] As Foucault observes, medieval confession

shifted "the most important moment of transgression from the act itself to the stirrings—

so difficult to perceive and formulate—of desire."[27] And this difficulty in perceiving and

formulating a penitent's interior "stirrings" poses for the clergy a formidable interpretive

problem. The hermeneutic work required by confession is, as I have previously stated, an

effect of how Christianity associates an individual's "truth" with the secret, unseen,

interior spaces of the body. The consequences of this interiorly located truth are, as

Jeremy Tambling argues, that "no one can…finally prove the negative, that they are not

heretical."[28] Heresy is, of course, the sin of which the God of Love accuses the poet in

the Prologue. Indeed, this is precisely what the poet-persona of the *Legend* attempts to

---

[26] As I discuss in chapter one, the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215's *Omnis utriusque sexus* decree codified penitential ideas that had emerged during the eleventh and twelfth centuries and that emphasized proper contrition for one's sins and elaborated upon the workings of an individual's *will* by questioning the motives for sinning and the contextual circumstances surrounding sin. For a fuller explanation of medieval confession, see Mary Braswell, *The Medieval Sinner* (East Brunswick: Associated University Presses, 1983).

[27] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 19-20.

[28] Jeremy Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 40.

do, and it is because one cannot "prove the negative," that the *Legend* is read so often as a failure and, moreover, why the poem inevitably generates ironic readings.

The inevitable circularity of confession's evidentiary process and its reliance on external factors and features for proof, as described by the Parson, implies that "penitence" is a *cultivated* emotion. Cultivation underlies the Parson's chosen metaphor of a tree and, as such, belies the notion of penance as a spontaneous and *natural* expression of remorse. This cultivation suggests the applicability to penance of Judith Butler's theories of performativity: finally, what we take as an internal feature—in this case, remorse or contrition— is actually "one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts."[29] In turn, we might read the *Legend*'s good women as providing the memorable bodily acts that anticipate and produce the poet's contrition. For example, Cleopatra's vow to "fulfille" her "covenant" to Antony so that it "shal ben wel sene, / Was nevere unto hire love a trewer quene" (693-5). Cleopatra's desire to offer visible proof of her fidelity ("shal ben wel sene") reiterates the God of Love's demand for repentance that "shal wel be sene" (F.340). Thus, her tale ends not with her words but with the collapsing of any distinction between her text and her body: "And with that word, naked, with ful good herte, /Among the serpents in the pit she sterte" (696-7). It is entirely unclear whether the adjective "naked" refers to her "word" or to her body as she leaps ("sterte") into a pit of snakes. Either way her bodily act substantiates her spoken vow and memorializes her love for Antony. She performs her "trouthe" and her "truth" ("nevere unto hir love a trewer quene"). This idea of penitential performance becomes

---

[29] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), xiv.

crucial when we consider how the Prologue foregrounds the difficulty of self-representation as caused by the gap between intention and action or contrition and satisfaction.

Penitential discourse employs a hermeneutic of suspicion. Confessors presume sinfulness; they presume that individuals harbor within themselves secret sins that must be revealed. Yet, the very requirements for a "clean," "spontaneous," and "naked" revelation bespeaks a suspicion of language and an awareness that irony, or at lest the potential for it, is in the penitential discourse that must use language as its medium. In confession, truth trades one ambivalent body for another: a body of flesh for a body of words. When the Parson argues for the "fruyt of satisfaction" as an external and visible product of the ineffable, he regards the process of penitence as one of strict translation: a sinner *translates* thought and feeling from the world within his or her body to the world without. But the Parson's language suggests that, in reality, a sinner *cultivates* and *presents* their interior "truth." As Foucault puts it, confession extracts truth from within the depths of the penitent, places it "in between words," and holds that truth out like a "shimmering mirage."[30] Analogously, Russell Peck, reading the *Legend* in philosophical terms, sees the Prologue as in keeping with the "notion of poetry as a means of mediation between what is inside and outside the self."[31] Peck's observations can be pushed further in terms of the poem's particular manner of negotiating inner and outer worlds. The

---

[30] Foucault, *History of Sexuality,* 59.

[31] Russell Peck, "Chaucerian Poetics and the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*," in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Julian Wasserman and Robert Blanch (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 40.

Legend's use of penitential poetic suggests that penance, much like poetry, offers a

speaker/writer a discursive strategy for representing and presenting his or her inner truth

to an authoritative 'other' who appreciates and judges his "entente."

The Prologue's dream vision signals an introspective move on the poet's part; the

landscape of the dream is both familiar and unreal—his "psychic reality" so to speak—in

which he encounters the embodiments of his own fears, desires, pleasures, and beliefs.[32]

The spatial, temporal, and discursive dimensions of medieval penitential thought are

reproduced by the particulars of the *Legend*'s poetic making. Quite uniquely, the *Legend*,

as Kathryn Lynch puts it, "actually sets out a program that moves back inside [Chaucer's]

oeuvre, that requires him to make poems as well as read them."[33] The very architecture

of the Prologue's dream vision signals the significance of this inward, yet productive,

movement that replays the movements demanded by confession in the fourteenth century.

Consequently, the prelude to the poet's dreaming is unlike any we find in Chaucer's other

dream visions, where there is only a perfunctory transition between "reality" and dream.

For example, in the *Parliament of Fowls* the dreamer reads from a book, but as darkness

---

[32] Fradenburg defines the psychoanalytic concept of a "psychic reality" as
follows: "Psychic reality is a concept that speaks, in fact, to the enormous difficulty,
even the danger, of making absolute distinctions between inner and outer
realities…Freudian, Lacanian, and object-relations analysis all insist on the following: the
fathers, mothers, siblings, ideals, authorities, saviours, and persecutors constructed by the
psyche are phantasmatic, which is not to say they are not 'real', but more precisely that
they are psychically real—composed of fragments of memory, the markings of desire,
pleasure, and pain" ("Analytical Survey, II: We are Not Alone: Psychoanalytic
Medievalism," in *New Medieval Literatures, 2*, ed. Rita Copeland, David Lawton, and
Wendy Scase [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998], 258).

[33] Kathryn Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer,
2000), 116.

falls he says merely, "to my bed I gan me to dresse" (PF 88); wearied from the day's

labor, he "tok reste" and slept "faste" (PF 94-5). Similarly, the *Book of the Duchess*

shows the poet-dreamer put to sleep quite suddenly: "Such a lust" takes the poet that he

falls asleep "right upon" his book (BD 273-4). And, in the *House of Fame*, the narrator

emphasizes the normalcy of his bed-time routine: "Whan hit was nyght to slepe I lay /

Ryght ther as I was wont to done" (HF 112-3). In contrast, the poet's preparations for

sleep in the *Legend* seem exceptional and even ritualized.

In the Prologue, we find the scene of sleep and dream ceremoniously staged. The

poet's movements are synchronized with that of the daisy that he worships. During the

day, the daisy (or "eye of day") is "ayein the sonne sprede" (F.48, G.48), but, when "the

sonne out of the south gan weste," the daisy "gan close and goon to reste" (F.197-8).

Likewise, the poet, after observing the daisy all day long, hastens home at night to his

"herber"—a secluded and enclosed space in which the natural world has been

reconstructed in part:

> Hom to myn hous ful swiftly I me spedde
> To goon to reste, and erly for to ryse,
> To seen this flour to sprede, as I devyse
> And in a litel herber that I have,
> That benched was on turves fressh ygrave,
> I bad men sholde me my couche make;
> For deyntee of the new someres sake,
> I bad hem strawen floures on my bed.
> Whan I was leyd and had myn eyen hed,
> I fel on slepe within an houre or twoo.
> (F.200-9, G.96-103)

The poet's "litel herber" or little harbor operates as a spatial metaphor for the poet's body

or mind. Imagery of death and entombment pervade this passage: the enclave is

96

furnished with benches of newly dug turf ("turves fresh ygrave") and the poet is "leyd"

out upon a bed strewn with flowers. Although it is clear that the poet is not going to his

eternal rest, the daisy's "dredde" for the "derknesse of nyght" (199) conveys a potential

danger. We are meant, I think, to read the dream-world as a liminal space wherein the

dreamer is neither alive nor dead but in stasis. And from this hibernation, the poet, like

the daisy, hopes to awaken revivified.

The poet's devotion to the daisy—which closes at darkness and opens again with

the sun—signals his preoccupation with the idea of resurrection; he declares:

> With dredful hert and glad devocioun,
> For to ben at the resureccioun
> Of this flour, what that yt shulde unclose
> Agayn of the sonne, that roos as red as rose,
> (F.109-12)

The allusion to resurrection is further advanced by the daisy's incarnation as Alceste and

Alceste's mythology as the quintessential good wife who "for hire husbonde chees to

dye, / And eke to goon to helle, rather than he" (F.513-4, G.500-1). For this selfless,

sacrificial act, Alceste is "rescowed" by Hercules, who "broght hir out of helle agayn to

blys" (F.515-6, G.503-4). And Chaucer, presumably without precedent, invents for her

the metamorphosis into a star. Moreover, the conventional trope of nature's renewal after

the "pore estat" (F.125, G.113) of winter also emphasizes the Prologue's theme of

rebirth, as does the poet's description of the "small foules" who cheat death by escaping

the fowler's snare and the springtime "repentynge" of the fickle "tydif," who "for

newfangelnesse" sought their mate's "mercy" for their "trespassynge" (F.154-6). The

poet lauds the "innocence" and "ruled Curtesye" of these birds' natural "pitee"; he says,

97

"But I clepe nat innocence folye, / Ne fals pitee, for vertu is the mene" (F.163-5). The birds are not jaded by their mates' trespassing, but rather they forgive them instinctively and with no false pity. Thus, the Prologue is replete with images of unaffected innocence and *natural* renewal that are analogous to the reconciliatory process of penitence as described by the Parson.

The theme of resurrection, which reverberates throughout the Prologue, corroborates the poem's penitential context. The sacrament of penance, often compared to Christ's act of raising Lazarus from the dead, is figured as a metaphoric resurrection of a sinner's soul and body. In this vein, the Parson cites Saint Augustine: "But he be penytent for his olde synful lyf, he may nat bigynne the new clene lyf" (96). Here "the new clene lyf" is both the absolution the penitent receives after confession and the final reward of heaven. Either way the promise of "penitence" repeats the promise of resurrection: "lyf by deeth and mortification of synne" (1079). Moreover, the Parson encourages sinners to obtain penance's renewal frequently, and he assures that as often as the sinner "falleth he may aris agayn by penitence (1072). Correspondingly, the Prologue depicts a day of judgment wherein the poet, at least in the eyes of the God of Love, has fallen. The dream vision culminates in the God of Love demanding that he relinquish his old life—"Let be the chaf, and writ wel of corn" (G.529)—in order to rise again by his penitence. Literally, the Prologue causes or produces the legends of good women: they are fruit of the poet's introspective and retrospective dream vision. In this way, the stories of women function to mediate the poet's penitential experience. Through the

sacrifice and suffering of innocent women, the poet attempts to rise again, redeemed and renewed.

III

The entire first half of the Prologue works to establish the poet's heartfelt and quasi-religious devotion to the daisy. The F version of the Prologue, especially, is laden with theological or pseudo-theological terminology—sooth, doctrine, credence, feyth, beleve, reverence, resureccioun, mercy, trespassynge, worship, devocioun, preyse, evele, desir, gost, preve, and repentynge—which frame the poet's worship of the daisy and, ultimately, his penance within a salvatory, spiritual context. Moved by a combination of reverence and ardor, the poet goes out daily "To seen this flour ayein the sonne sprede" (F.48, G.47); the "blisful sighte" of the daisy "softneth" the poet's "sorwe," and he swears that he will love it until he dies (F.50):

> And I love it, and ever ylike newe,
> And evere shal, til that myn herte dye.
> All swere I nat, of this I wol nat lye;
> Ther loved no wight hotter in his lyve.
> (F.56-9)

The poet's repeated avowals of constancy foresee how his "truth" will be called into question by the God of Love, and his evocation of sorrow in the midst of his celebration of love suggests that the daisy offers consolation for past and present pain, especially the pain of Criseyde's betrayal.

The poet's literary sin or "trespas" against the religion of love is, more accurately, a trespass against women, because, according to his detractors, *Troilus and Criseyde*

showed how "Crisseyde Troylus forsok" and how "wommen had don mis" (G.265-6).

As a consequence, the God of Love asserts that "men to wemen lasse triste, / That ben as

trewe as ever was any steel" (F.333-4). Just as men are made to distrust women, the God

of Love distrusts the sincerity of the poet's intentions, and the poet's disputed fidelity is,

by analogy, paralleled with Criseyde's lack of fidelity. Furthermore, because of the

inscrutability and unpredictability of her "slydyng corage," Criseyde seems to precipitate

the *Legend*'s crisis of "trouthe."[34] In addition to her betrayal of Troilus, I argue that the

imperceptibility of Criseyde's "entente" disqualifies her as one of the God of Love's

approved stories. The God of Love declares her off-limits, an unauthorized text whose

interpretation must be censored; he orders the poet: "Let be the chaf, and writ wel of corn

/ Why noldest thow han writen of Alceste, / And laten Criseide ben aslepe and reste?"

(G.529-31). The *Legend*'s poet offers Criseyde, the "chaf" against which the "corn" is

defined, as the first of several penitential sacrifices. He lays Criseyde to rest (as she is

likewise laid to rest, albeit in different manner, by Robert Henryson's *Testament of*

Cresseid) and turns instead to exemplary figures, positive examples of feminine love.

The daisy, resurrected and reborn every morning, prefigures the poem's

exemplary female martyr: Alceste. Aleceste's dual performance—as an emblem of

feminine virtue and as mediator on behalf of the poet—is a function of how the Prologue

twins the "trouthe" of the poet to the "trouthe" of women. The daisy anticipates

Alceste's redemptive role as mediator in the poet's argument with the God of Love and

---

[34] Indeed, Jennifer Campbell explores the poem's figuring of "Criseyde-as-enigma," and the narrative crisis that "arises over questions of Criseyde's moral integrity and intentions. See "Figuring Criseyde's 'Entente': Authority, Narrative, and Chaucer's Use of History," *Chaucer Review* 27 (1993): 343.

betokens the poet's abandonment of Criseyde and his championing of sacrificial women. As almost an epilogue to *Troilus and Criseyde*, the Prologue illustrates the poet's conversion from the worship of Criseyde to the worship of the daisy and the daisy-queen, Alceste: a change of heart first anticipated by the poet's promise at the end of the *Troilus* to "gladlier" write of "Penelopees trouthe and good Alceste" (Tr. 5.1777-8). This turn towards Alceste and its expectation of reader displeasure—already evident in the *Troilus*—reveals the fictionality of the *Legend*'s penance. As a result, like the God of Love's opposition, Alceste's intercession is crucial to the staging of poet's penitential performance, which begins with a conversion not unlike Troilus's apotheosis. The poet turns away from the unfaithful Criseyde to worship Alceste, who is the "trouthe of womanhede" "that bereth our alder pris in figurynge" (F.297-8). He adopts, as the correct object of veneration, the daisy, whose constant behavior and resurrective narrative makes it a fixed and transparent symbol of virtue and, thus, the perfect consolation for the enigmatic and capricious Criseyde.

Essential to the daisy's virtue are of the characteristics of fixity (stability) and transparency; moreover, the daisy is fully visible, " hire chere is pleynly sprad" (F.64), which signifies "the fantasy of its perfect accessibility."[35] Likewise, Alceste, as the God of Love says, "kytheth what she ys" (F.504). Alceste's exemplary body is a microcosm of what Lynch describes as the poet's "luminous world of transparent essences and brilliant surfaces that reveal, rather than conceal, endless depths of meaning."[36] In the

---

[35] Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 189.

[36] Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical*, 119.

101

Prologue, the body of Alceste bears the weight of (re)presenting the poet's much disputed "trouthe." Her capacity to reveal rather than conceal meaning poses a solution to the problematic gap between intention and action, or contrition and satisfaction. The poet/sinner must necessarily demonstrate the sincerity of his words and "entente" by repeatedly performing or acting *out* his penitence—following-up confessional speech with visible, revealing satisfaction. In contrast, Alceste models an ideal, although ultimately unsustainable, form of being—"a phantasmic promise of the good."[37] As such, Alceste is the "naked text" brought to life, and, as such, is the guarantor of womankind's fidelity and the poet's good intent.

Because she achieves transcendence through her death, Alceste is more (and less) than one of the sacrificial stories the poet tells in the *Legend*. All the same, Alceste provides the poet with a model of sacrificial substitution; she chooses to die for her husband and take his place in hell. Likewise, the poet attributes his salvation to her. He composes a "song in preysyng of this lady fre" (F.248) in which he claims: "For, nadde comfort ben of hire presence, / I hadde ben ded, withouten any defence" (F.278-9). Embodying the virtues of mercy and self-sacrifice, Alceste mediates between the poet and the God of Love, and, without her intervention, the poet claims "I hadde ben ded." Alceste demonstrates the material and symbolic instrumentality of the female body. The poet, however, explicitly inverts this power structure and declares himself to be the daisy's instrument— working "as an harpe obeieth to the hond" (F.90). He explains:

> My word, my werk ys knyt so in youre bond
> That, as an harpe obeieth to the hond

---

[37] Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 187.

And maketh it soune after his fyngerynge,
Ryght so mowe ye oute of myn herte bringe
Swich vois, ryght as yow lyst, to laughe or pleyne.
Be ye my gide and lady sovereyne!
As to myn erthly god to yow I calle,
Bothe in this werk and in my sorwes alle.
(F.89-96)

Nevertheless, because of her objectification, the daisy's role as poetic muse appears a fundamentally passive one: she is the means by which the poet finds his voice and revives his feeling.

By naming the daisy and the daisy-queen, Alceste as his "gide," the poet signifies their specific function with the *Legend*; both the daisy and Alceste literally lead the way to sacrifice—they model sacrificial desire. Unlike Genius's role in the *Confessio Amantis*, the daisy does not attempt to guide the poet to truth through reason but, instead, stirs the poet's emotions "to laughe or pleyne." As Florence Percival points out, the daisy "was thought literally to have power to heal the heart."[38] If we read the daisy's healing power in terms of penance, we find that the poet's passionate belief in the daisy suggests, in part, his desire to believe in Truth: a desire to heal his sorrows and renew within himself a state of innocence and unity with god. In this same vein, Donald Rowe articulates the poet's need for healing in explicitly penitential terms:

> The very antagonism of self expressed by the narrator's dream, the consequence of his divided nature, is necessarily to regain unity, for the self-flagellations of contrition are both a product of man's division and a means of purging the self of divisive sin; consequently, and paradoxically, contrition is simultaneously an expression of love, a desire for unity.[39]

---

[38] Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary*, 31.

[39] Donald Rowe, *Through Nature to Eternity: Chaucer's Legend of Good Women* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 43.

Rowe's observation about the "antagonism of self" recalls the oppositional structure of confessional discourse. Opposed by the God of Love, the poet's "truth" and self-mastery are called into question. But by writing about female martyrs, the poet, according to the God of Love's promise, will "wynne" (F.567, G.543) back his love and, thus, experience (re)union with divine. But first he must perform his penance. Often we read the *Legend* exclusively in terms of the poet's redemption of classical women, yet perhaps it is even more the case that the poet needs redeeming. Throughout the *Legend of Good Women*, the "treachery of language" manifests itself as the treachery of lovers and the treachery of the poet. Therefore, in the wake of the problematic reception and interpretation of *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Roman de la Rose*, the poet initiates in the legends a more naked or penitential style of writing and, thereby, tries to prove the impossible: that he is not a heretic.

IV

Poetry and "penitence" alike grapple with the "shimmering mirage" that is a "truth" (whether the truth of the poet or the truth of womanhood) represented "in between words." As I discussed in chapter one, confession manuals register a fear of literary or rhetorical artifice. Confessors demand plain or "naked" speech. Yet, plainness is a style in itself, and, thus, confession manuals make problematic assumptions about the transparency of language and a problematic differentiation between speech and writing, orality and textuality. The *Legend*'s poet expresses a similar desire for textual transparency in the G version of the Prologue when he exclaims: "For myn entent is, or I

104

fro yow fare, / The naked text in English to declare" (G.85-6). Here, the poet's promise "to declare" the naked text implies his desire to collapse the distinctions between text and speech. The spatial dynamics established by this statement further a fantasy of *presence*; the "naked text" will keep the poet from *going from* his readers ("fro yow fare"), it will keep the poet close at hand or present. Within the poem's immediate context, Sheila Delany proposes that the "naked text" might reflect the poet's "utopian wish" for "a work so transparent in meaning as to require no interpretation."[40] Confession manuals, as I have previously explained, similarly promote the "utopian wish" for a "naked confession:" a stated desire for linguistic and narrative candor. Ultimately, this prelapsarian fantasy endeavors to circumvent the treachery of language and the miscommunication that arises between writer and reader, speaker and listener.

Within the Prologue's dream, we see ample evidence of how language can betray. The God of Love accuses the poet of betraying his law, and, moreover, the poet is betrayed by his own language—his authoring of *Troilus and Criseyde* and translating of the *Roman de la Rose*. Consequently, as the poet kneels "in good entente" before his daisy, the God of Love suddenly "hys eyen caste" upon the poet and demands, "Who kneleth there?" (F.308-12, G.234-7).[41] Reminiscent of Amans's exchange with Venus in

---

[40] Sheila Delany, *The Naked Text: Chaucer's Legend of Good Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 93. Largely on the basis of this line and its possible Wycliffite connotations, Delany argues that the F version is a later revision of the G: "Given this changing climate, it is far easier to imagine the ever-diplomatic Chaucer removing the distinctively Wycliffite phrase 'naked text' from his G Prologue than adding it to F" (42).

[41] Again, the F version emphasizes the poet's religious devotion to the daisy whereas the poet of the G version strikes more of a casual pose— "lenyng fast by" the daisy when the God of Love spots him and asks, "Who restith there?" (G.238).

Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, the poet, kneeling in the posture of one who is penitent,

answers: "Sir, it am I" (F.314, G.240).[42] The poet needs no further introduction and the

God of Love begins to berate him: he is a "worm" and a "foo," who "mysseyest" and

"hynderest" the love's "olde servauntes" with his "translaciuon" that "lettest folk from

hire devocioun" (F.318-25, G.244-51). Finally, the God of Love's antagonism

culminates in the accusation of heresy: "That is an heresye ayeins my lawe" (F.330,

G.256). As with Genius in the *Confessio Amantis*, the God of Love *opposes* the poet in

the manner of a judge/confessor, demanding that he acquit himself.

The God of Love's opposition stages a crisis of "entente" and highlights the

problems of representation. Additionally, Lynch concludes that "the poet's own motives

as an author are subject to interpretation and misinterpretation, resulting not only from

the temporal conditions of language and the wills of his readers, but from the exhaustion

of his own innocence as speaker and writer."[43] Like Peck, Lynch approaches the

Prologue's foregrounding of epistemology through philosophical discourse, but, it seems

to me that psychoanalysis and philosophy ask similar questions. Lynch's analysis

implies that the problems of representation are not strictly the fault of willful readers and

the "conditions of language" but are equally a product of the poet's troubled psychology,

or, as she puts it, his "exhaustion" of innocence. Psychoanalysis provides us with a

theory by which we can read the poet's condition in the Prologue as one of lack, and thus

we might read the poet's exhaustion in explicitly psychoanalytic terms.   The God of

---

[42] In the G version of the Prologue, the poet is "lenynge faste by" and "restith"
(G. 234-238) near the daisy instead of kneeling before it in devotion as in the F version.

[43] Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions*, 112.

Love's opposition unsettles the poet and evidences his lack. When, in the dream vision, the God of Love appears and "by the hand" holds the daisy-queen, Alceste (F.213, G.145), he literally displaces and replaces the poet, who had previously imagined he "myghte, day by day, / Duellen alwey" by the daisy's side (F.175-6). The poet's nearness to, and synchronicity with, the daisy is upset further by the God of Love who questions his proximity to the flower: "What dostow her / So nygh myn oune floure, so boldly?" (F.315-6). The God of Love's claims the daisy as his "oune floure" and declares that the poet is an unworthy worm, who draws *too near* ("to neghen ner") his flower (F.317-8). In response to the lack that the poet suddenly and fearfully perceives in himself, the penitential legends function as strategy of desire.

The penitential legends most obviously propose to rescue the poet from death, but such a literal explanation of the *Legend*'s recuperative desires does not adequately account for all that transpires in the Prologue nor does it fully account for the complexity of the poet's relationship to the God of Love and to Alceste. Recently, Alan Fletcher has argued that we need "to introduce to our reading of the *Prologue* to *The Legend of Good Women* a fuller awareness of how Chaucer caused the God of Love to cast Chaucer's persona in an oppositional role, that of heretical challenger to his authority."[44] Fletcher is correct to draw our attention the poet's role as antagonist, and I would further suggest that this role emerges as a direct effect of the poem's penitential structure. Admittedly, because the poet has been labeled a heretic and compelled to recant, there is strong inclination to interpret his penance as a forced performance. Yet, even if forced, it does

_____
[44] Alan Fletcher, "Chaucer the Heretic," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 73.

not necessarily follow that the poet's strategy in the legends is deliberately subversive and disingenuous.[45] As a "heretic," the poet appears to challenge the God of Love's authority, but, at the same time, the God of Love challenges the poet's self-possession by disputing his identity as a faithful servant of Love and, especially, Love's consort, Alceste. Thus, the poet's relationship to the God of Love (and his Law) can hardly be one of simple subversion.

Acting as a mediator, Alceste undertakes the poet's defense; she argues that deeds can produce results that are discontinuous with a person's intent:

> He myghte doon yt, gessyng no malice,
> But for he useth thynges for to make;
> Hym rekketh noght of what matere he take.
> Or him boden maken thilke tweye
> Of some persone, and durste yt nat withseye.
> (F.363-7)

Alceste suggests a number of plausible explanations for the poet's alleged heresy: that, he used improper 'matter' unwittingly and without 'malice,' that he wrote in ignorance, or perhaps acted against his will. With this later excuse, Alceste imagines a situation similar to the one often invoked for the *Legend* in which "some persone" of importance bids Chaucer to make a work that he "durste yt nat withseye." Her charitable presumption of innocence foils the God of Love's wrath, and, through her intervention, mercy and forgiveness prevail. By proliferating different interpretations of the poet's intentions,

---

[45] Indeed, under most circumstances, the confessional situation cannot help but be coercive. Sacramental confession's demand to speak implies a degree of duress. A sinner must confess at least once a year, and if she fails to do so, she can at the very least be denied the Sacrament of the Eucharist and at the most be excommunicated.   For a discussion of the coerciveness of confession as it pertains to modern confession in a criminal justice setting, see Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confession: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

Alceste undermines Love's certainty. Her point seems to be that the same effect can be produced by various and, finally, unknowable motives. Subsequently, Chaucer shifts the Prologue's climax away from the *querelle* and towards a sacrificial and salvific punishment.

The poet-persona, however, tries to extend the *querelle* by clarifying his "entente" in translating the *Roman de la Rose* and writing of Criseyde; he professes his innocence: "Naught have agilt, ne doon to love trespas" (F.463, G.453). He argues that his "entente" was to "forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce" (F.472, G.462), and that in portraying Criseyde's inconstancy he does not suggest that all women are likewise unfaithful. Employing a strategy of negative example and warning (which he will use again in the individual legends), the poet argues that like a "trewe man, withouten drede" at a "theves dede," a "trewe lover" should have nothing to fear if he speaks "a fals lovere som shame" (F.464-7, G454-7). The poet shifts guilt and accountability from himself to the reader; he implies that true lovers will find no fault with his work. Rather than causing lovers to abandon their devotion to Love, his writings prick the consciences of false lovers. Consequently, the poet's self-defense figures as an anti-confession. He expresses neither guilt nor remorse for his actions; however, he does accept responsibility for his own "menynge" (F.474, G.466) But Alceste summarily dismisses the poet's "entente" and "menynge," exclaiming, "Lat be thyn arguynge, / For Love ne wol nat countrepleted be / In ryght ne wrong…" (F.475-7, G.465-7). According to Robertson, the poet's failed attempt at justifying his works "on the grounds of truth and intentionality…is indicative of the shaky footing these concepts find," and the problem, she concludes, lay in "ever

fully conveying or textualizing intention." [46]   Indeed, like the poet's use of *abbreviatio* in

the legends,[47] Alceste cuts-off speech and constrains "arguynge." She, thereby, tries to

avoid the "treachery of language." In the end, Alceste's interruption underscores the

judge's role in constituting meaning and exercising interpretive control; the poet's

acceptance of and submission to authority is more important than debating "ryght ne

wrong." Moreover, this cessation of argument prepares the reader for the dramatic rather

than didactic unfolding of "trouthe" through penitential performance.

　　　As a sinner and accused heretic, the poet must, at last, submit to the God of

Love's authority. Although it is repeatedly disregarded as such by critics of the poem,

this relationship between judge (God of Love) and judged (poet) is an explicitly

penitential one. Tambling describes the relationship between confessor and confessant

and the specifically Christian, orthodox contours of penance in terms that are both

Foucauldian and Lacanian:

> [C]onfession puts the emphasis onto the confessor, who is the final
> authority on the status of what has been said to him, not the person who
> has undergone the experience or committed the sin. Not the self, but the
> Other must validate or accuse, and the self must submit to its discourse.[48]

Rather than resisting judgment, the poet accepts his penance almost eagerly; he says,

"And with that word my bokes gan I take, / And ryght thus on my Legende gan I make"

(F.578-9). He willing submits to the Other and acknowledges the God of Love as the

subject supposed to know (*sujet supposé à savoir*). Jacques Lacan's definition of the self

---

[46] Robertson, "Laboring in the God of Love's Garden," 134.

[47] For a discussion of the use of *abbreviatio* in the *Legend*, see Woods, "Boys
Will be Women."

[48] Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject*, 40.

as "subject" in relation to the "discourse of the Other," makes clear that "desire makes sense only if one can imagine that some other exists who already has the desirable thing, and who might therefore provide the desiring subject with what he needs."[49] In applying these concepts to Chaucer's work, we may see the poet's subjection as the appropriate response of one who *desires* to believe in and know T/truth. The poet, as subject to the discourse of the God of Love, imagines that by fulfilling his penitential obligation to write "yer by yere" a "glorious legende / Of goode wymmen" (F.481-4, G.471-4) he will obtain what he needs or lacks.

<div align="center">V</div>

In the legends themselves, the poem's emphasis shifts from the poet's psychology—dream vision—to his actions; he shifts from the confessional modes of introspection and retrospection to the penitential modes of performance and production. Immediately upon being assigned his penance, the poet collects from his books the evidence necessary to prove the existence of good women. Hardly contrite for his poetic (mis)deeds but, nevertheless, submissive before the God of Love, the poet produces the stories of good women in order to demonstrate his much contested orthodoxy. Penance provides the structure that informs and organizes his production of legendary texts. Because confession demands plain speech and penitence requires the signs of contrition, the poet emphasizes pathos and drastically abbreviates the women's stories. And taking the daisy and daisy-queen as his model for the naked text, he attempts to represent

---

[49] Denis Foster, *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 8-9.

similarly the bodies of his good women as transparent, and, therefore incapable of dissimilitude.[50] Penitence and poetry, I argue, both wrestle with the problem of representation, and, thus, together they partake in a fantasy of a naked *corpus*. In heaven, the Parson argues, the soul does not transcend the body, but instead it is transformed as "cleer," "inmortal and strong," "hool," and without hunger, thirst, or cold (1078-9). This desire for corporeal clarity and wholeness signals the desire for complete self-possession and union with the divine. The Parson claims that at its resurrection "the body of man, that whilom was foul and derk, is moore cleer than the soone" (1075-77). Here, the Parson describes the body's metaphorical purification after death, but, furthermore, his statement imagines a body as clear and thus without the capacity for concealment and treachery. Therefore, I turn now to the Legend of Lucrece as an example of how the poet attempts to write the stories of good women in a penitential style that imitates the patently signifying *corpus* that is both a text and body: Alceste.

The pathos-laden story of Lucrece's rape and suicide thematizes the synchronicity between form and substance. The Legend of Lucrece highlights what Lynch calls the "poetics of impossibility"; Lucrece's tragedy manifests the impracticality and failure of the "naked text."[51] This legend is well-discussed in a number of recent critical studies, many of which acknowledge the semiotic function of Lucrece whose "countenaunce is to

---

[50] Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 187.

[51] Lynch claims that the *Legend* is "an extended exploration of the 'impossible'" and the "whole point of the Prologue…is that purity of intention is inevitably corrupted if not by the execution of a text, then by its reception" (*Chaucer's Philosophical,* 113 and 121).

112

hire herte dygne, / For they acorde bothe in dede and sygne" (1738-9).[52] Yet, many

critics elide the poet's penitential investment in Lucrece's tragedy and focus instead on

ascertaining Chaucer's intentions: how he intends her story, especially her suicide, to be

read. Scholars often single out the Legend of Lucrece as unique, different, especially

problematic or contrary, and, consequently, the tale reproduces in miniature the larger

debate over whether or not to read the poem ironically.[53] However, the poem's

immediate point is not Chaucer's sincerity (or lack thereof). Instead, the poet, through

his penitential performance, struggles to determine whether sincerity and "entente"—his

and the good women's—can be faithfully rendered in language or whether treachery and

misrepresentation are inevitable.

Chaucer tackles in the *Legend*, as Lynch puts it, "no[thing] less than the ancient

hermeneutical question of how any communication and interpretation are possible" and

"whether humans have access to Truth, or merely truths."[54] This ancient debate,

however, takes on new significance when specifically coupled with the language of

repentance. The "truth" that repentance must communicate through language is the truth

---

[52] See, especially, Delany, *The Naked Text*, 202-8; Carolyn Dinshaw, "'The Naked Text in English to Declare': *The Legend of Good Women*," rpt. in *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems*, ed. William A. Quinn, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 357-9; Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical,* 131-9; and Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary,* 261-83.

[53] For Percival, Lucrece is an exception to the *Legend*'s ironic or antiphrastic rule: "In many of the other stories it would seem that Chaucer was damning women by purporting to praise them. *Lucrece* is clearly different" (*Chaucer's Legendary*, 281). Similarly, Lynch admits that "Lucrece poses a problem to those critics (myself included) open to sustained irony in the legendary. She is the best of Chaucer's 'good women,' the least subject to qualification" (*Chaucer's Philosophical*, 131).

[54] Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical,* 114.

of the "self," in Tambling's formulation, "a self that is marked by the desire to show that it possesses truth."[55] Therefore, the poet's authorial investment in the legends is necessarily selfish or self-interested, and his performance a strategy of desire. As penance, the legends illustrate his desire to sacrifice himself and good women so that he might ultimately be saved. In the Legend of Lucrece, the poet's strategy manifests itself as the desire to show that he possesses the truth of Lucrece by recovering her intent. Yet there emerges a rival for the possession of her embodied truth or truthful body: Tarquin. Through this rivalry, the tale links the violent possession of women with the acquisition of truth.

At the tale's beginning, the poet makes a notable departure from his Ovidian source when he emphasizes that Colatine and Tarquin enter "prively" (1716) into Lucrece's "estris" (1715) or interior apartments in order to spy upon her. Lucrece's disheveled appearance—"Dischevele, for no malyce she ne thoughte" (1720)—operates as a visible manifestation of her interior thoughts, but it also accentuates the vulnerability inherent in her "naked" position: Lucrece is oblivious to Tarquin lurking in the shadows. Thus, as Delany puts it, Lucrece participates "witting or not, in a system of signs in which she is interpreted…She becomes, precisely through the visible virtue of her behavior, a topos for the voyeur."[56] In the position of voyeur, Tarquin "caughte to this lady swich desyr" (1750). The poet, who for different reasons also pursues the naked text, likewise shares in Tarquin's desire. The poet draws to memory the "verray trewe"

---

[55] Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject*, 40.

[56] Delany, *The Naked Text,* 206.

(1685-6) text of Lucrece just as Tarquin draws her "forme" to mind: "Ryght so, thogh that hire forme were absent, / The pleasaunce of hire forme was present" (1768-9). Ultimately, this doubling of desire suggests the very operations of the *Legend* as a whole and posits an analogous function for this particular legend and the larger poem that contains it.

The Legend of Lucrece pointedly recalls the poet's penitential task to praise women who "weren trewe in lovyng all hire lyves" (F. 485, G.475). This penance, Alceste promises, will restore the poet to the God of Love's good graces. Likewise, Tarquin makes a sport out of praising wives, yet his "pley" (1698) maintains a therapeutic goal; he suggests to his fellow soldiers: "with oure speche lat us ese oure herte" (1704). Both the *Legend* and the Legend of Lucrece underscores the cathartic purpose of male storytelling—men telling stories about women in order to secure for themselves some consolation. Colatine's boasting, however, has unforeseen consequences when he exposes his wife to Tarquin's predation. Acting as panderer, Colatine licenses a certain enjoyment of Lucrece's virtue, which escapes his control. Analogously, the poet participates in Lucrece's exposure, and she is caught in his gaze. The poet suddenly interposes and interrupts Tarquin's response to Lucrece in order to provide a narrative aside, rendered as such by the Riverside editors: "(And by no craft hire beaute nas nat feyned)" (1749). In this way, the poet's looking and Tarquin's are conflated; they both covet Lucrece's beauty "nat feyned." Furthermore, the illusion of a presence behind the poet's all-knowing and all-seeing voice gives the reader the perception of unmediated access to truth—we forget for a moment that our looking, and

Tarquin's, is highly mediated by the poet's "word." Quite possibly, therefore, Lucrece's

authenticity is a fiction that reflects the poet's desire for the "naked text."

Secretly observing Lucrece alone in her bed chamber, the poet embellishes her

over-heard speech with a portrait of "wifly chastite" (1737). Judging as would a

confessor, he describes how "ful tenderly she wep," how "mekely she let hyre eyen

falle," and how her "teres" were "ful of honeste" (1732-37). Thus, he asserts his direct

knowledge of Lucrece's sincerity. In contrast, Tarquin can only "conceive" her physical

"beaute," "cheere," "shap," and "manere" (1746-7). Not surprisingly, Tarquin fixates

upon Lucrece's exterior features, while the poet penetrates into her thoughts, emotions,

and, implicitly, her good intent. The poet asserts that Lucrece's "contenaunce is to hire

herte dygne" (1738), which suggests that, like Alceste, Lucrece reveals rather than

conceals. Yet neither the poet nor Lucrece can maintain this idealized semiotics.

When he violates her body, Tarquin violates her chief virtue: the "accord" between

"countenance" and "heart"; as this unity is compromised, she finds herself paralyzed.

Moreover, Tarquin threatens that if she resists, he will misrepresent what has occurred:

> As I shal in the stable slen thy knave,
> And ley hym in thy bed, and loude crye
> That I fynde in swich avouterye.
> And thus thow shalt be dead also lese
> Thy name, for thow shalt none other chese.
> (1807-11)

Seemingly, she endures the rape in order to "chese" her own death. Finally, she turns to

suicide as her "self-defining or self-signifying" *and* "completely self-destructive act."[57]

---

[57] Dinshaw, "'The Naked Text in English to Declare,'" 359.

Yet, with her body's integrity compromised, the poet depicts Lucrece as needing to *perform* her "trouthe."

Despite being forgiven by her friends and family, Lucrece is inconsolable after her rape; she seems to know that, in her fallen state, a hermeneutic of suspicion will prevail—she will be presumed guilty no matter what she says. She, therefore, feels compelled to prove her sincerity in deed rather than word. Chaucer's Lucrece, as Lynch puts it, "harbors a profound ambition to reflect her inner intent in every outward action. Her love of 'truth' is what motivates her to do away with herself when her physical intactness can no longer embody her inner rectitude."[58] In her final moments, Lucrece takes heed of her clothing and is careful "Lest that hir fet or suche thyng lay bare" (1859) and, thus, seems very much aware of the vulnerability of her position. She is, at last, supremely self-conscious of her body as a text to be interpreted. By regaining control over her body, Lucrece attempts to determine the meaning of her name. But because her suicide exemplifies the failure of language and because performance is never proof of anything, there is a certain futility to Lucrece's actions and to the poet's retelling of them. Language fails Lucrece and with it her strength to oppose Tarquin. The power of speech and "myght" are provocatively and repeatedly juxtaposed by the narrative: "No word she spak, she hath no myght therto" (1796) and "wel wot men that a woman hath no myght. / what, shal she crye, or how shal she asterte" (1800-1). Speaking, for Lucrece, figures any "myght" she may have. Analogously, her power to "asterte" remains tied to her power to "crye," both of which Tarquin's "swerd at herte" (1802) prevents.

---

[58] Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical,* 136.

Having established that her words and deeds are strictly bound to one another, Lucrece loses power over her voice as soon as she loses power over her body and vice versa. As a naked text, she cannot defend herself against Tarquin who "hath hire by the throte with swerd at herte" (1803). But, perhaps more invidiously, neither can she defend herself against the poet and his penitential text, which likewise has something mightier than a sword at her heart. The fantasy of privacy and pseudo-confessional space that the poet constructs around Lucrece exaggerates this metaphorical sword. The male poet transforms the private tragedy of Lucrece's rape into an exemplary public spectacle. Lucrece, made aware of her vulnerability by Tarquin, attempts to cover her bare feet as she dies, but her efforts are in vain as her dead body is put "openly" on display by Brutus and the poet: "openly the tale he tolde hem alle, / And openly let cary her on a bere" (1865-6). Tarquin's manipulation of Lucrece's body is matched by the poet's more subtle, yet equally selfish, desire for her corps(e) as proof of his sincere penitence.

VI

As the poet (re)collects his stories of good women, he applies to the stories a common moral: women are true and men are false. In this way, the narrative gives the women's lives and deaths some measure of meaning. Yet in most instances the women are denied the transformative powers of language—their letters of lament are cut-off and their woe deemed inexpressible. Therefore, the *Legend* as penance subjects women to suffering, pain, and sacrifice without offering them any transcendence such as that experienced by either Troilus (through his apotheosis) or the poet (through his penance).

Instead, the women—narrated rather than narrators—are locked within their own tragic *corpus*, wherein their bodies and not their words are made to signify their enduring "trouthe" and the truth of the poet. And, by the poem's substitutive logic, the poet rescues good women for his own spiritual gain—their suffering is recruited by the poet to serve as the satisfaction for his own penitential undertaking. During her rape, the poet's calls explicit attention to Lucrece's loss of words ("What shal she seyn?") and loss of voice ("What, shal she crye"). On the one hand, the text suggests the possibility of the poet's sympathetic identification with Lucrece; after all, his own cries of innocence have been silenced, and he too has experienced subjugation at the hands of the God of Love. But while he receives mercy and "lytel" (F.501, G.489) penance, Lucrece is not equally fortunate: her corpse is carried through town on a bier.

In many instances, the women of the *Legend* endure the cruelty and death that the poet evades through his storytelling—a penitential telling that repeatedly silences female voices while emphasizing their corporeal suffering. For example, in the Legend of Philomela, Tereus's rape of Procne leads to a further brutality so monstrous that the poet's eyes "wexe foule and sore" to look upon the tale (2240). The story carries the trace of deeds "so grisely" and so "foule" that the "venym of so longe ago" will still "enfecteth hym that wol beholde" (2238-42). The poet is visibly rattled by Tereus's violence and almost silenced as though it were his tongue that was cut out. It is not the rape that has him shaken but the mutilation of Philomela. His reaction exposes his participation in deeds similar to Tereus's—the excising of the female tongue. For example, his rendering of Procne's lament as inarticulate: "Allas! The wo, the

compleynt, and the mone / That Progne upon hire doumbe syster maketh!" (2379-80).

Just as Philomela's adoption of an *ecriture feminine* in the warp and woof of the loom thwarts Tereus' plans, it likewise threatens to exclude the male poet and deny his appropriation of the sisters' story. Importantly, the poet omits Philomela and Procne's revenge and metamorphosis, and, instead, rushes the story towards a tragic denouement: "And thus I late hem in here sorwe dwelle" (2382). These final words suggest that to satisfy the God of Love, the poet (whether willingly or unwillingly) must cut-off women's language; the more language there is, the greater the potential gap between thought and deed, contrition and satisfaction.

In order to rescue good women and thereby rescue himself, the poet struggles against an excess of signification and meaning so as to express univocal truth and sincerity. Dinshaw argues that the poet, after having been seduced by Criseyde, "wants his females simple, stable, and orderly" and that, therefore, in the *Legend* "he rigorously chastens the letter and controls the slippery feminine."[59] Although the poet may successfully expunge many ambiguities and contradictions from the legends by exercising *abbreviatio*, his textual sanitation is not as complete as Dinshaw implies. In the Legend of Cleopatra, for instance, he proclaims "And forthy to th'effect thanne wol I skyppe, / And al the remenaunt, I wol lete it slippe" (622-3). Here and elsewhere in the legends, the poet declares his intention to emphasize the "effect"—event, action, "bare story," and moral—rather than the art or *artifice* of storytelling.[60] Therefore, he would

---

[59] Dinshaw, "'The Naked Text in English to Declare,'" 348.

[60] See Robert Worth Frank, "The *Legend of Good Women*: Some Implications," rpt. in *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems*.

"skippe" adornment because just as "men may overlade a ship or barge" (621), men may overburden narrative. And he does not want to include embellishment and, as a consequence, "slake" or "omit" anything "that bereth more effect and charge" (620). Yet, inevitably, the tales are "overlade" by meaning just as the women are burdened by the affective responsibility they bear for the sacrificial poet. Ultimately, Cleopatra's woe is excessive and unspeakable and, therefore, outside the text: "ther is tonge non" that may tell of Cleopatra's "routhe" (669-70). Yet her "trewe and stable" body, like Lucrece's, has its dramatic and demonstrative "buryinge" within the text (703, 668). Furthermore, critical details that the narrator would do well to suppress (e.g., the evocation of Augustine's "great compassion" for Lucrece) have a way of repeatedly *slipping* into the text.

A number of inconvenient details complicate the poet's stated intention of producing a "naked text," and such textual slippage authorizes critical readings of the *Legend* that construe the poet and his narrative as deliberately resistant and subversive. But who or what exactly does the poet resist? Possible answers have included the God of Love and courtly romance. Such arguments presume that the poet acts deliberately and that the poem's ironic effects are intentional. In contrast, I have been arguing that the poet's strategy is one of desire and that irony is an inevitable structural consequence of the *Legend*'s penitential poetic. Supremely self-conscious of the gap between intention and action, contrition and satisfaction, the poet works to resist the treachery of language—the play of signification and multiplication of meaning. Thus, he freely excises details from the legends that do fit the stated "effects" of his storytelling. By

121

emphasizing narrative effects rather than narrative *art*, the poet attempts to write plainly and, ultimately, penitently. Yet, the poet's plain speech is itself a style, and, therefore, his writing develops certain methods and themes that are characteristic of confessional discourse. In the Legend of Lucrece, for example, we saw how the poet emphasized the synchronicity between Lucrece's intentions and her actions. This synchronicity addresses the confessional desire for corporeal and linguistic transparency. Elsewhere, as in the Legend of Thisbe, the poet uses a method of concealment and revelation to suggest the presence of the "naked text."

In the Legend of Lucrece, the poet explored the impossibility of the naked text, but the Legend of Thisbe provides a cautionary tale about the treachery of the *clothed* text. The poet admits that in Piramus he has found the rare man who is true: "Of trewe men I fynde but fewe mo / In alle my bokes, save this Piramus" (917-8). Thus, the tale of Thisbe illustrates how even when people have the best of intentions, the ambiguity of language and the misreading of signs can result in betrayal and tragedy. The poet begins his story with the walls of Babylon: images of fortification and protection. He says that around the town "the queen Semyramus / Let dychen al aboute and walles make / Ful hye, of hard tiles wel ybake" (708-9). More than keeping dangers out, these walls keep maidens in. In Babylon, "Maydenes been ykept, for jelosye, / Ful streyte, lest they diden som folye" (722-3). For "jealousy" and fear of "folly," maidens are kept very tightly or closely ("ful streyte"). Despite their neighborly proximity, Piramus and Thisbe must meet "pryvyly" and by "sleyghte" speak of their "desyr" (733-4). Constrained, their desire grows stronger because "As wry the glede and hotter is the fyr" (735). The more

you cover the fire, the hotter it gets. And, likewise, "Forbede a love, and it is ten so wod" (736). Here we see that despite the presumed innocence of the maidens, the patriarchal hermeneutic of suspicion actually causes the very "folly" it has attempted to prevent. The "effect" or point of the tale seems to be that secrecy begets deception and deception leads to tragedy.

Ultimately, love will find a way, and the lovers find the means to "deceyve" their "wardeyns" (753). The lover's discover a "letel narwe clifte" (744), and through this "chink" they confess their love:

> And with a soun as softe as any shryfte,
> They lete here wordes thourgh the clifte pace,
> And tolden, while that they stode in the place,
> Al here compleynt of love and al here wo
> (745-8)

Quietly as any words in a confessional ("softe as any shryfte") they let their words through the chink pass. The narrative compares the lovers to confessor and confessant, but Piramus and Thisbe's desire exploits the privacy of confessional space. Nevertheless, the poet occupies the masterful position of confessor and judge: he *knows* the secret that Piramus and Thisbe conceal from their "jelos fadres" (900). And just as the lovers desire the consummation of their love, the poet desires the revelation of "truth." Thus, Piramus and Thisbe conspire to "stele awey" and "forth out of the cite for to goon; / And, for the feldes ben so brode and wide, / For to mete in o place at o tyde" (779-83). By escaping out into the "brode and wide" fields, the lovers plan to "beguile" their guardians and circumvent the city walls. Because of the secrecy of her affections and the necessity of concealing her intentions from her friends and family, Thisbe hides her face as she leaves

123

town. Her "covenaunt" with Piramus jeopardizes her good name and honor: "For alle

hire frendes—for to save hire trouthe— / She hath forsake; allas, and that is routhe" (798-

9). Therefore, with her face "ywympled subtyly," Thisbe steals away "ful pryvyly" (781-

2). Significantly, her chosen disguise—the wimple—proves to be the lover's undoing; it

is the sign that Piramus will tragically misread.

In a variation upon the narrator's penitential rendering of the "naked text,"

Thisbe's attempt at artifice, at concealing her "trouthe" from her friends and family,

culminates in a violent double-suicide. When Piramus arrives late to their place of

rendezvous, he finds Thisbe's "wimpel torn" and misreads its significance—he believes

that Thisbe is dead and laments that he ever "bidde a woman gon by nyghte / In place

there as peril falle myghte!" (838-9). The tale establishes the "maiden" as vulnerable

when outside the walls where "peril falle myghte," and, consequently, Piramus cannot

imagine female agency that is resourceful and self-preserving rather than self-destructive.

Piramus misconstrues the bloody wimple as the indisputable proof of Thisbe's death.

Meanwhile, Thisbe, who has safely concealed herself within a cave, worries that in her

absence Piramus will think her "fals and ek unkynde." Ultimately, the absence of

Thisbe's body creates two entirely different (mis)interpretations: she is dead or she is

false. When she emerges from the cave, Thisbe finds that her lover has "smot" himself

and lays "[b]etynge with his heles on the grounde, / Al blody" (863-4). As is the case in

so many of the legends, a true lover is a dead lover. Unlike Lucrece, there is never any

question of Thisbe's good "entente," but, nevertheless, she must perform the "truth" of

her love. She must add her body to the sacrifice.

Confronted with Thisbe's grief, the narrator employs the trope of inexpressibility. He protests, "Who coude wryte which a dedly cheere / Hath Thisbe now" (869-70), but, at the same time, he manages to narrate the "effect." He represents her ineffable feeling in explicitly corporeal terms:

> …and how hire heer she rente,
> And how she gan hireselve to turmente,
> And how she lyth and swouneth on the grounde,
> And how she wep of teres ful his wounde;
> How medeleth she his blod with hire compleynte;
> How with his blod hireselve gan she peynte;
> How clyppeth she the deede cors, allas!
> How doth this woful Tisbe in this cas!
> How kysseth she his frosty mouth so cold!
> (870-879)

The power of Thisbe's pathos is contingent upon its excess—how it surpasses the bounds of signification. And poet employs the rhetorical figure of *repetitio* (the repeated refrains of "how hire heer," "how she gan," "how she wep," and so forth) to convey successfully this excessive feeling. The poet situates himself as a sympathetic witness to her suffering, and he simultaneously reveals and obscures Thisbe's pain. This textual striptease, so to speak, demonstrates the poet's masterful manipulation and appropriation of Thisbe's embodied "truth." Hence, the lovers' will to conceal is finally countered by the poet's will to know and to reveal their secret. Repeatedly, in the legends, female suffering occurs as the consequence of male self-interest, a pattern that replicates the poet's self-interested appropriation of the stories and voices of good women. With her dying words, Thisbe incriminates the "jelos fadres," whose selfishness and "envy" first inspired the lovers' secrecy: "And now, ye wrechede jelos fadres oure, / We that whilom were children youre, / We preyen yow, withouten more envye / That in o grave yfere we

moten lye" (900-903). Like Tarquin, these possessive fathers compete with the poet for custody of the naked text. The poet, however, always has the last word.

VII

In accusing the poet of leading folk from their devotion by translating *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Roman de la Rose*, the God of Love does not dispute the veracity of such texts so much as their effects upon readers. He suggests that such knowledge can be an obstacle to faith and devotion. The legends bring the God of Love's desire for blind faith to one tragic and sacrificial end after another—many of the "sely" or innocent women of the legend are blind to the disingenuous intentions of their lovers, which makes their deaths all the more poignant and their exemplary function all that much more meaningful—it renders their self-sacrifice pure. The women are bad and novice readers of the masculine text, and the knowledge they earn through painful experience is too little, too late. Therefore, it is fitting that each of their stories ends not with their own words or conclusions but with the poet's moralizing. The legendary women are the means to a redemptive end, but they are not the end in itself. Ultimately, the women cannot redeem themselves but can only stand in for the redemption of poet. They perform a figurative penance for Criseyde's treachery and the poet's heresy.   Out of his introspective and retrospective looking, the poet produces and shapes a new "truth" from old texts. Translation, as it turns out, is always a process of invention, and "is always, in

one way or another, an act of appropriation."[61] And the poet's penitential *translatio* appropriates women's suffering for his own self-authorization and re-invention.

In the end, it seems that treachery and misrepresentation are inevitable; the poet repeatedly exposes male hypocrisy and, therefore, must almost absurdly insist upon his own singular sincerity: "Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo, / Syn yit this day men may ensaumple se; / And trusteth, as in love, no man but me" (2559-1). Many of the legendary women, if not literally dead and buried, are abandoned by their lovers and by the poet to their pain and suffering. Philomela and Procne are left in a mute embrace, and Hypispyle remains chaste for the remainder of her life, but "nevere hadde she joye at hire herte" (1578). Adriadne walks along the "stronde barefot" (2189), wailing as Theseus's ship sails out to sea. Theseus slips away in the middle of the night, analogously to the way the poet slips out of each tale. Finally, the poet slips away altogether, abandoning his tales unfinished and leaving Hypermestra "fetered in prysoun" (2722), making for an awkward conclusion to the poet's penance. Long after the selfish husband and poet have fled the scene, Hypermenestra sits in her prison-cell and suffers the silently the price of disobeying her father by rescuing her "unkynde" husband (2716) from certain death. We cannot fail to recognize the irony in this final bit of injustice—it is inevitable. In this the last of the legends, there is no avenue of escape from the treachery of language and the treachery of lovers. And so the *Legend* closes upon this image of a "weik" and "helpless" (2713-4) woman resigned to her sad fate.

---

[61] Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, 186

We can, of course, never be certain that Chaucer planned to stop with the nine legends we have. With the exception of Lucrece, however, there are some very simple thematic associations between the legends that suggest that they might be read in pairs: Cleopatra and Thisbe both involve men who are relatively true; Dido, Hipsipyle, and Medea are all concerned with the feigned appearances of false lovers and with how the heroic reputations of Aeneas and Jason evoke pity and desire in the women they woo; Ariadne and Philomela deal with sisters; and Phyllis and Hypermenestra reveal the poem's unraveling—the narrator's increasing frustration with his task.[62] Nevertheless, the broken form of the *Legend*—its unfinished state—has helped promote the ironic reading of the poem that I have been attempting to complicate. The critical disenchantment with the legends presumes Chaucer was likewise bored with the project and with "good women." At different moments throughout his narration, the poet registers his desire to make "haste" (2456) and finish his penance because he is "agroted" or "fed up" (2454). As Lisa Kiser puts it:

> These lines (and others like them) constitute what many critics have seen as evidence that Chaucer was in actuality bored by his legendary and that therefore the only proper response is to share in the poet's impatience. But this view unfortunately confuses the fictional stance of Chaucer's narrator (who is tired of having to do penance for a ridiculous God of Love) with what Chaucer the poet actually manages to accomplish in his individual legends—despite his narrator's professed boredom and annoyance with the task.[63]

---

[62] William A. Quinn describes the pattern of the legends as 4 + 1 + 4. The Legend of Lucrece, he argues, "represents the center by item count" and is a "tonal sinkhole" (*Chaucer's Rehersynges: The Performability of the Legend of Good Women* [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994], 139).

[63] Lisa Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 96.

Kiser's point is well-taken, but it seems problematic to accept the poet's "professed boredom and annoyance" as a sincere expression of his feeling while at the same time deeming his tone in the legends as otherwise ironic. If the poet is an unreliable one (and he is), we are hard-pressed to pick and choose his moments of reliability.

What we are left with then is an overwhelming impression of the poet's need to inscribe his own suffering and sacrifice into the poem. The triviality of the poet's sacrifice, in comparison to that of the women whom he sacrifices, is not the point. Fradenburg explains that "restraint, sacrifice, duty, 'containment,' *are* forms taken by desire," and, the *Legend* clearly articulates the link between sacrifice and desire.[64] For many of the legendary women, death—the ultimate sacrifice—functions as an extension of their desire for their lovers. Thus, the poet's penitential duty, his containment of the female letter, is a form of desire that enhances *jouissance*, which "is not pleasure because it involves unpleasurable excesses of sensation…not pleasure in the possession of an object or a feeling of fulfillment."[65] In this way, the narrator's description of his "agroted" condition is appropriate: to be satisfied in such excess as to be dissatisfied. Perhaps for this reason the poem must be left unfinished and the reader left unsatisfied and desiring closure. Moreover, the impression of the poet as ambivalent with respect to his sacrifice does not necessarily suggest his ambivalence towards, or (dis)satisfaction with, women. Indeed, I would argue that it might express his lack and his inability to

---

[64] Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 7.

[65] Ibid.

believe that through his penitential writing he can achieve satisfaction and self-possession.

Penitential texts such as the Penitential Psalms or medieval penitential manuals like *The Parson's Tale* or *The Clensyng of Mannes Soule* provide the way to God and salvation and, thereby, function to reform their readers. Similarly, Sanok points out that the "reception of hagiographic texts, constitutes a particularly active kind of participation, one which allows the text to function as a conduit for divine grace and favor."[66] In the *Legend*, the form of the poet's penance—the discourse of hagiography— makes explicit a penitential relationship between virtue and suffering. And the good women of the *Legend* function to confer their grace, as acquired through innocent suffering, upon the poet and, thus, demonstrate the affective responsibility that women bear for sacrificial men. Like the daisy, the women are instruments of feeling. The *Legend* attempts in vain to perform the poet's sincerity by depicting the fidelity of legendary women. Yet the poet buckles under the weight of his penitential task. As psychoanalysis shows, agony, it turns out, is the inevitable condition of penitence. Hence, he only partially endures the "heavy thing" that is women's language: "What shulde I more telle hire compleynyng? / It is so long, it were an hevy thyng" (2218-19). Time and again, he leaves the women's letters unfinished or unwritten; their voices are silenced and, finally, so is his.

The performance of female bodies, as patently signifying and revealing rather than concealing, is preferred to language. And, as narrative, the legends are drastically abbreviated in order to emphasize their moral effect—the effect of women's cautionary

---

[66] Sanok, "Reading Hagiographically," 329.

stories upon readers and, most important, their effect for the poet. In terms resonant with the penitential language explored elsewhere, the poet exclaims: "Now to th'effect, now to the fruyt of al" (1160). In this gesture at a moral conclusion, the poet's language recalls that of the Parson. With each legendary woman's tragic biography, the poet produces the fruit of his penitential satisfaction. Whether his "fruit," the product of his literary labors, satisfies cannot, finally, be proven or known. The "truth" the poet offers is, in the end, only a "shimmering mirage" placed "in between language."[67] The recurring debate between sincere and ironic readings of the poem may very well point, as Sanok contends, "to the competing authority of both." [68] Yet, I would argue that finally such readings are the inevitable consequence of the poem's underlying penitential structure that sets in motion a protracted game of truth-making—a game from which our critical judgments about Chaucer and his poet's sincerity or insincerity all proceed.

In the order to perform his penitential satisfaction, the poet sacrifices the *corpii* of "good women." The women of the *Legend* bear for him an "affective responsibility," and thus he appropriate the pathos of their suffering in order to recuperate his poetic reputation. In this respect, we might see the *Legend*'s penitential discourse as gendered. Likewise, gender figures centrally in the following chapter on *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The *Book* allows us to turn from a male authored text to a real woman's confessional discourse. Moreover, we shift from the *Legend*'s abbreviated female speech to Kempe's compulsive confessing, weeping, and traveling. Yet, like the *Legend*, the

---

[67] Foucault, *History of Sexuality,* 59.

[68] Sanok, "Reading Hagiographically," 346.

Book attempts to give credence to feeling—to perform and present authenticity. Through confessional discourse, Kempe hopes to prove that she is a "true" mystic. Hardly offering her readers a "game," Kempe and her *Book* impart truth earnestly; I turn now to the sober truth-telling of *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

Chapter Four:

Recuperation and Repetition: Producing the Chaste Text

in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

While Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* emphasizes the poet's "entente,"

judgments of authenticity dominate the criticism of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In this

chapter, the confessional truth-making of Kempe's *Book* demonstrates not the inevitable

irony of its penitential structures but its inevitable failure. Just as the poet of *Legend* fails

to prove his good intentions, the repetitions of Kempe's *Book* indicate how the text fails

to establish Kempe as an authentic mystic. Rather than re-opening the debate about

whether or not Kempe's experiences were true and how we might know, I want to shift

attention to how the *Book* employs confessional technologies in its attempt at producing

"very trewth." As in the *Legend*, confession or penance emerges in the *Book* as a gesture

of recuperation and a strategy of desire. Yet, unlike in the *Legend*, where the poet

appropriates the stories of legendary women in order to materialize and present his

ineffable feeling, the textualized body produced by the *Book* is Kempe's own. Despite

confession's demand for a naked text, I will argue that Kempe's gendered position and

her role as wife inform her production of an entirely different type of textualized body—a

chaste *corpus*.

The inclusion of the early fifteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe* in my

analysis of literary confession signals a difference or perhaps a disruption. The *Book*

makes no pretense to literariness. Although medieval readers did not necessarily

distinguish between literary and non-literary texts, such distinctions are certainly

registered by modern readers.[1] In previous chapters on Gower and Chaucer, I have noted

that confessional discourse has the effect of generating a fictional "I" that claims to

access the author's meaning and intent and thus critics often succumb to the

autobiographical fallacy. Despite its consistent use of third-person narration, it has

become conventional to classify the *Book* as the first autobiography in English.[2] Readers

may be comfortable challenging the authorial *presence* of Chaucer but we hesitate to

dispense with the *presence* of Margery Kempe.[3] The desire for Kempe reflects a desire

---

[1] David Lawton, for example, argues as follows: "She does not seek the space of
fiction, or the reflexivity of language: we are mistaken to thrust either upon her book.
She does not cultivate instability of voice or metaphor, nor does she wish to acknowledge
it. Her only challenge to authority is her desire for recognition by it. She does not set out
to write or dictate a literary text; and the *Book of Margery Kempe* has no place in English
literary tradition as it was self-consciously constructed (and circumscribed) for and by the
fifteenth century. It may be worth speculating that *The Book of Margery Kempe* was
never excluded from a literary canon because it never sought to be part of one." ("Voice,
Authority, and Blasphemy in the *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Margery Kempe: A
Book of Essays*, ed. S. J. McEntire [New York: Garland Publishing, 1992], 111).

[2] See, for example, Peter Dorsey, "Women's Autobiography and the
Hermeneutics of Conversion." *A/B: Autobiography Studies* 8 (1993): 72-90; Cheryl
Glenn, "Reexamining *The Book of Margery Kempe*: A Rhetoric of Autobiography," in
Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women and the Rhetorical Tradition, ed. Andrea Lunsford
(Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 53-71; Janel Mueller, "Autobiography
of a New 'Creatur': Female Spirituality, Selfhood, and Authorship in *The Book of
Margery Kempe*," *New York Literary Forum* 12-13 (1984): 63-75.

[3] Alternatively, Sarah Beckwith suggests that Kempe's *presence* is undesirable to
some critics, that she is "simply too intransigently present." Kempe's intransigence
explains her failure as a mystic. Beckwith summarizes this particular view of Kempe's
failure as follows: "[h]er book nominally written for the glorification of God…is more
concerned with the glorification of Margery. And she remains incapable of abasing
herself sufficiently for the glory of her maker to shine through" ("A Very Material
Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe," in *Gender and the Text in the
Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance [Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 1996], 198-
9).

for the past but also a desire to recover the authentic voice of a "real" medieval woman. Indeed, it is hard to argue with the "reality" of Kempe's *Book* and its portrayal of real rather than fictive confession. Yet such clear oppositional categories of real and fictive are misleading. Both Gower and Chaucer demonstrate the fictionalizing capacity of confessional discourse. Consequently, in the *Book* we are aware again that when a sinner confesses, she does not merely describe reality but she alters it. As with the *Legend*, the *Book* engages with the thorny problems of intention and (re)presentation, as well as reading and translation. Thus, rather than reflexively accepting or rejecting Kempe's *presence*, we might ask how the text brings her, or perhaps fails to bring her, into being. Approaching the *Book* as an example of confessional discourse, we begin to apprehend not only the text's difference but its continuity with other late-medieval "literary" confessions.

In contrast to Chaucer's legends, which have the effect of limiting female speech, the *Book* privileges Kempe's speaking. Indeed, with the exception of one traumatic confession to a "scharp reprevyng" priest (198), Kempe never appears to be at a loss for words or the Word.[4] Yet, at the same time, the *Book* problematizes any distinction between orality and textuality. The text establishes that Kempe's composition of her "forme of levyng" (86-7) is equivalent with the *writing* and *making* of a book but that she needs a *writer* or a scribe to turn story into text.[5] Nearly twenty years after her supporters

---

[4] All quotations are taken from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: D. S Brewer, 2004).

[5] For my part, I assume that such a scribe existed. In contrast, Lynn Staley argues, quite provocatively, that both the scribe and Kempe's illiteracy are fictions. See

first "bodyn hyr" to "*wryten* and *makyn* a booke of hyr felyngys and hir revelacyons" (78-81, emphasis added), Kempe is finally commanded by God that she "schuld don *wrytyn*," but she can find "no *wryter* that wold fulfyllyn hyr desyr and yeve credens to hir felingys" (85-9, emphasis added). Kempe emerges as the author of her own story, yet a "wryter" will authorize or give credence to her feelings. Moreover, despite her apparent illiteracy, Kempe's expresses her mystical experience in explicitly textual terms: for example, the Holy Ghost "*wrowt* in hyr mende and in hyr sowle" (70-1, emphasis added). From the outset, Kempe appears as a textualized body, a body written on by God and meant to be read as an exemplary text.

In such a clearly textual culture, there exists no voice, presence, or body outside the text. Therefore, even if David Lawton is correct in his assertion that Kempe "does not seek the space of fiction, or the reflexivity of language,"[6] I would insist that Kempe both produces confessional discourse and is produced by it, and, therefore, her confessional narrative can be placed along side the "fictions" of Gower, Chaucer, and Henryson. Recently, Karma Lochrie has suggested that the *Book* "is a mystical treatise that broadly translates medieval confession into autobiographical narrative, although no one has explored the confessional technologies in this work."[7] In what follows, I remedy this critical omission by doing precisely what Lochrie suggests: I explore the confessional technologies in the text. By discussing the *Book*'s confessional structure—the way in

Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

[6] Lawton, "Voice, Authority, and Blasphemy," 111.

[7] Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations*: *The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 42.

which confession informs and organizes the text's (re)presentation of Kempe as "creatur"—I endeavor to complicate categories of "truth" and "fiction." Kempe, certainly, *intended* her text to be a "truthful" one. Indeed, the narrator declares that "sche dede no thing wryten but that sche knew ryght wel for very trewth" (137-9). Yet, at the same time, the scribe as "wryter" gives credence to her feelings. The narrator asserts that the Kempe and her text merely describe truth, but the text itself tells a different story. The very process of writing the *Book*—of re-membering the past—produces "trewth" and "Margery Kempe."

In many ways, the *Book*'s "creatur" serves as a fitting counterpart to Gower's fictional Amans and Chaucer's penitential poet. Like these characters and the literary worlds they inhabit, Kempe inhabits a textualized world of saints' lives, devotional treatises, and biblical stories. Despite her protestations of singularity, her mysticism presents itself as a pastiche of late-medieval devotional practices. We might read such a pastiche not as evidence of her inauthenticity but as a function of how confessional discourse offers "a mode by which people enter into the discourse of their culture, where they step beyond reiteration of stories and into interpretation."[8] The *Book* shows Kempe doing just that—stepping beyond the reiteration of biblical and hagiographic stories and into their interpretation. Yet, unlike Amans and the *Legend*'s poet, the *Book* concerns itself with the confessing body of a woman and thus, like the *Ancrene Wisse* illustrates the fraught convergence of bodies, truth, and gender in medieval confession.

---

[8] Denis Foster, *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7.

II

In reading the *Book*, it might be fruitful to remember that there is no such thing as a full autobiographical representation, a writing of one's "real" life. Indeed, the text suppresses many of the realities of Kempe's historical life. The omission of certain details proves frustrating to some critics, but I suggest that these very absences signal the text's rhetorical fashioning. For example, although Kempe admits ultimately to having borne fourteen children (3684-8), there is little record of Kempe's literal motherhood in the *Book*. Besides the child, whose conception Jesus announces (1555), the only other mention of children occurs at the text's very beginning as the narrator recounts the traumatic birth of her first child and the relevant events that proceed from that trauma: her failed confession, nearly nine months of madness, and first vision of Christ.[9] The absence of such references to her motherhood is one way the text attempts to recuperate and remake her body as a chaste *corpus*. In so far as she is wife rather than a virgin, Kempe's body is a site of loss.[10] Therefore, the *Book* attempts to recuperate her vulnerable female body. Many critics of the *Book* have asserted that Kempe's body functions to express the "truth" that her words cannot, and thus they assume that her body

---

[9] Gayle Margherita suggestively argues that "the trauma of giving birth" is linked in the *Book* to an unnamed sin that reminds the reader of "yet another original—and originating—sin, which, according to Christian myth, forever bound woman to desire and to the body, excluding her from the signifying system which she (paradoxically) brought forth through her transgression" (*The Romance of Origins: Language and Sexual Difference in Middle English Literature* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994], 29).

[10] Barry Windeatt summarizes the consequences of Kempe's lack of virginity as follows: "In spiritual terms, virginity conserves status and confers power, of which, as a sexually experience woman, Kempe feels an abiding sense of irretrievable loss, together with feelings of guilt, taint, and exclusion" (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, 30).

provides a more *natural* or essential means of communicating than language does.[11] But

like the seemingly naturalized, yet nevertheless linguistically constituted, body of

Gower's *senex amans*, we might read Kempe's body as a discursively produced fiction

that furthers the text's rhetorical goals.[12] As such a textualized body, it is not *outside* of,

or marginal to, Kempe's mystical discourse, but instead functions within—and

sometimes against—the discourse's established terms.

In the proem to the *Book*, the scribal narrator admits that the *Book* "is not wretyn

in ordyr, every thyng aftyr other as it wer don, but lych as the mater cam to the creatur in

mend whan it schuld be wretyn" (134-5). Nevertheless, a certain order emerges. One of

the first things that the *Book* accomplishes is the creation of Kempe's body as a chaste

corpus and thus a privileged vessel for God's divine secrets. In chapter eleven, when

Kempe establishes a covenant of chastity with her husband (an event clearly out of

chronological sequence) the *Book* lays the rhetorical groundwork for all that will follow.

Through her renunciation of sexual intercourse—a form of penance—Kempe controls the

---

[11] See, for example, Karma Lochrie's privileging of Kempe's body as essential in *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

[12] By calling Kempe's body a "fiction," I am not denying that bodies exist but I am disagreeing with those critics who have read Kempe's body—as represented by the *Book*—as somehow prediscursive and essential. Analogously, with respect to Kempe and Julian of Norwich, Liz Herbert McAvoy has suggestively argued for the "language of the female body" as a "literary tool." As she puts its, "[m]y own reading of this 'language' of the female body is in terms of its being used as an authoritative literary tool and effective hermeneutic by the authors under examination rather than as than as some pre-existing, prediscursive 'essence' which is tapped into for purposed of achieving authority and asserting female 'difference'" (*Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004], 12).

boundaries of her body and redefines her body as a sacred and inviolable space. Like the body of the *senex amans*, Kempe's penitential body provides a remedy for inappropriate sexual desire. But desire is not so much satisfied by this chaste body as displaced from it. Christ declares her as his "synguler lover" (1680) and his "owyn blyssed spowse" (1686). Despite her conversion and her repudiation of intercourse with her husband as a "gret peyn and gret dysese" (1561-2), a language of desire establishes continuity between Kempe's old life and her new life.

Even with her body dedicated to God, Kempe remains a wife. As such, she presumably cannot seek, even if she wanted to, the literal enclosure of an anchoress such as Julian of Norwich. Instead, she seeks to remake herself imaginatively as a virgin and thereby close her body off that way. By the medieval period, as Gregory Gross observes, the motives for virginity had "gradually evolved from a defense of faith to a defense of the body itself."[13] In further defense of her body, under direction from God, Kempe begins to dress herself in white robes. This direction comes as Kempe is preparing to travel abroad to Rome, Jerusalem, and Saint James. In his doing so, God's motives appear, in part, to be protective or prophylactic: "I schal ledyn the thyder and brynge the ageyn in safte, and noon Englyschman schal deyn in the schyp that thow art in. I schal kepe the fro alle wykked mennys power…I wyl that thu were clothys of whyte and non other colowr" (1015-19). God promises her safe passage to and from England. But he also promises to keep her from "alle wykked mennys power." The requirement of white

---

[13] Gregory Gross, "Secrecy and Confession in Late Medieval Narrative: Gender, Sexuality, and the Rhetorical Subject," (PhD diss., Brown University, 1994), 124.

clothes—garb typically reserved for maidens—suggests that more than anything God means to protect her from the wickedness of sexual violation.

This divine mandate to wear white emerges as central to Kempe's spiritual (re)presentation. By attiring herself as a virgin, she hopes that her body will yield its own answer to the demand for truth. Therefore, she insists upon her entitlement to wear white when she and her husband meet with the Bishop of Lincoln to take their vows of chastity: "'My Lord, yf it lyke yow, I am comawndyd in my sowle that ye schal yyve me the mantyl and the ryng, and clothyn me al in whygth clothys" (1076-8). By altering the "outer" or surface appearances of her body, the white clothes announce publicly its closure. Her lack of virginity grieves Kempe, but God consoles her saying, "thu are a mayden in thi sowle" (1682). Nevertheless, he advises her to adopt white clothes as a deterrent against "velany of thi body" (2468-9). This wearing of white clothes, signals, as Carolyn Dinshaw puts it, "a disjunction between her multiparous body and her virgin desire, her desire, that is, to remake her body so that she is not merely *like* a virgin."[14] Although the white clothes signify her virgin desire, they cannot literally remake the body that born fourteen children. Ultimately, her body's exterior fails to represent its interior truth. Rather than guaranteeing her inviolability, her white clothes have the effect of provoking physical aggression, including unwanted sexual advances. As it turns out, such an imaginative remaking of the body is fully realizable only in text. If she cannot in reality recover her lost virginity, she will settle for a chaste text.

---

[14] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 146.

While many critics mention Kempe's penitential manner of living (including her frequent confessing), the *Book*'s confessional structures have not been discussed.[15] Yet read consistently in terms of epistemological crisis, Kempe shares in the trials of authenticity and truth of the confessional. Whereas in sacramental confession the body often functions as an obstacle to the revelation of a sinner's interior truth, in literary confession the author's book comes to stand-in for her body. As the *Book* acknowledges, a scribal writer gives credence to Kempe's feelings, and thus her virginal desires are made more real or authentic through textual rendering. The creation of Kempe's chaste *corpus* depends upon confession's discursive strategies of concealment and revelation. In using such strategies, Kempe takes advantage of the disjunction between inner and outer space, soul and body. Whereas a number of critics have suggested that the *Book* "effaces distinctions between body and soul, textuality and orality," I find no evidence for such effacement.[16] Instead, Kempe seems to deploy such distinctions to her rhetorical advantage. Certainly, the location of truth on the inward parts of her body causes Kempe agonized uncertainty as she struggles with self-doubt. But, at the same time, the *Book* transforms her body from a vessel of secret sin into a vessel of God's "prevyteys." Kempe alone controls the terms of access to her interior truth.

---

[15] Gregory Gross's unpublished dissertation, ("Secrecy and Confession") provides one exception to this rule. Gross considers the structural significance of confession as it pertains to secrecy in the *Book*. My consideration of the *Book*'s use of concealment and revelation further Gross's observations.

[16] Wendy Harding, "Body into Text: *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 177.

The opening chapter to the *Book* vividly illustrates the confessant's "will to conceal" as it is met by the confessor's "will to know." Eager to "reprove" and judge her, Kempe's confessor interrupted her confession just as she "cam to the poynt for to seyn that thing whech sche had so long concelyd" (194-5). Hence, the confessor fails to *draw* the "truth" out of Kempe's *corpus* and, indeed, his ministrations have quite the opposite effect—"sche wold no mor seyn" (197). The confessor's disapproval and her own fears of damnation cause her to go "owt of hir mende" (199). Stymied by the hasty priest, Kempe fails to produce a cathartic narrative. As devils paw ("rampyng"), threaten, pull, and drag ("halyng") her, Kempe's madness is characterized by a lack of physical self-control or self-possession (203-4). She is merely a puppet as the devils tell her what to say and what to do—she forsakes Christendom and her faith and denies Jesus, the Virgin Mother, and all her friends. She slanders her own self. From this unstable and self-destructive state, Kempe is rescued by Jesus and subsequently her "wyttys" are "stabelyd" (237). She signals her recovery by demanding from her husband the "keys of the botery to takyn hir mete and drynke as sche had don beforn" (239-40). This retrieval of domestic and physical control anticipates the ways she will order her chaotic life experiences through penitential narration. By revisiting and repeating this originary trauma, I would suggest that the *Book* works to effect its own catharsis, and thus its project is a specifically recuperative one.[17] The retelling of this failed confession

---

[17] Likewise, reading in terms of psychoanalysis, Marghertia points to how "the proem to the *Book* envisions the autobiographical project specifically in terms of recuperation," and she argues that the *Book*'s troubled production enumerates the losses suffered in the texts making—"the project of writing the past becomes bound up with the problems of reading and translation." Moreover, she suggests that "[a]utobiography

reinstates Kempe's powers of self-narration. The *Book* picks-up where her curtailed

confession left-off, and the demand to "wrytyn" substitutes for confession's demand to

speak.

This first chapter inspires in the reader the desire for "truth"—its pursuit, as well

as its possession and exposure. The text establishes the reader as Kempe's privileged

confidant or, in Foucault's words, a "virtual presence."[18] Unlike the hasty confessor, the

reader is aware that she was at "the poynt" of revealing her long concealed secret sin, and

thus the reader shares in Kempe's maddening frustration. Although Kempe later relieves

herself of this sin by confessing to a priest—"Sche was schrevyn sumtyme twyes or

thryes on the day, and in specyal of that synne whech sche so long had conselyd and

curyd" (368-70)—it remains "conselyd" from the *Book*'s readers. Ultimately, Kempe's

will to conceal—whether to conceal her body beneath white robes or to conceal her

divinely inspired thoughts from uncharitable "readers"—proves central to the way the

Book substantiates Kempe's authenticity as a mystic. Thus, Gross interprets her initial

confession as a kind of originary moment:

> The reason Kempe begins her life story here…has less to do with the
> specific nature of her unconfessed sin than it does with the structural
> symmetry between sin and mystical revelations *as* secrets. Kempe's
> traumatic experience in confession, then, is the seminal event out of which
> her life as a mystic grows.[19]

mirrors fiction in engendering a series of figural substitutions that re-member the gap left
by inaugural loss—the loss of memory as the only link to the historical real" (*The
Romance of Origins*, 16-17).

[18] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans.
Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1990)*,*
61.

[19] Gross, "Secrecy and Confession," 128.

Her life as a mystic evolves out her seminal confession but so does her life as a storyteller. Structurally symmetrical, both sins and mystical revelations function as secrets imbedded within Kempe's *corpus*. After her conversion, the narrator states that Kempe "new and undyrstod many secret and prevy thyngys" (56). And without these secrets there would be no secret and no author, Margery Kempe. Ultimately, the "prevy thyngys" of God replace sinful secrets, and the disjunction between body and soul allows Kempe to guard her divine secrets from the prying eyes of those who are unworthy, such as her "dedly enmy" (3814), the Mayor of Leicester.

The Mayor of Leicester's *will to know* why ("wil wetyn why") Kempe dresses in white clothes is met by her desire to conceal such information from a disbelieving layman (3840). The Mayor is "not worthy to wetyn it" (3844). She says to him: "'ye schal not wetyn of my mowth why I go in white clothys; ye are not worthy to wetyn it. But, ser I wil tellyn it to thes worthy clerkys, wyth good wil, be the maner of confessyon. Avyse hem yyf thei wyl telle it yow'" (3843-6). The Mayor will not know from Kempe's "mowth" her reasons for wearing white and, consequently, she refuses to *confess* her secret to the Mayor, and instead she will tell it to worthy clerks, with good will, *by the manner of confession*. She seems to trust that her secret will be protected by the seal of confession. She taunts the Mayor by encouraging him to solicit the worthy clerks for the information. In this manner, Kempe conceals her secret at the same time that she promises to reveal it through confession.

Additionally, this hostile exchange with the Mayor has the effect of equating Kempe's body to scripture—a text whose meaning can be known only through revelation

145

and by the ordained. It is important, however, that Kempe is almost always represented as actively revealing her mystical truth rather than having that truth extracted from her body by means of confessional interrogation or by threats of torture. Therefore, the Mayor's attempt at questioning inevitably fails. Also, as both a layman and an enemy, he inevitably misinterprets the language of Kempe's body. As an inversion of sin, Kempe's white clothes signal her internal purity—that she is a maiden in her soul. Nevertheless, the Mayor (mis)reads her unorthodox attire as a perversion. He suspects that both she and her motives are disreputable. Consequently, rather than signifying her vows of chastity, Kempe's white garb produces accusations of depravity. Presumably, the Mayor accuses her of promiscuity, but the narrator censors his actual words: "Than the Meyr alto-rebukyd hir and rehersyd many reprevows wordys and ungoodly, *the whiche is more expedient to be concelyd than expressyd*" (3819-20, emphasis added). This suppression of the Mayor's words shifts the emphasis to Kempe's indignant response, but it also demonstrates how the *Book* embraces confessional strategies. Recalling the "sharp reproving" of her "hasty" confessor, the Mayor causes both the Kempe and the narrator to keep secrets.

As the textualized body produced by and through confessional discourse, Kempe's chaste *corpus* presents itself as both more and less than the naked text demanded by medieval confession manuals. Kempe, it seems, cannot afford to present a naked text such as that offered by Lucrece in Chaucer's *Legend*. Lucrece's transparency, her complete availability to the male gaze, provides the *Legend*'s penitential poet with exactly what he needs. Yet, for Lucrece, that same transparency proves to be her undoing

and her tale culminates in rape and suicide. Likewise, Kempe's violation by devils in the

Book's opening chapter vividly demonstrates how her body can be appropriated and

forcefully possessed.[20] I would suggest that for Kempe the appropriation of her body—

be it divine or demonic—is always figured in sexualized and gendered terms. The *Book*

repeatedly registers Kempe's fear of rape and sexual violation. Consequently, her

creation of a chaste text registers not only a refusal of sex but of male appropriation more

generally.

Like the virgin martyrs with whom the *Book* explicitly associates Kempe—Saint

Margaret (her namesake), Saint Barbara, and Saint Catherine of Alexandria—the text

repeatedly illustrates her divine protection and the exceptional invulnerability of her

female body. As she is hauled before various ecclesiastical and political authorities,

Kempe endures accusations of heresy and corresponding threats of burning. Just as

often, however, she is threatened with rape. For example, the Steward of Leicester, "toke

hir be the hand and led into hys chawmbyr and spak many fowyl rebawdy wordys unto

hir, purposyng and desyryng, as it semyd hir, to opressyn hir and forlyn hir" (3736-39).

We might read the Steward of Leicester's attempt at having a privy conversation with

---

[20] Indeed, Christianity figures the female body as inherently more susceptible to
sin and possession. Nancy Caciola summarizes this paradox of the medieval female body
as follows: "This increased susceptibility also meant that women were more receptive to
possession by God or Holy Spirit. Thus the female nature is inherently more labile and
impressionable. Her greater piety moves her to quicker identification with suffering,
causing her to 'more quickly give forth tears'—one of the classic possessed behaviors.
Yet despite this inherent religiosity, the female also is more susceptible to evil influences
and spiteful behavior as well. Bartholomew [the Englishman] constructs the feminine as
caught between competing poles of piety and wickedness, love and hate, tears and lies.
These contrary impulses effectively portray her as more strongly moved by external
influences than the masculine." (*Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in
the Middle Ages* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003], 134).

Kempe in his "chawmbyr" as a perversion of confessional space in which the dynamics of power, knowledge, and subjection are literalized. Possibly in hopes of provoking from Kempe a *revealing* response, the Steward pronounces many foul and suggestive words. Kempe, however, interprets his words as a literal threat of physical violence; it seems to her that he intends to oppress and rape ("forlyn") her. She begs him to "spare" her because she is "a mannys wife" (3741-2). Here, we notice that Kempe does not rely upon her metaphorical virginity but instead her husband's prior claim upon her body. In turn, the Steward responds by insisting upon knowing whether God or the devil possesses her: "Thu schalt tell me whethyr thu hast thi speche of God er of the devyl" (3743-4). Thus, the Steward's desire to access her body figures also a desire to know the "truth."

In this way, we see how *Book* equates the desire to know Kempe's truth with the desire to possess or appropriate her body. Through sexual proposition, the Steward tries to ascertain whether or not her body is "open" to him. His aggressive interrogation ultimately succeeds, if albeit for unexpected reasons. Kempe is so frightened by the Steward that she finally *reveals* herself to him: she "telde hym how sche had hyr speche and hir dalyawns of the Holy Gost and not of hir owyn cunnyng" (3750-2). As Barry Windeatt points out, "only in such extreme circumstances will [Kempe] divulge to a layman the origin of her understanding."[21] Here, the Steward's threat of rape and

---

[21] Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 232, explanatory note line 3752. Throughout the *Book*, Kempe is exceedingly reluctant to reveal her visions to laypeople. For example, she asks a layman to read and translate the first and evilly written copy of the text, but she makes him promise "nevyr to bewreyn (reveal) it as long as sche leved" (118). This reluctance is further evidence of how Kempe treats her visions as secrets meant only for select revelation. Analogously, only in the most desperate of circumstances would a person confess her sins to a layperson.

imprisonment provides the dramatic, agonistic backdrop for Kempe's true "confession."

Kempe prevails over her aggressor—he is finally "al astoyned of hir wordys" (3752).

This passage, like so many in the text, links confession "to bearing witness as a martyr

does, to being a participant in an agon which is under the public gaze."[22] However, even

with this confession of faith the Steward remains doubtful: "'Eythyr thu art a ryth good

woman er ellys a ryth wikked woman'" (3755). This statement illustrates the difficulty

Kempe has in proving the negative—in proving that she is not a heretic.

III

By refusing to confess plainly or nakedly the "many secret and prevy thyngys"

(56) revealed to her by God, Kempe invites suspicion and (mis)interpretation.

Determining whether or not Kempe has her "speche of God er of the devyl" and the

possibility of demonic possession requires, as Foucault observes, "hermeneutic work":

> [F]or Christians, the possibility that Satan can get inside your soul and
> give you thoughts you cannot recognize as satanic, but that you might
> interpret as coming from God leads to uncertainty about what is going on
> inside your soul. You are unable to know what the real root of your desire
> is, at least without hermeneutic work.[23]

The Steward, for his part, seems unwilling to do the work. Despite Kempe's astonishing

declaration, he does not know what to think or believe. Moreover, his evocation of

extremes—either she is "a ryth good woman" or she is "a ryth wikked woman"—

---

[22] Jeremy Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 36.

[23] Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutic* rpt. in *The Foucault Reader*, 361.

suggests her problematic status as a wife. The Steward began by interrogating her

orthodoxy but he ends by questioning her goodness as a woman. In Kempe's case, the

presumed vulnerability and deficiency of her female body furthers the crisis of truth that

ensues from the potential for possession.

Interestingly, rather than eliding the necessity of hermeneutic work by declaring

Kempe's "truth" as transparent and self-evident, the *Book* reproduces it and thus

reproduces the problems of knowing one's own desire and the desire of others.   Because,

as I have previously discussed, Christianity locates truth on the inward parts of the body,

Kempe's "readers" find it difficult to determine whether or not her mystical visions are

true. Kempe finds both supporters and detractors. Her supporters—"worthy and

worshepful clerkys" (76)—"tokyn" or accepted that she was "inspyred wyth the Holy

Gost" (76-8). Her detractors, however, conclude that "her mevynggys and hyr

steringgys" (74) are the work not of God but an "evyl spyryt" (75). In the proem, the

scribal narrator pointedly emphasizes charity. He claims that for the text to be an

effective exemplar, the reader cannot be hindered by a "lak of charyte" (8). Immediately,

then, the narrator establishes the *Book*'s meaning as contingent upon the reader's

attitude.[24] Such an anticipation of, and a demand for, reader response and participation

highlights the hermeneutic work required by the text. Kempe, seemingly caught between

"competing poles of piety and wickedness, love and hate, tears and lies," [25] inspires in her

---

[24] As McAvoy puts its, "an understanding of the *Book* is dependent upon whether
the reader has charity or hindrance. These different models of reading are already present
in the text and articulated by her critics and her supporters" (*Authority and the Female
Body*, 171).

[25] Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 134.

"readers" polarizing responses, and the *Book* dramatizes such polarization by casting

Kempe in an oppositional role, as a challenger to authority.[26] As with relationship

between the poet and God of Love in Chaucer's *Legend*, we might read Kempe's

position, as one who both *opposes* and is *opposed*, in explicitly penitential terms.

The repeated interrogations of Kempe's orthodoxy, as recorded by the *Book*,

function as the public equivalent to the sacramental confession that she performs

"sumtyme twyes or thryes on the day" (368-9). Both forms of questioning, private and

public, inform and organize the text's narrative structure. As I have discussed in previous

chapters, oppositional structures and strategies are central to confessional discourse's

production of truth. Yet, in the *Book*, Kempe's mystical knowledge upsets the typical

power dynamics of confession. Possessed of the Holy Spirit, Kempe "knew and

undyrstod many secret and prevy thyngys whech schuld befallen" (56-7). Kempe's

knowledge and *understanding* of divine secrets usurps clerical prerogatives. Such

knowledge gives Kempe's power, and thus her spiritual vocation threatens the authority

of the clergy. Kempe's claim to "truth" brings her into open conflict with prominent

members of the English clergy. In Canterbury, for example, an "eld monk" demands that

she speak, "'What kanst thow seyn of God?'" (867). Kempe replies that she can both

speak and hear of God, and she rehearses the monk a story from scripture (868-9).

Angered by her reply, the monk declares "'I wold thow wer closyd in an hows of ston,

that ther schuld no man speke wyth the" (870-1). Having incited Kempe to speak, the

---

[26] Julian Yates reads such polarizing responses as the effect of "Margery's status as a mirror—a woman whose actions clearly indicate some deep significance, but whose meaning is beyond verification" ("Mystic Self: Margery Kempe and the Mirror of the Narrative," *Comitatus* 26 [1995]: 76.)

monk would then foreclose all future possibility of her speaking. He would, in a way, seal her confession of faith. Kempe demonstrates too much knowledge. She poses a threat to both clerical power and patriarchal authority more generally. Kempe's oppositional, confessional speech has the effect of unsettling her listeners' sense of self-possession. In the case of the monk, he would respond to such dispossession by enclosing her wayward body and thus appropriating her "truth." Furthermore, the monk's anxiety evidences the countervailing effects of confession. Kempe's storytelling (here a story from scripture) spills out of its confessional space or enclosure and enters pubic discourse.

The old monk repeats the confessional demand to speak, but he does not like what he hears. As a countervailing effect of sacramental confession, Kempe demonstrates the capacity to categorize, narrativize, and finally interpret her experiences. Along with increasing vernacular and spiritual literacy among the medieval laity, we might consider confession as contributing to the "breakup of the clerical monopoly of learning" and that such a breakup "fractures the authoritative claims which are so dependent on the myth of unity—and unitary language."[27] The fracturing of clerical language and authority creates a space for Kempe to speak the Word. At issue in the *Book* is whether or not Kempe merely reiterates scripture or if her speaking constitutes interpretation and preaching. Despite being accused of Lollardy, the *Book* carefully establishes Kempe's orthodoxy. Yet even as she merely repeats scripture, she freely

---

[27] Sarah Beckwith, "Problems of Authority in Late Medieval English Mysticism: Language, Agency, and Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Exemplaria* 4 (1992): 197.

applies it to an interpretation of her life and the lives of others. In doing so, she occupies a dual position of both judge and judged. At numerous points in the text, Kempe uses her knowledge of doctrine and scripture as a method of critiquing clerical corruption. Moreover, as a laywoman and a wife, Kempe circulates freely in medieval society. She travels widely to pilgrimage sites in England, Italy, Germany, and Jerusalem, and the old monk's anger evidences his anxiety at this circulation of her chaste, yet nevertheless, (re)productive body—a discursive body that reproduces scripture and shapes its own truth. Transformed from a vessel of sin into a vessel for God's "privyteys," Kempe's confessional truth-telling—her telling of secrets—acquires a prophetic potency, and the *Book*'s retrospective narrative serves to substantiate her uncanny knowledge.

Against frequent accusations of heresy and threats of burning, she repeatedly confesses her faith in God and declares the authenticity of her mystical experience. The *Book* deploys a hermeneutic of suspicion, and we might consider to what extent and to what rhetorical end the text dramatizes opposition and doubt. Two mutually authenticating strains of confessional discourse emerge in the *Book*. Kempe's public declarations are juxtaposed with her private revelations to a series of confessors, who perform the hermeneutic work of confirming her status as a mystic. Kempe's attitude towards patriarchal authority is complex, and, hence, Jeremy Tambling observes that her repeated need to review her whole life "so that sin, contrition, confession, and penance are all alike gone over again, suggest her subjectivity, need for an other, and indeed for the patriarchy which she is elsewhere subverting."[28] The need for an 'other' manifests

---

[28] Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject*, 60.

153

itself most obviously in her relationship with her confessors and the *Book*'s scribe. Quite

possibly, the text's scribal narrator is also her confessor, Robert Spryngolde.[29] Yet even

if they were not in point of fact the same person, the scribe maintains a relationship with

Kempe that functions analogously to her relationship with her confessor. Both her scribe

and her confessor(s) listen to, judge, and authorize Kempe's "truth."[30] They "yeve

credens to hir felingys" (89) and consequently play an essential role in the authenticating

and authorizing the *Book*.

While Kempe often defies and disrespects clerical authority, she maintains steady

and even affectionate relations with her confessors. She manifests her affection for

Spryngolde when she declares to the Virgin Mary that she would like her confessor

beside her in heaven: "'I may newyr qwyte hym the goodnesse that he hath don to me

---

[29] As Windeatt observes, several correspondences between the priest who acts as
Kempe's scribe and her confessor, Robert Spryngolde including that "both the priest and
Spryngolde are recorded as shaken in their faith in her (1415-16, 1173-4, 5120-4) and as
scarcely daring to speak to her when public opinion is against her (105-8, 5672)" (*The
Book of Margery Kempe*, 7). Furthermore, it would have been natural for Kempe's
confessor or spiritual director to write her biography. It would, however, have been more
typical for a confessor to write his female penitent's biography after her death. See, for
example, Jodi Bilinkoff, *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450-
1750* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[30] Staley argues that the text's authority "rests upon the presence of the scribe
whose fear, skepticism, service, and emotive recognition duplicates perhaps any man or
woman's reaction to the carefully conceived protagonist of *The Book of Margery Kempe*"
(*Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, 36). For Staley, the *Book*'s use of dissent or
opposition is a conscious rhetorical strategy on the part of its author, Kempe, and the
scribe's progress from skepticism to acceptance models the typical (and perhaps ideal)
reader's interpretive experience. I agree with Staley that the scribe exemplifies a certain
hermeneutic of suspicion, but I am not persuaded that its deployment is necessarily
evidence of authorial intention. Instead, the scribe's suspicions (as well as her
confessors') seem to reflect the pervasiveness of confessional discourse in medieval
culture.

and the gracyows labowrys that he hath had abowt me in heryng of my confessyon'"
(628-31). She feels that she cannot "qwyte" or "repay" Spryngolde for his "gracious
labors," and thus she finds herself indebted to him for *hearing* her confession.
Ultimately, Kempe's confessions of sin and confessions of faith prove mutually
constitutive. When, for example, she approaches the Vicar of Saint Stephens and asks to
speak with him for an hour or two "in the lofe of God" (1225), the Vicar replies: "What
cowd a woman ocupyn an owyr er tweyn owyrs in the lofe of owyr Lord?" (1227-8). The
Vicar doubts her capacity to speak of God for a sustained time, but confession has
provided Kempe with that capacity. The narrator tells us that the Vicar sat down in the
church and Kempe sat "a lytyl besyde" (1230-1) him, and this detail evokes the
topography of medieval confession. After being seated, Kempe shows the Vicar her
"maner of levyng" (1232). She begins her story at childhood and includes as much as she
can remember or "ny as it wolde come to hir mende" (1233). She reveals her sins
against God—how "unkynd," "prowde," "veyne," "obstynat," and "envyows" (1234-6)
she had been. In order to profess her love for God, Kempe must reconstruct her
conversion from sinfulness to sanctity. Her capacity to speak of God explicitly
corresponds with her narration of life experience. Not only can Kempe fill the space of
an hour or two speaking of God, she cannot seem to stop speaking and confessing.

Kempe's relations with her confessors are never strictly affirmative or
affectionate. Indeed, as confessors should, they often question, doubt, and *oppose* her.
Kempe complains to the Carmelite friar, Master Alan of Lynn, who "was principal gostly
fader to this creatur," that Robert Spryngolde (confessor in Master Alan's "absens") is

155

"rygth scharp" to her and will not believe her feelings—"he settyth nowt by hem; he heldeth hem but tryfelys and japys" (1414-6). Spryngolde's disbelief unsettles Kempe, but the anchorite assures her that God has "ordeyned hym to be yowr scorge…The mor scharp that he is to yow, [the mor] clerly schinyth yowr sowle in the sygth of God" (1424-29). In this way, Spryngolde's doubt refines Kempe. He is ordained by God to be her scourge, and his testing clarifies and purifies her. Likewise, Jesus later tells Kempe that he is pleased with Master Spryngolde, who has not flattered her and although "he hath be sharp to the sum-tyme, it hath ben gretly to thy profyte" (7302-4). Spryngolde's severity profits Kempe. Therefore, she submits to Spryngolde because he is, in Lacanian terms, the *sujet supposé à savoir*. As I discussed in the previous chapter, such subjection only makes sense if the 'Other' is perceived as already having what the desiring subject lacks or needs. Kempe's intimate, mystical relationship with God complicates the typical relationship of confessor and confessant, judge and judged. God promises to fulfill all Kempe's needs directly without intercession, yet, despite such assurances, the *Book* records her recurrent anxiety and doubt. Kempe cannot be absolutely certain that her thoughts and feelings come from God and not Satan. She needs her confessors to perform the hermeneutic work they have been ordained to do—she needs them to discern her "truth."

Throughout, the *Book* registers the possibility that Kempe may be deceiving herself and thus deceiving others. God directs her to reveal selectively her thoughts and feelings to sympathetic members of the clergy: "And I byd the gon to the ankyr at the Frer Prechowrys, and schew hym my prevyteys and my cownselys whech I schewe to

156

the" (527-9). When she *shows* her "prevyteys" to the anchorite, he approves her visions

and instructs her to return whenever she "receyveth swech thowtys" (536), so that he may

tell her, through God's permission, "whethyr thei ben of the Holy Gost or ellys of yowr

enmy the devyl" (539-40). As her first spiritual advisor, Master Alan determines whether

or not her secrets ("prevyteys") are from the Holy Spirit or from the devil. Acting as her

confessor, he discerns and authorizes her "truth." Although Kempe primarily relies upon

her confessors for authorization, God urges her to share her revelations with other

members of the clergy. Accompanied by her husband, Kempe travels widely throughout

England. Wherever they travel she shows "hir felyngys and hyr contemplacyons" to

"Goddys servawntys" in order to know ("wetyn") if there is any deceit ("dysseyt") in her

feelings. The *Book* mystifies the processes by which her confessors and other members

of the clergy make such discernments. Instead, the text emphasizes her repeated gestures

of showing or revelation.   Equally mystifying are the means by which Kempe reveals her

feelings to others. At times, the text describes the ineffability of her visions—she "cowd

nevyr telle the grace that sche felt" (61)—but frequently the *Book* elides problematic

issues of language and representation by speaking in terms of *showing* rather than *telling*.

By describing scenes of concealment followed by revelation, the reader is perhaps

meant to believe that Kempe's "truth" has, in fact, been brought into being by the text.

Analogously, as a form of supra-linguistic presentation, Kempe's excessive weeping

should, arguably, avoid problems of linguistic representation. They should close the

problematic gap between intention and action and between interior and exterior space.

As a corporeal expression, Kempe's weeping seems to express the ineffable. The *Book*

repeatedly explains that her weeping and tears manifest Kempe's contrition for her own sins and the sins of others: they are "the grace that God wrowt in her of contricyon, of devocyon, and of compassyon, throw the yyft of whech gracys sche wept, sobbyd, and cryid ful sor ageyn hir wyl—sche myth no chesyn" (5184-6). Her weeping, sobbing, and crying evince the gift of grace that God *wrote in her soul* of contrition, devotion, and compassion. Kempe's tears function to present her good intentions and her truth, yet, just as her white garb provokes hostility and suspicion, so does her weeping. Numerous disbelievers and detractors distrust Kempe's weeping. They suspect that her tears are cultivated rather than spontaneous: "mech pepul wend that sche mygth wepyn and levyn whan sche wold, and therfor many men seyd sche was a fals ypocryte" (400-2). Many people accuse Kempe of hypocrisy and of crying on command. The narrator, however, claims that she cries against her will and that she cannot choose ("sche myth no chesyn") when to cry or not. As a manifestation of her interior feeling of contrition, Kempe's tears operate in penitential terms. Contrition proves effective only if it manifests itself spontaneously. Because the spontaneity of Kempe's tears is questioned, she is suspected of feigning contrition.

In order to counter such accusations of deceit, the *Book* portrays a trial by which Kempe's tears are finally *proven* to be spontaneous and therefore authentic. The narrator describes a trial arranged by two priests, who "had gret trost in her maner of crying and wepyng" (6730), but who, nevertheless, experienced "gret dowte whedyr it wer deceyvabyl er not" (6730-32). Unbeknownst to Kempe, the priests devise a trial, and, not unlike Colatine and Tarquin in the "Legend of Lucrece," they attempt to observe

158

Kempe's behavior "in prevy place" rather than an "in opyn place" (6756). Discounting

themselves as an audience, the priests observe the apparent artlessness of her tears: she

"brast owt in boistows wepyng and sobbyng, and cryid as lowde er ellys lowder as sche

dede whan sche was amongys the pepil at hom" (6744-6). Kempe has so much devotion

that "sche myth not kepyn it prevy" (6743-4), but her tears "brast owt" of her body. In

this way, the narrator portrays Kempe's feeling as spontaneous and uncontrollable—she

would keep her feelings concealed within her body if it were not a physical impossibility.

For the narrator and the two unidentified priests, this spontaneity contradicts any

peformativity and thus artfulness. Yet the priests' initial doubts make evident that even

this "language" of the body demands hermeneutic work. The necessity of the trial and,

indeed, the need for the *Book* to give credence to her feelings belies such proof. Finally,

her tears do not *prove* anything. In the Christian context wherein an individual's truth is

located on the body's inward parts, proof is never possible. There is only repeated

performance (both linguistic and corporeal) and endless hermeneutic work.

IV

Forgiven by Christ of all her sins to the "utterest poynt" (498), Kempe's body

hosts the divine rather than the demonic. But, in so far as Kempe continues to doubt "the

real root of her desire,"[31] the *Book* continually returns to the trauma of her initial demonic

possession. As Gross points out, "the obligation to confess is in some way paradigmatic

---

[31] Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 361.

of all that will follow in her *Book*,"[32] and after her initial failed confession, Kempe adopts

a penitential manner of life.[33] The text recounts the repetitiveness and compulsiveness

with which Kempe confesses. She confesses two to three times a day and repeatedly

confesses the sin that she had concealed. Such repetition, according to penitential

theology, is unnecessary and even unhealthy. This compulsive rehearsal of sin and one

sin in particular—which never is *revealed* per se—and the corresponding self-accusation

demonstrates the extent to which Kempe internalizes confessional precepts. It also

demonstrates how, for Kempe, confession functions as a strategy of desire and as an act

of recuperation that, paradoxically, restages again and again the "primal scene of

exposure, shame, and guilt" that is absolutely necessary to project of making the *Book*.[34]

I would suggest that the repeated exposure of Kempe's unnamed sin signals the *Book*'s

attempt at recuperation and her desire for a stable and unified self.

Finally, then, I want to consider the place of repetition in the *Book of Margery

Kempe* and how repetition figures as part of the text's recuperative project. According to

Matthew Boyd Goldie, repetition is characteristic of the *Book*'s narrative structure and

---

[32] Gross, "Secrecy and Confession," 116.

[33] Kempe participates in a late-medieval movement of lay piety, especially
popular among women, that illustrates, as Bilinkoff puts its, "the extraordinary
importance that confession held in the lives of late-medieval and early modern
Christians." According to Bilinkoff, "a common thread" connecting diverse lay religious
practices "was an intense interest in penance": "In this period, it seems, many Christians
felt a particularly strong impulse to examine their consciences, confess their failings, and
perform acts of penance. Some went even further, renouncing sin and resolving to
change the direction of their lives. For the pious penitence was not just an annual ritual
but…'a condition, virtually a way of life'" (*Related Lives*, 13).

[34] Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature*
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 21. Here, I paraphrase Brook's analysis of
Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*.

"Margery Kempe's approach to representing herself as psychosomatically stable, undivided, and an *auctor*."[35] As the narrator acknowledges in the proem, the "boke is not wretyn in ordyr, every thyng aftyr other as it wer don" (134). The text does not proceed chronologically. Seemingly, the only properly ordered events are those at the very beginning—the originating confession, madness, recovery and subsequent three or fours years. As compared to the spiritual autobiography of Saint Augustine, for example, the *Book* deemphasizes Kempe's "conversion" and instead foregrounds her penitential manner of living. In representing this penitential life, the text underscores stability or stasis rather than progress or growth in character. Repetition has the effect of representing Kempe's character as stable, undivided, and unchanging. In certain ways, however, this stability contradicts the operations of sacramental penance. As I argued in chapter two, the confessional mode creates an unstable narrative space, and confession occurs between two substantially unstable subjects. Confession produces instability precisely because of the intrinsic modifications it effects in the sinner. In grammatical terms, for example, the "I" speaking the words "I sinned" can never be the same as the "I" which is being spoken.   However, Christ's love and compassion permanently rescues Kempe from a state of sin. She is exempted from confession's destabilizing process.

At the beginning of the *Book*, after having endured several years of temptation, Jesus appears to Kempe for a second time. Jesus forgives her sins "to the utterest poynt" (498), and this exceptional forgiveness confers on Kempe a unique state of grace from which she cannot "fall" in any conventional sense. The emphasis on the "utterest" or

---

[35] Matthew Boyd Goldie, "The Feynyng Aesthetic in Fifteenth-Century English Literature," (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1999), 6.

utmost point differentiates Kempe's absolution from the forgiveness of sins pronounced

by a mere mortal priest. God assures her of this absolute forgiveness for the first time in

chapter five:

> 'Dowtyr, why wepyst thow so sor? I am comyn to the, Jhesu Cryst, that
> deyd on the crosse sufferyng buttyr peynes and passyons for the. I, the
> same God, *foryefe the thi synnes to the utterst poynt. And thow schalt
> nevyr com in helle ne in purgatorye,* but when thow schalt passyn owt of
> this world, wythin the twynkelyng of an eye, thow schalt have the blysse
> of hevyn, for I am the same God that have browt thi synnes to thi mend
> and mad the to be schreve therof. *And I graw[n]t the contrysyon into this
> lyves ende.*' (496-503, emphasis added)

God tells her she "schalt nevyr com in helle ne in purgatorye," and he grants her

"contrysyon" until the end of her life. God exempts Kempe from purgatory, and thus at

her death she will experience no further separation from God but instead join him

immediately in heaven ("wythin the twynkelyng of an eye"). Yet, despite this absolute

forgiveness, Kempe continues to confess and perform excessive penitence. Moreover,

God will have to assure Kempe repeatedly of her salvation throughout the *Book*.

Windeatt notes this feature when he remarks that Kempe's "sense of the remission

of her sins reoccurs often."[36] For example, on the occasion of her pilgrimage to

Jerusalem, God declares to her: "'Thu comyst no hedyr, dowtyr, for no nede but for

meryte and for mede, for thy synnes wer foryovyn the er thow come her, and thefor thu

comyst hedyr for incresyng of thi mede and of thi meryte'" (2356-8). With her sins

forgiven, Kempe has *no need* ("no nede") for pilgrimage. Therefore, her penitential

pilgrimage serves to *increase* her reward ("mede") and her merit. In this way, she has

---

[36] Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 71, explanatory note line 498. See
chapters 8, 15, 29, 36 and 57.

been emancipated from a penitential economy.[37] Instead of trying always to *repay* the

Lord for her *debt* of sin, she experiences a surplus of good works. Free from her own

debt, Kempe tries to pay off the debt of others. She makes God the "executor" of all her

"god werkys." She asks that half of her "good works" be given to her confessor for the

"encres of hys meryte," and she tells God that the other half should be "sprede on thi

frendys and thi enmys and on my frendys and myn enmys" (634-40). This surplus of

good works (or *goods*) in turn, leads to even greater excess as God repays her "gret

charyte" with a "dubbyl reward in hevyn" (642-3). Absolutely solvent, Kempe suffers

nonetheless, and this suffering, which otherwise would be characterized as repayment,

produces surplus and charitable giving instead. Like those of Christ, her good works and

suffering are given over to the repaying of others' debts

　　　This surplus, I would argue, denies that Kempe lacks anything, and, moreover, it

has the effect of creating stasis both for the character of Kempe and the narrative. Under

normal circumstances, Kempe's repeated penitential actions and continued iterations of

contrition would be absolutely necessary. Penitence is a repeatable sacrament because

humans always fall back into debt—they always lapse into sin and need to be forgiven

again. For this reason, confession manuals advise Christians to confess frequently. And

although she has no *need* ("no nede") for forgiveness, Kempe regularly and even

compulsively confesses. Her desire for confession (if not forgiveness) is such that she

---

[37] Discussing the text's use of economical language, David Aers emphasizes the "assimilation of the market to Christianity": "Continually accumulating, continually spending, continually needing to purchase 'mor,' the model of the market and the relationship it sponsors determines this version of guilt, forgiveness, and salvation" (David Aers, *Community, Gender and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430* [London: Routledge, 1988], 80).

grows incredibly distraught whenever she finds herself without a confessor. In Rome, a "gostly enmy" slanders Kempe, and she is subsequently cast out of the Hospital of Saint Thomas of Canterbury. Kempe's first concern is for access to confession: "When this creatur sey sche was forsakyn and put fro among good men, sche was ful hevy, most for sche had no confessowr, ne myth not be schrevyn than as sche wolde" (2618-20). Likewise, while in Rome, Kempe partakes in a miraculous confession with a priest who does not speak in English yet who can understand her perfectly: "he undirstod what sche seyd in Englysch to hym, and sche undirstod what that he seyd…yet he undirstod not Englich that other men spokyn" (2699-701). Here, by the power of prayer, Kempe and the priest share in a unique comprehension that surmounts their linguistic differences. She proceeds to confess to the German priest "alle hir synnes, as ner as hir mende wold servyn hir, fro hir childhode unto that owre, and recevyd hir penawns ful joyfully" (2704-5). This confession, like the production of the *Book*, relies on the Kempe's recollection "as ner as hir mende wold servyn" as well as relying, in this instance, on miraculous translation. The *Book* rarely specifies Kempe's sins. The nature of her transgression—from childhood to present—is largely irrelevant. Of paramount importance, however, is Kempe's need or desire for confession and how this desire informs the composition of her *Book*.

Because of Kempe's needless compulsion, I will offer that these confessions are better seems as the *Book*'s subtext and structural paradigm rather mere events and topical content. Throughout the text, Kempe regularly confesses in the same manner as described above—always from childhood to present, always repeating sins previously

confessed. Given her absolute forgiveness and surplus of merit, Kempe's compulsive

repetition indicates that confession does not function for Kempe in simple terms of

forgiveness or consolation.   Nor is it the means by which she is reconciled with her

community and stripped of her individuality.[38]   In part, confession provides Kempe with

a method by which she can order and interpret her own experience and thus partake in her

own "subjectification." Although Windeatt notes the "evident verbal reminiscences"

between Kempe's *Book* and other devotional texts (Richard Rolle's *Incendium Amoris*,

Walter Hilton's *Scala Perfectionis*, and the life of Saint Bridget of Sweden), Kempe

claims that no extant models adequately address her individual spiritual experience:[39]

> Sumtyme the Secunde Persone in Trinyte, sumtyme alle thre Personys in
> Trintye and o substawns in Godhede, dalyid to hir sowle and informyd hir
> in hir feyth and in hys lofe how sche schuld lofe hym, worschepyn hym,
> and dredyn hym, so excellently that sche herd nevyr boke, neythyr
> Hyltons boke, ne [B]ridis boke, ne *Stimulus Amoris*, ne *Incedium Amoris*,
> ne noth other that evyr sche herd redyn, that spake so hyly of lofe of God
> but that sche felt as hyly in werkyng in her sowle, yf sche cowd or ellys
> mygth a schewyd as sche felt. (1253-1261)

The Godhead "dallies" in her soul and informs her in her faith and in his love so

excellently that she never heard a book that spoke so highly of the love of God as she felt

working in her soul. Kempe's feeling, consequently, exceeds the previous written record

---

[38]   Mary Braswell, for example, argues that the "reformed penitent is never an
individual, but a type. His confession has stripped him of those particular sins which
have made him unique, and he has espoused the cardinal virtue of humility. His is a
passive good; the goal of the confessional has been met, and we find him interesting not
for his future activities but for his past" (*The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and
Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages* [East Brunswick, NJ: Associated
University Presses, 1983], 13).

[39]   Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe,* 10.

and requires a new and unique record of its own. In this way, Kempe acts as to *shape* truth rather than merely reflect or represent it.

Confession's interpretive frame produces episodic narratives—narratives that are character or "subject" driven rather plot driven. For example, in the *Confessio Amantis*, we see Amans character being drawn, so to speak, as he reacts to Genius's exempla. Amans plays the part of frustrated lover, but the reader is never told the whole of his love story from beginning to end. Likewise, Kempe's *Book* relies on a series of episodes that are topically orientated—her desire for chastity, her consolidation of clerical support, her gift of prophecy, her pilgrimages, accusations of heresy in England, and so forth. Sacramental confession does not have the creation of a complete life-record as its objective. Instead, the sinner describes in detail the circumstances surrounding her thoughts and deeds, and, of course, she establishes her underlying motives or intentions. Such a structure lends itself to repetition as an individual's proclivities, weaknesses, and particular character-traits emerge. We see such repetition used in the *Book* to stabilize Kempe's character by reiterating that her intentions are good and her motives are pure.

Ultimately, the *Book*'s repetitions both gesture towards and attempt to conceal its inevitable failures. The way in which the Kempe must repeatedly *prove* herself to others signals the treachery of language and the inescapability of misinterpretation. There will always be some "readers" who believe her to be "a fals feynyd ypocrite" (5233-4). Moreover, the way in which Jesus must repeatedly assure Kempe of his love suggests that her desire will never be satisfied so long as she lives. Although absolved all sin and on intimate terms with God, Kempe still experiences painful separation.   Thus, she longs

for death and the union with the divine that death promises. Revolving in her mind the time of her death, "sor syhyng and sorwyng, for it was so long delayd," she asks God: "how long schal I thus wepyn and mornyn for thy lofe and for desyr of thy presents?" (5905-9). Kempe weeps and mourns for God's love, she is continuously desirous of his presence. It is perhaps because of the impossibility of satisfaction that the *Book*, much like *The Legend of Good Women*, refuses closure. Hence, Book Two continues Book One. Book Two describes the grace God "wrowt in hys sympel creatur" in the years after the first book (7431-2). As almost an addendum, it includes "notabyl mater, the whech is not wretyn in the forseyd tretys" (7434-5). Significantly, this second book ends with Kempe's prayers, including a confession of faith, her thanks for and praise of God's mercy, and her appeal for the salvation of others. Yet, even in her prayers, Kempe asserts the "truth" of her tears and asks that God "excuse" or justify her so that all the world "knowyn and to trowyn" that her weeping was the work and gift of the Holy Spirit (8386-7). Again, Kempe repeats herself—she cannot seem to help it anymore than she can help her compulsive weeping.

The impossibility of proof means not only inevitable irony and misinterpretation but also agony. For Kempe, who must repeatedly examine her feelings in order to determine the real of root of her desire, agony is the inevitable condition of her life of penitence. Modeling her life upon the redemptive life of Jesus Christ, Kempe seeks to perfect herself and her body. The *Book* claims to stabilize Kempe who, before her conversion, had "evyr ben unstable" (24). Yet Kempe puts on and off white clothes; she does and does not eat meat; she weeps but is also bereft of tears. The only stability in

167

Kempe's life is her constant desire. Always desiring, Kempe can never be satisfied. That her desire has been redirected away from the world and towards the divine does not matter. When she is without tears, even for a few days, she is "bareyn" and suffers a profound sense of lack—she "had do gret a peyne for desyr that sche had of hem, that sche wold a yovyn al this world, yyf it had ben hir, for a few teerys" (6717-21). She has great pain of desire for tears. Similarly, Kempe declares to the Lord that she is always hungry for the Word: "for alle the clerkys that prechyn may not fufillyn, for me thynkyth that my sowle is evyr alych hungry" (4781-2). All of the clerks that preach may not fulfill Kempe. Although the *Book* attempts to prove Kempe's fulfillment and thereby offer recuperation from the losses incurred from sin and separation from God, it necessarily fails.

The *Book*, I think, often proves unsettling and even painful for readers because it transparently exposes Kempe's desire and lack. Kempe always wants more and never has enough. She is never satisfied, and thus her text fails to satisfy the reader's desire for "truth." Kempe repeatedly returns to the trauma of her unknowing—to the trauma of her division from God and the experience of lack. Despite God's repeated assurances that she will be saved and that in heaven she will occupy a privileged position at his side, such pleasures are continually deferred. Because Kempe experiences a state of constant becoming, the *Book* offers no narrative progress. Neither she nor her reader ever arrives and, therefore, the text promises satisfaction but never actually delivers it. Ultimately, Kempe's own lack of "truth" makes plain the reader's own agonized condition. In this

way, Kempe does offer her readers a "merowr" (mirror) so that they might "have sum litel sorwe in her hertys" (6242-4).

If contemporary criticism is any indicator, the *Book* fails to establish Kempe's truth beyond a doubt. Not taken seriously as an authentic mystic, Kempe's *Book* occupies an uncomfortable place in the literary canon. Frequently, critics denigrate the *Book* as both bad religion and bad literature. Thus, Lawton surmises that Kempe's "text survived because she was a woman—with a woman's voice, and the authority of a woman's body."[40] Valued for its gendered authorial *presence*, I would suggest that Lawton's statement explains why the text currently survives in the canon and not why it survived in the fifteenth century. Yet, as an awkwardly situated and hybrid text, the *Book* offers us an opportunity to complicate categories of literary and didactic, "truth" and "fiction." Confession functions as a privileged discourse for producing truth, but it also provides "authors" with inventional strategies. As such a discourse, confession suggests that truth and fiction are mutually constitutive rather than oppositional categories. Moreover, this "religious" or "didactic" discourse by secular authors such as Gower, Chaucer, and Henryson in no ways proves their morality or "truth" anymore than it proves Kempe's. For example, in the next chapter on Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, confessional discourse works to produce the truth of the fictional literary character, Criseyde/Cresseid.

We find that for the narrator and the readers' of the *Testament*, that the demand to speak of Cresseid's falsity functions as an imperative. It is of paramount importance that

---

[40] Lawton, "Voice, Authority, and Blasphemy," 114.

the traitorous Cresseid receive her end due. Thus, from the "real" and unstable speaking subject, Margery Kempe, my discussion of the gender now turns to the confessions of a female character. Just as the confessional demand to speak structures the writing of Kempe's (re)membered spiritual life, the *Testament* attempts to make known the fatal and wretched destiny of fair Cresseid. The compulsive disclosures of Henryson's poem, however, operate not as a strategy of Cresseid's desire but, instead, of masculinist desire. In many ways, the poem claims to offer Cresseid redemption by allowing her to confess, yet the text evokes an explicitly pagan world that excludes her from a Christian economy of guilt and repentance. Furthered by its use of legal language and juridical setting, the *Testament* produces for its readers a seemingly objective truth. At the same time, the narrator's humanist fantasy of Cresseid's agency and volition works to erase any complicity in, or desire for her suffering. In the end, the narrator tries to dispose of his unstable subject by offering Cresseid to his female readers a warning. The poem's desire for closure, however, is belied by its compulsive speaking. In order to say what needs to be said, the *Testament* must keeping returning to Cresseid and her "slydynge of corage."

Chapter Five

'O fals Cresseid': Confession and Closure
in Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*

In the works of Gower, Chaucer, and Kempe, confessional discourse implicitly

belongs to a Christian world of sin and redemption. But the *Testament of Cresseid*, the

fifteenth-century poem by the Scottish poet, Robert Henryson, severs ties with this world,

and the juridical language and pagan setting of the poem underscore this severance.

Cresseid is cut-off from the Christian system of penitential redemption. Amendment,

according to Cresseid, is impossible: "My greit mischeif, quhilk na man can amend"

(455).[1] Confession, therefore, serves as the means of facilitating punishment rather than

as a "way" to salvation. In contrast to Chaucer's preoccupation with the nuances of

"entente" in the *Legend of Good Women* (and also in the *Troilus*), the *Testament* appears

to offer a less ambiguous and more public treatment of guilt. The poem does not discern

Cresseid's "truth" so much as it declares it, and the authority for such a declaration rest

upon a legal discourse of confession rather than a religious one. Legal idiom, I would

suggest, grants to the poem's judgments the appearance of objectivity, and, within this

juridical context, Cresseid's confession allows the narrator (and perhaps the reader) to

judge her without feeling guilty.

Cresseid's confession of guilt justifies her "thoillit" (suffering) and "wofull end"

(70). The punishment of leprosy visited upon Cresseid's body requires her confession

---

[1] All references to the *Testament of Cresseid* are taken from Denton Fox's edition
in *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) and will be cited by
line reference in the text.

and substantiates her guilt, according to one reader, as that "false vnconstant whore."[2]

The poem rests upon the fiction of Cresseid's volition (her will and her agency), but there is only one saying that will satisfy her readers. In previous chapters, I have focused upon confession as a strategy of desire, and here again I discuss it as such but with an important difference. In the works of Gower, Chaucer, and Kempe, it is the confessant (Amans, the poet, Kempe) who desires to obtain truth, satisfaction, redemption, and so forth. However, in the *Testament*, confessional discourse serves as a strategy of the narrator's (and perhaps even Henryson's) desires. More than anything, the narrator desires closure, and Cresseid's confession provides it, as does her leprous body. Like the aged body of Gower's *senex amans*, Cresseid's leprous body serves to constrain, if not satisfy, desire. Unlike the *senex amans*, however, Cresseid's abject body is not a penitential one functioning to negate *her* desire. Instead, it attempts to satisfy desire *for* her. Thus, as I will demonstrate, the poem partakes in a fantasy of spent masculinist desire—in the fantasy of satisfaction, stability, and completion. Yet, as we saw in Kempe's *Book*, desire can never be satisfied, because "[d]esire desires, above all, its own continuation, not its fulfillment."[3] We find this continuation, rather than fulfillment, in Troilus' response to Cresseid at the poem's conclusion and in the poem's very need to speak once more of "lustie Creisseid" (69).

To provide readers with proper closure, Henryson's *Testament* must revisit and reopen a problematic and unstable "subject": Criseyde/Cresseid. As an epilogue to, and a

---

[2] Sir Francis Kinaston, qtd. in Fox, ed. *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, xiv.

[3] L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 4-5.

172

textual effect of, Chaucer's *Troilus*, the *Testament* attempts to resolve and stabilize

Criseyde's story and Chaucer's ambiguous treatment of her without appearing to *judge*

her too harshly.[4] In my interpretation of *Troilus and Criseyde* and its after effects in the

Legend of Good Women, I approached Chaucer's Criseyde as a character who causes, in

part, the poem's crisis of "entente." Criseyde's "slydynge of corage," I argued, disrupts

the desires of her readers for a stable and transparent text. Consequently, the *Legend*'s

"judge," the God of Love fixates upon the poet's intentions and compels the poet to

perform penance for his literary transgression. In response, the poet's penitential writing

emphasizes the embodied suffering of legendary women while excising female speech.

Henryson's *Testament*, however, elides the issue of authorial intention through its

invocation of "ane vther quair" (61). Significantly, the narrator acts as the *reader* and not

the writer of Cresseid's "fatall destenie" (62). Indeed, the narrator registers his distrust of

authors, including Chaucer: "Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?" (62). He

even suggests that this "vther quair" or "narratioun" was possibly "fenyeit of the new /

Be sum poeit, throw his inventioun" (63-5). Yet, rather than undercutting the poem's

claim to access the "truth" of Cresseid, the narrator's skepticism manifests itself as mere

rhetorical posturing. By the end of poem, the skeptical narrative "I" has been persuaded

of Cresseid's fate and its appropriateness. He thus orders "worthie wemen" to "bier" in

mind "this sore conclusioun / Of fair Cresseid" (610, 614-5). In this way, he seems to

---

[4] As Susan Aronstein puts it, the *Testament* "closes down the dangerous
ambiguities of Chaucer's tale," especially Chaucer's ambiguous attitude towards
Criseyde" ("Cresseid Reading Cresseid: Redemption and Translation in Henryson's
Testament," *Scottish Literary Journal* 21 [1994]: 6-7).

have found an exemplary truth in his "vther quair" regardless of whether or not it is "fenyeit of the new."

The narrator's "vther quair" reports "the lamentatioun / And wofull end of this lustie Creisseid" (68-9). In this account, Cresseid returns to her father's house after having been dismissed by Diomede. A despondent Cresseid then blames her misfortune on "fals Cupide" and his "blind" mother, Venus (134-5). Subsequently, she falls into a dream wherein a classical pantheon puts her on trial for blasphemy. Finding her guilty, the gods give to her a "wraikfull sentence" (329): leprosy. When she awakes from her nightmare, Cresseid looks in the mirror and finds her face "sa deformait" (349). Wishing to keep her shame a secret, Cresseid leaves her father's house to enter a leper "hospitall at the tounis end" (382). Abject and impoverished, Cresseid laments her fate and offers up a complaint. There is no remedy for her misfortune, and her "greit mischeif," she says, no man can "amend" (455). Among the ranks of beggars, Cresseid and Troilus cross paths one last time. Moved by the encounter and his generous alms-giving, Cresseid swoons and, finally, confesses to her betrayal: "'O fals Cresseid and trew knicht Troylus!'" (546). Her life at an end, she sits down with paper and makes her last testament. Troilus, learning of her "infirmitie," "legacie," "lamentation," "pouertie," and death, has the last word: "'I can no moir; / Scho was vntrew and wo is me thairfoir'" (601-2). Even at the bitter end, there is no forgiveness for Cresseid. Troilus's final condemnation matches Cresseid's own self-accusation. Together their words confirm her untruth. As she predicted, her mischief can not be amended. The narrator's last words

(the last line of the poem) echo Troilus': "Sen scho is deid I speik of hir no moir" (616).

Finally, Cresseid is dead and buried, and there is no more to say.

"If death is the mark of completion,"[5] then the *Testament* completes the Criseyde

story in a way that Chaucer's poem could not. The poem, I will argue, enacts this closure

through the confessional demand to speak. In the very last line of the poem, the narrator

links the cessation of his speech with Cresseid's death. Throughout, Cresseid has been

incited to speak, and the poem's climax occurs when, at last and very explicitly, she

avows her guilt, her falsity. The *Testament* gestures repeatedly at saying and unsaying

and, in this way, the entire text literalizes the narrative structure of confessional

discourse. Sir Francis Kinaston, a late sixteenth-century translator of the *Testament*,

situates Henryson's poem as follows: "Mr Henderson wittily obseruing, that Chaucer in

his 5th booke had related the death of Troilus, but made no mention what became of

Creseid, he learnedly takes vppon him in a fine poeticall way to expres the punishment

and end due to false vnconstant whore."[6] Observing what Chaucer had left unsaid

("made no mention of"), Henryson takes it upon himself to say ("expres") what needs to

be said. Cresseid, according to Kinaston, receives her "end due." There was, he implies,

no other way for Cresseid's story to end. Kinaston's interpretation mirrors that of the

Testament's narrator. Much in the manner of the narrator of the *Troilus*, who knows that

---

[5] Lesley Johnson, "Whatever Happened to Criseyde? Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," in *Courtly Literature: Culture and Context: Selected Papers from the 5th Triennial Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society, Dalfsen, the Netherlands, 9-16 August, 1986*, ed. Erik Kooper and Keith Busby (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins Publishing Co., 1990), 314.

[6] Qtd. in Fox, ed. *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, xiv.

175

his story must and will end in tragedy and betrayal, the narrator of the *Testament* knows, in turn, how Cresseid's story will end even before it begins. In this way, the narrator's (re)telling is redundant except for what remains unsaid—"'O fals Cresseid.'"

The *Testament* raises the issue of authorship only to efface it, and I would argue that this same elision recurs problematically in the poem's criticism. By shifting focus away from male authorship in order to emphasize Cresseid's confessional speaking, we might notice how certain readings of the *Testament* foreclose discussion of the narrator's culpability in Cresseid's suffering. As Susan Aronstein points out, "[c]riticism of the *Testament* centers around Henryson's treatment of Cresseid and usually asserts that the poem, by providing the finally repentant heroine with an 'end due', in some way 'redeems' Cresseid by allowing her to confess her guilt and thus to redeem herself."[7] For many critics, Cresseid's confession of guilt is *the point* of Henryson's poem, and, as Aronstein's emphasizes, these same critics tend to characterize the poem's narrative strategy as benignly redemptive.[8] Like Troilus, who does the leper folk "greit humanitie" (534) with his alms-giving, the poem generously *allows* Cresseid to confess. The

---

[7] Aronstein, "Cresseid Reading Cresseid," 5. Aronstein further argues that rather than redeeming Cresseid, the poem redeems the patriarchy.

[8] See, for example, John McNamara who argues that "the narrator hopes to restore Cresseid's good name, recounting her sins against the gods, her punishment and, most important, her gradual moral regeneration" ("Language as Action in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," in *Bards and Makars: Scottish Language and Literature: Medieval and Renaissance*, ed. Adam J. Aiken, Matthew P. McDiarmid, and Derick S. Thomson [Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1977], 42). More recently, Melvin Storm concludes that "Chaucer leaves Criseyde with not even the opportunity for penitence. She disappears from the poem, as it were, with all her imperfections on her head. Henryson, tortuously, gives her her chance, and she takes it" ("The Intertextual Cresseida: Chaucer's Henryson or Henryson's Chaucer?," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 28 [1993]: 120).

"humanist" Cresseid acquires self-knowledge and finally accepts personal responsibility for her actions.[9] Echoing Calchas's response to his daughter's humiliation—"'Perauenture all cummis for the best'" (104)—critics of the poem, likewise, have determined that Cresseid's suffering is for the best. But, we might ask, best for whom? By locating blame entirely within the individual, Cresseid, we fail to observe how the patriarchal social order has treated Criseyde/Cresseid in Chaucer's hector's words, as a "womm[a]n for to selle" (Tr. 4.182). Moreover, I would add, we fail to observe how the poem employs confessional discourse as a strategy of masculinst desire.

II

Paralleling the *Testament*'s own retrograde looking—its looking back—I want to (re)turn now briefly to Chaucer's *Troilus* and its unstable "subject," Criseyde. Examining the *Troilus*, we find that Chaucer deliberately interpolates the structures of confession with those of courtly love. Confessional discourse, in the *Troilus*, functions to inspire desire in both Troilus and Criseyde. The poem explores at length the problematic dimensions of "entente" and the narrative pleasures of hiding and telling secrets about the

---

[9] Felicity Riddy concludes that "the dominant reading" of the *Testament* is as a "getting of wisdom" poem and, thus, "there seems to be general agreement that it shows the awakening of conscience through suffering." Yet, as Riddy maintains, such readings "fail to acknowledge [the poem's] antifeminism" ("'Abject Odious': Feminine and Masculine in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," in *Chaucer to Spenser: A Critical Reader*, ed. Derek Pearsall [Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999], 287 and 290).

"truth of pleasure."[10] The poem's use of interior space—the closet, the bedroom at Deiphoebus's house, Criseyde's empty domicile—reproduces confession's interiorizing movements. By emphasizing pleasurable speech-acts and the deferral of satisfaction, the *Troilus*, in contrast to the *Testament*, illustrates how confession furthers (and even produces) desire. The *Troilus*'s ambiguous treatment of Criseyde and what its narrator does not say about Criseyde's failure to return to Troy, inspires the *Testament* to expropriate confessional speech and redirect it towards punishment rather than pleasure, towards the extinguishing of desire rather than its continuation. In this way, we might read the *Testament*'s particularly punitive form of confessional discourse as a response to Chaucer's (mis)use of the same discourse in the *Troilus*.

The secrecy of courtly love produces a wealth of confessional scenes in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The tragic tale of Troilus's "double sorwe" casts Pandarus in the role of secret confessor to the newly converted lover, Troilus. Because he has so publicly disparaged love, Troilus's immediate impulse is to conceal his love for Criseyde:[11]

> Thus took he purpos loves craft to suwe,
> And thought he wolde werken pryvely,
> First to hide his desir in muwe
> From every wight yborn, al outrely,
> But he myghte ought recovered by therby,
> Remembryng hym that love to wide yblowe
> Yelt bittre fruyt, though swete seed be sowe.
> (1.379-85)

---

[10] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 71.

[11] All quotations from Chaucer's works are taken from the *Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) and are noted parenthetically.

Troilus decides to pursue love's "craft," but he thought he would work "pryvely" and hide his desire in "muwe" or in secret. He recalls that if knowledge of love blows too widely it yields "bittre fruyt." From these concerns, he weighs carefully "what for to speak, and what to holden inne" (1.387). Such isolation, however, causes Troilus frustration; he does not mind suffering but only if Criseyde validates his pain: "Al was for nought: she herde nat his pleynte; / And whan that he bythought on that folie, / A thousand fold his wo gan multiplie" (1.544-6). Instead, it is Pandarus—his would-be confidant—who finds Troilus "allone" in his bedchamber and overhears his "groone." Pandarus confuses the symptoms of love-sickness with the pains of spiritual contrition. Disturbed by Troilus's weakened and emasculated condition, Pandarus attempts to provoke Troilus to anger and thus "his corage awaken" (1.564). The narrative implies that silent suffering and concealment inflict emotional injury upon the one who conceals.

Ultimately, Pandarus's behavior mimics that of a religious confessor. Through a belabored process of interrogation, Pandarus attempts to learn Troilus's secret in order to offer him the appropriate remedy for his psychosomatic ailment. In the lengthy dialogue that follows Pandarus's initial discovery of Troilus "bywayling in his chambre" (1.547), the confessional structures of concealment and revelation emerge as Pandarus demands that Troilus speak. For over 300 lines, Pandarus cajoles Troilus and tries to extract from him the source of his woe. The text oscillates between Troilus's desire to hide his secret and Pandarus's desire to reveal what has been "hid" or "hiden" from him. Troilus claims, "I hide it for the beste" (1.581), but Pandarus objects:

This Pandare, that neigh malt for wo and routhe,

> Ful ofte seyde, "Allas what may this be?
> Now frend," quod he, "if evere love or trouthe
> Hath ben, or is bitwixen the and me,
> Ne do thow nevere swich a crueltee
> To hiden fro thi frend so gret a care!
> Wostow naught wel that it am I, Pandare?
> (1.581-8)

Pandarus responds to Troilus's desire to hide his "gret care" by suggesting that Troilus's secrecy threatens their friendship: "Ne do thow nevere swich a crueltee / To hiden fro thi frend so gret a care!" As a friend, Pandarus insists upon his good intentions as well as his ability to help: "I wol parten with the al thi peyne" (1.589). Here, "parten" carries a dual meaning—Pandarus will *separate* Troilus from his pain but also *share* with Troilus all his pain. The former suggests cure while the latter indicates that Pandarus desires to be party to both the secret and Troilus's suffering.

At last persuaded, Troilus reveals that has been stricken with love, yet he warns Pandarus to "hide it wel—I tolde it nevere to mo" (1.613). In turn, Pandarus chastises, "How hastow thus unkyndely and longe / Hid this fro me, thow fol?" (1.617-8). Troilus has been a fool to go without help, and, moreover, his secrecy shows unkindness. After another 250 lines, Pandarus finally succeeds at orchestrating Troilus's climatic disclosure: "Allas, of al my wo the welle, / Thanne is my swete fo called Criseyde!" (1.873-4). As with the Black Knight's declaration, in the *Book of the Duchess*, that White "ys ded" (BD 1309), the elaborate process by which Troilus arrives at his disclosure is as important, if not more important, than the disclosure itself.

In this "confessional" scene, we find Troilus relieved not of his "peyne" but of the burden of secrecy. The narrative repetitions of "hid," "hiden," and "hide" function to

incite the reader to desire at the same time that Pandarus attempts to incite Troilus to

name his love-object, Criseyde. So named, Criseyde emerges as both the object of

Troilus's desire as well as the poem's. Moreover, as this particular exchange reveals,

hiding a secret and telling a secret are mutually constitutive pleasures. According to

Michel Foucault, the pleasure taken in concealing and revealing truth belongs to

confessional discourse:

> [P]leasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing and telling it, of capturing and captivating others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out into the open—the specific pleasure of the true discourse of pleasure.[12]

In the protracted scene described above, we observe the pleasure that the narrative takes

in a luring a secret out in open. The continued deferral of Troilus's revelation creates a

sense of climax. Pleasure follows from both the building of and the arrival at the point of

climax. As Foucault's language suggests, the "pleasure in the truth of pleasure" proves

seductive, and thus truth-telling captures and captivates. Such a seduction works in a

bidirectional way—Pandarus seduces Troilus and induces him to tell, and at the same

time Pandarus is utterly captivated by Troilus's secret.

Once Pandarus becomes a party to Troilus's secret, he takes pains both to satisfy

Troilus's desire by delivering Criseyde and to contain the secret that his interrogations

have brought forth as elicited. Having initiated Troilus's confessional narration,

Pandarus becomes anxious to maintain his power over the lovers by controlling their

secret. If a secret is known too widely, it is no longer a secret and thus no longer

pleasurable. Therefore, much like the clandestine love affair between Thisbe and

---

[12] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 71.

181

Piramus, the demands of secrecy will fuel Troilus and Criseyde's mutual desire and further the poem's true discourse of pleasure. At first only shared between the two male friends, the secret ultimately must be shared with Criseyde. Consequently, Pandarus draws her away from her female "compaignie" (2.86) and introduces her to a discourse of secret knowledge and pleasure. Through the interrogative conventions of confessional discourse, Pandarus, as mediator or go-between, coaxes the lovers' speech. Both in Troilus's relationship to Pandarus and in Criseyde's relationship to both men, we see how confession structures the scenes of romantic secret sharing. Informed that Troilus lies near death, Criseyde, visits him privately in his bed-chamber. Criseyde is "poked evere" (3.115) by Pandarus to take pity on Troilus, but she responds to Pandarus's interrogation with her own probing questions. "'I what?'" she asks, "'by God and by my trouthe, / I nat what ye wilne that I sey'" (3.119-21). She does not know what Pandarus would have her confess. Moreover, she demands that Troilus reveal his "entente"; she says, "I wolde hym preye / To telle me the fyn of his entente. / Yet wist I nevere wel what that he mente" (3.125-6). Criseyde's concern is for the "fyn" or "end" of Troilus's intentions and whether they are honorable or not. In this way, Criseyde introduces into the narrative the problems of "entente." Criseyde demands from Troilus a different type of confessional revelation, and the terms of intent shift the register of desire.

In the end, however, the narrative does not question Troilus's intentions or the nature of his desire for Criseyde. Instead, the poem will implicitly ask whether or not Criseyde intended to betray Troilus. The poem's deployment of confessional structures

suggests that Criseyde's innermost intentions and desires can be known.[13] However,

Criseyde's failure to return from the Greek camp as promised throws this fantasy of

knowing into crisis, and all the narrative emphasis upon secrecy and private, quasi-

confessional, spaces compounds this crisis. After she has been traded to the Greeks, for

example, with her body and heart outside the reach of Pandarus's influence and Troilus's

gaze—Criseyde becomes absolutely impenetrable to the scrutiny of her "readers." In her

absence, Troilus visits her empty palace where he beholds "How shet was every wyndow

of the place, / As frost, hym thoughte, his herte gan to colde" (5.534-5). The materiality

of her home substitutes for the body that once inhabited it. The doors and windows of

her palace are barred and shut, and Troilus finds little consolation in looking upon this

closed structure: a cold and forbidding replacement for Criseyde's now absent (and

formerly open) body.

At the poem's conclusion, the location of Criseyde's "trouthe" emerges as the

poem's central preoccupation. As he is dying, Troilus cries out to an absent Criseyde:

"Where is youre faith, and where is youre biheste? / Where is youre love? Where is

youre trouthe?" (5.1675-6). These questions rhetorically suggest that Criseyde has lost

faith and fidelity, but they also reveal how Criseyde's deepest desires and intentions

remain hidden from her readers and even her "writer." The narrator, like Troilus,

---

[13] Analogously, C. David Benson argues that the "*Troilus* makes us wonder what
Criseyde really thinks and feels my constantly preventing access to her innermost self:
we never know when or even if she ever fully loves Troilus, for example, and must be
content with her ambiguous public statements" ("Critic and Poet: What Lydgate and
Henryson Did to Chaucer's *Troilus and Crisyede*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 53
[1992]: 23-40; rpt. in *Writing after Chaucer: Essential Readings in Chaucer and the
Fifteenth Century*, ed. Daniel Pinti [New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998], 239.

remains uncertain about the location of her heart exclaiming (with respect to Diomede),

"Men seyn—I not—that she yaf him her herte" (5.1050). Finally, the inscrutability of

Criseyde's heart, as well as her sliding affections, inspires the condemnatory responses of

Troilus, Pandarus, and the critics.[14] Henryson's *Testament*, of course, offers one such

condemnatory response.

III

As an object of exchange in the *Troilus*, Criseyde's misfortune might be better

understood a turn of unexpected good fortune because, ultimately, she escapes the

tragedy of Trojan history. In the *Testament*, however, she finds herself within a different

tragedy—a personal tragedy, presumably of her own making. This tragedy begins with

Cresseid's dismissal from Diomede and her return to her father, who says, "'Douchter,

weip thow not thairfoir; / Perauenture all cummis for the best'" (103-4). Despite his

position of power as "keiper of the tempill" (107), Henryson's Calchas is a benign but

impotent figure. A soothsayer, he has no apparent insight into his daughter's

predicament and no foreknowledge of her fate. He casually accepts his daughter's

disgrace and suggests that her (ex)change in fortune is for the best ("Perauenture all

cummis for the best"). Rather than expressing outrage or anger, Calchas seems resigned

to the inevitable. Indeed, Cresseid's fate in the *Testament* has the ring of inevitability

about it—having betrayed Troilus, she should have expected to be betrayed in turn.

---

[14] For a discussion of this critical receptions see Carolyn Dinshaw's seminal
chapter "Reading Like a Man: The Critics, the Narrator, Troilus and Pandarus" in
Chaucer Sexual Poetics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) 28-64.

Diomede's (mis)use of Cresseid goes unremarked upon by either the male narrator or the poem's patriarchal figure-head, Calchas. Presumably, Diomede exchanges Cresseid for another woman once he has "gottin his desyre" (101). In the *Troilus*, Hector's empty boast—"we usen here no women for to selle" (4.182)—rejects the selling or exchanging of women as a national policy. In contrast, Diomede's exchange of Cresseid is figured in strictly personal terms. Diomeid, we are told, fulfilled his desire and subsequently wearied of Cresseid. Importantly, this explanation of Diomede's motives demonstrates how the poem and its male protagonists partake in a fantasy of spent desire.

Three male figures appear in Henryson's *Testament*: the narrator, Calchas, and Troilus. These are emasculated men, and, indeed, their ineffectualness furthers the poem's erasure of patriarchal agency and thus culpability. Aged and impotent, the narrator realizes that love's heat, "in ane man of age / It kendillis nocht sa sone as in ȝouthheid" (29-30). In the old, he says, his heart ("curage") is spiritless ("doif") and "deid" (31). Unregenerate, he decides against kindling the fire of love from within and instead warms himself from without through means of fire, drink, and reading. For his reading material, the narrator chooses two tragedies—Chaucer's *Troilus* and the "vther quair." But rather than sparking his desire, these tragic tales seem strangely aimed at extinguishing it further. Having called into question the legitimacy of his textual authorities, we might question the narrator's motives for reading.[15] Alicia K. Nitecki suggests that "the senex's traditional psychological predisposition—jealousy of youthful

---

[15] David J. Parkinson describes the narrator as follows: "he is a self-indulgent old fellow who is, after all, merely reading and telling this tale to pass time. There is no indication that his wintry experiences will spur him to change his own life" ("Henryson's Scottish Tragedy," *Chaucer Review* 25 [1991]: 356).

sexuality—makes him a particularly apt narrator for the tale of lusty youth punished,"
and, furthermore, "[t]he tale is, as it were, psychologically desired by the old man."[16] As
such a desired tale, the *Testament* seeks not only to punish Cresseid but to expose her
body and render it undesirable.

From the very beginning, the *Testament* serves to make a public record of
Criseyde/Cresseid's otherwise obscured fate. Diomede, for example, declares her
dismissal in a "lybell of repudie" (74). In this way, the poem accomplishes what the
Troilus could not: it brings Cresseid out of the Greek camp. The narrator of the *Troilus*
would only speculate about Criseyde's fate, could only respond to rumor and second-
hand report ("men sayn"), but the narrator of the *Testament* presumes to confirm her guilt
and observe her humiliation first-hand. Henryson's narrator, as I have said, acts as a
reader. He does not translate his "vther quair" but, instead, seems to read the story aloud
and thus re-tells it. He narrator represents himself as merely a sympathetic witness to
Cresseid's "woful end" rather than the author of it. Once he begins to read Cresseid's
tragedy, he abruptly breaks off to exclaim:

> O fair Cresseid! the flour and *A-per-se*
> Of Troy and Grece, how was thou fortunait,
> To change in filth all thy feminitee,
> And be with fleshly lust sa machulait
> And go amang the Greikis air and lait
> Sa giglot-lyk, takand thy foull plesance!
> I have pity thee suld fall sic mischance! (78-84)

The narrator's tone oscillates between the laudatory and the condemnatory, and he voices

confusion with respect to Cresseid's accountability. The narrator characterizes Cresseid

---

[16]   Alicia N. Nitecki, "'Fenʒeit of the New': Authority in *The Testament of
Cresseid*," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 15 (1985): 125.

as strutting among the Greeks "gigot-lyk" or like a wanton woman at all hours of the day. "Yit nevertheles," he says, "quhat ever men deme or say / In scornefull langage of thy brukkilnes, / I sall excuse als far-furth as I may" (85-7). Here he seems to imitate the narrator of Chaucer's *Troilus*: "And if I myghte excuse hire any wise, / For she so sory was for hire untrouthe, / I wis, I wolde excuse hire yet for routhe" (5.1097-9). While Chaucer's narrator emphasizes Criseyde's great woe at betraying Troilus, Henryson's narrator highlights her "foull plesance." He cannot, finally, muster the same "routhe" expressed for Criseyde in the *Troilus*.

Henryson's narrator offers a flawed defense of his heroine. He claims that he will *excuse* her "brukkilnes" or frailty, but, at the same time, he plays the ventriloquist by giving voice to the scornful words that other men "deme or say." Cresseid embodies desire in the *Testament*. Hence, in a tale bent upon the exclusion and foreclosure of desire, his attempt at excusing Cresseid appears doomed to fail. The narrator cannot decide whether to blame Cresseid—her "fleshy lust"—or whether to blame fate and fortune: her "mischance" (84) and "distres" (89) caused by "Fortoun" (90). The narrator's vacillation might be contrasted with the responsibility taken by Cresseid in her confessional soliloquy, "O fals Cresseid and trew knicht Troylus!" (553). The narrator's lament, "'O fair Cresseid,'" syntactically parallels Cresseid's avowal of guilt. This parallel illustrates how Cresseid finishes the process of judgment that the narrator begins. The narrator's inept excuses insinuate *willful* desire that her confession ultimately substantiates.

The narrator's impotent interjections on Cresseid's behalf reflect his more literal impotence. Just as her father offers empty consolation, so does the narrator. While, in the stanza described above, he hyperbolically professes to excuse, his language highlights Cresseid's agency. Through a series of active verbs—"change," "go amang," and "takand"—he suggest that if she "falls" it is through her own *will* or volition. In stereotypically tragic form, the narrator contrasts the glories of the past with the diminished present. He juxtaposes fair Cresseid, who was the flower and the chief letter, with false Cresseid, who changes all her "feminitee" for "filth." At this point in the poem, Cresseid's "filth" is metaphorical and spiritual rather than physical, but the narrator anticipates her abjection through leprosy, when her flesh quite literally becomes "foull." Moreover, through the stanza's repeated alliteration upon words begining with the letter "f" and the proximity within the sentence of "feminitee" and "filth" implies that there is little actual difference between Cresseid's pre-and post-lapsarian condition. . He registers the doubleness of her nature, but, at the same time, he cannot help but reveal what the poem tries on many levels to repress—the duplicity of patriarchy. He puts forth the rhetorical question: "how was thou fortunait, / *To change* in filth all thy feminitee" (79-90, my emphasis). The narrator's use of "to change," as well as his insinuation of Cresseid's prostitution—"desolait scho walkit vp and doun, / And sum men sayis, into the court, commoun" (77)—recalls how Criseyde was traded for Antenor and Hector's denial, "we usen here no women for to selle" (Tr, 4.182). Her (ex)change was the direct consequence of a political decision.

History and politics, however, do not figure in Henryson's tragedy as they do in Chaucer's poem. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, tragedy ensues when the political and personal collide. But the *Testament* excludes the political, as Lesley Johnson puts it, by providing "a further displacement of the history of Troy."[17] Furthermore, the *Testament* removes Cresseid from any relevant historical or cultural contexts that might mitigate her guilt. Likewise, the narrator's halting excuse of Cresseid excludes any evidence that would contradict the appropriateness of Cresseid's fate and thus undermine the poem's final unassailable "truth"—Cresseid's falsity. As with both Chaucer's Criseyde and Lucrece in the *Legend*, Henryson's narrative repeatedly depicts Cresseid within quasi-confessional spaces. For example, Cresseid, publicly humiliated by Diomede's "lybell of repudie" (74), retreats from the public gaze and withdraws to the interiors of her father's house. Once inside her father's house, Cresseid avoids exposure and suspicion by not presenting herself publicly "with sacrifice" (115) at the temple of Venus. Instead, she conceals herself in a "secreit orature":

> …Cresseid, heuie in hir intent,
> Into the kirk wald not hir self present,
> For giuing of the pepill ony deming
>
> Of hir expuls fra Diomeid the king;
> Bot past into ane secreit orature,
> Quhair scho micht weip hir wofull desteny.
> Behind hir bak scho cloisit fast the dure,
> And on hir kneis bair fell doun in hy.
> (116-123)

As in the Legend of Lucrece, when the reader secretly observes her in her bedchamber, the reader here witnesses Cresseid's despair, behind closed door. In this way, despite her

---

[17] Johnson, "Whatever Happened to Criseyde?," 314.

attempts to flee exposure, the narrative continually works to disclose Cresseid's innermost thoughts.

The poem's recurrent movement from interior to exterior space parallels the progress of confessional discourse. Such movements will have the effect of emphasizing a series of disclosures by Cresseid, and, finally, the complete public exposure of her leprous body. Similarly, David J. Parkinson argues that the poem establishes interior spaces only to have Cresseid driven out from them: "For much of the time, setting is focused upon interiors (the court, the secret oratory, the leper's hospice), within each of which the excluded protagonist Cresseid hides (and is either exclaimed over by the narrator or complains at length herself), and from each of which she must perforce depart."[18] From within the first of these interior spaces, the secret oratory, Cresseid weeps for her "wofull desteny" (121) and addresses her gods. The stage thus set, we might, as readers, expect a confession by Cresseid. Indeed, I would suggest that narrative creates just such an expectation. Yet instead of self-blame, Cresseid angrily cries out against Venus and Cupid. Cresseid's blasphemy, her (mis)use of speech, offers a saying that must later be unsaid.[19] Her lament, "'O fals Cupide'" will later become "'O fals Cresseid.'" Cresseid's speech, here, proves to be the first in a number of disclosures that demonstrate the *Testament*'s confessional demand to speak. Yet, this inducement of Cresseid's speaking is not meant, as so many critics have argued, to redeem her. Instead,

---

[18] Parkinson, "Henryson's Scottish Tragedy," 356.

[19] For a discussion of blasphemy in the poem, see Edward Craun, "Blaspheming Her 'Awin God': Cresseid's 'Lamentation' in Henryson's *Testament*," *Studies in Philology* 82 (1985): 25-41.

the poem's confessional discourse authorizes and substantiates the narrator's judgment that she has changed her "filth" for "feminitee."

Cresseid's blasphemy precipitates a dream-trial in which the gods punish her with leprosy. This punishment has the effect of providing the corporeal evidence of Cresseid's as of yet unconfessed depravity. The seeming injustice of and incongruity of this punishment to its crime, blasphemy, are offset by Cresseid's eventual confession to her "true" crime: "lustis lecherous" (559). During the dream-trial, Cupid pleads his case against Cresseid before a parliament of pagan gods. He accuses her of "slander and defame injurious" (284). Cupid argues that she has wrongly blamed Venus for "hir greit infelicitie," her "leuing vnclene and lecherous" (281, 284). Although Cupid never explicitly addresses Cresseid's infidelity, he takes the "truth" of her "infelicity" and "unclean and lecherous living" wholly for granted. In Cupid's estimation, she has behaved indecorously. The gods (and the narrator) profess their interest in present events, in her current sin of blasphemy. Yet, all the while, the poem functions to recuperate the past by supplying the judgment left unsaid by Chaucer's *Troilus*. In particular, the text serves to constrain Cresseid's willfulness—the root from which all her transgressions stem. Finally, Cupid demands revenge—"Me think with pane we suld mak recompence" (291)— not for Cresseid's infidelity but for her misuse of speech. In her complaint against Venus and Cupid, Cresseid dares to represent herself as a victim. Such a suggestion cannot be left unpunished by the gods or by the poem. Saturn delivers the gods' verdict: "'Thy greit fairness and all thy bewtie gay, / Thy wantoun blude, and eik thy goldin hair, / Heir I exclude fra the for euermair" (313-5). Again the narrative

191

registers terms of exclusions as the gods "exclude" or withdraw from Cresseid her beauty, her defining virtue.

However, just as the poem depicts its pagan pantheon at its most vengeful and unmerciful, the narrator interrupts his story to beg for mercy:

> O cruell Saturne, fraward and angrie,
> Hard is thy dome, and to malitious!
> On fair Cresseid quhy hes thow na mercie,
> Quhilk was sa sweit, gentill and amorous?
> Withdraw thy sentence and be gracious—
> (323-7)

Saturn's judgment, he says, is too malicious. He asks why Saturn has "na mercie" upon "fair Cresseid" who was so sweet, gentle, and amorous. Yet, again, we find that as the narrator tries to excuse Cresseid, his language and syntax betrays him. He enumerates Cresseid's supposed attributes, but his interjection takes the form of a rhetorical question. Thus, readers must supply their own answer as to why Saturn had no mercy upon Cresseid. Furthermore, among her qualities he names her amorousness, which recalls her excessive love of the opposite sex—her lust or desire.[20] The narrator's protestation on Cresseid's behalf proves as ineffectual as Cresseid's complaint, and that is, I would suggest, how he wants it. With no real chance of intervening in the events of the dream-trial (he is, after all, merely *reading* about events already transpired), the narrator's interpolation into the narrative serves his own desires rather than serving Cresseid. The presence of the pagan pantheon mystifies justice and displaces human and, especially, patriarchal responsibility for judgment.

---

[20] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989, *s.v.* "amorous," (a.); 1: "Of persons: Inclined to love; habitually fond of the opposite sex."

IV

The physical effects of the gods' punishment of leprosy are dramatic: Cresseid's eyes, voice, and complexion are altered by the disease. When she awakens, Cresseid's reflection in "polesit glas" confirms that the nightmare has become reality as she sees "hir face sa deformait" (348-9). Cresseid's deformities render her impotent by revising her desire and by extinguishing the desire of others for her. Previously, she ensnared men with her feminine charms, but now men "fle the place" (341) and flee her. As such an object to be pitied rather than desired, she excludes herself from the society of her father's house and joins the leper-folk. Ultimately, Cresseid's earlier blasphemous speech parallels her more appropriate use of speech at the poem's conclusion. Having urged her towards "correct" speech, Cresseid finally utters her guilt in explicit terms. Two separate stanzas end with the following refrain: "O fals Cresseid and trew knicht Troylus!" (546, 553) and a third stanza repeats her self-indictment: "Fy, fals Cresseid; O trew knicht Troylus!" (560). The last interjection of "fy" shifts the tone of her soliloquy from mere tragic exclamation to an expression of self-disgust and disapproval.[21] Moreover, the syntactical construction makes "Cresseid" the *object* of appeal even though she is the speaking subject. By speaking of herself as an object, Cresseid, finally, appears to confess and judge herself. Similarly, Aronstein contends that Cresseid learns to *read* herself correctly.[22] The poem does not *allow* Cresseid to confess so as to redeem

---

[21] *OED*, 2nd ed. 1989, *s.v.* "fie," (int.); 1: "An exclamation expressing, in early use, disgust or indignant reproach."

[22] See Aronstein, "Cresseid Reading Cresseid."

her. Instead, Cresseid's confession *allows* the reader to pass judgment in security "knowing that the guilty party not only deserves and accepts but perhaps in some sense wants punishment."[23] By damning herself, Cresseid permits her readers' to judge her and "speik of hir no moir" (616).

The *Testament* works to name desire in order to disclose it and then foreclose it. Largely uninterested in the religious confession's nuanced examination of heart, mind, and soul, the poem's conclusion summarily defines Cresseid's "entente" as synonymous with desire. In her confession, she identifies excessive desire—"sa efflated…in wantones" (549)—as her sole motivation for betraying Troilus. Moreover, she reveals that the object of her desire was desire itself: "My mynd in fleschelie foull affectioun / Was inclynit to lustis lecherous" (558-9). Cresseid's mind was inclined towards lust or desire. Cresseid turns to Diomede not for any unique characteristics he embodies (or for the protection he can provide) but for the characteristics that she embodies: lust and "greit vnstabilnes" (568). Defined by her great instability, Cresseid embodies desire itself. In her written last will and testament, Cresseid consigns her body to the carrion and worms and her spirit to Diane, "quhair sho dwellis, / To walk with hir waist woddis and wellis" (587-8). In so doing, her once desirable body is buried in the text, and her lusty spirit, presumably, is chastened by the virginal goddess, Diana. The poem takes its title from this last testament, and this symbolic dispensation of her belongings, especially her body and spirit, points to how the poem figuratively disposes of Cresseid. Because a last will refers to a person's last *wishes* or *desires*, it emphasizes *volition* and agency. In this way,

---

[23] Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 5.

194

the poem claims to inscribe Cresseid's final intentions within the poem. In "allowing" Cresseid to confess, the narrator—and by extension the reader—act not only as the executor of her last will and testament but also as her confessor. Both legal testament and religious confession stress volition. But, I would argue that the *Testament* may rest upon the fiction of Cresseid's volition rather than its reality. We might read Cresseid's self-determination as part of the poem's male fantasy or wish-fulfillment, and thus we might notice how all of the poem's saying—its speaking about Cresseid and its urging of Cresseid to speak—culminates in death and silence.

The *Testament* attempts to extinguish desire for Cresseid. Yet by needing to speak once more of her, the poem demonstrates that, unlike Diomede, readers and narrators never weary of her. Likewise, when Troilus encounters an unrecognizably deformed Cresseid begging on the side of the road, she inspires in him a "spark of lufe" that "kendlit all his bodie in ane fyre" (512-13). Her memory renews his desire: "With hait fewir, ane sweit and trimbling" (514). Subsequently, Troilus for "knichtlie pietie and memoriall" of "fair Cresseid" throws a purse of gold in Cresseid's lap. Transformed beyond recognition by her disease, fair Cresseid is a memory ("memoriall") both literally and figuratively. Yet this memory functions as a potent stimulus. Seemingly, neither the poem nor Troilus can successfully exclude Cresseid or its desire for her. Perhaps both Troilus and the narrator realize as much and that is why they "can no moir" (601).

EPILOGUE

Epistemological crisis or the problem of knowing features prominently in the texts that I discuss in *Producing the Middle English Corpus: Confession and Medieval Bodies*. Therefore, Michel Foucault's discussion of confession as a privileged discourse for the production of truth proved incredibly useful. Especially fruitful for the study of literature, Foucault's influential theory shows how as a *discourse*, confession enacts a process of "subjectification" in which the speaking subject is also the subject of her statement. Ultimately, a sinner takes herself as the subject of her own discourse and, at the same time, becomes subject to the discourse of the 'Other.' Both Foucauldian and Lacanian theories of subjectivity demonstrate the fraught relationship between confessant and confessor, judged and judge. Thinking about literary confession in this way, I suggested that we might begin to consider the *motives* for confessional narrative. In Gower, Chaucer, Kempe, and Henryson, I demonstrate that *desire*—for truth, renewal of faith, recuperation of the fallen body, stability, closure—underlies the need to confess. In thinking about confession as a strategy of desire and of the confessional "subject" as a location of unconscious desire, I also employ the insights of psychoanalytic theory. Although not fully or consistently explored throughout, one implication of my project is to highlight the utility and even necessity of psychoanalysis for the study of medieval confession. Arguing as I do in my dissertation that confession produces bodies, I find the constructedness of emotions residual to the constructedness of bodies; thus, my work has important implications for study of medieval emotion.

Via their interest in epistemology, what we call, medieval literary confessions necessarily speak to issues of representation. But because, as I demonstrated in my chapter on Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, such representations never *prove* anything, we might in the future explore more fully how confession engages with issues of presentation or performance. In this respect, Judith Butler's theories, too, especially that of performativity of gender, should prove of interest to scholars of medieval confession. As of yet, gender has received little attention from critics discussing confessional discourse. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, however, suggests that gender, as well as the perceived differences of the female body, explicitly affect the narrative produced by and through the confessional discourse. Likewise, categories of gender emerge in the poetry of Gower, Chaucer, and Henryson; while my analysis focused at times on confession's production of female subjects (on "good" wives and "good" women), we might also read Gower, Chaucer, and Henryson as constructing and performing *masculinity*.

In modern parlance, confession has become nearly synonymous with autobiographical writing. Indeed, as a "literary term," confession is typically classified as a type of autobiography. In criticism on medieval literature such a conflation likewise occurs, and throughout my dissertation I have critiqued what I call the autobiographical fallacy or fantasy. Although confession and autobiography are certainly related, an unproblematized conflation of the two modes proves limiting, especially to the study of medieval literature. During the Middle Ages, few if indeed any autobiographies, per se, were written. Perhaps it is for this very reason that scholars so frequently overlook or

underestimate the contributions of late-medieval writers to the narrative *form* of confession. My work, therefore, has attempted to demonstrate the great versatility and complexity of confession in Middle English literature. Rather than serving as merely a theme or topic, confessional discourse informs, organizes, and structures canonical texts by authors examined herein.

In chapter one, I argued that the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 provided the institutional spark that transformed confession from a practice into a *discourse*. The Council's legislation initiated a series of ecclesiastical reforms bent on educating and ultimately produced faithful Christian subjects. I illustrated how the Council's project to produce the Christian "subject" took place within a specific rhetorical and ideological context. In particular, I was interested in how the Council's rhetoric worked to establish the boundaries of Christendom in terms of inner and outer, the center and the margin. In this fashion, the medieval Church constituted itself as metaphorical body. Within and at the center of this body resided "truth" and the true faithful, while the infidels or the unfaithful maintained its margin. Analogously, the Council's *Omnis utriusque sexus* decree rhetorically figured the individual Christian's body as divided between inner and outer space. This division and the, consequent, location of truth on the inwards parts of the body, proved important for reading both confessing bodies and confessional texts. Appearing in response to the Fourth Lateran Council's legislation, a myriad of vernacular manuals provide penitents with instruction in how to confess. These manuals illustrated confession's demand to speak plainly or nakedly. Although from the very beginning confessional discourse was deeply suspicious of and antagonistic to rhetoric, I show that

it contained the seeds of its later literariness. The *form* of confession is an inventive and productive one.

I believe that, at present, medieval confessional discourse is too narrowly conceived and too narrowly governed by the perception of confession as inherently moralizing or didactic and thus categorically opposed to literariness. Yet "moral" Gower's *Confessio Amantis* employs confessional structures for the furtherance of both instruction ("lore") and pleasure or desire ("lust"). The *Confessio* portrays confession as neither moral nor immoral but rather as a productive and inventive "middel weie." As such and as illustrated by my analysis of The Tale of Mundus and Paulina, confession is a morally neutral discursive space proliferating fantasies, desires, bodies, and subjectivities. For Gower's confessing protagonist, Amans, confession offers a "weie" of both producing desire and attempting to satisfy it. At the poem's conclusion, the surprise appearance of the *senex amans* serves as a penitential body designed to constrain the lover's inappropriate desire. Such a body attempts to provide both the lover and the reader with an objective "truth" or reality. In the end, however, Gower's *senex amans* offers only further fiction or fantasy. It is perhaps *more true*, but it is not *truth*.

As in the *Confessio Amantis*, confessional or penitential discourse likewise informs Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and its discussion of sincerity. Significantly, my reading of the *Legend* as a penance offers a way of reading the Prologue together with the legends. The Prologue evokes epistemological debate and witnesses the poet's crisis of truth as his authorial intentions are called into question by the God of Love. Similarly, we find that critics read the poem in terms that repeat the text's own language of "truth"

199

and "entente." Here, as in the *Confessio*, we find autobiographical fallacy or fantasy as an effect of confessional discourse. This fantasy shows, in part, the critical desire to recuperate Chaucer's authentic meaning. Analogously, the *Legend* illustrates the poet's attempt at recuperating and (re)presenting his true "entente." Obligated by Alceste to perform penance for his poetic misdeeds, the poet attempts such recuperation through the penitential writing of the legends. In order to complete his "penance" satisfactorily, the poet must be careful of both what he says and how he says it. Thus, the *Legend*'s abbreviated tales of sacrificial women imbue the poet's performance with a certain pathos by which the poet hopes to nakedly *present* or bring into being the evidence of his sincerity.

Ultimately, the *Legend* attempts in vain to perform the poet's "trouthe" by depicting the "trouthe of womanhede," and, as psychoanalysis shows, agony turns out to the inevitable condition of penitence. Similarly, the agonized and compulsive confession of Margery Kempe demonstrates how the *Book of Margery Kempe* shares in the trials of authenticity and the truth of the confessional. Like Chaucer's *Legend*, the *Book* is often read in terms of epistemological crisis, and, as a consequence Kempe's text generates a polarizing response—either she is either believed to be a true mystic or she is not. Again, rather than merely a thematic concern of Kempe's *Book*, confession instead provides its structural paradigm. Through structures of concealment and revelation, Kempe produces a textualized body, a chaste *corpus*. The discursive figuration of such a body points, in particular, to the gendering of confessional discourse. Just as Chaucer's gender strategies in the *Legend* prove to be compensatory, so too do Kempe's. Because it attempts to lend

200

"credence" to her mystical feelings and confessional speaking, the *Book*'s narrative strategies emerge as recuperative. Kempe's chaste *corpus* functions to compensate for her "real" body's perceived lack and vulnerability. Finally, however, the *Book*'s compulsive repetitions expose the desire for stability and stability's very impossibility. Kempe desires both a closed body and closed text, yet in the end she can only pray for the promised satisfaction of the afterlife.

Rather than eliding the hermeneutic work required by confessional discourse, *The Book of Margery Kempe* reproduces it and thus reproduces the problems of knowing one's own desire and the desire of others. Knowing the desire of the feminine 'other' is the object of Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. While Kempe sought to close off her body from sexual and demonic violation, the *Testament* seeks to foreclose the monstrous, sexualized body of Chaucer's Criseyde. In this, the last of my chapters, confession becomes synonymous with closure. Confession's demand to speak—both to say and unsay—motivates the *Testament*'s need to speak of Cresseid once more in order to, finally, "speik of hir no moir." Similarly, the narrative compels Cresseid to speak in order to confess to the crime of "lustis lecherous." The poem *knows* that Cresseid traded her femininity for filth, yet she herself must likewise know her "truth." Coming as it does before her confession, Cresseid's punishment of leprosy substantiates (and even bring into being) her guilt. Therefore, rather than allowing her to confess in order to obtain redemption, Cresseid's confession allows the narrator to damn her without feeling any further need to *excuse*. The *Testament*'s pagan setting and legal language effectively cut Cresseid off from a Christian system of salvation while, at the same time, asserting that

"truth" is objective. Suggestively, this late fifteenth-century poem shows the convergences of law and confession. Although I do not have time or space to consider how, in the late-medieval period, the confessional mode may have begun to serve increasingly juridical rather than spiritual ends, I offer it as a suggestion for further inquiry.

Repeatedly, my analysis returns to frustrated desires for certainty, stability, and closure. Yet perhaps we might read such failures and frustrations as inadvertent successes. Because, as Michel Foucault has suggested, the act alone of confessing, independent of its consequences, produces "intrinsic modifications" in the one speaking (or writing), confessional discourse has the effect of altering reality. Therefore, confession's inherent instability always presents and invents new possibilities, productions, "subjects," truths, and *corpii*. Finally, we must consider, as this discourse's greatest asset, its mutability and adaptability. Likewise, flexibility and intertextuality may emerge as medieval literature's contribution to the confessional mode.

Medieval texts have the effect of troubling any clear delineation between the stories of others and the stories of oneself. In the literary confessions I have examined, the protagonists seek truth(s) that are multiple and subjective rather than universal. Moreover, the texts often evince a relationship between the particular and the general: Amans is both the "one loving" and a man; the *Legend*'s poet is both the individual author of specified texts and just another man who has betrayed women; Margery Kempe is both "singular" and an exemplary mirror; Cresseid is both the notorious betrayer of Troilus and a stereotypically fickle woman. This productive tension between extremes

suggests that there is not such thing as simple self-narration. Instead there exist

problematic layers of intertextuality and complex narrative mediation. A full exploration

of the complexity and multiplicity of medieval literary confessions is still needed. My

dissertation offers one intervention and one potential avenue of inquiry. Yet there is

always more hermeneutic work to be done.

Bibliography

Aers, David. *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360-1430*.
London: Routledge, 1988.

Allen, Elizabeth. "Gower Answers Chaucer: Constance and the Trouble with Reading."
ELH 63 (1997): 627-55.

Allen, Peter. "Reading Chaucer's Good Women." *Chaucer Review* 21 (1987): 419-34.

Aronstein, Susan. "Cresseid Reading Cresseid: Redemption and Translation in
Henryson's *Testament*." *Scottish Literary Journal* 21 (1994): 5-22.

Baldwin, John. "Intellectual Preparation for the Canon of 1215 Against Ordeals."
Speculum 36 (1961): 613-36.

———. "From the Ordeal to Confession: In Search of Lay Religion in Early Thirteenth
Century France." In *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, edited by Peter
Biller and A. J. Minnis, 191-209. Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 1998.

Batchelor, Patricia. "Feigned Truth and Exemplary Method in the *Confessio Amantis*."
In *Re-Visioning Gower*, edited by R. Yeager, 1-15. Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press,
1998.

Beckwith, Sarah. "Problems of Authority in Late Medieval English Mysticism:
Language, Agency, and Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Exemplaria* 4
(1992): 171-200.

———. "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe." In
Gender and the Text in the Later Middle Ages, edited by Jane Chance, 195-215.
Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 1996.

Benson, C. David. "Critic and Poet: What Lydgate and Henryson Did to Chaucer's
Troilus and Crisyede." *Modern Language Quarterly* 53 (1992): 23-40. Rpt. in Pinti,
Writing after Chaucer, 227-41.

Benson, Larry D., ed. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Biddick, Kathleen. *The Shock of Medievalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

Bilinkoff, Jodi. *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450-1750.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

Biller, Peter, and A. J. Minnis, eds. *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages.* Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 1998.

———. *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body.* Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 1997.

Bloomfield, Morton W. *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature.* Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1952; Rpt., 1967.

Boffey, Julia. "Lydgate, Henryson, and the Literary Testament." *Modern Language Quarterly* 53 (1992): 41-57.

Bossy, John. *Christianity in the West.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Boyle, Leonard E. "The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology." In *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, edited by Thomas J. Heffernan, 30-43. Knoxville: Tennessee Press, 1985.

Braswell, Mary. *The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages.* East Brunswick: Associated University Presses, 1983.

Brooks, Peter. *Troubling Confession: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Brown, Peter. *Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Brundage, James. "Sin, Crime, and the Pleasures of the Flesh: The Medieval Church Judges Sexual Offences." In *The Medieval World*, edited by Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson, 294-307. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge, 1990.

———. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex.* New York: Routledge, 1993.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle*

Ages. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982.

———. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987.

———. "The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages." In *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, edited by Michael Feher, 160-219. New York: Zone, 1989.

———. "'Why All the Fuss about the Body?': A Medievalist's Perspective." *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1995): 1-33.

Caciola, Nancy. *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

Campbell, Jennifer. "Figuring Criseyde's 'Entente': Authority, Narrative, and Chaucer's Use of History." *Chaucer Review* 27 (1993): 342-58.

Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 9, *s.v.* "Lateran Councils." New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1907-12.

Cherniss, Michael. *Boethian Apocalypse: Studies in Middle English Vision Poetry*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.

Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *De Inventione. De Optimo Genere Oratorum*. Trans. H.M. Hubbell. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960.

Coleman, Janet. *Medieval Readers and Writers: 1350-1400*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.

Copeland, Rita. *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Craun, Edward. "Blaspheming Her 'Awin God': Cresseid's 'Lamentation' in Henryson's *Testament*." *Studies in Philology* 82 (1985): 25-41.

———. *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Cullen, Mairi Ann. "Cresseid Excused: A Re-Reading of Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*." *Studies in Scottish Literature* 20 (1985): 137-59.

Davis, Lennard J. *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other*

Difficult Positions. New York: New York University Press, 2002.

Delany, Sheila. *The Naked Text: Chaucer's* Legend of Good Women. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994.

De Hamel, Christopher. *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*. Boston: D.R. Godine, 1986.

De Looze, Laurence. *Pseudo-Autobiography in the Fourteenth Century: Juan Ruiz, Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart, and Geoffrey Chaucer*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997.

Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

———. "'The Naked Text in English to Declare': *The Legend of Good Women*." In Quinn, *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems*, 347-82. Reprinted from *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*.

———. *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

Donaldson, E. T. "Chaucer the Pilgrim." *PMLA* 69 (1954): 928-36.

Donavin, Georgiana. *Incest Narratives and Structures of Gower's Confessio Amantis*. Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 1993.

Dorsey, Peter. "Women's Autobiography and the Hermeneutics of Conversion," *A/B: Autobiography Studies* 8 (1993): 72-90

Dreyfus, Hubert, and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Drucker, T. "The Malaise of Margery Kempe." *New York State Journal of Medicine* 72 (1972): 2911-17.

Durkin, Philip. "Examining One's Conscience: A Survey of Late Middle English Prose Forms of Confession." *Leeds Studies in English* 28 (1997): 19-56.

Echard, Siân. "Glossing Gower: In Latin, in English, and *in absentia*: The Case of Bodleian Ashmole 35." In Yeager, *Re-Visioning Gower*, 237-57.

———. "Pre-Texts: Tables of Contents and the Reading of John Gower's Confessio

Amantis." *Medium Aevum* 66 (1997): 270-87.

———. *A Companion to Gower*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004.

Everett, Walter. "A Critical Edition of the Confession Section of *the Clensyng of Mannes Soule*." PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1974.

Fisher, John H. *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1965.

Flamborough, Robert of. *Liber Poenitentialis*. Ed. J. J. Francis Firth. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1971.

Fletcher, Alan. "Chaucer the Heretic." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 53-121.

Foster, Denis. *Confession and Complicity in Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

———. "The Eye of Power" (1977). In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-77*, edited and translated by Colin Gordon, 146-65. New York, Pantheon Books, 1980.

———. "The Subject and Power." In Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 208-26.

———. "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress." In Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 229-52. Rpt. in Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, 340-72.

Fowler, Alistair. *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Fox, Denton, ed. *Robert Henryson: The Poems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, 1987.

Fradenburg, L. O. Aranye. "Analytical Survey, II: We are Not Alone: Psychoanalytic Medievalism." In *New Medieval Literatures, 2*, edited by Rita Copeland, David Lawton, and Wendy Scase, 249-76. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

———. "The Scottish Chaucer." In *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Scottish Language and Literature*, 177-90. Stirling, Scotland: William Culross & Son, Ltd., 1981. Rpt. in Pinti, *Writing After Chaucer*, 167-76.

———. *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Frank, Robert Worth. *Chaucer and the* Legend of Good Women. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972.

———. "The *Legend of Good Women*: Some Implications." In *Chaucer at Albany*, edited by Rossell Hope Robbins, 63-76. New York: Franklin, 1975. Rpt. in Quinn, *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems*, 303-13.

Fyler, John. *Chaucer and Ovid*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

Ganim, John. "Chaucer, Boccaccio, Confession, and Subjectivity." In *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales, New Essays on an Old Question*, edited by Leonard Koff and Brenda Schildgen, 128-48. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000.

———. *Style and Consciousness in Middle English Narrative*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Cheryl Glenn, "Reexamining *The Book of Margery Kempe*: A Rhetoric of Autobiography." In *Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women and the Rhetorical Tradition*, edited by Andrea Lunsford, 53-71. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995.

Goldie, Matthew Boyd. "The Feynyng Aesthetic in Fifteenth-Century English Literature." PhD diss., City University of New York, 1999.

Gower, John. *Confessio Amantis*. In *The Complete Works of John Gower*. Vols. 2-3. Ed. G. C. Macaulay. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900-01; rpt. *The English Works of John Gower*. Early English Text Society Extra Series 81-82. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900; rpt 1957.

Green, Richard Firth. "Chaucer's Victimized Women." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 10 (1988): 3-21.

———. *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

Gross, Gregory. "Secrecy and Confession in Late Medieval Narrative: Gender, Sexuality, and the Rhetorical Subject." PhD diss., Brown University, 1994.

Hamilton, Sarah. *The Practice of Penance: 900-1050*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2001.

Hanning, Robert W. *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

Harding, Wendy. "Body into Text: *The Book of Margery Kempe*." In *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, edited by Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury, 168-87. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.

Harper, Stephen. *Insanity, Individuals, and Society in Late-Medieval English Literature: The Subject of Madness*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003.

Hartung, Albert, ed. *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*. Vol. 7. New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1986.

Hasenfratz, Robert, ed. and trans. *Ancrene Wisse*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000.

Heng, Geraldine. *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Ingham, Patricia Clare. "Psychoanalytic Criticism." In *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, edited by Steve Ellis, 463-80. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

———. *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Johnson, Lesley. "Whatever Happened to Criseyde? Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*." In *Courtly Literature: Culture and Context: Selected Papers from the 5th Triennial Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society, Dalfsen, the Netherlands, 9-16 August, 1986*, edited by Erik Kooper and Keith Busby, 313-21. Amsterdam: J. Benjamins Publishing Co., 1990.

"Joseph's Troubles about Mary." In *York Mystery Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle and Pamela

King (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Ed. Barry Windeatt. Cambridge:
D. S. Brewer, 2004.

Kinneavy, Gerald. "Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the Penitentials." *Chaucer Review* 19 (1984): 144-61.

Kiser, Lisa. *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the* Legend of Good Women. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983.

Lawton, David. "Voice, Authority, and Blasphemy in the *The Book of Margery Kempe*." In *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, edited by Sandra J. McEntire, 93-115. New York: Garland Publishing, 1992.

Lea, Henry C. *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church*. 3 vols. Vol. 1. Philadelphia: Lea Brothers, 1896.

Leicester, Marshall. *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the* Canterbury Tales. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.

Lochrie, Karma. "The Language of Transgression: Body, Flesh, and Word in Mystical Discourse." In *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies*, edited by Allen J. Frantzen, 115-40. Albany: SUNY Press, 1991.

———. *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.

———. "Desiring Foucault." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997): 3-16.

———. *Covert Operations*: *The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.

Lynch, Kathryn, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

———. *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000.

Mannyng, Robert, of Brunne. *Handlyng Synne*. Ed. Idelle Sullens. Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Early Renaissance Text and Studies, 1983.

Mansfield, Mary C. *The Humiliation of Sinners: Public Penance in Thirteenth-Century France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.

Margherita, Gayle. *The Romance of Origins: Language and Sexual Difference in Middle English Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.

Mathews, Jana. "Land, Lepers, and the Law in *The Testament of Cresseid*." In *The Letter of the Law: LegalPractice and Literary Production in Medieval England*, edited by Emily Steiner and Candace Barrington, 40-66. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.

McAvoy, Liz Herbert. *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004.

McDonald, J. Craig. "Law and the Poetic Imagination: The Poetry of Robert Henryson." PhD diss., University of York, 1980.

McEntire, Sandra J., ed. *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1992.

McNally, John J. "The Penitential and Courtly Tradition in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*." *Studies in Medieval Culture* 1 (1964): 74-94.

McNamara, John. "Language as Action in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*." In *Bards and Makars: Scottish Language and Literature: Medieval and Renaissance*, edited by Adam J. Aiken, Matthew P. McDiarmid, and Derick S. Thomson, 41-51. Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1977.

McNeill, John T., and Helen M. Gamer, eds. *Medieval Handbook of Penance*. New York: Octagon Books Inc., 1965.

Meecham-Jones, Simon. "The Poet as Subject: Literary Self-consciousness in Gower's *Confessio* Amantis." In *Betraying Our Selves: Forms of Self-Representation in Early Modern English Texts*, edited by Henk Dragstra, Sheila Ottway, and Helen Wilcox, 14-29. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Middleton, Anne. "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II." *Speculum* 53 (1978): 94-114. Rpt. in *Medieval English Poetry*, edited by Stephanie Trigg, 24-46. London: Longman, 1993.

Mirk, John *Instructions for Parish Priests*. Ed. Edward Peachock. 1868. Rev. ed. F. J. Funivall. Early English Text Society, Original Series 31. London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1902.

Mitchell, J. Allan. "Gower for Example: *Confessio Amantis* and the Ethics of Exemplarity." *Exemplaria* 16 (2004): 203-34.

Montibus, William de. "Peniteas Cito Peccator." In *William De Montibus: The Schools and the Literature of Pastoral Care*, edited by Joseph Goering, 107-138. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1992.

Morris, Colin. *The Discovery of the Individual: 1050-1200*. London: The Camelot Press, 1972.

Mueller, Janel. "Autobiography of a New 'Creatur': Female Spirituality, Selfhood, and Authorship in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *New York Literary Forum* 12-13 (1984): 63-75

Nicholson, Peter. "The 'Confession' in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*." *Studia Neophilogica* 58 (1986): 193-204.

Nitecki, Alicia N. "'Fenʒeit of the New': Authority in *The Testament of Cresseid*." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 15 (1985): 120-132.

Olsson, Kurt. *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the* Confessio Amantis. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992.

Ober, W. "Hysteria and Mysticism Reconciled." *Literature and Medicine* 4 (1985): 24-40

Palmer, R. Barton. "Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*: The Narrator's Tale." In *New Readings of Chaucer's Poetry*, edited by Robert Benson and Susan Ridyard, 183-94. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003.

Pantin, W. A. *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962.

Parkinson, David. "Henryson's Scottish Tragedy." *Chaucer Review* 25 (1991): 355-62.

Patterson, Lee. *Chaucer and the Subject of History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.

———. "Christian and Pagan in *the Testament of Cresseid*." *Philological Quarterly* 52 (1973): 696-714.

Payer, Pierre. *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984.

Peck, Russell, ed. *Confessio Amantis*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966; rpt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980.

———. "Chaucerian Poetics and the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*." In *Chaucer in the Eighties*, edited by Julian Wasserman and Robert Blanch, 39-55. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986.

———. "The Phenomenology of Make Believe in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*." *Studies in Philology* 91 (1994): 250-69.

———, ed. *Confessio Amantis, Vol. 1*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000.

———, ed. *Confessio Amantis, Vol. 2*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000.

Percival, Florence. *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998.

Phillips, Helen. "Register, Politics, and the *Legend of Good Women*." *Chaucer Review* 37 (2002): 101-28

Pickles, J. D. and J. L. Dawson, eds. *A Concordance to John Gower's Confessio Amantis*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1987.

Pinti, Daniel, ed. *Writing After Chaucer: Essential Readings in Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998.

Pitard, Derrick G. "Sowing Difficulty: *The Parson's Tale*, Vernacular Commentary, and the Nature of Chaucerian Dissent." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 299-330.

Quinn, William A. *Chaucer's Rehersynges: The Performability of the Legend of Good Women*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994.

———, ed. *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1999.

Rabinow, Paul, ed. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

Riddy, Felicity. "'Abject Odious': Feminine and Masculine in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*." In *Chaucer to Spenser: A Critical Reader*, edited by Derek Pearsall, 280-96. Malden, MA.: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999.

Robbins, William. "Romance, Exemplum, and the Subject of the *Confessio Amantis*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 19 (1997): 157-81.

Robertson, D. W. "A Note on the Classical Origin of 'Circumstances in the Medieval Confessional.'" *Studies in Philology* 43 (1946): 6-14.

Robertson, Elizabeth. *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990.

Robertson, Kellie. "Laboring in the God of Love's Garden: Chaucer's Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002): 115-47.

Root, Jerry. *'Space to Speke': The Confessional Subject in Medieval Literature*. New York: Peter Lang, 1997.

Roper, Gregory. "*Pearl*, Penitence, and the Recovery of the Self." *Chaucer Review* 28 (1993): 164-86.

Rowe, Donald. *Through Nature to Eternity: Chaucer's Legend of Good Women*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.

Rubin, Miri. *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Sanok, Catherine. "Reading Hagiographically: The *Legend of Good Women* and Its Feminine Audience." *Exemplaria* 13 (2001): 323-54.

Scala, Elizabeth. *Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Schueler, Donald. "The Age of the Lover in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*." *Medium Aevum* 36 (1967): 152-8.

Schutz, Andrea. "Absent and Present Images: Mirrors and Mirroring in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*." *Chaucer Review* 34 (1999): 107-24.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham:

Duke University Press, 2003.

Senior, Matthew. *In the Grip of Minos: Confessional Discourse in Dante, Corneille, and Racine*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994.

Simpson, James. "Ironic Incongruence in the Prologue and Book I of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*." *Neophilologus* 72 (1988): 617-32.

———. "Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 20 (1998): 73-100.

Specht, Henrik. "'Ethopoeia' or Impersonation: A Neglected Species of Medieval Characterization." *Chaucer Review* 21 (1986): 1-15.

Staley, Lynn. *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.

Stock, Brian. "Medieval Literacy, Linguistic Theory, and Social Organization." *New Literary History* 16 (1984-5): 13-29.

Storm, Melvin. "The Intertextual Cresseida: Chaucer's Henryson or Henryson's Chaucer?" *Studies in Scottish Literature* 28 (1993): 105-122.

Strohm, Paul. "A Note on Gower's Persona." In *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in its Contexts, 700-1600*, edited by Mary Carruthers and Elizabeth Kirk, 293-8. Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1982.

Tambling, Jeremy. *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990.

Tanner, Norman, ed. and trans. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Nicea I to Lateran V*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990.

Tentler, Thomas. *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.

Tuttle Hansen, Elaine. "Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*." *JEGP* 82 (1983): 11-31.

Watt, Diane. *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Wetherbee, Winthrop. "The Theme of Imagination in Medieval Poetry and the

Allegorical Figure 'Genius.'" *Medievalia et Humanistica* 7 (1976): 45-64.

———. "Genius and Interpretation." In *Magister Regis: Studies in Honor of Robert Earl Kaske*, edited by Arthur Groos, 241-60. New York: Fordham University Press, 1986.

Windeatt, Barry, ed. See Kempe.

Woods, Marjorie Curry. "Boys Will be Women: Musings on Classroom Nostalgia and the Chaucerian Audience(s)." In *Speaking Images: Essays in Honor of V. A. Kolve*, edited by Robert F. Yeager and Charlotte C. Morse, 143-66. Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 2001.

———, and Rita Copeland. "Classroom and Confession." In *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, edited by David Wallace, 376-406. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Yates, Julian. "Mystic Self: Margery Kempe and the Mirror of the Narrative." *Comitatus* 26 (1995): 75-93.

Yeager, Robert F., "English, Latin, and Text as 'Other': the Page as Sign in the Work of John Gower." *Text* 3 (1987): 251-267.

——— ed. *Re-Visioning Gower* (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1998).

VITA

Cathryn Marie Meyer was born in St. Paul, Minnesota on June 7, 1975, the daughter of Rosemary and James. A. Meyer. After completing her work at Hill-Murray High School, Maplewood, Minnesota, in 1993, she entered St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. From September of 1995 to June of 1996, she studied abroad at Harris-Manchester College, Oxford University. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from St. Olaf College in 1997, graduating *cum laude* and with Distinction from the English Department. From the fall of 1997 until the summer of 1998 she worked at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In August 1998, she entered the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin. While at the University of Texas she held many positions including Assistant Instructor for the Division of Rhetoric and Composition, Program Coordinator for Medieval Studies, and Program Coordinator for the Humanities Institute. She has presented her scholarship at numerous conferences and has won several awards. Most notably, she was the 2004/5 Helen Ann Mins Robbins Fellow at the University of Rochester, New York. From September of 2005 to May of 2006, she returned to her alma mater, St. Olaf College, as a Visiting Instructor of English literature and composition.

Permanent Address: 111 Trail Rider Way, Georgetown, Texas 78628

This dissertation was typed by the author.