DREAMS AND VISIONS IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This study illuminates the connection between the conventions of medieval mystical texts and the English dream vision genre. It diverges from the majority of dream vision studies by addressing the entire range of English visionary poetry, from *The Dream of the Rood* through the late medieval Chaucerians. The dissertation examines these pieces of literature as they relate to medieval mystical practices and writings, focusing on the ways in which biographical visionary experiences of the mystics influence literary English dream visions, while also touching on the ways in which religious literature likewise appropriates the courtly conventions of French and Middle English visionary poetry. The study of this relationship is facilitated through analysis of the role of the narrator in relation to the events of the visionary experience in both mystical and literary texts. While this role has been previously discussed in terms of activity or passivity on the part of the narrator, this study builds on this dichotomy with a model comprised of degrees and varieties of active and passive behavior, and uses this model in order to examine the relationship between autobiographical and literary visionary texts. Ultimately, this study argues that it is most productive to consider mystical texts and dream visions as members of a larger category of visionary literature, particularly as this approach encourages comparison between texts previously read apart, and may even challenge the classification of texts traditionally considered fictional.

The dissertation includes a comparative reading of Julian of Norwich's *Showings* and *The Dream of the Rood*; discussion of narratorial roles in representative mystical

writings by Hadewijch of Antwerp and Mechthild von Magdeburg; discussion of

narratorial roles in religious dream visions represented by *Pearl* and William Langland's

Piers Plowman; and discussion of narratorial roles in secular dream visions represented

by Geoffrey Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and the Robert Henryson's *Testament of

Cresseid*. It concludes that while the roles which narrators occupy vary among

visionaries and visions in the subgenres discussed, the role of Interpreter is notably

absent in many non-autobiographical texts, suggesting an increased expectation of

audience participation facilitated by the transferal of the role of Interpreter from narrator

to the listener/reader.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Dreams and visions are, in a sense, experiences occupying two opposing sides of a spectrum. The former represents an activity which nearly every human experiences at some point in his or her life, and which many people report on a nightly or semi-nightly basis, and the latter represents supernatural excursions experienced by a privileged few. Dream content ranges from the mundane and meaningless to the prophetic and divine. While modern dreams tend to be viewed as natural unconscious responses to waking stimuli in the popular tradition established by Sigmund Freud,[1] some medieval dreams were received as potential communications sent directly from God, and are treated as such in both Old and Middle English literature. Thus, in Bede's account, Cædmon the lay brother (a simple man in possession of no particular poetic talents) is given the gift of religious composition by an angel in a dream and immediately authors the first known religious poem in English; while the story is presented as an anomalous, miraculous one, Bede's audience is nonetheless expected to believe in the potential for dreams to work as conduits between the earthly and the heavenly.

While Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, one of the most influential dream theory texts of the Middle Ages, allows for the "idle" dream central to modern interpretation, it is important to note that rarer, supernaturally-influenced dreams

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[1] See Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) for the influential theory behind modern responses to dream activity, as well as *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) for the continued attribution of subconscious preoccupations and desires to waking, conscious activity and behavior.

are, indeed, accepted as possible by medieval dreamers, and are taken seriously as such

in a good many texts. Dreams in both pagan and patristic schemas exist in a spectrum

running from true to false. In Macrobius (and similarly in Calcidius), this spectrum

includes five distinct categories: *oraculum* (a revelation revealed by an authoritative

figure), *visio* (a vision of mundane events to occur in the future), *somnium* (a vision of

veiled truth requiring interpretation), *visum* (the appearance of specters), and *insomnium*

(visions brought about by waking distress). The former three are true or significant

visions, the latter two false or meaningless. These categories are not mutually exclusive;

Macrobius reveals how the dream of Scipio simultaneously embraces aspects of the

three true categories, *oraculum*, *visio*, and *somnium*.[2] Indeed, the qualities of both the

oraculum and *somnium*, as we shall see, are characteristic of a good many medieval

dream poems.[3] The true/false dichotomy of dreams is taken up again by the church

fathers Augustine, Tertullian, and Gregory the Great, but with spiritual and supernatural

implications imposed on it. In *De Genesi*, for instance, Augustine orders dreams in a

hierarchy from true to false, and argues that they can lead to knowledge through spiritual

(as opposed to corporeal or intellectual) vision.[4] Along with Tertullian and Gregory, he

embraces the possibility of internal and external sources of dreams. While internal

sources originate from bodily functions and thoughts or preoccupations (responsible for

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[2] See William Harris Stahl's translation of the *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* ((New York, 1990), III.12).

[3] *Piers Plowman*, for example, includes a good many oracular guides as well as scenes (such as the tearing of the pardon and the Tree of Charity) which require interpretation.

[4] See the third chapter of Steven F. Kruger's *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1992).

Macrobius's *visum* and *insomnium*), external sources can be good (angelic) or evil (demonic). Thus, true dreams have the potential to be associated with angelic revelation, while false dreams can imply demonic deception.[5]

In the Old English poem *Daniel* (contained in the Junius manuscript and traditionally/apocryphally attributed to Cædmon), for example, the divinely- inspired dream of the king Nebuchadnezzar is interpreted by the eponymous prophet (the story consisting of an adaptation of events from the biblical book of Daniel). The wicked king's prophetic dream (*somnium*) is revealed to be a divine warning against his pride, the consequences of which prove to be inescapable. Nebuchadnezzar's attempted execution of the righteous youths Ananias, Mishael, and Azarias as retribution for their rejection of his Babylonian gods is thwarted by divine will, and the king is driven into exile. Dreams can thus function as warnings as well as rewards, and can be sent to the wicked and righteous alike.

Medieval visionary sequences, on the other hand, tend to be reported by religious professionals, whose writings have the potential to be read as authoritative spiritual revelations suitable for a wider audience (which can include either religious professionals only or extend a lay audience as well). While lay mystics do exist, Margery Kempe being the most well-known of these in England, the majority are members of religious orders and housed in religious communities (for example: Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, and the Helfta mystics Gertrude the Great, Mechthild von Hackeborn, and Mechthild von Magdeburg). Like dreams, which have the possibility of

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[5] Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, 45-50.

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being interpreted as either revelatory or deceptive, recorded mystical accounts presented as truth sent directly from God himself may nonetheless be challenged by religious authorities who find the contents to be suspect or heretical (as Marguerite Porete's persecution and execution illustrate). Like Cædmon's dream experience, they are hailed (by those who accept their contents as true and good) as extraordinary, miraculous events. Although mystical accounts do not always coincide with dreaming or sleep states, they do require a departure from the conscious, waking world to a metaphysical realm. Thus, Julian of Norwich's initial vision (which coincides with a near-death experience during which the priest holds a crucifix before her eyes) appears to take place during a trace state brought on by intense physical distress. Hadewijch of Antwerp, on the other hand, reports her initial vision as taking place when the Lord travels to her bedside, introducing the possibility of either a trance state or a dream vision. However, while significant, non-mystical dreams tend to involve the intervention of an authoritative guide (such as Scipio's Africanus) or the use of opaque symbolism to convey information (as in Nebuchadnezzar's dream), mystical accounts are marked by direct communication with the divine, and often involve the sharing of special, hidden knowledge with relevance to a wider audience than to the visionary herself or himself. Visionary accounts, such as the writings of Julian and Hadewijch, also tend to suggest that the vision comes as a result (or a reward) of long-term spiritual training and a dedicated quest for hidden knowledge. The mystic thus becomes a special, chosen vessel for divine revelation, tasked with processing and recording visionary events and, eventually, making them known to a wider audience.

The recording of visionary accounts, both authentic and fictional, has propagated two forms of medieval visionary literature treated as distinct genres in current criticism: dream visions and mystical texts. Included in the former category are works such as Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and Langland's *Piers Plowman*; included in the later are the writings of Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Birgitta of Sweden, and other mystics of the Middle Ages whose recorded experiences are considered to be autobiographical. Dream visions are described as *non*-autobiographical works characterized by the distinct frames (the narrator's pre- and post-dream waking experience) surrounding the dream content at the center of the work.[6] By non-autobiographical, I mean that the events in the dream vision are not believed to have actually occurred to the poet or narrator.[7] They are marked by a recognizable structure which sets them apart[8] from mystical texts, which can be structured in various ways: as a series or collection of visions (Julian of Norwich, Birgitta of Sweden), a series of genre pieces including dialogue, prose, and poetry (Mechthild of Magdeburg), or framed visionary experiences similar to those found in fictional pieces (Hadewijch of Antwerp).

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[6] See the first chapter of A. C. Spearing's *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge, 1976), which defines the parameters of the dream vision genre.

[7] For example, Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* is heavily influenced by biographical elements (namely, the death of John of Gaunt's wife, Blanche), but the elegiac sequence (the conversation between Chaucer's narrator and the Man in Black) itself is fictional. Again, *Piers Plowman* contains references to contemporary politics, and certain "biographical" passages have been interpreted as references to William Langland's own life; however, the bulk of the story, comprised of dialogues with allegorical guides, allegory-heavy plotlines, and fantastic scenery, is read as fiction.

[8] *Piers Plowman* can be taken as a notable exception, consisting of a series of linked dream vision accounts rather than one only. Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, too, subverts genre expectations by containing a central narrative rather than a dream. Both of these works will be discussed in detail in later chapters.

Mystical texts are, all in all, less restricted by structural genre expectations than are dream visions.

The focus of this study is on the similarities between autobiographical and non-autobiographical medieval visionary accounts rather than the differences. It includes discussion of the ambiguities which make the hard distinction between literary[9] dream visions and mystical events problematic, and even limiting. Rather than isolating them in separate genres, I argue that both dream visions and mystical texts should be included in a larger category of medieval visionary literature. In order to argue for the legitimacy of this organizational strategy, I will explore the ways in which the narrators of dream visions and mystical texts function in exemplars of the autobiographical and non-autobiographical subgenres. Through exploration of narrators' roles in mystical and literary texts, I will establish the close link between the two varieties of visionary literature, as well as the possibility (explored in Chapter II) that texts previously considered to be literary might just as easily be read as mystical texts. Elimination of the traditional boundary between literary and autobiographical visions thus allows for texts to be read in a new light, and for connections between texts which were once held apart due to their perceived differences to be explored in full.

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[9] I will use "literary" in this study to distinguish between works which are considered to be fictional, and those which are read as autobiographical. Chaucer's dream visions, for instance, may be referred to as "literary." My intention is not to suggest that a work such as Julian's *Showings*, which, particularly in the context of its revisions, exhibits great awareness of audience, authority, and reception, is not literary in a broader sense of the word. I find "literary" to be a helpful term in identifying a particular type of visionary literature, and, at least, less problematic than "fictional" (which I resist due to the frequent presence of biographical and autobiographical factors in literary dream visions, as well as the prominence of philosophical and theological inquiry which drives a good many dream vision plots).

Review of Scholarship

Twentieth-century studies of the dream vision work to define the genre and explore its appeal throughout the late medieval period. Charles Muscatine's *Chaucer and the French Tradition* establishes a literary context for Chaucer's poetry, including his dream visions, by demonstrating the important influence of French poetry from the *Roman de la Rose* to fourteenth-century dream poets familiar to Chaucer, including Guillaume de Machaut and Jean Froissart.[10] Muscatine's approach thus establishes a tradition for English dream vision poetry while demonstrating ways in which it continued to engage with contemporary continental literature. This approach is taken up again nearly thirty years later by James I. Wimsatt in *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries: Natural Music in the Fourteenth Century*, which expands on Muscatine's work by considering how the French practice of incorporating musical pieces into their poetry informs Chaucer's own practice.[11] Comparative studies of English and continental dream poetry, particularly French poetry, are characteristic of a good many studies of the genre to the present day.[12] In one of the earliest of the dream vision genre studies, *The Realism of Dream Visions*,[13] Constance B. Hieatt sets about to determine why the dream vision genre was so attractive to medieval poets for certain

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[10] Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley, 1966).

[11] James I. Wimsatt, *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries: Natural Music in the Fourteenth Century* (Toronto, 1991).

[12] See also William Calin's comprehensive comparative study, *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* (Toronto, 1994).

[13] Constance B. Hieatt, *The Realism of Dream Visions: The Poetic Exploitation of the Dream-Experience in Chaucer and His Contemporaries* (The Hague, 1967).

kinds of work.[14] She is particularly interested in "dream psychology" found within

dream visions, details which lend a realistic, dream-like quality to the vision and may

explain the genre's appeal to medieval writers and their audiences. Hieatt focuses on

English literature of the fourteenth century, namely the works of Chaucer, *Pearl*, and

Piers Plowman. Although this is a rather limited selection, she does note that her

choices are varied in content and subject, although similar in form. Published a decade

later, A. C. Spearing's foundational study, *Medieval Dream-Poetry,* comprises one of

the earliest systematic overviews of the dream vision genre, beginning with the literature

of the French tradition before jumping ahead to the work of Chaucer, his

contemporaries, and his followers. The breadth of the study is well suited to examining

the variety of topics treated in dream visions, as well as their relation to medieval dream

psychology. Spearing does not, however, include Anglo-Saxon dream poetry in this

study, choosing to begin his survey in the thirteenth century with the *Roman de la Rose*.

The criticism of the last thirty years has expanded on earlier studies by analyzing

dream visions from specific angles, identifying subgenres of visionary literature, such as

the courtly poem and the religious poem, and at times questioning the dream vision's

generic qualities by breaking down barriers between seemingly distinct types of

visionary literature. In *Boethian Apocalpse*,[15] Michael D. Cherniss focuses the study of

the dream vision to examine how fourteenth- and fifteenth-century dream poetry belongs

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[14] Hieatt notes that the *Gawain* poet, if he or she did author all for works in Cotton Nero A.x, chooses the dream vision form for *Pearl*, but not for the other three works of the manuscript, indicating that the genre fit a particular need and was not simply used for imitation's sake.

[15] Michael D. Cherniss, *Boethian Apocalypse: Studies in Middle English Vision Poetry* (Norman, OK, 1987).

to a tradition which can be traced back to Boethius's well-known visionary masterpiece, the *Consolation of Philosophy*. His genre study is thus narrowed to examine the influence of a single foundational text on a popular mode of literature. J. Stephen Russell's *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form*[16] interrogates the generic features of the dream vision, seeking to determine how constellations of motifs along with authorial intent can help modern scholars to determine what is and is not a dream vision poem.[17] This monologue contributes to boundary studies of the dream vision genre, erecting a wall around a select number of "true" dream visions and banishing others outside it. Published in the same year, Kathryn L. Lynch's *High Medieval Dream Vision* narrows its focus onto a subgenre of the dream vision characterized by "a set of repeating allegorical characters – Nature, Genius, and Reason – and arguments about sex, love, the limits of human knowledge, and the use and status of poetic fictions"[18] and represented by such works as Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae* and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*. She argues that this "high medieval" dream vision responds to and defends "a philosophically realist paradigm within a framework of continuous change."[19] Lynch's study explores the reasons why the genre is ideal for the exploration of abstract

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[16] J. Stephen Russell, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus, 1988).

[17] For instance, Russell argues that Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* is a dream vision, but that Dante's *Divine Comedy* is not.

[18] Kathryn L. Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford, 1988), 7.

[19] Lynch, *High Medieval Dream Vision*, 16.

philosophical ideas, and represents a movement (which I will continue) to identify

distinct types of dream vision literature within the larger established genre.

More recently, Michael St John argues in *Chaucer's Dream Visions: Courtliness
and Individual Identity*[20] that each of Chaucer's four dream visions treats the courtly

subject in such a way that allows for critical thinking on an individual level with regard

to the court. Thus, the Man in Black represents an unthinking devotion to French courtly

tradition in his intemperate grieving; it is the narrator (and, by extension, reader) who is

able to see his subjection to the tradition as harmful. His approach is representative of a

good many scholarly studies which approach visionary literature from a social and

historical perspective.[21] Dream vision matter is driven by the contemporary events and

social practices of the poet's time and provides insight into the customs and concerns of

both the author and his or her audience. Likewise, John Bowers's study *The Politics of*
Pearl*: Courtly Poetry in the Age of Richard II* frames the dream vision in terms of the

fourteenth-century culture of the nobility and its relationship to the court of Richard II.[22]

Taking a similar historicist approach to St John's and Bowers's, Renate Blumenfeld-

Kosinski draws together works of literary and visionary writers alike in the study *Poets,*

[20] Michael St John, *Chaucer's Dream Visions: Courtliness and Individual Identity* (Aldershot, 2000).

[21] See, for example, Helen Barr's "Major Episodes and Moments in *Piers Plowman* B" (in Andrew Cole and Andrew Galloway, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to* Piers Plowman (Cambridge, 2014), 15-32), which likens Langland's Lady Meed to Alice Perrers, the mistress of Edward III.

[22] John Bowers, *The Politics of* Pearl: *Courtly Poetry in the Ages of Richard II* (Cambridge, 2001).

Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Schism, 1378-1417.[23] Moving beyond traditional

barriers between the two genres, she unites the two in her study of the ways in which

visionary literature served as an outlet for anxieties brought about by the ecclesiastical

instability of the Great Schism. Finally, Jessica Barr's *Willing to Know God: Dreamers*

and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages,[24] while maintaining some distinction between

"literary" and "authentic" visionary experiences (which might be represented by *Piers*

Plowman and the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich, respectively), breaks down the barrier

between these traditional genres by demonstrating how both portray the vision as an

epistemological tool: "Examining these 'genres' and comparing their representations of

visionary knowing powerfully foregrounds the active role that the visionary or dreamer

had to play in the comprehension of the vision while problematizing the generic

distinctions between them."[25] Thus, Barr's study is concerned with ways in which

narrators of dream and visions attain knowledge while challenging traditional barriers

between the genres of autobiographical and fictional visionary texts.

  My study seeks continue the questioning of these genre distinctions by

approaching narratorial behavior from a different angle. Rather than focusing, as Barr

does, on methods of gaining knowledge, I will discuss an array of visionary behaviors,

outlined below. My study, like Barr's and Blumenfeld-Kosinski's, investigates what

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[23] Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Schism, 1378-1417*
(Pennsylvania, 2006).

[24] Jessica Barr, *Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages* (Columbus,
2010).

[25] Barr, *Willing to Know God*, 12.

Barbara Newman has noted to be an area under-investigated by medieval scholars: the ambiguous line between "authentic" and "fictional" visions which leads to "in-between" texts which can be interpreted as either autobiographical or literary more often than is usually acknowledged.[26] I will also follow Lynch's lead in defining subgenres of dream vision literature so that I can examine the narrator's behavior in a variety of specific visionary contexts. By comparing narrators' roles in autobiographical mystical, religious literary, and secular literary texts (which will be defined in the chapter outline below), I intend to demonstrate that the boundary between biographical and literary visionary literature fades and often disappears; in some cases, this occurrence suggests exciting new readings for works previously assumed to belong solidly in one category or the other.

Methodology

This study includes analysis of texts spanning from the *Dream of the Rood* through the work of the late medieval Chaucerians. I take a wide view of medieval visionary texts in order to more successfully describe the patterns exhibited by narrators of the Middle Ages. In mystical texts, the narrator is considered to be equivalent with the author attributed to the work (that is, Margery Kempe is the narrator of the *Book of Margery Kempe*).[27] While the possible intervention of scribes in the works of religious

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[26] Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2003), 26.

[27] This is not to imply that the mystics are artless in their self-representations, and one might question whether there can ever be a true equation between the author of a work and his or her representation on the page. Self-representation, considered from a rhetorical viewpoint, is always skewed according to context and audience. It may be more accurate to say that the Margery Kempe of the *Book of Margery Kempe* is a

professionals, particularly women, will be addressed as appropriate, the author/narrator

is considered to be the individual whose first-person visionary account is being

described, regardless of whether he or she actually held the pen which first transcribed it.

In literary dream visions, a distinction between poet and narrator is typically assumed.

The narrator is a more or less fictional construct who may bear similarities with the poet.

Chaucer's narrators are notable for occasional hints at self-representation (particularly in

the *House of Fame* and the *Legend of Good Women*). However, when the poet is

unknown, as in the case of *Pearl*, the narrator is typically not assumed to represent the

author or to enact autobiographical scenes. As we will see in Chapter IV, modern

scholarship tends to be cautious of reading biographical details into dream visions where

no external evidence to support such a reading exists; thus, autobiographical readings of

Piers Plowman have fallen under scrutiny. In this study, I will proceed with caution

when discussing the relationship between the poet and narrator in literary dream visions;

the narrator and poet will be considered distinct unless considerable evidence points to

the contrary.

The tendency to read a narrator's behavior in terms of activity and passivity is

not new.[28] It has proven a helpful schema for discussing character activity, and this

project will build on it by defining a range of specific narratorial roles which represent a

spectrum of active and passive stances in relation to the visionary landscape, events, and

version of Margery (who seems to be intent on presenting herself as a remarkable mystic), but not the only
one (we might wonder how she represented herself in her mundane, everyday roles as wife, mother, beer-
maker, neighbor, and so on).

[28] For example, Jessica Barr describes mystics' acquisition of knowledge in terms of their activity and
passivity (*Willing to Know God*, 16-19).

characters. The bulk of this project will involve analyzing representative texts from a

variety of visionary subgenres in order to identify patterns in the narrator's behavior and

establish links between varieties of literature that have previously been read largely in

isolation from one another. The aim is not only to encourage cross-readings of these

subgenres, but also to provide a helpful vocabulary for describing varieties of medieval

visionary literature and the roles of their narrators.

The most passive of narratorial modes is also universal: that of Witness. There is

no visionary account unless the narrator has watched it unfold so that he or she can

report back to the audience. This role does not require any particular exertion on the

narrator's part, and, along with the post-visionary telling/recording of the event, may

constitute the entirety of the narrator's "activity" during the visionary sequence.

Chaucer's eavesdropping on the birds' mating in the *Parliament of Fowls* is thus

markedly passive; the subjects of his dream vision give no indication that they are aware

of the human spy among them. He does not influence the scene before him in the

slightest,[29] and functions as a window into the fantastic courtly event. The role of

Witness (along with that of Transmitter, as we shall see) represents a "baseline" activity

which all visionary narrators share. Unless the visionary experience is seen by a primary

witness, it cannot be passed down and discussed.

The measure of activity and passivity, I would like to note here, is a somewhat

subjective endeavor, and I wish to qualify the ordering of the roles which proceed

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[29] That is, provided that we take for granted that the visionary sequence is being transmitted in an accurate and honest fashion. Barring any significant evidence to the contrary, this study will treat visionary accounts as accurate representations of events.

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upward in activity from that of Witness. In my ordering of active stances, I will work

from those with lesser to greater physical, measurable/perceptible influence on the

content and direction of the vision, thus moving from those occurring outside the vision

(before or afterward) to those which take place within the vision proper. I would like to

stress, however, that the ultimate activity of stances is largely reliant on context, and that

I do not find the hierarchy of sorts which I have established here for the purposes of

organization to be universally accurate or impervious to challenge. Is the dreamer of

Pearl, for instance, more active when he declares his love for the Maiden and expresses

his discontent for the heavenly system which has made her distant and nearly

unrecognizable, or when he dashes into the river which separates them? The latter

action is more physical and, perhaps, more "active" than the former; however, the lion's

share of the content of *Pearl* is shaped by verbal expression of the narrator's will, not by

physical interaction with characters or scenery. The ordering from lesser to greater

physical engagement may be a traditional way of measuring activity, but it is not the

only way. Measures of activity, when they can be determined, must always be

considered in the context of the work. The purpose of this study, in any case, is not to

argue for a set scale of activity or passivity, but to compare patterns of behaviors across

types of visionary literature.

The role of Catalyst is used to describe the presence of explicit, pre-visionary

activity on the narrator's part which initiates his or her mystical experience. In an

autobiographical vision (such as Julian of Norwich's), this normally manifests when the

mystic indicates that he or she has been pursuing specific spiritual knowledge during

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waking life, which is accordingly provided during the mystical sequence. In this case, the exertion of will toward discovery or growth is taken as an action which catalyzes the vision, much in the same way in which a follower of Freud might explain that a waking anxiety or obsession spawns a related dream sequence. This activity applies equally to literary visions when the content of a narrator's dream provides an answer to an explicitly-stated, waking quest for knowledge. In *Piers Plowman*, the narrator, Will, expresses over and over his preoccupation with knowing Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest; this quest for perfection unites his numerous didactic dream sequences.

While the activities constituting catalysis must occur before the vision occurs, those which establish the role of Transmitter must occur afterward. As mentioned earlier, the role of Transmitter is a universal one; if the dreamer or mystic does not share his or her experience with others, then there is nothing to know or discuss. The transmission of information can be made to an all-inclusive audience or to a limited one (mystical texts, for example, may be intended for an exclusive audience of religious professionals, or the visionary might choose to include lay readers as well). Implicit in the sharing of the visionary account, autobiographical or literary, is the notion that its contents are valuable and applicable to more individuals than the narrator alone. The narrator may choose to write the account himself or herself, or he or she may dictate it to others. In some texts, the transmission of the visionary content remains implicit by virtue of its recorded existence, while in others (such as the writings of Mechthild of Magdeburg) the act of inscribing and sharing the vision is addressed explicitly in the text.

Moving one step closer to the vision proper, we come to the role of Interpreter. Interpretation of visionary accounts can occur either during the vision or as a result of contemplation after waking from the experience. In her ninth vision, for example, Hadewijch demonstrates her competency as a reader of symbolic objects and figures in her encounter with Lady Reason; she does not need a guide to instruct her in the meaning of the images she encounters. In order to interpret the contents of their dreams, visionaries assume a level of authority, typically of a spiritual nature. Given the often esoteric images which populate their visions, the narrator's role as Interpreter opens up his or her experience to a wider audience. Readers are provided the key to entering the mystical world and benefiting from the hidden knowledge revealed in private to the visionary. As will become evident in Chapters IV and V, however, the role of Interpreter is not universal, and, in fact, is often omitted in late medieval dream visions. The content of these fictional visions (including *Pearl*, *Piers Plowman*, and the dream poetry of Chaucer) is apparently familiar enough that the narrator is not required to explicitly interpret it; the role of Interpreter is, instead, trusted to the reader.

Verbal engagement represents another level of visionary participation. The role of Interlocutor can manifest in comparatively active and passive stances; I will refer to these speaking roles as Receptive Interlocutor and Dynamic Interlocutor respectively. The Receptive Interlocutor is one who is content to respond in an affirmative or supportive manner to any verbal statements or commands issued by other visionary figures. He or she may agree to complete a task, for instance, or may concur with a proposition uttered by a companion. In this case, the focus of the narrative is typically

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on speech and actions performed by characters other than the narrator, whose activities are limited to those of Witness and Receptive Interlocutor within the vision. The Dynamic Interlocutor, on the other hand, does more than simply agree with statement and take commands; this narrator exerts his or her will on the visionary landscape through speech. Mechthild of Magdeburg is notable as a strong Dynamic Interlocutor who does not simply take commands, but issues them to God himself. By so doing, she enacts her desires through language, initiating the release of souls from purgatory. The Jeweler of *Pearl* is less successful in changing his circumstances through conversation with the Maiden, although his exertion of will is notable.

Finally, physical action is represented in the role of Agent. Like Interlocutors, I have separated Agents into two types marked by varying degrees of activity: the Guided Agent and the Dynamic Agent. The Guided Agent, like the Receptive Interlocutor, tends to perform actions at the request of or in agreement with other visionary characters. John of Patmos, when he is commanded to consume the scroll given to him by the angel in the Apocalypse, fits the role of the Guided Agent. The action conforms to the will of the guide, not of the narrator. The Dynamic Agent performs actions according to his or her own will, and without prompting by others. When *Pearl*'s Jeweler throws himself into the river which separates him from the Maiden at the end of his vision, he is a Dynamic Agent; he even admits that he understands that his behavior is contrary to the Lamb's will, and that he performs the desperate action despite the risk of death that it brings. While the Guided Agent is happy to perform the script composed

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by other visionary figures, the Dynamic Agent is willing to disrupt the status quo, for good or for ill.

These roles (outlined in Appendix A) comprise the vocabulary which will be used in order to describe narratorial behavior in the dreams and visions analyzed in this study. While different patterns of roles will emerge from text to text, the examination of narrators' behavior across autobiographical and literary visionary works will not only bring to light the similarities between particular pieces that were previously not read together, but will also reveal specific innovations that might be used to better describe works contained in either grouping.

Chapter Outline

The chapters of this study are organized to move from one subgenre of visionary literature to the next. Toward this purpose, the category of the literary dream vision will be broken into two subgenres: the religious and secular literary dream vision. These classifications will be described in greater detail in the following chapters; in summary, the religious dream vision is a work with a theological or spiritual problem at the center (such as *Pearl*), while the secular dream vision is largely concerned with matters of the court and courtly love (such as *The Book of the Duchess*).

Chapter II, however, will begin by considering two works typically read as occupying distinct genres: Julian of Norwich's *Showings* and the anonymous Old English dream poem, *The Dream of the Rood*. This chapter directly addresses the concerns of the study by challenging the wide scholarly consensus that the *Dream of the Rood* should be read as a literary dream vision rather than an autobiographical one. By

comparing the roles of Julian and the narrator of the *Dream of the Rood*, as well as by discussing the work of Old English visionary-poets Cædmon and Cynewulf, I will argue that while it is impossible to determine whether the events of the *Dream* can be considered autobiographical, particularly in the absence of any biographical information on its poet, it is equally impossible to prove that they should be considered unequivocally fictional. The behavior of the narrator allows enough ambiguity to permit speculation about an Old English mystic whose work resembles that of Julian of Norwich in many ways. This chapter reveals just one example of interpretive possibilities which the narratorial approach to visionary literature allows.

Chapter III comprises an analysis of the first of three subgenres of visionary literature, the autobiographical vision. It opens with discussion of the complex, two-way influence between the tropes and metaphors of the courtly religion of love (exemplified in the *Roman de la Rose*) and the language of the Christian faith and mysticism. The two courtly mystics (that is, mystics who make use of the language of courtly literature in the spiritual contexts of their writings) central to discussion in this chapter are thirteenth-century visionary writers Hadewijch of Antwerp and Mechthild of Magdeburg. Analysis of their strategies as narrators not only reveals a complex relationship with the religion of love (which is employed to an extent, but falls short of expressing the surpassing wonder of their mystical encounters), but also a progression in assumption of active roles corresponding with spiritual development (in Hadewijch's case) as well as distinct rhetorical choices influencing the expression of narratorial roles (particularly in Mechthild's authoritative writing).

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Chapter IV moves to the next closest subgenre of visionary text, the religious literary dream vision. The Gawain-poet's *Pearl* and William Langland's *Piers Plowman* are chosen as representative texts of this grouping. Because these works, like those of the mystics, are concerned above all with theological and spiritual matters, the question that this chapter seeks to answer is whether the narrators of the literary works can be distinguished from those of the autobiographical texts in any significant way. Through analysis of these narrators' roles in comparison to those in Chapter III, it is revealed that the religious literary narrator lacks the authority and interpretive powers of the non-literary mystic. The literary narrator's abandonment of the role of Interpreter highlights the artistic freedom of the poet (to create narrators who, unlike the mystics, are allowed to "fail," or at least fall short of ideal reception and understanding, in their visionary encounters). It also suggests that matters discussed in religious literary visions are typically not as esoteric in nature as those of the mystics, and that the role of Interpreter can therefore be passed safely to an educated or perceptive lay audience.

Chapter V involves analysis of the last visionary subgenre, the secular literary dream vision, represented by Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. Building on the observations related to the Interpreter role in the previous chapter, it discusses ways in which the late medieval obtuse dream narrator continues to abandon his or her interpretive potentials, either through subversion or a lapse of intellect. In the *Book of the Duchess*, the narrator's tendency to mask his knowledge in favor of cultivating a mask of agreeable ignorance is discussed in terms of class-consciousness and rhetorical strategies. The narrator of the *Testament of Cresseid*,

on the other hand, presents a case of a narrator who believes himself to be an adept interpreter of visionary events, but who, in fact, makes plain his inability to grasp the true meaning of Cresseid's spiritual development in his flawed closing moral. In both these works, the poets are shown to build upon the ways in which interpretation might be passed from the narrator to the audience, and how this transfer of the interpretive role enhances the poem as a whole.

Finally, Chapter VI revisits the patterns discovered in the four chapters described above, and hints at potential directions for further development to which this study points. Namely, the study of visionary narrators and performance (or narrators *as* performers) will be suggested as a natural direction for the next stage of inquiry, with particular attention paid to the involvement of the audience in the visionary sequence through the transferal of roles covered in Chapters IV and V.

CHAPTER II

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD AND THE ENGLISH VISIONARY TRADITION

Although the Vercelli Book's *Dream of the Rood* predates the *Roman de la Rose* by over two hundred years[30] and the English dream vision tradition by over three hundred years,[31] it fits neatly into the dream vision genre. The dreamer, possibly identical with the poet, opens the poem with a simple, brief declaration: the audience is informed that the dreamer has experienced the "best of dreams," which came to him at *midre nihte*, when the *reordberend*, "speech-bearers," sought out rest. The urgency of the speaker's wish to reveal his dream is evident in his hurried introduction, which immediately gives way to a fantastic vision. I will discuss this vision momentarily, but first I would like to focus on the frame surrounding the poem's subject matter.

The frame of *The Dream of the Rood*, particularly the introductory context for the dream, might not be as lengthy or distinct as those found in the French and English

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[30] These calculations are based on the late tenth-century dating of the manuscript established by Förster, cited in Michael Swanton's edition of the text (Manchester, 1970).

[31] It might be argued, based on evidence from the *tituli* of the eight-century Ruthwell Cross, that *The Dream of the Rood* predates the *Roman de la Rose* and subsequent dream vision literature by several centuries more. Éamonn Ó Carragáin treats *The Dream of the Rood* as a separate poem from the lines found on the Ruthwell Cross; nevertheless, he notes the similarities between his analyses of the texts in *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the* Dream of the Rood *Tradition* (Toronto, 2005) and states in the introduction to the book that "in some sense, the Ruthwell poem is the ancestor, or at least a close relative, of the *Dream*" (7). While this chapter will focus on the Vercelli Book poem, not the Ruthwell fragments, I share Ó Carragáin's assessment of *The Dream of the Rood* as a later form of a poem in the Old English metrical tradition. The *Dream* is *at least* three hundred years older than the dream vision literature of the late Middle Ages; however, its roots trace back much further.

dream vision traditions,[32] but it serves to emphasize the vision's relevance to waking life

from the start of the poem. The devotional[33] nature of the piece dictates the content of

the frame; not only does the poem begin with the narrator's hurried, eager introduction,

but at the end of *The Dream of the Rood*, the dreamer reveals that the cross itself has

commanded that he share the vision with others, that they, too, might seek refuge in the

salvation of Christ achieved on the *sigebeam*, "victory tree." This is followed by a brief

meditation on the transitory nature of worldly joys and the never-ending bliss of heaven,

to which the narrator hopes to be borne after his death by the cross of Christ. From

beginning to end, the private vision is presented as an event of high public relevance, a

sermon of sorts which urges the audience to prepare for death and the afterlife. The

cross of the central vision is important insofar as it makes possible the narrator's (and,

by extension, redeemed humanity's) salvation through its unhappy participation in the

crucifixion. As noted above, in the narrator's conclusion, the cross is described as a

literal means of transportation to paradise: "ond ic wene me / daga gehwylc hwænne me

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[32] I would consider Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* (or its predecessor, Guillaume de Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne*) to be an example of a poem possessing the distinct frame structure characteristic of late medieval dream visions.

[33] There is some debate over whether the contents of the Vercelli Book were meant for private or public devotion, although critics generally agree that the original scribe was not copying the works for his own use (see Paul Szarmach, "The Scribe of the Vercelli Book," *Studia Neophilologica* 51 (1979): 179-88). Elaine Treharne reads the compilation as a document meant for public consumption through preaching ("The Form and Function of the Vercelli Book," in Alastair Minnis and Jane Roberts, eds., *Text, Image, Interpretation: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Its Insular Context in Honour of Éamonn Ó Carragáin* (Belgium, 2007), 253-66), while Éamonn Ó Carragáin argues that it functioned as a florilegium for private devotion, with *The Dream of the Rood* itself pertaining to the liturgy, namely the Annunciation ("Crucifixion as Annunciation: The Relation of 'The Dream of the Rood' to the Liturgy Reconsidered," *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 63.6 (1982): 487-505). Whether intended for public or private use, however, the consensus is that the contents of the book are meant for the spiritual edification of its audience. The contents of *The Dream of the Rood* do nothing to discredit that assessment.

dryhtnes rod, / […] on þysson lænan life gefetige / ond me þonne gebringe þær is blis mycel" (135b-36, 138-9).[34] The cross's narrative provides a natural transition to the dreamer's parting meditation on the eternal joys of heaven.

At the center of the poem is the vision itself, encountered by the narrator in his sleep: "Þuhte me þæt ic gesawe syllicre treow / on lyft lædan, leohte bewunden, / beama beorhtost" (4-6a). The cross hovers in the dreamer's sight, glorious in its initial description, covered in gold and set with gems. The imagery of the cross, however, is not stable; its shimmering beauty gives way to a gory sight as blood begins to seep from its right side. The dreamlike qualities of the poem are perhaps strongest in the narrator's description of the cross's ever-changing aspect, "hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed, / beswyled mid swates gange, / hwilum mid since gegyrwed" (22b-23).[35] The surreal gives way to the impossible: the cross speaks to the dreamer, relating the story of the crucifixion from the point of view of the instrument of torture, portraying itself as a hesitant retainer forced to participate in the slaying of its lord. The allegory of the Middle English dream visions is nowhere to be found, replaced with prosopopoeia and a strong riddling nature.[36] After Christ's death, the cross is taken down and buried, where it lies in wait until it is discovered by the followers of God, who adorn it with gold and

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[34] All citations of Vercelli Book texts are taken from the edition by Krapp and Dobbie (New York, 1932).

[35] Constance Hieatt discusses the dreamlike qualities present in *The Dream of the Rood* at length in her article "Dream Frame and Verbal Echo in *The Dream of the Rood*" (*Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971): 251-263).

[36] Margaret Schlauch's influential article, "The 'Dream of the Rood' as Prosopopoeia" (*Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown* (New York, 1940), 23-34.), argues for the link between the Old English poem and the conventions of Roman elegiac poetry. This, of course, does not exclude allegory as a possible literary device, but explains how the poet may have encountered and chosen those devices actually present in *The Dream of the Rood.*

silver, recalling the splendid imagery from the beginning of the vision. This triumphant conclusion gives way to the cross's command that the vision be shared and the narrator's final words.

The narrator himself (or herself) plays the expected role, setting the context (however brief) for the dream and relating its details in full before imbuing the private experience with significance for the audience. As in later dream visions, the narrator's presence does not necessitate that he take an active role in the activities of the dream. The narrator functions as a Witness (both in his passive listening when the cross speaks and in his eager repetition of the contents of his vision afterward) and as an Interpreter of sorts, not only repeating his dream experience but also explaining its significance to the audience. The poem is not merely a re-telling of the crucifixion from a unique point of view (the cross's); it is also a reminder of the Last Judgment and the life that follows, a call for the living to forsake the temporary pleasure of life and seek their rewards in heaven. The dream of the cross is therefore of universal relevance, and the narrator is important insofar as he repeats the vision sent to him and ensures that his audience understands why he is doing so.

But who is this narrator, really? His or her identity is ambiguous, both because of the limited evidence in the text, which, as discussed above, presents the narrator as a dreamer, a witness, and an interpreter, and the anonymous nature of the poem itself. One can speculate that the narrator of *The Book of the Duchess*, for instance, is a version of Chaucer himself: self-deprecating at points (in his exaggerated ignorance of the reason for the Man in Black's / John of Gaunt's suffering), tantalizingly (pseudo-?)

autobiographical at others (in the mysterious malady which keeps him from his sleep at the beginning of the poem, which is never named or explained). The narrator of the dream vision is fictional, just as the Man in Black himself is but a romanticized portrait of John of Gaunt, not the man himself; still, there is the temptation, when the author is known, to look for brief flashes of reality in the story.[37] In *The House of Fame,* this temptation is even greater; the narrator is called "Geffrey" and described by the Eagle as rather heavy-set, a feature which contemporary portraits of Chaucer do not contradict. Again, we have Chaucer's characteristic self-deprecation, humorously presented. But how much of this portrait is true to the poet himself? As a man who regularly interacted with members of the nobility and held positions in civil service throughout his life, we can hardly expect that Chaucer was oafish in his everyday dealings with others; indeed, it is difficult to believe that a clown could father the prominent late medieval school of Chaucerians that sprang up so shortly after his death.[38] Even when the narrator is explicitly identified as "Geffrey," he is still not quite the same "Geffrey" who authored the poem. Perhaps knowing the author of *The Dream of the Rood* would not help us understand his narrator so much after all; denied this crutch, we must turn again to the content of the poem itself.

  The Dream of the Rood itself leaves us with sparse details. We know that the narrator is Christian, as he is able to provide a short explanation of the dream's spiritual

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[37] One would imagine that the portrait is also idealized, given that Chaucer, who relied on the patronage of the upper-class, is writing the poem as a memorial to John of Gaunt's wife, Blanche. In his book, *Chaucer's Jobs* (New York, 2004), David Carlson writes at length about Chaucer's vested interest in upholding the authority of the ruling class and the ways in which his works reflect this interest.

[38] See Seth Lerer's *Chaucer and His Readers* (Princeton, 1993).

meaning at the end of the poem and relates the cross of Christ to his own salvation. As stated above, the dream is not merely recited; it is both interpreted for a wide audience and discussed in terms of its personal significance to the dreamer. We may perhaps infer that the narrator, the individual chosen to experience the dream and trusted to repeat it to others, is a spiritually-mature or pious individual who has been chosen for this role, as is typically the case in the reception of visionaries by those who hold their writings to be true and divinely-inspired. The *Dream* narrator is at least educated enough to understand how his vision relates to orthodox Christian faith and express this coherently to an audience. However, this may be reading too much into the role of the dreamer; whether or not he is particularly worthy of the dream and the role of Witness and Interpreter, we can only speculate.

The usual approach to *The Dream of the Rood* is that used in the interpretation of later medieval dream visions; the narrator is not assumed to be identical with author or poet. There may be some degree of overlap in identities, as noted in the discussion of Chaucer's works above, but generally the dream visions are read as non-biographical, or "fictional,"[39] works. A partial exception is found in N. A. Lee's "The Unity of *The Dream of the Rood*," which identifies the dreamer as "the second of a long line of English visionaries who have felt irresistibly impelled to write or tell of their experiences, or of some message that they have received, in vernacular English."[40] He

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[39] That is, non-factual. In this case, the truth of the dream and its interpretation is by no mean diminished, but the reader is not to assume that the poet ever actually had the dream; the cross's narrative is merely imagined as a means to arrive at the final discussion of salvation and Judgment Day.

[40] N. A. Lee, "The Unity of *The Dream of the* Rood," Neophilologus 56 (1972): 469-86, at 471.

continues to say that "the poem, in its preserved form at least, would make little sense if it did not conform to the normal pattern of visionary accounts," acknowledging the use of the visionary genre, but reading its presence as a poetic device. The dreamer is the mystic here, not the poet.[41]

But what if this dreamer-mystic *was* the poet? There is no way to prove that the two are linked, let alone identical (remember, not even Chaucer the Narrator is identical to Chaucer the Poet[42]), but it I would like to entertain this notion for a moment. Suppose that *The Dream of the Rood* has been placed into the wrong genre, assumed to belong to the dream vision tradition when it really belongs to the school of medieval mystical texts. The content of the poem, rather than creatively telling the story of the crucifixion from the unlikely point of view of the cross in order to introduce the theme of final judgment and salvation, becomes biographical, a vision sent to the dreamer/poet which accomplishes the same ends. How likely is this scenario? Is there any reason in particular to classify *The Dream of the Rood* as a literary piece rather than as a mystical text? And what does the piece's ambiguity suggest about the relationship between the genres of the literary dream vision and the visionary text?

One objection that could be raised to the idea that the poem might be visionary rather than literary is that *The Dream of the Rood* adheres to poetic devices found in Old

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[41] For more on the relationship between pre-Anselmian mysticism/meditative practice and Old English verse, see Anne Savage's "The Place of Old English Poetry in the English Meditative Tradition" in Marion Glasscoe, ed., *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1987* (Cambridge, 1987), 91-110.

[42] See the first chapter of *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York, 1970) for E. Talbot Donaldson's discussion on the difference between Chaucer the Poet and Chaucer the Pilgrim.

English works that are very clearly fictional. The meter is regular, although marked by the heavy use of hypermetric lines at points. The dream vision frame is certainly not unusual and will become more and more prevalent in the upcoming centuries. Margaret Schlauch's article, "The 'Dream of the Rood' as Prosopopoeia," and the many studies which proceed from her analysis[43] establish the presence of literary devices found in Roman poetry, strengthening the case that *The Dream of the Rood* is a carefully-crafted poetic exercise, despite its spiritual content. And yet there are many counter-objections to raise to these: first, the dream vision frame is not unheard of in visionary literature, as the Apocalypse of St. John easily demonstrates. Secondly, the use of literary devices and even verse is also not denied to the mystics, nor to non-fictional spiritual matter in general. The story of Cædmon, discussed in greater detail below, involves not only a gift of verse within a mystical dream experience, but the transmission of biblical history into verse form by the poet. The Junius Manuscript contents, including verse renderings of parts of Genesis, Exodus, and Daniel, are not considered fictional by any means, and the poetic form of the content does not diminish its importance. The Flemish mystic Hadewijch, who will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, is notable for her appropriation of courtly verse form and tropes in order to write poetically about holy matters. The notion that the artfulness of a piece detracts from its truthfulness or spirituality is simply not true where medieval texts are concerned.

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[43] See, for example, J. A. Burrow's "An Approach to *The Dream of the Rood,*" *Neophilologus* 43 (1959): 123-33.

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The anonymity of the text may lead to assumptions of a work's fictionality by default; it is easier, perhaps, to believe in the words of Walter Hilton or Julian of Norwich[44] than some unnamed, unknown entity.[45] *The Cloud of Unknowing* is among the most well-known anonymous visionary texts, but it is also written with such explicit reference to contemplative practices that its relevance to the mystical genre is not disputed. If *The Dream of the Rood* is, in fact, a visionary text, it may be misidentified due to its dream vision formatting (as noted above, "non-fiction" dream visions are not unheard of, but they are still not the norm) paired with its author's anonymity. In *The Textuality of Old English Poetry*, Carol Pasternack describes the 'I/We' narrator typical of anonymously-authored Old English poetry, including *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and, of course, *The Dream of the Rood*. She reads the use of the first-person pronoun as an early, developing stage, a narrator that is not yet fully functional in the way that modern readers expect: it is a formula, not a real person.[46] This reading of the Old English narrator as formula makes it natural to avoid reading the words of the dreamer in *The Dream of the Rood* as the words of the poet; the poet cannot be conflated with a narrator who, according to Pasternack, barely exists at all. However, I would like to resist this reading, as compelling as I find it in some Old English texts. There is a

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[44] Although by modern standards, biographies of named mystics are often sparse in detail. Does the mere presence of a name lend a work legitimacy?

[45] The skepticism surrounding Margery Kempe's writings might seem to contract this principal, although I would argue that she is the exception that proves the rule. Many modern readers complain that her *Book* is suspiciously, artificially true to the visionary genre, a "vision-by-numbers" written by a woman with aspirations to sainthood. Her lack of reliability stands in stark relief to those mystics who are considered sincere.

[46] Carol Pasternack, *The Textuality of Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1995), 13-14.

difference between the "we" in *Beowulf* and the "ic" in *The Dream of the Rood*. The first is nebulous, general, pertaining to no person or crowd in particular. It calls to attention, creates an audience for a story. It functions as well on a modern audience as on a medieval one (although a modern person may be significantly less informed on the history of Scyld Scefing). It is truly formulaic. The "I" in *The Dream of the Rood* (and much Old English elegiac poetry, I would argue) is not so ambiguous; this "I" falls asleep, has a dream, recalls a vision, and talks about his own salvation. It is true that this is not the developed, dynamic narrator that the modern reader has come to expect. Later medieval writers are much more generous with details of their personal lives, just as their names are more likely to be recorded in connection with their writings (Margery Kempe, for example, on both counts, if we are to take her writings as autobiographical[47]). However, I think it is dangerous to assume that these unnamed, undeveloped narrators are always simply formulas, referring to no one in particular. Perhaps the "I" is hypothetical, a character summoned from the air in order to have experiences and deliver sermons for the audience's edification: a puppet ready to deliver a script. Or perhaps not.

Anne Savage takes a step beyond N. A. Lee's identification of the dreamer/narrator as a mystic. In her article "Mystical and Evangelical in *The Dream of the Rood*: Private and Public," she first explores the dreamer in a monastic context, suggesting that he might be described as a contemplative or even a monk, and also, in

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[47] For an opposing view to the autobiographical reading of Kempe's work, see Lynn Staley's *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (Pennsylvania, 1994).

passing, allows that the poet might be "projecting himself into the dreamer."[48] This is

far from Pasternack's formulaic narrator; Savage not only looks for evidence that might

suggest something about the narrator's occupation and ideal audience, but also touches

on the possibility, however briefly, that the narrator might in fact be a representation of a

real person who had a real mystical experience. By contrasting Savage's reading from

more common analyses of the narrator, I do not necessarily intend to favor her focus

over other critics' interpretations of the dreamer. What I do wish to emphasize is that

neither Savage's mystic dreamer/poet nor Pasternack's formulaic narrator can be proven

decisively to represent the original poet's intentions. When the possibility of the

narrator being conflated with the poet is introduced, it becomes remarkably difficult to

distinguish *The Dream of the Rood* from any other medieval mystical text. There is no

way to prove that it *is* a non-fiction account of a visionary experience, but there is also

no detail which can conclusively eliminate it from the pool of possible mystical texts.

In order to explore this idea more carefully, I will compare *The Dream of the

Rood* first to the famous opening vision in Julian of Norwich's *Book of Showings*, and

secondly to the works of two other Old English poets, Cædmon and Cynewulf. My goal

is first to demonstrate the ambiguity between the dream vision and mystical genres.

Secondly, I wish to discuss the close relationship between visionary dreams, mystical

experience, and poetic expression present during the Old English period. Finally, at the

end of the chapter, I will discuss how my analysis of genre and *The Dream of the Rood*

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[48] Ann Savage, "Mystical and Evangelical in *The Dream of the Rood*: Private and Public," in Valerie M. Lagorio, ed., *Mysticism: Medieval & Modern* (Salzburg, 1984), 4-11, at 6.

sets the groundwork for the larger study of the dream vision genre and the medieval religious text.

The Dream of the Rood and Julian of Norwich's *Book of Showings*

The *Dream* narrator's initial vision of the cross, with its hallucinatory shifts between the shining gems and the streaks of blood, is probably the most striking image of the poem and has accordingly been the focus of many studies, particularly those which analyze the significance of cross as a physical object in medieval culture.[49] The image is arresting and frightening, commanding the dreamer's attention for the entirety of the vision, during which the powerful symbol gives a sermon ranging in scope from the cross's own gruesome and woeful history to its participation in the outcome of Judgment Day. The idea of the cross of Christ dominating a vision is, of course, not unique to *The Dream of the Rood*. One of the most well-known accounts is connected with Constantine and retold in Cynewulf's *Elene*, another Vercelli Book poem, when the emperor famously beholds an awesome vision of the cross before being commanded to take it as his sign into battle. The cross is not merely a concept in medieval literature; it is a symbol which draws the literal gaze, both in waking life (as the Ruthwell Cross and similar monuments attest) and in the imagination. Julian of Norwich's mystical vision of the cross combines the two, as the physical object morphs into something very different during her near-death experience.

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[49] See Annemarie E. Mahler's "*Lignum Domini* and the Opening Vision of *The Dream of the Rood*: A Viable Hypothesis?" *Speculum* 53.3 (1978): 441-59; Sandra McEntire's "The Devotional Context of the Cross Before A. D. 1000," in Paul E. Szarmach and Virginia Darrow Oggins, eds., *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Culture* (Kalamazoo, 1986), 345-56; and Barbara C. Raw's "*The Dream of the Rood* and its Connections with Early Christian Art," *Medium Aevum* 39.3 (1970): 239-56 and "The Cross in *The Dream of the Rood*: Martyr, Patron and Image of Christ," *Leeds Studies in English* 38 (2007): 1-15.

Julian of Norwich's *Showings* begins with the story of her brush with death, which initiates her famous series of visions. On the fourth day of a life-threatening illness, Julian is visited by a curate, who intends to administer last rites to the dying woman. He holds the crucifix before her eyes, and Julian describes a shift in perception. The cross occupies the whole of her sight, just as it does in the *Dream* narrator's vision. Her surroundings fade to darkness, and the cross alone is illuminated. She becomes transfixed, describing all else surrounding the cross as exceedingly ugly and frightening, as if "it had ben much occupied with fiendes" (*Showings* 3.31-2).[50] This initial visionary experience is present in both the short and long texts of *Showings*, told in remarkably similar language; while her account of the following visions is revised and expanded throughout her lifetime, this image remains seared into her memory.[51] The crosses of Julian's mystical writings and *The Dream of the Rood* are tied together not only by their commanding presence, but also by their supernatural, inexplicable appearances. The cross of the *Dream* is at once glorious and gory; Julian's cross shines with a mysterious, holy light against a suddenly darkened world. It is clear from the point that the cross appears that the narrator is moving away from the physical world toward an extraordinary encounter.

Julian's vision of the cross, much like that of the *Dream* narrator, serves as the threshold into a larger, exceedingly complex mystical experience. Just as the crucifix

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[50] All references to Julian of Norwich's *Showings* are based on the long text edited by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Toronto, 1978).

[51] For more on Julian and revisions, see Barbara Newman's "Redeeming the Time: Langland, Julian, and the Art of Lifelong Revision," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 23 (2009): 1-32.

transforms into a terrible symbol of power, Julian's physical life fades as she moves into

the metaphysical realm, full of visions that will take a lifetime to recover from her

memory and unravel in her mind before returning once more to physical reality through

the pen. The similarity between *Showings* and *The Dream of the Rood* thus extends far

beyond superficial details such as the presence of a commanding cross which welcomes

the visionary into a realm of private revelation. The vision first involves an escape from

the physical world into a world of spiritual truth; the narrator is severed from every day,

waking life either through the more commonplace activity of sleep or through the more

dramatic near-death experience.

The visionary next experiences or "sees" images linked to spiritual truths that

may not be immediately self-evident. The *Dream* narrator is confronted by a cross,

whose narrative eventually leads to a short sermon contrasting the temporary joys of

earthly life with the lasting joys of eternal life, attainable through Christ's sacrifice on

the cross. Julian's far more complex series of visions also demand her interpretation; the

simple image of an object like a hazelnut, for instance, leads to the far-from-evident

explanation of its spiritual significance:

> "I looked theran with the eye of my vnderstanding, and thought: What
>
> may this be? And it was answered generaelly thus: / It is all that is made.
>
> I marvayled how it might laste, for me thought it might sodenly haue
>
> fallen to nawght for littlenes. And I was answered in my vunderstanding:
>
> It lasteth and ever shall, for god loueth it; and so hath all thing being by
>
> the loue of god. In this little thing I saw iij propreties. The first is þat

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god made it, the secund that god loueth it, the thirde that god kepyth it."

(5.11-18)

Julian methodically follows the description of her vision with an explanation of its meaning. "What can this be?" she asks herself, speaking at once for herself and her audience. "Here is its meaning," she follows, providing a concise answer for the question posed. She answers her own questions by making use of her "vnderstanding," meeting revelation with reason. Julian's interpretation is followed by a summation of the meaning of her vision. The hazelnut-item is not an idle hallucination, because it contains within its humble appearance three universally-applicable truths: God made it, God loves it, and God keeps it. Julian understands that is not enough for the visionary to merely recite a list of images, for this would mean nothing to the audience. Its public relevance is found in its deeper meaning.

Finally, the visionary, having returned to earthly reality, brings with him or her the knowledge gained from the spiritual realm. This is not only contained in the brain, but physically inscribed with ink and parchment. The vision takes on a solid, tangible existence independent of the original dreamer or mystic, and is free to occupy the minds of others. This is an extension of the task of interpretation; now that the visionary has established that his or her experience contains a demonstrable spiritual truth, it must be passed on to others.[52]

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[52] Anne Savage provides an excellent analysis of the dual private and public contexts of *The Dream of the Rood* (which, I would argue, is applicable to a good many medieval visionary texts) in "Mystical and Evangelical in *The Dream of the Rood*: Private and Public," cited above.

The Dream of the Rood, then, can be compared to a quintessential mystical text in terms of both content and delivery. Both texts make use of a striking cross image which arrests the visionary's attention and initiates the mystical experience. Both emphasize an intersection between spiritual sight and the powers of reasoning, either implicitly (in the *Dream*) or explicitly (in *Showings*). Both include the presentation of an image or images which are afterward interpreted for the audience. Both demonstrate audience-awareness, both through the inclusion of a coherent interpretation of scenes and events and discussion of the vision's relevance to those who did not witness it firsthand. In terms of my classification of narrators' roles in visionary literature, both Julian and the *Dream* narrator can be described as Witnesses in their passive stances and Interpreters and Transmitters in their active stances (note that of the active stances represented, these are lower on the spectrum and lean toward passivity). I would argue that these similarities make it very difficult to state conclusively that *The Dream of the Rood* belongs to a different genre from Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, despite the span of time that separates them.

One might object that *The Dream of the Rood* exists in different stages, both on the Ruthwell Cross and in the Vercelli Book, and suggest that this diminishes its authority as a visionary text. I would counter that Julian's work also exists in at least two versions, albeit separated by a shorter span of time than the *Dream* poems. Does a text lose its authority if it is revised by an individual other than the original author? By modern sensibilities, it probably does. It is less clear whether it does by the standards of

the Old English metrical tradition, which notably lacks the emphasis on authorship and originality that developed in later centuries.

Starting with the allowance that the narrator of *The Dream of the Rood* is not necessarily a formulaic non-entity, but may actually represent a real person, namely a version of the poet himself, it becomes very difficult to distinguish the poem from more established mystical texts, such as *Showings*. The similarities between the two are not at all superficial; they overlap both in terms of content and their focus on spiritual edification. But for all their shared qualities, it is still true that a span of several centuries separates the two; the Old English of the *Dream* has developed into a late form of Middle English by the time Julian has her near-death experience. Accordingly, I would like to spend the next section considering evidence from Old English literature that the *Dream of the Rood* visionary is comparable to those in a contemporary timeframe. My focus will be on the accounts of two Old English poets who experienced their own brushes with the supernatural: Cædmon and Cynewulf.

Cædmon and Cynewulf

The story of Cædmon's *Hymn*, recorded in Book 4, Chapter 24 of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, is so well known that I will summarize it only briefly. A lay brother of Whitby Abbey named Cædmon flees the entertainment at a feast, apparently due to his inability to join in the festivities by taking up the harp which is being passed around the company and singing in turn.[53] Retreating to the

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[53] In his article "The Theology of Caedmon's *Hymn*" (*Leeds Studies in English* 7 (1974): 1-12, at 9), D. R. Howlett suggests that Cædmon might have fled through shame at having to sing a pagan song, which

stable, he falls asleep and has a dream. In this dream, "someone"[54] commands the

brother to "Canta mihi aliquid," "sing me something." Upon replying that he cannot

sing anything at all, Cædmon is instructed to sing about creation. To his astonishment,

Cædmon finds that he is able to do so; when he wakes, the miraculous gift of poetry has

not left him. Not only does he remember his creation song, but he finds that when he

has sacred history or doctrine read to him, he is able to transform this raw material into

new, holy songs. At the encouragement of the abbess, Cædmon takes monastic vows

and continues his work in the monastery, producing metrical versions of the book of

Genesis, Israel's flight from Egypt, the history of Christ's Incarnation, Crucifixion, and

Resurrection, and the Last Judgment, among untold others. At the end of his pious life,

Cædmon enjoys one last blessing, accurately predicting his immanent death, taking the

Eucharist, and dying quietly in his sleep.

The historical veracity and origins of the story have been explored from several

angles. A good many articles have been written comparing Bede's Cædmon story with

pieces of folklore that share the motif of the divinely-inspired poet.[55] While not all of

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disagreed with his conscience; thus, his story is significant in that he learns how to produce doctrinally-sound verse which is not too frivolous for a Christian to sing. While I agree with Howlett that Cædmon's significance is based largely on his ability to produce Christian literature in Old English metrical form, I prefer Bede's straightforward explanation: Cædmon literally could not compose poetry prior to his dream, and his story is treated as noteworthy, even miraculous, for this reason.

[54] All references to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, both in the original Latin and modern English translation, are taken from Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors's edition (Oxford, 1969).

[55] See Theodore M. Andersson, "The Caedmon Fiction in the *Heliand* Preface*," PMLA* 89.2 (1974): 278-84 and "Passing the Harp in Bede's Story of Caedmon: A Twelfth Century Analogue," *English Language Notes* 15 (1977): 1-4; Dennis Cronan, "Cædmon and Hesiod," *English Studies* 87.4 (2006): 379-401; Frederick Klaeber, "Analogues to the Story of Cædmon," *Modern Language Notes* 42.6 (1927): 390; G.

these studies discuss the question of the story's authenticity explicitly,[56] other scholars

are more direct in their approach. Colmán O'Hare's reading of the Cædmon story

focuses on its potential for spiritual edification rather than its status as history: "Drawing

on his creative and scholarly background and experience, Bede in this tale upholds the

rhetorical primacy of Scripture. Moreover, he illustrates that supremacy through a

touching, vivid and memorable example of the common medieval poetic form, the

dream-vision, in which a human dreamer receives a 'truth' through the agency of a divine

messenger."[57] While he does not deny that the story is meant as history in part, O'Hare

favors an emphasis on Bede's reason for including it in the *Ecclesiastical History*. It is a

lesson first, history second. G. R. Isaac takes a step further, arguing that Bede's

Cædmon story is dubious and that the *Hymn* is unlikely to have existed at all in an

original Old English text (he argues that the Old English translations are derived from

Bede's Latin).[58] While there is no consensus among scholars regarding the authenticity

of the Cædmon story, the seeds of doubt have been generously sown.

A. Lester, "The Cædmon Story and Its Analogues," *Neophilologus* 58.2 (1974): 225-37; and John D. Niles, "Bede's Cædmon, 'The Man Who Had No Story,'" *Folklore* 117 (2006): 141-55.

[56] G. A. Lester, however, does explore the question of authenticity in "The Cædmon Story and Its Analogues," referenced above.   While acknowledging similarities between the Cædmon story and its commonly-discussed analogues, particularly the Mohammed story, he argues not only that Bede went to great lengths to emphasize the story's authenticity, but also that modern scholars are less likely to take the existence of analogues as proof of inauthenticity than nineteenth-century scholars.

[57] Colmán O'Hare, "The Story of Cædmon: Bede's Account of the First English Poet," *American Benedictine Review* 43.3 (1992): 346-47.

[58] G. R. Isaac, "The Date and Origin of *Cædmon's Hymn*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 98.3 (1997): 217-28, at 226.

Regardless, the inclusion of the story in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, while certainly not proving that a man named Cædmon ever existed or experienced a miraculous dream, does suggest that it belongs to the historical genre, at least in Bede's opinion. Furthermore, it is set at a well-known and verifiable location, Whitby Abbey, around the same time as a known abbess, Hild, resided there.[59] There is nothing, aside from the extraordinary events of Cædmon's dream and gift of song, to suggest that the story is to be taken as fantasy or folklore. It may be classified as a hagiography, with the allowance that saints' lives, in Bede's time and long afterward (and even today, depending on one's religious beliefs), are not considered to be works of fiction.

Thus it is not unreasonable to conclude that the notion of a non-fictional person experiencing a true, holy vision in his or her sleep is not a foreign concept to the Middle Ages, a fact which a large body of medieval writings on the veracity and significance of dreams confirms.[60] Cædmon may not have existed; perhaps Bede's "translation" is the original poem, and the story is included in the *History* for the spiritual edification of the reader. However, to the medieval mind, Cædmon *could have* existed, and individuals who claimed to experience revelatory dreams were, at times, taken seriously. The idea of a *Dream of the Rood* visionary is no more fantastic than the idea of a Cædmon is; if anything, the additional biographical details given by Bede make Cædmon's story all the more remarkable, as he apparently had no special theological or education training to

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[59] Dennis Cronan discusses the chronology of Cædmon's time at Whitby Abbey in relation to Hild in "Cædmon's *Hymn*: Context and Dating," *English Studies* 91.8 (2010): 817-25.

[60] See Steven Kruger's *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1992) for a thorough survey of medieval literature and theory pertaining to dreams.

make his selection for the gift of poetry more likely. The narrator of *The Dream of the Rood*, for all we know, could have been an earlier Julian of Norwich, a contemplative individual with aspirations to greater spiritual knowledge and experience, such as those which Julian describes in the second chapter of *Showings* as the three gifts. A dreaming mystic in the early Middle Ages is not an impossibility.

Cædmon receives the gift of poetry; the *Dream* narrator, if he existed, received the gift of vision, which was afterward turned into poetry. These are not quite the same thing; the emphasis in Bede's story is on ability gained, not knowledge. A closer comparison to the *Dream* narrator can be found in Cynewulf, the poet who wove his name with runes into *Christ II, Elene, Fates of the Apostles*, and *Juliana*. *Elene* is of interest to my study for two reasons: for its inclusion in the Vercelli Book and shared motifs with *The Dream of the Rood* (the focus on the cross both as a powerful physical object/image and as a means to salvation) and for Cynewulf's epilogue, which discusses the source of his poetic inspiration and revelation, which evokes Cædmon's own supernatural gift.

The superficial link between *The Dream of the Rood* and *Elene* is not difficult to identify. *Elene* includes the well-known story of Constantine's vision of the cross, which he takes as a sign into battle. Like *Showings* and *The Dream of the Rood*, *Elene* is interested in portraying the cross as an icon or symbol; the main body of the story, however, shifts from a visionary cross to an emphatically literal or physical one. Constantine's mother, the eponymous Elene, goes on a quest to recover the cross of Christ as an artifact. This draws to mind the cross of *The Dream of the Rood*,

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specifically the portion of its story which refers to its recovery from the pit in which it had been cast and buried following the crucifixion. The cross is discovered by the followers of God, who adorn the once-humble cross with gold and silver, recalling the splendid imagery of the dreamer's initial encounter. The grouping of these two works together in the Vercelli Book seems to defy coincidence.[61]

The epilogue to *Elene* offers an even deeper connection between the two works. The focus on eschatology and Judgment Day is evident in the closing portions of both *Elene* and *The Dream of the Rood*; *Elene* is also a work that is not only concerned with the story it tells, but the reader's interpretation of its significance. In "Cynewulf's Epilogue to *Elene* and the Tastes of the Vercelli Compiler: A Paradigm of Meditative Reading," Éamonn Ó Carragáin describes Cynewulf's preoccupation with Judgment Day as "not the anxiety of a poet afraid that his poem might not come out right, but rather that of a monk aware that for himself and his readers death and judgment were swiftly approaching."[62] His status as a poet gives way to that of a prophet. Cynewulf may be focused on the "fyr" of Last Judgment and the frightening punishment that awaits the wicked (in contrast with the glory in store for believers), while the *Dream* narrator dwells instead on the lasting joy of heaven (in contrast with the transitory delights of the

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[61] Éamonn Ó Carragáin has done important work exploring the Vercelli Book as a compilation of works exploring prominent themes and ideas, including the liturgical calendar, meditation, and eschatology. See "Crucifixion as Annunciation: The Relation of 'The Dream of the Rood' to the Liturgy Reconsidered" (referenced above); "Cynewulf's Epilogue to *Elene* and the Tastes of the Vercelli Compiler: A Paradigm of Meditative Reading," in Christian J. Kay and Louise M. Sylvester, eds., *Lexis and Texts in Early English* (Amsterdam, 2011), 187-201; and "How Did the Vercelli Collector Interpret *The Dream of the Rood?*" *Occasional Papers in Linguistics and Language Learning* 8 (1981): 63-104.

[62] Ó Carragáin, "Cynewulf's Epilogue," 191.

earth); however, the closing emphasis of each poem is on the audience's need to prepare for Judgment Day and life after death. Meditation on Judgment spurs the reader to action on behalf of his or her soul.

The two poets also move from their own experiences outward. Cynewulf discusses his own sinful state, when he was "weorcum fah, / synnum asæled" (1242b-43a), before being saved by the cross of Christ. Ó Carragáin notes that Cynewulf achieves a smooth transition from "the microcosm of Cynewulf's body and its sins to the macrocosm of the world" in the acrostic portion of the epilogue, which leads to the closing sermon on Judgment Day.[63] Likewise, the *Dream* narrator progresses from his own faith in the cross's saving power and his anticipation of the permanent joys of heaven to a more universal message in the closing lines of the poem: "He us onlysde ond us lif forgeaf, / heofonlicne ham" (147-8a). Personal testimony provides a bridge between the main matter of the poem and its interpretation. The poet tells the audience "this is how the story applies to me; now we can clearly see what it means for you, and for the rest of humanity." Cynewulf is saved from his sins by the cross, and therefore the members of the audience must put their trust in the cross for their own salvation (or escape from damnation, given the focus on hellfire at the end of the poem). The *Dream* narrator waits for the cross to ferry him to eternal joy, and so must the audience, putting vain and earthy things aside in favor of lasting treasures. Every part of the poem is crafted to lead to an understanding of the story and its applicability.

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[63] Ó Carragáin, "Cynewulf's Epilogue," 193-95.

The portion of Cynewulf's epilogue that stands out in particular, however, is his discussion of the source of his spiritual understanding, which is represented in his poetry. Once again, Cynewulf's status as a poet cannot be easily separated from his occupation as a contemplative: the former relies totally on the latter. Beginning in line 1236, Cynewulf begins to discuss his word craft:

> Þus ic frod ond fus   þurh þæt fæcne hus
>
> wordcræftum wæf   ond wundrum læs,
>
> þragum þreodude   ond geþanc reodode
>
> nihtes nearwe.   Nysse ic gearwe
>
> be ðære rode riht   ær me rumran geþeaht
>
> wisdom onwreah. (*Elene* 1236-42a)

Here Cynewulf's efforts as a poet are met with divine revelation. He uses his skill to weave words, but this is not sufficient to produce inspired poetry. Cynewulf also needs to meditate, both on his words and on the cross itself:

> Ic þæs wuldres treowes
>
> oft, nales æne,   hæfde ingemynd
>
> ær ic þæt wundor   onwrigen hæfde
>
> ymb þone beorhtan beam,   swa ic on bocum fand,
>
> wyrda gangum,   on gewritum cyðan
>
> be ðam sigebeacne. (1251b-56a)

Cynewulf's meditation seems to be focused on two objects: the cross itself, and writings pertaining to the cross. The latter is significant in that it recalls activity associated with

the meditative practices of contemplatives. The link between the study of books and meditation is well-documented in Guigo II's *Scala Claustralium*, or *Ladder of Monks*,[64] which describes the eponymous ladder as being comprised of four rungs: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.[65] Just as one cannot reach the top of a ladder without first stepping up from lower rungs, each activity leads naturally to the next. Reading precedes meditation, which leads to prayer. Prayer comprises petition to God, while during the most sublime state, contemplation, the practitioner listens for the voice of God. Ó Carragáin notes the ascetic nature of Cynewulf's practice, pointing out that his habit of studying *nihtes* (1239a) falls in line with the Rule of St. Benedict, with its prescribed period of memorization and meditation before dawn.[66] Thus, Cynewulf's *Elene*, with its focus on the Final Judgment, takes on a devotional quality: "The primary function of Cynewulf's study of the material on the Cross was to make his mind susceptible to a higher activity, the activity of prayer. He wrote his poem to encourage his readers to open their hearts in turn to the promptings of the same Spirit, and, thus inspired, to pray for his soul."[67]

While the narrator of *The Dream of the Rood* does not convey the level of formal asceticism found in Cynewulf's *Elene* (notwithstanding Anne Savage's reading of the *Dream* narrator as a possible mystic), the role of the cross in dispensing revelation is

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[64] All references to Guigo II's *Scala Claustralium* are taken from the edition by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Kalamazoo, 1981).

[65] Guigo II, *Scala Claustralium*, 68.

[66] Ó Carragáin, "Cynewulf's Epilogue," 198.

[67] Ó Carragáin, "Cynewulf's Epilogue," 199.

strikingly similar in the two poems. Cynewulf's meditations on the cross bring insight

and understanding, leading to a devotional text which uses the looming dread of

Judgment Day to motivate his audience to soul-searching, prayer, and repentance. The

story of Elene's quest provides the reader with a text on the cross; presumably Cynewulf

meditated upon this story, among others, in his own quest for diving revelation.[68]

Perhaps the audience is meant to follow Cynewulf's example, taking the poem as a

source for their own meditations on the cross. Likewise, the *Dream* narrator is met by

the cross in his sleep; he is told another cross legend (which seems to intersect with the

matter discussed in *Elene*, the recovery of the long-lost cross), which contributes to

another devotional poem drawing the audience's attention to the end times and Judgment

Day (though with less emphasis on hellfire and more on heavenly rewards). The cross in

both poems functions as a means of revelation, a dispenser of wisdom and

understanding. While the *Dream* narrator(-poet?) does not include the autobiographical

details found in *Elene*, his reaction to a revelatory encounter with a cross is very similar

to that of Cynewulf. The story is turned to poetry, the reader instructed to look inward

and prepare the soul for its eternal fate.

 As I have demonstrated, the *Dream* narrator not only resembles the mystics of

the late medieval period, but is virtually indistinguishable from more contemporary, Old

English contemplatives. Cædmon, whom Bede depicts as a historical personage,

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[68] Jackson Campbell, for instance, claims that Cynewulf's *Elene* most closely follows the Latin story *Inventio Sanctae Crucis* ("Cynewulf's Multiple Revelations," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 3 (1972): 257-77, at 258). Whatever Cynewulf's source material, if one takes the final portion of his poem describing his meditative practices seriously, it follows naturally that meditation on a text like the *Inventio* could lead to the revelation he describes. The text might then serve the poet again as source material with the potential to similarly enlighten his audience.

whatever the truth may be, is representative of early medieval individuals who

experienced revelations in dreams and whose experiences were held to be true by their

contemporaries. The story of Cædmon's visionary dream also introduces the idea of

converting holy matter to verse, a practice carried out by both the *Dream* poet and

Cynewulf. The *Dream* poet, if he is equivalent to the narrator, does not stand out either

in terms of his mystical experience or his impulse to put his vision into verse. In fact,

Cynewulf not only versifies the story of *Elene*, but also explicitly addresses the topic of

divine inspiration in the epilogue to his religious poem. The main body of *Elene* is not

the poet's vision, although given Cynewulf's description of his meditative habits, which

focus on both the cross and writings about it, there is a strong implication that it at least

helped lead to the contemplative state he describes. Cynewulf's gift of knowledge

through the cross closely mirrors the *Dream* poet's encounter, which is delivered in the

form of a unique cross legend. The two poets use their stories in order to lead the

audience to a devotional state of mind fixed on the events of the Last Judgment. If

Cynewulf is accepted as a historical personage,[69] and his meditations on the cross are

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[69] Cynewulf's existence, like that of Cædmon, is a question debated among scholars, and is closely tied to questions of authorship. Frederick Tupper's article "The Philological Legend of Cynewulf" (*PMLA* 26.2 (1911): 235-79) is an early indicator both of the impulse among scholars to breathe life into their own image of the poet, the "featureless phantom" (236), and of the skepticism with which such efforts would be met, often rightly so. Carol Pasternack questions the often anachronistic understanding of Cynewulf as the unique "author" of every text he signs, given the collaboration that defines the Old English poetic tradition (*Textuality*, 16-19). Jason Puskar continues in this vein, arguing that Cynewulf's signature on *Fates of the Apostles* does not prove that he actually wrote it, but rather is evidence that he appended a preexisting poem to *Andreas* ("*Hwa þas fitte fegde?* Questioning Cynewulf's Claim of Authorship," *English Studies* 92.1 (2011): 1-19.). This would not constitute "plagiarism" (a modern concept), because the signature is not intended to denote a claim to the modern idea of authorship in the first place. Jacqueline Stodnick lampoons modern attempts to claim Cynewulf as an "author" in "Cynwulf as Author: Medieval Reality or Modern Myth?" (*Bulletin of the John Rylands Uniersity Library of Manchester* 79.3 (1997): 25-39), arguing that "criticism often reveals more about the nature of the critic than the text" (29);

taken as true, leading to a genuine mystical encounter, there is no reason that the *Dream* narrator, unnamed though he might be, should not be considered as a potential early medieval contemplative as well.

Conclusions

My purpose in beginning this study with a close analysis of *The Dream of the Rood* is to initiate a closer examination of the characteristics that separate the genres of the medieval dream vision and the visionary text. As I discussed in the beginning of the chapter, there is a question of authenticity in the way the dream vision narrator is read. In a few cases, such as the works of Chaucer, the narrator is allowed to possess some ties to the "real world," even if we assume that the depiction of the poet as narrator is semi-autobiographical at best. The narrators of visionary texts, on the other hand, are allowed to "exist" more easily (with perhaps a few reservations, which will be discussed in Chapter III) as autobiographical depictions of the mystic in question. This creates a distinction between the genres: whereas dream visions are "fictional," or non-biographical, mystical texts are more readily accepted as "non-fiction," or biographical.

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in other words, critics look for (and construct) an original, romanticized, thoroughly modern personality in Cynewulf because it is what they have grown accustomed to and come to expect in a poet, resulting in anything but Pasternack's (semi-)anonymous participant in an established verse tradition. Stodnick goes on to argue that, in the absence of any historical references to or record of existence of a poet named Cynewulf, the Cynewulf runes cannot conclusively be read as proof of any particular person at all, neither modern personality nor Old English poet (31). While I find this claim to be overly-skeptical (after all, I am claiming that, in the epilogue to *Elene*, one can catch brief glimpses of a distinct individual: a participant in the English mystical tradition), I agree with the above critics that Cynewulf the author did not necessarily compose all, or even most, of his verses originally. He certainly made use of preexisting metrical patterns and verse in his own compositions, as did his contemporaries. However, while avoiding the error of trying to turn Cynewulf into a medieval William Blake, I do not see any reason to interpret a lack of contemporary reference to Cynewulf (something that one might expect in modern times, but not necessarily the early Middle Ages) as conclusive evidence that the man did not exist at all.

However, as the above discussion of *The Dream of the Rood* suggests, the distinctions between the genres are not always transparent; in fact, in the case of the *Dream*, assigning the poem to one genre or the other can become a vexing task. On the one hand, it fits the specifications of the dream vision genre that one would expect to find: it possesses a dream-frame, a narrator who functions as a Witness and Interpreter, and a clear rational for sharing the private experience with the public. On the other hand, most, if not all, of these criteria could be applied to the experiences of the mystics Cædmon and Cynewulf. And if one compares *The Dream of the Rood* to a text which can be counted as a mystical work without any ambiguity, such as Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, then certain similarities, both superficial and substantive, are not difficult to discover. This leads to an important question: how can medieval visionary texts, biographical and non-biographical, be distinguished from one another consistently? And in the light of puzzling text such as *The Dream of the Rood*, is it always productive to do so?

This study is concerned with exploring the tenuous borders between two genres that share many qualities with one another: the dream vision and the mystical text. I am not interested in tearing down these borders, but in exploring the points at which one genre becomes nearly indistinguishable from the other, and the implications about the nature of medieval visionary texts, both literary and mystical, which these points of similarity can offer. Working from the analysis of a single text, *The Dream of the Rood*, I will now explore how these observations can be applied more generally to the dream vision and mystical genres. Chapter III will expand on this chapter's analysis by

exploring in detail the complex relationship between courtly poetry, specifically dream literature, and late medieval mystical writings. This discussion will center on the idea of rhetoric appropriated in two ways: first the language of orthodox religion by the court poets, and next the language of the religion of love by the mystics.

CHAPTER III

MYSTICAL TEXTS AND THE RELIGION OF LOVE

In Chapter II, the similarities between *The Dream of the Rood* and *Showings* were described in terms of narrators' roles in the texts: those of Witness, Interpreter, and Transmitter. This comparison served to demonstrate that the literary dream vision did not differ so much from the mystical text after all, and, in fact, might be a mystical text itself. In this chapter, I will continue developing the categorization of visionary texts by looking specifically at the writings of two medieval mystics: Hadewijch of Antwerp and Mechthild von Madgeburg. In studying these contemplatives, I will be interested first in establishing patterns of narrative roles in each work. Do medieval mystics tend to take a passive role during visions, or do they occasionally take an active stance (and how so)? Are there similarities between each writer's roles, or is each writer's behavior during the visionary experience so unique as to bar any general observations? And finally, can mystics' roles be compared productively with the roles of narrators in medieval literary texts, namely dream visions? This last question will persist through Chapters IV and V, and will be answered in the conclusion to the study.

The second point of interest during this chapter is to examine the complex relationship between courtly literature and religious writings in the Middle Ages. Because I am interested in establishing a connection between two genres of medieval literature, it is important that I address the double-appropriation of vocabulary and tropes that can be seen so evidently in much late medieval literature: the language of Christian

religion by the courtly poets, and the language of the religion of love by the Christian mystics. This comparison will further demonstrate how modern categories of literature may not be as obvious to medieval thinkers as they are to us, and will continue to disassemble the boundary often imposed between religious and secular medieval literature in current scholarship.

The Religion of Courtly Love

In "What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*," C. S. Lewis famously argued that Chaucer's main contribution to Boccaccio's tale was in the former poet's "medievalization" of the work.[70] This medievalization includes the imposition of the system of courtly love onto the Italian source, a process which can be readily observed in the depiction of Chaucer's narrator. The *Troilus* narrator takes on a hybrid identity in the poem, playing a central role in a religion centered on romantic love while still managing to give the role a distinctly Christian flavor.   Although he professes devotion to the classical gods of love, the narrator describes himself as one who "God of Loves servantz serve" (I. 15)[71]; this clever play on the title of the pope, "Servant of the Servants of God," is an excellent example of the rhetorical appropriation characteristic of the courtly religion of love. Here, the pagan meets the Christian, and the two elements are blended together to create the system of idealistic devotion to romantic love

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[70] C. S. Lewis, "What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*," *Essays and Studies* 17 (1932): 56-75, at 56.

[71] All references to Chaucer in this chapter are taken from Larry D. Benson's *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1987).

prominent in medieval court literature. The gods of love retain their classical titles,

Venus and Cupid, but their religion assumes markedly Christian aspects.

This does not necessarily mean that either religious system disappears within the

courtly work; at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer's narrator denounces the

religion of love in favor of the Christian faith, and the nature of his invective against the

former religion (which is associated with "payens corsed olde rites" (V. 1849)) suggests

that it is aligned more strongly with the classical gods than with Christianity. Aspects of

the religions mix but do not blend thoroughly, making it possible for the *Troilus* narrator

to make coherent references to the orthodox Christian faith to which he apparently

converts at the end of the work. At the same time, it is in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

that we encounter the Prioress, Madame Eglantine, who in addition to speaking French

"ful faire and fetisly / After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe" (*Prologue* 124-5), bears a

brooch on her rosary on which are inscribed the words "Amor vincit omnia" (162),

"Love conquers all." In the object of the Prioress's rosary we find a physical

representation of the odd amalgam that is the religion of courtly love: the broach,

bearing its motto of romantic love, is nevertheless accommodated – literally supported –

by the symbol of Christian devotion, and Madame Eglantine does not appear to be

conscious of or troubled by any inherent opposition between the objects, whatever

Chaucer's readers, past or present, might think. Nor does her occupation prevent her

from acquiring a rudimentary form of French, at Chaucer's time still the language of

high literature, and she certainly must have read (or listened to) romances and courtly

verse. She may be a religious woman, but she is a cultured one. Unlike the *Troilus*

narrator, she does not feel that any fancy for (or indeed, devotion to) the concept of romantic love bars her from her religious calling; from her we hear no bitter blasphemy against the gods of love.

However, it is important to keep in mind that modern eyebrow-raising at the Prioress's seemingly worldly (and even potentially prurient) attachments may be the product of a fundamental misunderstanding of courtly love. C. S. Lewis's *Allegory of Love* is simultaneously respected as an important and influential text on the subject of medieval courtly verse and criticized for Lewis's "moralization"[72] of romantic texts, particularly for his (in)famous claim that Adultery constitutes one of the central attributes of courtly love.[73] As E. Talbot Donaldson and others have demonstrated, adultery is not essential to courtly love at all. Courtly love is a vehicle through which a variety of relationships may be explored: between two individuals who are married to one another (such as John of Gaunt's "Man in Black" and his lost love, Blanche[74]), between two individuals who are not married to one another or to anyone else (such as

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[72] E. Talbot Donaldson says of this moralization "I sometimes darkly suspect that a moral scholar who establishes within a highly moral medieval world a grossly immoral antibody hopes that he can thereby draw off some of the guilt from great writers who treat of illicit love when, morally speaking, they ought to have known better" ("The Myth of Courtly Love," *Ventures* 5 (1965): 16-23, at 22). Whatever the reason for Lewis's emphasis on adultery in courtly love, Donaldson is quite right in noting that it very often makes no appearance at all in quintessential courtly romances, such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, and that in Chaucer it only tends to feature in *fabliaux* such as *The Miller's Tale*, which is noticeably lacking in Humility or Courtesy, two of Lewis's other marks of courtly love (18).

[73] Lewis's marks of courtly love, including Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love, are introduced in the chapter "Courtly Love" in *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford, 1936).

[74] While it is true that the Man in Black, representing John of Gaunt, never makes explicit reference to marriage with his lady in *The Book of the Duchess,* John Lawlor points out that marriage is not ruled out either ("The Pattern of Consolation in *The Book of the Duchess*," *Speculum* 31.4 (1956): 626-48, at 631). He also addresses the portrayal of marriage in English courtly literature, which is not, as Lewis's *Allegory of Love* suggests, barred from the genre. Chaucer's Dorigen and Arveragus are cited as another example of a married courtly couple (628).

Lanval and his faerie mistress, or Troilus and Criseyde), between two individuals, at

least one of whom is married to another (such as Lancelot and Guinevere), and so on.

Indeed, the widespread use of courtly discourse in late medieval works renders it

unhelpful in the scholarly debate over the identity of the *Pearl* Maiden in relation to the

narrator. Is she his daughter or not? That the courtly nature of the Jeweler's interactions

with the Maiden does not rule out the possibility that he is her father only strengthens the

argument that courtly love is not limited to a narrow set of relationships, and certainly

not adulterous ones.[75] John Benton (who also challenges the ubiquitous belief at the

time that troubadours *must* have been in earnest when they claimed to desire the

adulterous consummation of their love for the noble ladies of their songs[76]) ends his

sweeping study of the historical context for courtly love with the words "As currently

employed, 'courtly love' has no useful meaning, and is not worth saving by redefinition.

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[75] For example, María Bullón-Fernández argues that the narrator's use of sexually-charged courtly language demonstrates that in the heavenly setting, he "sees his daughter as a blessed creature but thinks of her as a love-object" ("'Byȝonde þe water': Courtly and Religious Desire in *Pearl*," *Studies in Philology* 91.1 (1994): 35-49, at 43). Catherine S. Cox also comments on the potentially incestuous overtones between the narrator and the Maiden, comparing it with the Maiden's own relationship with the Lamb, he "both husband and father, she both child and bride" ("'My Lemman Swete': Gender and Passion in *Pearl*," in Susannah Mary Chewning, ed., *Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture: The Word Made Flesh* (Aldershot, England, 2005), 75-86, at 81.). Disturbing though these analyses may be, they demonstrate that courtly language is not a barrier to scholars' interpretation of the Jeweler and Maiden's relationship as a familial one. In the chapter "Mourning and Marriage in Saint Bernard's *Sermones* and in *Pearl*" (The Song of Songs *in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1990), 119-35), Ann Astell points out that Bernard uses the language of love in order to describe his relationship with deceased brother Gerard, indicating that the use of erotic language when discussing a family member (and, indeed, a member of the same sex) may not have been seen as incestuous or suggestive to a medieval audience as it is to a modern one.

[76] John Benton, "Clio and Venus: A Historical View of Courtly Love," in F. X. Newman, ed., *The Meaning of Courtly Love* (Albany, 1969), 19-43, at 27.

I would therefore like to propose that 'courtly love' be banned from all future conferences."[77]

The frustration that accompanies Benton's conclusion is palpable in the huge body of literature which struggles to define (or redefine) the phrase, or to rescue it from the faulty definitions of others. While I do not wish to join Benton and others who consider courtly love to be "critical fallacy"[78] in tossing out the troublesome phrase just yet, I do intend to tread carefully when speaking about courtly love and its accompanying religion of love, especially in relation to Christian doctrine. Accordingly, for the purposes of this study, courtly love describes a particular type of idealized, normally erotic or romantic affection cultivated between members of the nobility.[79] It typically comprises a struggle undertaken by a man to win the affections of a lady, who at first resists his courtship, but eventually succumbs to his pleas for mercy. Late medieval tales of courtly love often intersect with those of chivalry, with skills in knighthood corresponding positively with those in love.[80] Relationships showcasing courtly love may be viewed as positive (Troilus and Criseyde) or negative (Diomede and Criseyde) by the audience and/or the narrator of a romantic story. These unions are

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[77] Benton, "Clio and Venus," 37.

[78] Roger Boase's term is described in *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love* (Manchester, 1977), 111-14. D. W. Robertson demonstrates the same skepticism as Benton toward the phrase "courtly love" in his section on medieval portrayals of love in his *Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1962), 391.

[79] This does not mean that people in the lower classes did not know of or practice courtly love; however, in late medieval literature courtly couples are almost always members of the nobility, with the exception of fabliaux such as Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*.

[80] Jennifer G. Wollock, *Rethinking Chivalry and Courtly Love* (Santa Barbara, California, 2011), 42.

fostered through a system of rules of courtesy regarding behavior and speech, which is theorized and put on display in manifestations of the religion of love.

Charles Muscatine addresses the blending of romantic doctrine with Christian concepts in courtly French and, later, English literature, arguing that "the idealism of romance is in some ways a transposed Christian idealism, and its literature inherits, through a clerkly class of poets, the conventional method, if not the matter, of hagiography and pious legend."[81] The otherworldly setting of French romances, such as the *Roman de la Rose*, when combined with the religion of love, thus "takes on the organizing structure of an imitated or assimilated Christian cosmos, with its worshipers, its martyrs and angels, its God of Love, and its Paradise."[82] It is not difficult to find echoes of Christian worship in the portrayal of the most famous medieval lovers. Their devotion, self-denial, and willingness to die in service of (or from deprivation of) their elevated ladies calls to mind the trials of holy saints and martyrs. In *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*, Chrétien de Troyes presents Lancelot with Guinevere's comb, and the love-struck knight swoons for joy, treasuring each golden hair, for in the religion of love, it is a holy relic. Later, Lancelot's initial hesitation at climbing into the shameful cart is treated like a break of faith; Peter's three-time denial of Christ is more readily forgiven by his savior! The parallels between the religions are not precise, but the general principles, particularly the ideas of refinement through suffering and, eventually, bliss through unwavering devotion, are strikingly similar.

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[81] Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley, 1966), 14.

[82] Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 15-16.

Literary treatments of the religion of love are highly idealized, and while they

might have influenced or echoed the behavior and customs of the nobility, they are to be

read with care and not as literal representations of how medieval people actually lived or

thought.[83] The stories of Chrétien de Troyes are to be taken as hyperbolic with regard to

the religion of love; no one really behaved like his love-struck heroes. Likewise, a

degree of adherence to the ideals of courtly love, as Richard Firth Green argues,

functioned as a social mark of nobility when it manifested in "real life,"[84] and it could be

used by the sincere and insincere alike, to good ends and to evil ones.[85] As Carol F.

Heffernan demonstrates in her analysis of the "disease" of love (*hereos*), the medieval

term for lovesickness is not only linked etymologically to the nobility (*hereosi*) by

physician Bernard de Gordon, but was explicitly tied to the idle lifestyle uniquely

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[83] Richard II provides an exception of sorts to this rule in his theatrical (although genuine) displays of grief after the death of Queen Anne of Bohemia, which included the destruction of Sheen and the avoidance of any place Anne had visited in life. "Extravagant gestures of mourning" are identified by John M. Bowers as an aspect of masculine identity shaped by the ideals of courtly love (*Politics of Pearl* (Cambridge, 2001), 165). It is worth noting, however, that Richard's fits are notable *because of* their extreme theatricality. Only a king would have the wealth and power necessary to mourn his wife through such costly and eccentric public displays. Richard is the exception to public manifestations of courtly identity, not the rule. The courtly aristocracy, as Richard Firth Green puts it, did not die of their passions, but "they seem to have felt that they should at least appear capable of such an extreme emotion" (*Poets and Princepleasers* (Toronto, 1980), 114) through their play at the game of love, which included exaggerated gestures of devotion as marks of social identity but rarely reached the level of Richard's notorious pageantry.

[84] Richard Firth Green, "Troilus and the Game of Love," *Chaucer Review* 13.3 (1979): 201-20, at 205.

[85] See also David Aers's chapter "Masculine Identity in the Courtly Community: The Self Loving in *Troilus and Criseyde*" in *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360-1430* (New York, 1988), which discusses the effect of the code of courtly love on medieval masculine identity through exploration of Troilus's character.

available to members of the upper class.[86] The best cure for lovesickness was to "get out of the house," so to speak, and occupy the mind with other things (although, as we observe in the romances, adventure is not always sufficient to cure its heroes of their obsession for their ladies). *Hereos* is marked by "anorexia, insomnia, hollow eyes, pallor, moaning, and weeping,"[87] all of which feature prominently in literary depictions of the passion of courtly lovers. Its symptoms closely link it with the medieval descriptions of melancholy and mania,[88] disorders resembling modern-day depression, which may help to explain why medieval individuals were susceptible to an illness that seems so unusual to a twenty-first-century reader. Just as *hereos* is a "rich man's" illness in medieval culture, the cast of a courtly romance gravitates toward the upper classes.

Who besides the suffering, pale young man is drawn to the altar of love? If a hero like Troilus takes on the identity of the fanatical worshipper, the lady assumes the role of the goddess. Muscatine condenses the qualities of the ideal courtly lady into a general description: she has "blonde hair, a white unwrinkled forehead, a tender skin, arched (but not plucked) brows, gray (*vair*) eyes, well spaced, a straight, well-made nose, a small, round, full mouth, a sweet breath, and a dimpled chin"; additionally, she is tall, "with smooth, white neck, small, hard breasts, a straight, flat back, and a certain

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[86] Carol F. Heffernan, "Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*: The Disease of Love and Courtly Love," *Neophilologus* 74 (1990): 294-309, at 301.

[87] Heffernan, "Chaucer's *Troilus*," 296.

[88] Heffernan, "Chaucer's *Troilus*," 296.

broadness of the hips."[89] The lady's excellence in appearance, behavior, and breeding

must match the culturally-defined ideal, just as each of a deity's attributes must attain

perfection. In the realm of courtly love, it is the lady, not the man, who wields the god-

like power to answer the prayers of her devotee,[90] and as virtuous as she might be, she is

often accused of cruelty when she declines to grant her admirer the favor – or the

intimacy – that he desires.

However, the lady is not the only deity present in the paradisal garden of love,

for Cupid and Venus are the consistent rulers in the realm. Put hierarchically, Cupid and

Venus are gods, the lady a demigod. A different lady occupies each young man's

dreams (excluding love triangles, and notwithstanding the patterns in appearance

described by Muscatine), but Cupid and Venus remain key players in courtly romance.

They, like the lady, are recipients of the prayers of the lovesick, and they, too, can

answer those prayers as they see fit. They can also act capriciously, violently piercing a

victim with love's arrow regardless of his or her consent. There is a streak of cruelty in

the gods and demigods of love; Troilus is made to suffer, whether he wills it or not, by

Cupid's arrow, and Criseyde both imparts pain on Troilus by abandoning him and

experiences pain herself through the circumstances that make necessary her betrayal.

The religion of love is marked by unkind and even sadomasochistic qualities that seem

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[89] Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 17-18.

[90] This does not, however, mean that the religion of love had any positive influence on women's rights in medieval society; the contrast between a woman's fictional role in a relationship and her actual role could be quite cruel by modern standards. John Benton attributes the general increase in human quality of life during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and beyond to the increase in social stability, not to courtly ideals about human relationships ("Clio and Venus," 35).

to force a barrier between it and the religion from which it borrows its imagery and language.   Then again, Christianity could present its own challenges to medieval believers. Tison Pugh gets at the heart of the matter in his analysis of the game of courtly love in *Troilus and Criseyde* by focusing on its danger and cruelty. Not only are the players deceptive in their interactions with one another, often inflicting considerable mental anguish on each other (not even sparing the objects of their affection), but lovers themselves are constantly tormented by yet another deity, Fortune, who is not depicted as impartial force, but as an entity who actually takes delight in the anguish imparted with each turn of her wheel.[91] Troilus is set free to engage in heavenly play through his death, and here a new Christian set of rules appears to trump those of the game of love.[92] But is Troilus really saved? Mercury delivers him to the afterlife, so the implication is that the pagan hero is still barred from the Christian paradise, despite the fact that the means to salvation were never available to him in the first place; for how could Troilus have ever learned of Christ?[93] The most sincere of lovers thus loses the game of love, and, much more importantly, the game of salvation as well. The potential for arbitrary punishment and horrific loss is present in both religious systems.

There is an argument to be made that the religion of love, with its swooning heroes and its deified ladies, could be considered objectionable from a Christian perspective in some cases. V. A. Kolve's study of the "god-denying fool" in the Middle

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[91] Tison Pugh, "Christian Revelation and the Cruel Game of Courtly Love in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Chaucer Review* 39.4 (2005): 379-401, at 392.

[92] Pugh, "Christina Revelation," 391.

[93] Pugh, "Christian Revelation," 396.

Ages highlights the ways in which the fool of Psalm 52, who is usually artistically represented as a madman in medieval psalters, bears some resemblance to the hero of a romantic tale. The Tristan story is marked both by the hero's strategy of disguising himself as a madman in order to escape King Mark's detection and be reunited with Yseult, and by his pursuit of "heaven on earth" through the adulterous relationship with his lady. Tristan's choice flies in the face of church teachings and God's law, but he is more interested in earthly pleasure than heavenly joy; he is the medieval fool who chooses the illogical path to happiness.[94] And while Chaucer's Troilus is not as heedless as Tristan, his overwhelming passion for Criseyde still demonstrates how God's religion can be displaced by love's religion (especially in a pagan setting), rather than simply being opposed in a fit of willfulness, as in Tristan's story.[95] I agree with Kolve that the details of certain romances (particularly those involving adultery, such as Tristan's) can portray the lover in an unflattering way that is not to be admired or emulated by the audience.[96] Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, despite its celebration of romantic love, is strongly tempered by a Boethian focus on the inconstancy of worldly happiness, and its conclusion drives home the sharp contrast between Troilus's earthly romance and the

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[94] V. A. Kolve, "God-Denying Fools and the Medieval 'Religion of Love,'" *Studies in the Ages of Chaucer* 19 (1997): 3-59, at 33-38.

[95] Kolve, "God-Denying Fools," 42.

[96] It is especially important to consider the original audience's values and beliefs when reading medieval romances involving adultery. John Benton points out that, in medieval culture, for a man to sleep with his lord's wife would not only be considered immoral, but treason, the worst form of adultery ("Clio and Venus," 26). Ignorance of this cultural fact can drastically change an audience's attitude toward a character like Lancelot, who is often viewed indulgently or even favorably in modern retellings of Arthurian lore (such as T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*). To Chrétien de Troy's original audience, however, Lancelot might have seemed more of a villain than a hero (28).

everlasting love of Christ. The potential for idolatry in medieval romances makes

religious language and metaphor an obvious avenue through which to speak about

romantic love; however, whatever objectionable situations courtly literature may have

described on occasion, it did not prevent religious thinkers from feeling that the religion

of love had something to offer in the way of spiritual expression.

In her article "Chaucer's Point of View as a Narrator in the Love Poems,"

Dorothy Bethurum points out that Alain's *De Planctu Naturae*, which she believes

betrays the "essential hedonism" of the author, nonetheless manages to make its

argument with a "religious fervor" that "gives the stamp of sanctity to his teaching."[97]

This observation helps to illuminate the value of appropriating religious language in

order to speak about secular topics; it is a rhetorical strategy which lends the legitimacy,

the fervor, and the familiarity of Christian ritual and belief to topics that might otherwise

be considered mundane and unworthy of serious treatment. That is not to say that the

advent of the religion of love suddenly made romance into a serious preoccupation for

everyone (or anyone); even in literature, it is often (and heartily) lampooned. Richard

Firth Green draws attention to the cynical attitudes of the Duc de Berri and the Lord of

Chambrillac toward fidelity in his discussion of courtly love's presence in medieval

culture, also pointing out that while men of the Middle Ages were no more likely to die

of heartsickness than they are today, the appearance of lovesickness might be used

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[97] Dorothy Bethurum, "Chaucer's Point of View as a Narrator in the Love Poems," *PMLA* 74.5 (1959): 511-20, at 512.

deceptively in order to seduce an unwary lady.[98] The chivalrous principles manifest in

courtly literature were obviously well-known, but they did not apply to the same degree

in court life as they did in literature, and they could certainly be subverted.[99] Green uses

this historical context to argue that the ending of *Troilus and Criseyde* serves as a

reminder to Chaucer's audience in the court of Richard "not to take the game [of love],

or themselves, too seriously."[100] Troilus, ascending from the earth after his death, looks

down and laughs; the veil of courtly ideals is stripped away, and his love-induced

suffering becomes a farce in the face of eternity. This does not mean that Chaucer was a

cynic with regard to love, nor that he intended to undermine the courtly society central to

his successful career as a civil servant and poet, but it does demonstrate that even at the

height of its popularity in England, the courtly style was not swallowed wholesale by

poets or their audiences. Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Book of the Duchess* share

space in his oeuvre with the hilariously irreverent *Miller's Tale*[101] and the remarkably

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[98] Green, "Troilus and the Game of Love," 204 & 206.

[99] Andreas Capellanus's *De Amore* is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. His meticulous study of courtly love shows that its existence as a system was well-known enough both by Andreas and his audience for Andreas to produce in his treatise a picture of court life that is at once highly evocative of the romantic literature of the day and very difficult not to read as satire. For example, in Book One Andreas insists that men older than sixty and women older than fifty are no fit for the game of love (edition by P. G. Walsh (London, 1982), 39). This interpretation of the commonly-held belief that the elderly are not fit for love is so literalistic that it becomes humorous; Andreas appears to be poking fun at courtly love through his eccentric portrayal of its principles.

[100] Green, "Troilus and the Game of Love," 218.

[101] Jerome Mandel describes the parody of courtly love in *The Miller's Tale* in "Courtly Love in the *Canterbury Tales*" (*Chaucer Review* 19.4 (1985): 277-89, at 283-85).

misanthropic *Merchant's Tale*.[102] Nonetheless, the religion of love did allow for the exploration of romantic themes with a dignity and seriousness previously unknown.

My argument in this chapter, however, is that the relationship between courtly literature and religious works, specifically mystical texts, is not one-way; contemplative writings make use of romantic language and tropes often and effectively. Medieval interpretations of the *Song of Songs*, many of which see in the erotic imagery a representation of the relationship between the Church and Christ,[103] demonstrate that the barrier between "worldly" and spiritual love in medieval literature is not as strong as might be thought, and that the use of romantic metaphor in religious writing, or *Brautmystik*, predates the religion of love and the development and spread of courtly poetry.[104] After all, marriage metaphors likening Christ to the groom and the Church to the bride are scattered throughout scripture itself.[105] The songs of the troubadours did not initiate the use of erotic imagery in spiritual writings, and it is important to recognize

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[102] For discussion of Chauer's treatment and subversion of courtly love in the *Merchant's Tale*, see Margaret Schlauch's "Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* and Courtly Love" (*ELH* 4.3 (1937): 201-12) and C. Hugh Holman's "Love in the Merchant's and the Franklin's Tales" (*ELH* 18.4 (1951): 241-52).

[103] See, for example, William of St Theirry's *Exposition on the Song of Songs* (trans. Mother Columba Hart (Spencer, Massachusetts, 1970)). William begins with Song 1:1, "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth!" of which he explains "A kiss is a certain outward loving union of bodies, sign and incentive of an inward union. […] Christ the Bridegroom offered to his Bride the Church, so to speak, a kiss from heaven, when the Word made flesh drew so near to her that he wedded her to himself" (25).

[104] For the distinction between *Brautmystik* and the courtly mystical writings of Hadewijch and Mechthild, see Barbara Newman's chapter "*La mystique courtoise*: Thirteenth-Century Beguines and the Art of Love" in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia, 1995).

[105] See, for example, Matthew 25: 1-13; Mark 2:19; Ephesians 5:22-33; Revelation 19:7; 21: 9-10.

this fact during the analysis of medieval spiritual texts[106]; nevertheless, the particular

way in which some medieval mystics chose to employ romantic language is so evocative

of courtly poetry and the religion of love as to defy coincidence. Barbara Newman has

coined a phrase for the conscious use of courtly language (not simply erotic imagery) in

mystical texts: *la mystique courtoise*,[107] or courtly mysticism. Hadewijch of Antwerp

and Mechthild von Magdeburg both partake of this literary tradition in their mystical

writings, and it is to their works that I will now turn. Texts exemplifying courtly

mysticism will function in this chapter as the bridge between courtly and religious

expression, and in these works I will continue my analysis of the narrative features that

likewise draw together texts that would otherwise be considered quite different, both

religious and secular.

Hadewijch and the Garden of Love

In *Mystics of the Church*, Evelyn Underwood reminds the reader in the opening

to the book that contemplative writers cannot be read as if they are blank slates.

Everyone begins with minds populated with memories and images, to which are added

messages from the outside world. This pre-existing data colors the way in which a

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[106] J. Reynaert makes this point effectively in his brief discussion of a reference to noble birth (*hoghe geslachte*) in Hadewijch's twenty-third Song ("Hadewijch: Mystical Poetry and Courtly Love," in Erik Kooper, ed., *Medieval Dutch Literature in Its European Context* (Cambridge, 1994), 208-25, at 209-210). Her reference to nobility suggests courtly language (and has even been read as an autobiographical clue hinting at the mystic's high birth) at a first glance; however, Reynaert reminds the reader that Bernard of Clairvaux's writing on the primal nobility of the soul not only predates courtly literature, but also makes the most sense in the context of Hadewijch's verse. While Reynaert goes on to discuss how Hadewijch's poetry *is* influenced by courtly literature, this analysis serves as a reminder that readers must not assume that everything that sounds like it is borrowed from secular verse necessarily is. The tendency to see connections where there are none can easily lead one astray.

[107] Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 137-67.

person processes incoming messages, as well as the strategies she or he uses to explain them to others:[108]

> "Thus it is that certain symbols and phrases – for instance, the Fire of Love, the Spiritual Marriage, the Inward Light, the classic stages of the soul's ascent – occur again and again in the writings of the mystics, and suggest to us the substantial unity of their experiences. These phrases lead us back to the historical background within which those mystics emerge; and remind us that they are, like other Christians, members of one another, and living (thought with a peculiar intensity) the life to which all Christians are called."[109]

I would like to add to this observation that mystics' minds are also molded by aspects of secular culture. It can be easy at times to forget that many dwellers in the monastery spent a good deal of their young life outside of it, and had the same exposure to songs and stories as their peers. Ann Astell notes that twelfth-century monasteries are notable for their recruitment of adults, often from aristocratic circles, who had experienced regular secular upbringing.[110] Members of the nobility who took vows brought with them knowledge of courtly culture, and very often familiarity with romances and other

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[108] Evelyn Underwood, *Mystics of the Church* (New York, 1964), 19.

[109] Underwood, *Mystics of the Church*, 20.

[110] Astell, The Song of Songs *in the Middle Ages*, 9.

fashionable literature.[111] And while it is important to consider how the words of earlier

and contemporary mystics influenced the imagery employed by medieval

contemplatives, it is also necessary to think about the ways in which culture –

specifically, courtly culture – played a part in how they chose to express the content of

their visions to the world. We should also keep in mind that the very fact that the

mystics chose to employ aspects of the religion of love in order to explain what they had

experienced testifies to the familiarity of courtly language and culture to their audience,

including other religious professionals. It is a system that is pervasive enough in

medieval culture to help the mystic to process and convey truths that might otherwise be

too foreign – too otherworldly – for comprehension.

Hadewijch's background is more or less unknown, although the heavy presence

of courtly language in her verse has led many scholars to believe that she must have

come from a noble background. J. Reynaert challenges this assumption, pointing out

that one need not have come from a wealthy family in order to encounter courtly

literature; all we can say for certain is that Hadewijch was familiar with the popular

romantic works of her day, and that she found them appropriate to her spiritual

writing.[112] Hadewijch's oeuvre is quite diverse, containing not only prose works

(visions and letters), but also a good many poems in stanzas and couplets. Courtly

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[111] Barbara Newman demonstrates that there is not a strong divide between secular and religious writing in
the Middle Ages, pointing to Bishop Fulk, Ramon Llull, and Dante as religious writers who began their
careers as courtly poets ("The Mirror and the Rose: Marguerite Porete's Encounter with the Dieu
d'Amours,'" in Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Duncan Robertson, and Nancy Bradley Warren, eds., *The
Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature* (New York, 2002), 105-23, at 106.)

[112] Reynaert, "Hadewijch: Mystical Poetry and Courtly Love," 209.

mysticism plays a prominent role in both her prose and poetry. The titles given her stanzaic poems in Mother Columba Hart's translation – "The Madness of Love," "Subjugation to Love," "School of Love"[113] – would be at home in a compilation of medieval love poetry. However, rather than focusing on her poetry, I would like to examine the way that Hadewijch incorporates aspects of the courtly dream vision in her own mystical works.

Vision 1 contains several striking similarities to a courtly dream vision. It opens with a description of Hadewijch's spiritual and emotional state before the vision, just as dream vision narrators typically describe their own situations in the frame to the dream itself. Hadewijch describes herself as experiencing, at a young and (she claims) spiritually immature age, "such an attraction of my spirit inwardly that I could not control myself outwardly in a degree sufficient to go among persons"[114] [soe grote treckinghe van binnen van minen geeste/, Dat ic mi van buten onder die menschen soe vele neit ghehebben en conste dat icker ghegaen ware][115] (I. 4-7). Hadewijch is apparently in bed during this incapacitated state (the Lord is said to have been brought "secretly to [her] bedside" [heymelike te minen bedde brochte] (I. 3)), making the nature of her following vision slightly ambiguous; is she thrown into a trance, or does she experience the vision during a dream state? The secrecy of the encounter is in itself

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[113] Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart (New York, 1980), 205, 193, & 162.

[114] All English translations of Hadewijch's visions are taken from Mother Columba Hart's *Hadewijch: The Complete Works* (the main matter discussed in this chapter, Vision 1, can be found in p. 263-71).

[115] All original Dutch citations of Hadewijch's visions are taken from Jozef Van Mierlo's *Hadewych: Visionen*, vol. 1 (Louvain, 1924).

evocative of the courtly lover's tryst; because the visionary experience is by necessity a private one, this may make the use of courtly tropes even more natural to those mystics who choose to employ them. Hadewijch obviously does not preserve its secrecy, as there is no shame in her holy relationship with the Beloved.

Upon entering the visionary state, Hadewijch feels herself led into a meadow, in which are several trees. An angel leads her from tree to tree, filling the same role as the dream vision guide, and at each instructs her regarding the tree's name and allegorical significance. The initial trees begin with fairly straightforward interpretations. The second, for example, is described as possessing beautiful, multi-colored leaves, each of which is covered by a withered one. The Angel commands that Hadewijch understand the leaves' significance, and she realizes that each shadowed leaf represents a virtue nevertheless lacking the "fruition of its Beloved"; the beautiful yet imperfect leaves are accordingly hidden in the face of God's majesty. The tree's leaves represent Humility. Here we find Hadewijch combining the role of Witness with Interpreter, although her understanding, much like Julian of Norwich's, appears to be spiritually guided. The much more complex tree of Wisdom is also understood only following the explicit command of the angelic guide. This tree bears three sets of three branches (a strikingly Trinitarian image): the lowest set has its leaves marked by red hearts, the middle set has its leaves marked by white hearts, and the highest set has its leaves marked by gold

hearts. Upon observing each set of leaves, Hadewijch is told to understand; this command initiates heavenly insight, which is passed along to the audience. [116]

Hadewijch's meadow is, all in all, the idyllic setting of the dream vision, its garden planted with allegorical trees of spiritual significance. By the time she reaches her Beloved, the garden has become a literal Paradise. Hadewijch's vision resembles the more pronouncedly allegorical of the dream visions, such as the contemporary *Roman de la Rose* and later *Floure and the Leafe*. Although an Agent, her actions tend to follow the prompting of her guide – for example, at his command she drinks from the bloody chalice which represents patience – or constitute an involuntary reaction to her settings, as when she falls down in awe at the feet of the Beloved. Thus, Hadewijch functions as a Guided Agent, for her will is dictated by the Beloved and in complete harmony with her angelic guide.

The Beloved, of course, occupies the role of the Object of Desire. Unlike Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's Rose (not to mention countless other lovely but thoroughly objectified ladies of courtly romance), he is a dynamic, real character, constituting perhaps Hadewijch's greatest break from the tradition of courtly love. In this romance, the focus shifts from the tormented, earnest lover to the object of her love (the gender reversal, too, is noteworthy). Hadewijch views him through a cross of crystal, evocative of the crystal stones at the bottom of the fountain of Narcissus in the *Roman de la Rose* which first direct the narrator's eyes to the beloved Rose. Likewise,

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[116] The symbolism of the leaves is complex enough that I do not wish to repeat it at length here. The explanation can be found in full in p. 265-66 of Mother Columba Hart's translation.

the crystal cross guides Hadewijch's eyes first to a symbolic representation of the Trinity, comprised of three pillars upon which the disk of eternity rests and within which the whirlpool of divine fruition rages. The Beloved appears at this scene. He is described in terms of great beauty, but with a touch of awe and fear that is absent from typical courtly literature:

> His appearance could not be described in any language. His head was grand and broad, with curly hair, white in color…and crowned with a crown that is like a precious stone […] His eyes were marvelously unspeakable to see and drew all things to him…in Love. I cannot bear to witness it in words, for the unspeakable great beauty and the sweetest sweetness of this lofty and marvelous Countenance rendered me unable to find any comparison for it or any metaphor.
>
> [Sine vorme was onseggheleke enegher redenen/. Sine hoeft was groet/ ende wijt/ ende || kersp van witter vaerwen / Ende was ghecroent met ere cronen / die gheleec enen steene […] Sine oghen waren aen te siene wonderleke onseggheleec / ende alle dinc treckende in hem in minnen/. Daer en maghic neit af te worde bringhen/. Want die ontalleke grote scoenheit / ende ouersuete suetecheit vandien werdeleken wonderleken anschine / dat benam mi alle redene van hem in ghelikenessen/.]
>
> (I. 248-59)

Thus physical description is still a key feature of the introduction to the Beloved, but assumes a solemnity and air of mystery appropriate to the divine subject. Perfection is

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not only beautiful, but ineffable and therefore formidable. The beginning of Hadewijch's description calls to mind Robert Henryson's later, more conventional courtly representation of Jupiter in *The Testament of Cresseid*:

> His voice was cleir, as cristall wer his ene,
>
> As goldin wyre sa glitterand was his hair,
>
> His garmound and his gyte full gay of grene,
>
> With goldin listis gilt on euerie gair (176-79)[117]

Hadewijch, however, moves beyond the courtly. The physical must give way to the mystical, the indescribable; God is *like* a courtly lover, but he exceeds the model, overwhelms it. The tropes of courtly love are useful for approaching the content of her vision, but Hadewijch continually tests the limits of the genre and, finding it wanting, leaves it behind.

The Beloved's message to Hadewijch is tempered with sternness, but never lacking in goodness or love. His admission that he is "incensed on one point" [omme belghe] (I. 309) with her is alarming, but it leads to revelation, not to punishment. Hadewijch's desire that her own works on behalf of God be recognized is offensive to the Beloved, but only because it reveals her ignorance of the nature of his own suffering on earth. Accordingly, he corrects her understanding with a "hidden truth":

> …never, for a single instant, did I call upon my power to give myself
>
> relief when I was in need, and never did I seek to profit from the gifts of
>
> my Spirit, but I won them at the price of sufferings and through my

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[117] From Denton Fox's edition, *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (Oxford, 1981).

Father, for he and I were wholly one […] before the day when my hour

came of my full-grownness. Never did I dispel my griefs or my pains

with the aid of my omnipotence.

[Dat ic nye ene vre mi seluen bi miere mogentheit ghenoech en dede in en

gheen ghebreken daer ic in was / Noch dat ic ane die gauen mijns

gheestes nye en veruinc/; Sonder dat icse met pinen van doghene

vercreech / Ende van minen vader/ die hi/ ende icke al een waren/ Alse wi

nv sijn, vore dien dach dat mine vre quam van miere volwassenheit. Jc

en wandelde mijn vernoy / noch mijn pine bi miere volcomenheit nye/.]

(I. 333-41)

Hadewijch is thus freed of the notion that her own earthly suffering comes at a greater

personal price than did Christ's, and at the same time drawn closer to her Beloved

through the revelation that their painful experiences are not of different qualities, but the

same. Compared to Chrétien's Guinevere, whose displeasure motivates her cruelty

toward the erring Lancelot, Hadewijch's Beloved is shown to exceed all earthly lovers,

for even his anger brings about the edification of those who love him. Again, Hadewijch

subverts the genre of courtly love in her representation of the perfect lover, who is not

only beyond reproach (and therefore perfectly justified in feeling reproach toward the

imperfect lover), but kind beyond compare. There is no trace of cruelty in Hadewijch's

holy lover; not only does he refrain from subjecting her to any wrath, however justified,

but he gives his knowledge freely to her so that their relationship might grow even

stronger.

Nor is there any hint of coyness or aloofness on the part of the Beloved (again avoiding any conventional courtly accusations of cruelty or meanness in the lover); he does not hold back any affection from Hadewijch, despite her spiritual immaturity, and appears eager to aid in her spiritual growth. Indeed, Hadewijch's powers of perception improve noticeably over the course of the visions, as if each mystical encounter spurs her development. In Vision 9, for instance, Hadewijch is confronted by a queen dressed in gold, escorted by three maidens in red, green, and black cloaks. When the queen asks the visionary whether she knows who she is, Hadewijch answers immediately: "Yes indeed! Long enough you have caused me woe and pain! You are my soul's faculty of Reason, and these are the officials of my own household with whom you walk abroad in such fine style!" [Jaic wel, ghi hebt mi soe langhe wee ende leet ghedaen / ende sidi die redene mijnre zielen / ende eest die familie mijns huus daer ghi met gheciert ghaet] (IX. 40-43). She continues to describe the identity of each of the cloaked maidens in detail, and her description is confirmed as true by Lady Reason, who, in turn, explains the allegorical significance of her own dress to Hadewijch. Not only is Hadewijch engaged in an even exchange of information rather than being merely fed it, but she also is able to interpret the allegorical tableau set before her immediately and accurately without the enabling commands of Vision 1.

Hadewijch's powers of perception are illustrated again in Vision 11, the vision of the grey and yellow eagles. Here again, her understanding is prompted by a question rather than a command: "Do you know who these different-colored eagles are?" [kinstu wie die sijn / die daer so menegherande varwe hebben?] (XI. 35-36). Although she is

less eager to answer the question than in Vision 9, Hadewijch still reports that, although she answers in the affirmative, "I nevertheless perceived the essence of all the things I saw" [Jc sach nochtan die dinghen welc si waren van allen dat ic sach] (XI. 37-39). She no longer needs to be commanded to understand; her will to attain spiritual knowledge is sufficient. It is notable that in this vision Hadewijch recognizes and reports on her advanced spiritual development. She explains that the eagle with the old, grey feathers and young body represents herself, "for I was attaining to perfection, beginning, and growing in love" [die comende / ende beghinnende / ende wassende was inder minnen] (XI. 52-54). Shedding the immaturity of Vision 1, Hadewijch attains confidence in her ability to interpret and report the contents of her visionary experiences. While she remains in a passive relationship to the scenes unfolding before her, she becomes more and more active as an authority on their meaning.

In her book *Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages*, Jessica Barr emphasizes the importance of both active and passive behavior to the visionary in pursuit of knowledge. This activity is not necessarily manifest through physical displays, but may necessitate "cognitive and volitional work on the part of the dreamer or visionary."[118] While Hadewijch does not seem to struggle cognitively to attain understanding of her visions – in this respect, she may be described as quite passive – she does demonstrate her will to reach a deeper understanding of spiritual matters throughout her writing. One of the most striking examples of Hadewijch's will and its efficacy in catalyzing educative visionary experiences is found in the causative

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[118] Jessica Barr, *Willing to Know* God (Colombus, 2010), 8.

relationship between Visions 2 and 3. Vision 2 briefly records a revelatory experience

which leads Hadewijch to wish fervently to answer the questions "What is Love? And

who is Love?" [wat es mine / ende wie es mine/?] (II. 20). These questions apparently

occupy her for two years before she has Vision 3, in which she is brought before a

Countenance who says:

> Behold, ancient one, you have called me and sought me, and what and
>
> who I, Love, am, myriads of years before the birth of man! See and
>
> receive my Spirit! With regard to all things, know what I, Love, am in
>
> them! And when you fully bring me yourself, as pure humanity in
>
> myself, through all the ways of perfect Love, you shall have fruition of
>
> me as the Love who I am. Until that day, you shall love what I, Love,
>
> am. And then you will be love, as I am Love.
>
> [Sich hier, oude /, die op mi gheroepen heues ende ghesocht / wat ende
>
> wie ic minne ben dusentech iaer vore der menschen gheborte/, Sich ende
>
> ontfanc minen gheest; van allen bekinne / wat icker minne in ben /. Ende
>
> alse du mi di volbringhes puer mensche in mi seluen dore alle weghe van
>
> volre minnen, Soe saltu mijns ghebruken wie ic minne ben / ; tote dien
>
> daghe || saltu minnen / wat ic minne ben/; ended an saltu minne sijn / also
>
> ic minne ben/] (III. 10-20)

The Countenance first acknowledges Hadewijch's volition, the two-year effort she put

forth in seeking Love, before rewarding her with the knowledge she seeks. While

Hadewijch appears to receive her visionary revelations with ease, she is quite active in

her waking life; years of spiritual struggle are rewarded in her visions. Her extra-visionary activity is typical of other medieval mystics. Julian of Norwich, too, reports that her revelations were preceded by the desire for three gifts: "mynd of the passion," "bodily sicknes," and "to haue of godes gyfte thre woundys" (II. 5-6).[119] As such volitional activity is key to the existence of the mystical experiences described in "authentic" visionary texts, it should not be overlooked. I have labeled this active role of the visionary as Catalyst.

In summary, Hadewijch's visionary roles in Vision 1 alone can be described as those of Guided Agent, Interpreter, Transmitter, and Witness. Her conversational roles begin passively; in Vision 1, she certainly fits the role of a Receptive Interlocutor, listening to and obeying her dream guide and the Beloved. In her immature state, Hadewijch is portrayed receptively; she has not yet acquired the maturity and experience necessary to allow her a more active role in her vision. Beginning with Vision 2, however, she begins to assume roles in addition to those listed above. Visions 2-3 add the role of the Catalyst, the willing seeker of God whose private spiritual inquiry brings about mystical, educative experiences, while Vision 9 presents her in the role of the Active Interlocutor, engaging in conversation with Lady Reason as a confident and able Interpreter. We learn from Hadewijch's *Visions* that the roles of the contemplative are not static; they can change over time, developing in conjunction with the mystic's spiritual state.

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[119] From the long text edited by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Toronto, 1978).

If visionary roles do not remain stable over the lifetime of a single mystic, we should certainly expect some variation from one individual to the next. In the following section, I will discuss the mystical writings of Mechthild von Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Divinity*. As in this section, I am concerned with two questions: how does Mechthild re-appropriate and -fashion the religion of courtly love and corresponding literary conventions in her text? Which visionary roles does she assume in her writings, and can we distinguish any patterns in them?

Mechthild von Magdeburg as the Active Visionary

Like Hadewijch, thirteenth-century Beguine[120] Mechthild von Magdeburg is known for her authorship of writings characterized by both courtly mysticism and *Brautmystik*. All of her known writings are collected in the volume *The Flowing Light of the Divinity* (*Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit*), which was composed in Middle Low German but comes down to us through Latin and Middle High German translations.[121] She was aided and encouraged in her writing by her Dominican confessor, Henry of Halle. It has been posited that Mechthild may have been influenced by Hadewijch's

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[120] That is, a member of a Christian lay order of women devoted to voluntary poverty, care of the poor, and a holy life. The Beguines were especially prevalent in the Low Countries during the thirteenth century.

[121] Sara S. Poor discusses Mechthild's choice of the vernacular and the original text's relationship with later translations in detail in "Mechthild von Magdeburg, Gender, and the 'Unlearned Tongue'" (*Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31.2 (2001): 213-50). Because the original manuscript is lost, modern readers are unfortunately forced to rely upon texts that likely do not only stray from the original through the usual perils of translation, but also because of their filtering through male translators. Poor, for instance, points out that protestations about Mechthild's frail female sex and lack of education in the Latin edition of *The Flowing Light of the Divinity*, which she argues is intended for a male audience, may have been added by her translators (230-31).

writings, although there is no conclusive proof that she ever encountered them.[122] She

does show a clear familiarity with contemporary courtly literature, and scholars

generally believe that she was of noble birth, although the extent of her family's nobility

is not known. Mechthild claims to have been greeted by the Holy Spirit for the first time

at age twelve, and continued in a close relationship with the Holy Spirit for the next

thirty-one years, although she did not move to Magdeburg to take up holy orders until

she was in her twenties.[123]

Mechthild's use of courtly tropes in her writing, particularly in her poetry,

follows the conventions established in secular literature. In Chapter 1 of Book 1, she

presents a conversation in verse between Lady Love[124] [miñe][125] and the soul, who is

referred to as the Queen [kúnegiñe]. While the poem begins with the soul's praise of

Lady Love, who is called "the epitome of perfection" [sere vollekomen], it quickly

transitions into a mode evocative of the courtly lover's complaint:

"Lady Love, You have deprived me

Of all that I ever wanted on this earth."

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[122] Frances Gooday reviews scholarship on the matter and conducts an investigation of Mechthild and Hadewijch's shared themes and tropes in the article "Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Antwerp: A Comparison" (*Ons Geestelijk Erf: Driemaandelijks Tijdschrift voor de Geschiedenis van de Vroomheid in de Nederlanden* 48 (1974): 305-62). Gooday ultimately concludes that Mechthild's writing was composed independent of Hadewijch's influence.

[123] Hollywood, Amy, and Patricia Z. Beckman, "Mechthild of Magdeburg" (in Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden, eds., *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition, c. 1100-1500* (Belgium, 2010), 411-30, at 411).

[124] All translations of Mechthild's writings are taken from Susan Clark's edition of the *Flowing Light of the Divinity*, translated by Christiane Mesch Glavani (New York, 1991).

[125] All citations of Mechthild in Middle High German are taken from Gall Morel's *Offenbarungen der Schwester Mechthild von Magdeburg oder* Das Fliessende Licht der Gottheit (Darmstadt, 1963).

[…]

"Lady Love, You have taken my childhood innocence."

[…]

"Lady Love, I am so much under Your spell that my body has become afflicted with a strange disease."

[…]

"Lady Love, You are a robber, and for this, too, You shall repay me."

[Fro miñe, ir hant mir benom̅e

Alles das ich in ertrich je gewan.

[…]

Frowe miñe, ir hant mir benom̅en mine kintheit

[…]

Frowe miñe, ir hant mich also sere betwungen, das min licham ist komen

in sunderlich krankheit.

[…]

Frowe miñe, v́r sint ein rŏberiñe, deñoch sont ir mir gelten.]

Lady Love replies to each of the soul's accusations, demonstrating the pettiness of her worldly complaints in the face of her eternal rewards. Thus, while the Queen fits the courtly paradigm by illustrating the extremes to which she is driven in order to submit to pursue God's love, Lady Love makes clear that the stakes of this game of love are stacked in the Queen's favor, despite her temporary set-backs. The two accordingly reconcile at the end of the poem:

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"Lady Love, now You have repaid me a hundred times on earth."

"Dear Queen, now all You have to demand is God with all His riches."

[Frowe miñe, nu hant ir mir vergolten hundert valt in ertriche.

Frowe kún, noch hant ir ze vordernde got und alle sine riche.]

Like Hadewijch, Mechthild's use of courtly language and themes at once showcases similarities between the pursuit of earthly and eternal love while far surpassing the former, leaving her secular exemplars pale and shallow in comparison. The soul's complaints of cruelty are not warranted, as the earthly lover's often are, but are shown to be petty in light of her lover's generosity. The sacrifices of the Queen are miniscule in comparison with God's riches, which are far greater than any earthly lover can offer; nonetheless, her complaints are heard and gently answered by Lady Love. The scale of God's love, patience, and generosity subverts genre expectations, allowing Mechthild to portray a heavenly lover who surpasses every courtly lover by leaps and bounds. The contrast casts all worldly lovers in an unfavorable light; just as the Queen's earthbound concerns become hollow in the face of eternity, worldly pursuits of love become frivolous in comparison with the Queen's desire for heavenly love.

Nonetheless, Mechthild infuses her writing with strikingly erotic language, although it often seems to stem from the *Brautmystik* tradition. In Chapter 3 of Book 1, for instance, the soul speaks once again to Lady Love, telling her to "Please tell my love that His bed is ready, / And I lovingly long for Him" [Sage minem lieben, das sin bette bereit sie / Und das ich miñesiech nach ime bin]. Here, it is unclear whether Mechthild is deriving her language from courtly literature or from the *Song of Songs*, although the

latter is a strong possibility. Book 1, Chapter 22 is more clearly an example of

Brautmystik, with God described as the Bridegroom, Mary and the Church as the Bride.

Hadewijch enters the same tradition in Vision 12, which frames Hadewijch as the Bride,

the Beloved/Christ as the Bridegroom. Both mystics balance their borrowings from

secular literature with the love metaphors of scripture; perhaps, given their tendency to

surpass the limits of courtly literature, the mystics find in *Brautmystik* as a more suitable

vehicle for the expression of their relationships with the divine. Given the clear

influence of both secular and religious writings on the intellectual development of both

women, however, I find it likely that the metaphors of both traditions serve as useful

tools for self-expression, allowing them to translate their mystical experiences into a

familiar and comprehensible form. Indeed, by pushing the limits of the courtly, both

Mechthild and Hadewijch are able to express to their audiences the all-surpassing

intimacy and fulfillment found in their relationships with God. In this respect, their

unique presentation of courtly love serves as a powerful rhetorical tool.[126]

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[126] In her article "Courtly Literature and Mysticism: Some Aspects of Their Interaction" (*Acta Germanica* 12 (1980): 41-60), Elizabeth Wainwright-deKadt concludes that Hadewijch's uses of courtly literature is more or less traditional (with some innovations), while Mechthild uses courtly language "in spite of herself," viewing it as vain and meaningless, but making use of its metaphors out of necessity for expression (60). While I do agree that there is some evidence of Mechthild's disdain for courtly frivolities (as seen in my analysis of Book 1, Chapter 1), I am not convinced that her use of prose is necessarily a reaction against courtly literature (58). I find it difficult to believe that Mechthild would devote such a large proportion of *Flowing Light of the Divinity* to verse if she felt it to be an inherently inferior and trivializing mode of literature to prose. In comparing Hadewijch and Mechthild's relationship with courtly literature, I tend to see more in common with their approaches (their eagerness to surpass the regular boundaries of the genre) and interpret their subversion of the genre as an intentional rhetorical move rather than as a necessary limitation. As Francis Beer points out, there is plentiful evidence that Mechthild was opposed to the frivolities of courtly life, as is seen in her visions of hell which include a suffering minstrel and princesses (*Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1992), 93). Still, I am not convinced (as Beer argues) that this means that Mechthild condemned courtly verse as an inherently inferior mode of communication.

Mechthild's visionary episodes in the *Flowing Light of the Divinity* give the

reader another view of her intimate relationship with God, particularly through her active

engagement with the content of many of the visions. In this respect she differs from

Hadewijch, whose engagement with the vision manifests most strongly in her extra-

visionary volition and related spiritual development, as well as in increasingly more

active conversational roles. Mechthild, in contrast, plays important, central roles in her

visions, many of which involve visits to hell and purgatory. In Book 3, Chapter 15, she

speaks of herself in the third person[127] as a soul which "gained such power that she led

Him [God] with His power, and they came to a more gruesome place than my eyes had

ever seen" [Do gewan si also grosse maht, de si în furte mit siner kraft], a vision of hell.

The soul takes pity on the damned, commanding that the Lord have mercy on them.

After the Beloved explains the reason for their suffering, the soul once more asks for

mercy. The Lord replies: "You were right to bring Me here. I will not neglect them or

leave them out of My consideration" [Du hast mich mit rehte harbraht, ich lasse si nit

unbedaht]. Mechthild's soul then confronts the devils and tormented souls with Christ's

ransom, which they are forced to confess is sufficient to free the seventy thousand

enslaved souls; they are promptly delivered by the Beloved, who tells Mechthild that he

will "take them to a mountainside covered with flowers on which they will find more

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[127] Sarah S. Poor discusses writing in the third person as a strategy used by Mechthild throughout the
Flowing Light of the Divinity to gain the authority associated with a masculine author ("Cloaking the Body
in Text: The Question of Female Authorship in the Writings of Mechthild von Magdeburg," *Exemplaria*
12.2 (2000): 417-53, at 426). Her discussion is focused on Mechthild's vision of the young girl receiving
the Eucharist (Book 2, Chapter 4), which, like the vision of torment, involves distancing shifts from the
first to the third person.

bliss than I can tell you" [bringen uf einen blůmenberg, da vindent si me wuñe deñe ich gesprechen kúne].

It is remarkable that Mechthild/the soul not only makes commands directed at the gruesome company of hell, but also toward God himself, who obediently follows her to the place of suffering, hears her pleas on behalf of the tortured souls, praises her alerting him to their plight, and grants her desire. Far from the submissive, silent Hadewijch of Vision 1, or even the eager-to-please Hadewijch of Vision 9, Mechthild presents herself as one who observes, makes judgments, and enacts change. Furthermore, she initiates the visionary journey, prompting God to follow her to the pit of torment through her own power. Mechthild revisits the emancipatory scene in Book 7, Chapter 2, when her prayers for souls in purgatory give way to a vision of the suffering objects of her prayers. Mechthild again takes pity on the souls and begs the Lord to allow her to descend into purgatory and comfort them.[128] He agrees to descend with Mechthild, who identifies a soul for whom she had prayed thirty years earlier. She requests the souls' release, and they duly ascend to paradise. Again and again, Mechthild represents herself as an individual with the authority and power to take an active role in her visions. While some visions are marked by passivity (such as the vision of the chalice in Book 2, Chapter 7), a significant number present Mechthild as a Dynamic Agent.

Mechthild also takes an active approach to her self-representation as the author of her book. While all known mystics' roles as Transmitters of their visionary

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[128] Mechthild begins this vision in the first person, but shifts to the third at this point, only to return to the first person again in a few lines.

experiences are implicit through the existence of their stories, Mechthild spends much time in the *Flowing Light of the Divinity* discussing her role in its composition. Chapter 26 of Book 2 addresses her anxieties about the reception of her book, which she is afraid might be burned. When she addresses God with her concern that he has erred in making her write the book, he responds

> "My love, do not upset yourself too much;
>
> The truth cannot be burned by anyone.
>
> He who wants to take it from My hand
>
> Must be stronger than I.
>
> This book is threefold
>
> And describes only Me.
>
> The parchment which surrounds it
>
> Describes My pure, white, and righteous humanity
>
> Which suffered death for your sake.
>
> The words which describe My marvelous Divinity
>
> Flow hourly into your soul from My divine mouth."
>
> [lieb minú, betrube dich net ze verre,
>
> Die warheit mag nieman verbreñen.
>
> Der es mir vs miner hant sol neṁen,
>
> Der sol sterker deñe ich wesen.
>
> De bůch ist drivaltig
>
> Und bezeichent alleine mich.

Dis bermit, de hie vmbegat

Bezeichent mîn reine wìsse gerehte menscheit,

Die dur dich den tot leit.

Dú wort bezeichent mine wunderliche gotheit,

Dú vliessent von stunde ze stunde

In dine sele us minem gotlichen munde.]

By explicitly discussing her role in the composition of the book, Mechthild is thus able to strengthen her authority as author, for the works on the pages are shown to flow directly from God. While her conversation with God stems from anxiety and insecurity, Chapter 26 has the opposite effect of actually making the strongest possible case for her legitimacy: divine inspiration. Caroline Walker Bynum notes that of the famous thirteenth-century mystics of Helfta,[129] Mechthild von Magdeburg projects the greatest sense of persecution and insecurity in her writings in comparison to those nuns who were brought up in a monastic environment.[130] As a result, Mechthild's efforts to bulwark her position lend her a unique sense of authority born out of persecution, real or imagined.[131] Mechthild's mastery of her work is evident from the very beginning of the *Flowing Light of the Divinity*, when she establishes reading guidelines (her instructions

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[129] That is, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mechthild of Hackeborn, and Gertrude of Helfta.

[130] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982), 228-29.

[131] Frank Tobin discusses Mechthild's efforts to command respect in his article "Audience, Authorship, and Authority in Mechthild von Magdeburg's *Flowing Light of the Godhead*" (*Mystics Quarterly* 23.1 (1997): 8-17), noting that despite the book's claim of divinely-inspired authorship, Mechthild still needed to make use of rhetorical devices in order to establish her authority (15).

that all who wish to understand her writing should read it nine times) and her audience

("all spiritual people, both the good and the evil" [allen geistlichen lúten, beidव़ bosen

und gůten]) in the first prose paragraph. The first chapter of Book 1 is introduced with

the phrase "Receive this book gladly, for it is God Himself Who speaks" [Dis bůch sol

man gerne enpfan, wan got sprichet selber die wort]. God's authority is lent to his

servant, Mechthild, who accordingly takes full ownership of her divinely-inspired words,

establishing the proper readership and setting rules so that it will be read correctly.

Again, Mechthild distinguishes herself from more passive mystics with an unusual

degree of agency, even in the Transmitter role universal to contemplatives whose

visionary experiences are known.

As noted in the Queen's conversation with Lady Love, as well as in Mechthild's

rescue journeys into hell/purgatory, she is best described as a Dynamic Interlocutor,

entering into conversations on equal ground with divine figures and enacting change

through requests. Like Hadewijch, she also serves as Interpreter of her visions, as is

seen in the most well-known of her mystical experiences, that of the poor servant girl at

John the Baptist's mass (Book 2, Chapter 4). Here, symbolic figures are interpreted by

Mechthild, who serves as narrator of the event in the third person rather than occupying

the central role; for instance, the people in the rose-colored clothes are identified as

widows, and the New Testament figures are first described in connection with their

traditional symbolism (John the Apostle with his eagle, John the Baptist with a white

lamb) before being named explicitly. However, in many of Mechthild's visions, such as

those of torment, images are less esoteric and do not require any particular explanation.

She also serves as Witness to her visions, although, as has been discussed at length

above, she is frequently driven to break into a more active role.

Conclusions

To conclude, Hadewijch and Mechthild von Magdeburg both reveal much about

both the mystics' particular use of courtly language and the variety of roles assumed

within their visions. Courtly literature presents the visionary with a familiar set of

metaphors, which can be used to translate difficult matter into a more recognizable form

for the audience. However, both Hadewijch and Mechthild, whether or not they felt any

hesitancy in employing courtly language and tropes, found it necessary to break with

familiar boundaries in their application of the courtly to spiritual matters. Thus,

Hadewijch's Beloved becomes an infinitely patient and generous benefactor, while, in

the same vein, Mechthild's complaining soul reveals the impropriety of the lover's

complaint in the divine romance. In both cases, courtly mysticism is supplemented by

Brautmystik, imitating romantic and erotic language use in scripture. Courtly language

is influenced by the language of religion, and is re-appropriated by the mystics to sit side

by side with direct references to scriptural love language. The courtly and the religious

genres of the Middle Ages are thus intricately linked, such that it is at times difficult to

tell courtly mysticism from the *Brautmystik* in the writings of Hadewijch and Mechthild.

The roles played by the mystics in their texts reveals that visionaries do not

behave in the same way from one author to the next, or even in a work by a single

author. Hadewijch begins passively as Witness, Interpreter, Transmitter, Guided Agent,

and Receptive Interlocutor; however, as she grows she proves to be a Catalyst of

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visionary encounters and a Dynamic Interlocutor. Mechthild, on the other hand, behaves in an unusually active manner throughout her book, adding to the usual roles of Witness, Interpreter, and Transmitter that of Dynamic Agent and Interlocutor. In Mechthild's case, it has been suggested by scholars that pressures generated by antagonistic authority figures drove the mystic to seek an authoritative role for herself, which may explain her unusually active stance in the visions and her tendency to speak explicitly about her role in the authorship of (and, therefore, her ownership over) the *Flowing Light of the Divinity*. Hadewijch's developments, in contrast, seem to be driven by spiritual growth rather than external pressures. Varying life experiences and situations, in addition to personal traits and intellectual and spiritual development, are likely to influence the manner in which the visionaries present themselves in writing, and must account for variations among them.

However, this does not mean that the roles used to describe the mystics, whatever constellation they might find in the individual, cannot be used to describe "fictional" visionaries as well. Chapter 4 will be concerned with the visionary roles of narrators in religious literary dream visions, including *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*. Can the basic roles of Witness, Transmitter, and Interpreter be applied to them, and which of the speaking and acting roles will they tend toward? Can the role of Catalyst be used to describe them? Will they assume roles not found in the mystics' works? These questions will occupy Chapter IV, while Chapter V will turn to secular dream visions, allowing for the three types of visionary literature (mystical/autobiographical, literary religious, and literary secular) to be compared with one another.

CHAPTER IV

THE ENGLISH RELIGIOUS DREAM VISION

In her introduction to *Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages*, Jessica Barr pinpoints one of the major differences between "authentic" mystical texts and religiously-themed dream visions: the latter group of visionary texts allows for the narrator to fail in his or her attempt to grasp fully the significance of the vision. This is possible because the narrators of the fourteenth century religious dream vision were not actually tasked with receiving and transmitting revelatory material; when this pressure is removed, the poet is free to explore "the limits of revelation's potential to convey knowledge."[132] Specific visionary scenarios can be constructed, narrators cultivated to respond to stimuli in particular ways. They are not made to respond to their surroundings in an ideal manner; indeed, their authors seem more interested in exploring their struggles than their virtues. Through their confrontations with perplexing problems and scenarios, these unlikely visionaries – the gem-obsessed Jeweler and lanky, sleep-loving Will – stumble toward truth. They ask foolish questions and make ill-informed statements. They are lectured, corrected, rebuked. The Jeweler is cast out of Paradise. The audience overhears it all. And while the reader, medieval or modern, may confidently reject the notion that he or she would fare as badly as the Jeweler or Will in the same position, it would be just as foolish to

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[132] Jessica Barr, *Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages* (Columbus, 2010), 8.

deny that the experience of reading the conversations between these narrators and their enlightened guides has no educative merit. The autobiographical visionaries instruct through transference of divine revelation, the literary dream vision poets through dialogue.

The poems in this chapter are not, like those in Chapter III, typically read as autobiographical accounts of visionary experiences by practicing mystics. Here, a degree of distinction is recognized between the poet and the narrator. In Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, it is generally assumed that Julian is, to the best of her ability, narrating her visionary experiences as they actually happened to her; the distinction between author and narrator is limited, and for all practical purposes the two are considered to be more or less equivalent. In the literary religious dream vision, by contrast, the narrator is a fictional character, and thus is not considered to be interchangeable with the poet. In *Piers Plowman* we will encounter a degree of complexity posed by possible interpretations of the "autobiographical" fragment of Text C, Passus VI (1-104). Scholars have traditionally read this portion of *Piers Plowman*, among others, as reflecting William Langland's authentic life experiences; however, this view is not universally-accepted, and is often based more upon instinct than upon textual evidence.[133] While E. Talbot Donaldson contends that there is little reason to believe

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[133] See, for example, C. David Benson's "The Langland Myth" (in Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith, ed., *William Langland's* Piers Plowman*: A Book of Essays* (New York, 2001), 83-99), which takes issue with a good many scholarly myths regarding the author and the texts of *Piers Plowman.*

that a passage which is by all appearances autobiographical should be read as fiction,[134] there is also little reason to believe that William Langland habitually lay down to sleep during his everyday errands and was constantly confronted with visionary states during these unconventional naps. Autobiographical elements may be infused in a larger work that is, by and large, fiction. George Kane warns against credulous readings which find autobiography in first-person medieval narratives, particularly those of Langland and Chaucer, where no evidence exists that the poet and the narrator should be equated, and I will endeavor to avoid this pitfall in the following analyses.[135] I do not wish to treat Langland as a blank slate upon which to project cultural values, to paraphrase John Bowers.[136] The two works upon which I will focus in this chapter, *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, will accordingly be read primarily as fictional texts belonging to the late medieval dream vision tradition. What distinguishes these works from those that will be analyzed in Chapter V is their focus on religious and theological matters. Thus, this chapter will represent visionary texts one step removed from those discussed in Chapter III; they still focus explicitly on spiritual matters, but are set in fictional dream settings and narrated by artificial mystics.

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[134] E. Talbot Donaldson, Piers Plowman: *The C-Text and Its Poet* (Hamden, Conn, 1966). See the chapter "The Poet: Biographical Material."

[135] George Kane, "The Autobiographical Fallacy in Chaucer and Langland Studies," *Chambers Memorial Lecture* (London, 1965).

[136] John Bowers, "*Piers Plowman*'s William Langland: Editing the Text, Writing the Author's Life," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 9 (1995): 65-102, at 81.

Pearl

The narrator of *Pearl* has drawn a significant amount of criticism for his perceived failings throughout his dream sequence. Critics are swift to innumerate his manifold sins, which include possessiveness,[137] sloth,[138] and pride in his meager theological prowess.[139] To these flaws can be added several lesser ones, including class-conscious materialism[140] and general obtuseness. If one were to take the Jeweler to be a semi-autobiographical figure representative of the *Pearl*-poet, *Pearl* itself as the true account of a vision following the loss of a dear child, it is still unlikely that one could reconcile listing the poet among the revered company of Julian of Norwich, Birgitta of Sweden, and the like. Even in comparison to the semi-mythical[141] mystics described in Chapter II (the *Rood* narrator/poet, Cædmon, and Cynewulf), he belongs in a class of his own. His imperfections are too apparent, his resistance to instruction too difficult to ignore.

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[137] See, for example, David Aers's "The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*" (*Speculum* 68.1 (1993): 54-73). The narrator here is described as attempting to use his memories of the Pearl Maiden's past, mortal form in order to control and possess her current, heavenly form, thereby preserving his own individualistic fantasies (63-67). See also Elizabeth Petroff, "Landscape in *Pearl*: The Transformation of Nature," *Chaucer Review* 16.2 (1981): 181-93, at 188.

[138] See Ann Wood, "The Pearl-Dreamer and the 'Hyne' in the Vineyard Parable," *Philological Quarterly* 52 (1973): 9-19, at 12.

[139] See Jessica Barr, *Willing to Know God,* 129 and Kevin Gustafson, "The Lay Gaze: *Pearl*, the Dreamer, and the Vernacular Reader," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 27 (2000): 57-78.

[140] See Helen Barr, "*Pearl*; or, 'The Jeweller's Tale,'" *Medium Ævum* 69.1 (2000): 59-79.

[141] Here, "mythical" refers to the poets' placement in the long-lost past, through which even scarce biographical details (such as Cædmon's story in Bede) take on an air of mythology rather than history. It is not meant to suggest that these poets never existed (as my argument in Chapter II demonstrates).

However, his difference from earlier narrators of visionary literature extends beyond his comparative lack of authority. The Jeweler, like Mechthild von Magdeburg, is also remarkably active within the dream landscape. His dynamic interaction with his surroundings and his companion can be described both in terms of physical actions and verbal engagement. Where many narrators might listen and learn from their dream guides, the Jeweler insists on making himself heard. Where most interact with the landscape passively, and only insofar as they are instructed to do so, the *Pearl*-narrator forces his will on the heavenly realm (and sets himself in opposition to God's will) in a brazen attempt to cross the river and claim the Maiden. He is accordingly expelled from the dream-paradise. The effects of the Jeweler's willful behavior are subtle, but drive the narrative in important ways. By compelling his wiser companion to correct his ill-informed statements, he is the one who directs the conversation. Through his impetuous narrator, the poet touches on a number of issues relevant to the political and theological landscape of his time. The debate over the justice of the Master's payment in the Parable of the Vineyard evokes growing concerns, soon to turn violent, over workers' rights to fair wages,[142] while the equally problematic elevation of the Maiden following infant death and its challenge to the hierarchical model of heavenly reward raises troubling questions regarding the value (if any) of choosing a contemplative life over an active

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[142] Barr, "Pearl; or, 'The Jeweller's Tale,'" 70-71.

one.[143] The *Pearl* narrator's role in the story might thus be paradoxically described as one of productive disruption.[144]

This is not to suggest that the *Pearl* poet can be distinguished from the mystics through his poem's timeliness or the narrator's habit of instigating political and social commentary. Lynn Staley, for example, convincingly argues that the revisions of Julian of Norwich's visions demonstrate her engagement with fourteenth-century conversations on authority, which drive her conscious self-fashioning in her writings. Furthermore, Staley contends that the blurring of the lines between master and servant in Julian's parable of the Lord and the Servant "cannot be detached from the highly charged and oppositional social language of the 1380s."[145] As I argued in the last chapter, mystics cannot be read carefully without attention to the social context in which they lived and worked; this principle applies equally to the fourteenth-century writers of religious poetry and their narrators, including both the Jeweler and Langland's Will.

Like the writings of Hadewijch and Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Pearl* blends the language of courtly love with that of religion. I will turn to its treatment of courtly matter momentarily, although I would like to pause and consider the structure of the work compared with those of the mystics discussed so far. *Pearl* represents a work

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[143] Nicholas Watson, "The Gawain-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian" (in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet* (Woodbridge, England, 1997), 293-313, at 302-303.

[144] See Mary-Jo Arn's description of the dream vision narrator's role in "Langland's Characterization of Will in the B-Text" (*Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters* 11.4 (1981): 287-301, at 287) as well as Larry Sklute's "Expectation and Fulfillment in *Pearl*" (*Philological Quarterly* 52 (1973): 663-79).

[145] Lynn Staley, "Julian of Norwich and the Late Fourteenth-Century Crisis of Authority" (in David Aers and Lynn Staley, eds., *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park, 1996), 107-78, at 161).

which fits into the pattern of the dream vision found in Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*: we begin with a pre-dream setting, enter into the dream sequence, narrated by the dreamer himself, and close with the awakening. Within the dream-sequence, the narrator finds himself in a springtime garden setting and is quickly met by a guide, who directs his assessment of his surroundings with a didactic intent. While the matter of *Pearl* serves to distinguish it from other exemplars of the late Middle Ages, in structure it is quite ordinary. This tidy organization is less characteristic of autobiographical mystical texts.[146] In Chapter III, I noted that the first of Hadewijch's visions closely resembles a literary dream vision in format, but this quality sets it apart from the others; it is atypical. Likewise, Mechthild's *Flowing Light of the Godhead* is a work exhibiting various genres of literature, including courtly poetry, didactic prose passages, and visionary accounts. However, her visionary accounts are not framed with a pre-visionary opening and a concluding awakening. *Pearl*, in contrast, represents a member of a distinct literary genre, and a highly-cultivated one at that. The *Pearl*-poet's characteristic eye for detail and precision, exemplified in his maintenance of the link-word patterning which binds the stanzas together and in his "rounding" of the poem by linking the first and final stanzas, gives *Pearl* a sense of artifice (although not of superficiality) which serves to distinguish it from the more "authentic" accounts of visionaries such as Julian and Mechthild. Whether or not the narrator's roles differ from

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[146] This "tidiness" does not mean that the poet is not familiar with or influenced by autobiographical visionary texts, however. Edward Wilson discusses the poet's familiarity with "gostly" or spiritual dreams in "The 'Gostly Drem' in *Pearl*" (*Neuphilologishe Mitteilungen* 69 (1968): 90-101). Likewise, A. C. Spearing discusses *Pearl*'s influence by both religious and secular literary traditions in *The* Gawain-*Poet: A Critical Study* ((Cambridge 1970), 107-110 & 117-18).

those of the mystic's on account of the structural restrictions of the medieval dream vision remains to be seen.

What of the *Pearl*-poet's treatment of courtly ideals? Here his practice resembles that of the courtly mystics. Mechthild's relationship with courtly literature is complex; she both embraces the religious appropriation of love poetry in her writing while frowning on the latter's frivolities. Hadewijch's treatment of courtliness is characterized by its limitations; she can begin to describe the Beloved in terms appropriate to an earthly lover, but before long his description begins to become inappropriate for a mortal subject as it approaches the sublime. The *Pearl*-poet's relationship with the courtly is similarly mixed and complicated. John M. Bowers has demonstrated the similarities between the splendor of *Pearl*'s liveried angelic hosts and the spectacle of Richard II's own retinue.[147] The implication – that the poet has ties to or wishes to ingratiate himself at the court of Richard – is strengthened by the king and poet's shared Cheshire heritage, Queen Anne's own ties to pearl imagery[148] and virginity,[149] and expressions of courtly mourning that may point to a specific set of occurrences: Richard's elaborate displays of grief over the loss of Anne.[150] Whether or

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[147] John M. Bowers, *The Politics of* Pearl*: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge, 2001), 119-20 & 137-38.

[148] Bowers, *Politics of* Pearl, 158.

[149] Bowers, *Politics of* Pearl, 167.

[150] Bowers, *Politics of* Pearl, 165-66.

not the royal couple can be read in the place of *Pearl*'s characters, it is clear that courtly culture is not being portrayed in a derogatory manner.

And yet there are moments of difficulty posed by the narrator's adherence to courtly ideals. As Felicity Riddy has argued, his occupation as a Jeweler firmly links him to court culture, making his courtly mode of expression and self-representation as a lover unremarkable.[151] His idleness at the beginning of the poem draws to mind a specific kind of lover: the wealthy nobleman with sufficient leisure time to spend lamenting a lost love,[152] evocative of Chaucer's Man in Black (although, as Helen Barr has demonstrated, the narrator continually marks himself as a social outsider through his preoccupation with wealth and appearances, his hypercorrect attitude toward courtly propriety, and his speech[153]). Like Chaucer's bereaved knight, he also isolates himself from others; as several critics have noted, the August setting suggests that it is the feast day of the Assumption of Mary,[154] a detail which further emphasizes the markedly antisocial activity necessary to the Jeweler's courtly grieving process. After falling asleep in an earthly garden, he awakens in a fantastic one. The typical literary dream vision setting is exchanged for a marvelous one, resplendent with crystal cliffs, silver

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[151] Felicity Riddy, "Jewels in *Pearl*," in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet* (Woodbridge: England, 1997), 143-55, at 149-50.
[152] Barbara Nolan points out that the Jeweler's self-absorption in his grief links him with the narrators of other courtly dream visions who occupy themselves with self-indulgent brooding over the objects of their love (*The Gothic Visionary Perspective* (Princeton, 1977), 160-62).

[153] Barr, "*Pearl*; or, 'The Jeweller's Tale,'" 61-68.

[154] See Jefferson B. Fletcher, "The Allegory of *Pearl*" (*JEGP* 20.1 (1921): 1-21 at 13); Marie Padgett Hamilton, "The Meaning of the Middle English *Pearl*" (*PMLA* 70.4 (1955): 805-824, at 813); and Elizabeth Petroff, "Landscape in *Pearl*: The Transformation of Nature" (*Chaucer Review* 16.2 (1981): 181-93).

trees, and beaches composed of pearls. Like Hadewijch, the *Pearl*-poet is already

pushing the limits of the genre, grasping to express an otherworldly garden much

grander than any seen on earth. Across a river, he spots a beautiful maiden, who, like

Robert Henryson's sadly-transformed Cresseid, stirs his memory. The maiden is not

disfigured, however; she is glorified. And unlike unfortunate Troilus, the Jeweler is able

to make the connection with his former darling, despite her unlikely metamorphosis. It

is the Maiden he had been lamenting in the opening *erbere*, restored to him in a dream,

whom he had held dearer "þen aunte or nece" (233). Hesitation gives way to joy, and he

calls out to her across the river.

The narrator's initial speech after recognizing his precious, lost Pearl is telling;

he launches directly into a courtly lover's complaint, an occupation which he apparently

feels is worthy of the occasion:

"Much longeyng haf I for þe layned,

Syþen into gresse þou me aglyȝte.

Pensyf, payred, I am forpayned,

And þou in a lyf of lykyng lyȝte,

In paradys erde, of stryf vnstrayned.

What Wyrde hatz hyder my juel vayned,

And don me in þys del and gret daunger?"[155]

[Since you slipped to ground where grasses rise

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[155] All references to *Pearl* are taken from the fourth edition of Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron's *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter, 2002).

I wander pensive, oppressed with pain,

And you in the bliss of Paradise,

Beyond all passion and strife and strain.

What fate removed you from earth's domain

And left me hapless and heartsick there?][156] (244-50)

The Jeweler's description of his deprivation in terms of *daunger* is especially reminiscent of the language of the courtly lover. In this case, it is death, not the lady herself, which is responsible for the withholding of the beloved and her favors from the lover,[157] but the suggestion of entitlement to the object of desire and the frustration of this desire remains. The Jeweler is taken aback when his expression of love and sorrow is coldly deflected by Maiden herself, who declines to legitimize his language of complaint and wastes no time in disassembling the Jeweler's narrative:

"Sir, ȝe haf your tale mysetente,

To say your perle is al awaye,

Þat is in cofer so comly clente

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[156] All translations of *Pearl* are taken from Marie Borroff's *Pearl: A New Verse Translation* (New York, 1977).

[157] Here I do not intend to suggest that the Jeweler is necessarily harboring erotic feelings toward the Pearl Maiden, but that his relationship with her is comparable to that between a courtly lover and his beloved. While some critics, including Jane Beal in "The Pearl-Maiden's Two Lovers" (*Studies in Philology* 100.1 (2003): 1-21), do argue for a sexual relationship between the Jeweler and the Maiden, I hesitate to wholeheartedly accept this interpretation; I am not convinced that the *Pearl*-poet gives his audience enough evidence to conclusively define the narrator's relationship with the Maiden. While there is erotic potential in the *Pearl*-narrator's language, I prefer to focus on his misspent courtly gestures as representative of an obtuseness characteristic of late medieval narrators. As I argued in Chapter III, courtly love can be used to describe a great variety of relationships, which need not necessarily be sexual in nature (although chaste relationships with no potential or desire for consummation are, of course, the exception to the rule).

As in þis gardyn gracios gaye

[…]

"Bot, jueler gente, if þou schal lose

Þy joy for a gemme þat þe watz lef,

Me þynk þe put in a mad porpose,

And busyez þe aboute a raysoun bref:

For þat þou lestez watz bot a rose

Þat flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef;

Now þurȝ kynde of þe kyste þat hyt con close

To a perle of prys hit is put in pref."

["Sir, your tale is told for nought,

To say your pearl has gone away

That is closed in a coffer so cunningly wrought

As this same garden green and gay

[…]

"But, jeweler, if your mind is bound

To mourn for a gem in solitude,

Your care has set you a course unsound,

And a cause of a moment maddens your mood;

You lost a rose that grew in the ground:

A flower that fails and is not renewed,

But such is the coffer closing it round,

With the worth of a pearl it is now imbued."] (257-60, 265-72)

The Jeweler's professional self-identification is called into question, for his lament

ignores the splendid way in which the Maiden has been transformed by death. A radiant

pearl enclosed in a matchless coffer, she enjoys a much higher estate now than she did

when the Jeweler lost her, and yet his perspective is limited by the courtly expectations

of the deprived lover. He has difficulty appreciating her radiance in the same way that a

jeweler would marvel at a flawless pearl. The Maiden's comparison of her mortal body

to a rose which has withered and died is topical and clever, for it appropriates courtly

metaphor, the comparison of the desirable young lady to the rose, and subverts it.[158]

Roses do not remain forever in bloom; they die and decay, betraying the earth-bound

temporality of the courtly lover's obsession. The rose becomes the gem, just as the

maiden becomes distinguished as one of the one hundred forty-four virgins of the

Apocalypse. The narrator, however, is driven by courtly conventions and the joys of the

past. His expression of loss is evocative of Mechthild's Chapter 1, Book 1, in which the

soul's complaints about the personal costs of a righteous life are each superseded by the

infinite gains of heaven. Likewise, the narrator's lament over the loss of his pearl

clashes with the paradisal setting of the poem, and the Maiden's harsh rejoinder is

appropriate, if jarring and painful. This courtly convention has no place in paradise, for

the splendor of the Maiden's new state far exceeds that of any earthly lover, and the

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[158] As Charlotte Gross points out, courtly language in *Pearl* is not only shown to be problematic (through the narrator's complaint and the response it provokes), but is also used as a means to explain spiritual truths to the Jeweler in terms that he will understand ("Courtly Language in *Pearl*," in Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman, eds., *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the* Pearl-*Poet* (Troy, NY, 1991), 79-92). In this respect, the use of courtly language as a tool for explanation and education in *Pearl* is similar to that found in the courtly mystics.

Jeweler's insistence on recalling and wishing for her former state as a merely human beloved is, from the Maiden's point of view, unseemly. The narrator's understandable expression of grief and desire for a happy past initiates the first of many scenes of conflict in *Pearl*. While the narrator is thus represented in an imperfect light not typical of the autobiographical mystics, he also initiates provoking questions for the audience to consider. In this case: what is the appropriate response to the loss of a Christian loved one? Does excessive grief represent an obstinate resistance to God's will?[159]

The narrator's main barrier to appreciation of the Maiden's new form and her heavenly surroundings is his fixation on the state she occupied before her transformation, a form of being which he desires to encounter once more and possess as he once did.[160] This past Pearl, whether she was a daughter or a lover, was attainable, a suitable recipient of his worldly devotion. Like the object of desire in courtly literature, she can be treated as a precious *thing*, as the Jeweler's own pearl-metaphors so aptly demonstrate: a gem which he may hold and hoard. As María Bullón-Fernández puts it, the Jeweler "sees his daughter as a blessed creature but thinks of her as a love-object."[161] Memory and reality – past and present – collide. The Jeweler's desire to encounter and enjoy a familiar relationship with the Maiden he once knew not only drives his

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[159] Charles Moorman discusses the *Pearl*-narrator in terms of his centrality to the plot of the poem ("The Role of the Narrator in *Pearl*," *Modern Philology* 53.2 (1955): 73-81). *Pearl* is focused on the narrator and his struggle to come to terms with the Maiden's loss; all interactions with the Maiden serve to address the narrator's problematic response to death (and, by extension, instruct the audience of the poem).

[160] David Aers addresses the narrator's use of the past as a weapon by which to defy the Maiden's present form in "The Self Mourning," 63.

[161] María Bullón-Fernández, "'Byȝonde þe water': Courtly and Religious Desire in *Pearl*," *Studies in Philology* 91.1 (1994): 35-49, at 43.

questioning of her "unfair" promotion, but dramatically manifests in his final, desperate struggle to cross the river that divides him from the Maiden.[162] The Maiden represents a desirable object which is cruelly withheld; when his attempts at bending the reality of heaven to fit his own beliefs and desires through debate proves futile, he attempts to claim her through physical force. Possessiveness is what prevents him from benefiting from his guide's instruction (at least within the span of the poem), and is what ultimately causes him to be expelled from heaven through the ending of the dream sequence.

The courtliness of the heavenly realm surpasses that of earth, which is revealed to be a cold, petty thing in comparison. Gross identifies the Pearl Maiden's definition of courtesy as "signif[ying] both divine grace and the community of love which, originating in love of God, prevail[ing] among the members and spouses of Christ," or "an ideal of perfection never fully realized by the imperfect beings who people [the *Pearl*-poet's] worlds."[163] Like Hadewijch's courtliness, the *Pearl*-poet's is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar to the audience. It draws the narrator and the reader into the fantastic dream setting, but constantly clashes with their earthly sensibilities. This conflict, rather than the narrator's willing acceptance of the Pearl Maiden's instruction, is what drives the didactic aspect of the poem.

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[162] Bullón-Fernández draws attention to the connection between swimming and sexual practice in courtly literature, suggesting that this scene represents an attempted violation of the courtly lady's favor ("'Byȝonde þe water,'" 47). Jane Beal likewise interprets the river-crossing as an act of romantic jealousy ("Pearl-Maiden's Two Lovers," 21). I would add that because the Maiden's exalted state is at one with God, it must also necessarily represent a violation of God's will, comparable with Adam and Eve's trespass, and is therefore also punishable by expulsion from paradise.

[163] Gross, "Courtly Language in *Pearl*," 87.

Thus far, we find the *Pearl*-narrator's relationship with his dream-guide to be an inverse of the mystics'; whereas visionaries tend to remain silent or at least cooperative during their otherworldly experiences, the Jeweler is decidedly uncooperative, if not pointedly disruptive. The mystics gladly receive knowledge, which is passed directly to their audiences, while *Pearl*'s audience is forced to glean instruction in a roundabout way, learning to find instruction and, perhaps, consolation in the Maiden's words even if the narrator does not. In their roles, however, the *Pearl*-narrator and the mystics agree. In what follows, I will discuss his activity as an Interlocutor, Agent, and potential Catalyst of the visionary experience.

The Jeweler's role as Dynamic Interlocutor is one of his strongest characteristics, and the topic of a good many scholarly studies. Despite his fantastic settings and the splendor of his guide, the *Pearl*-narrator insists on never leaving an assertion, no matter how orthodox, unquestioned. Attempts at domination of the Maiden generally manifest in efforts to control the conversation.[164] It should be noted that the Jeweler's irreverence cannot be satisfactorily explained as a result of being met by a guide other than God himself; a good many contemplatives report being met by lesser spiritual entities, such as angels, and yet remain obedient and eager for instruction. Many literary dream visions, including Dante's *Divine Comedy*, adhere to his convention (Dante's narrator, for example, reveres and honors Beatrice, who resembles the Pearl Maiden in many ways). The Jeweler, however, is closer in resemblance to the narrator of John Lydgate's *Reson and Sensuallyte*, whose preoccupation with the practice of love causes him to

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[164] See Barr, *Willing to Know God*, 136.

scorn the prudent advice of Reason (following in the footsteps of the *Roman de la Rose* dreamer). The common contrast between the practice of wisdom and love in medieval literature manifests in *Pearl* through the narrator's preoccupation with the latter at the expense of the former.

At the heart of the narrator's qualms with the Maiden's instruction is the worldly concept of justice. Underlying their theological arguments, I would argue, is the Jeweler's unspoken grievance: he has suffered greatly at the loss of the Maiden, and therefore he deserves to possess her, preferably in her former, earthly state. As he himself puts it, now that he has recovered his precious treasure, must he it "eft with tenez tyen?" (331) From her first words spoken to the narrator, however, it has become apparent that the Maiden does not feel the need to repay her admirer for his suffering on her behalf. This question of justice (and just deserts) surfaces almost immediately in the narrator's questioning of the Maiden's heavenly estate. The Maiden's definition of courtesy, based on spiritual values and not ones of earth, makes all the citizens of heaven members of the body of Christ:

> "As heued and arme and legg and naule
>
> Temen to hys body ful trwe and tryste,
>
> Ryʒt so is vch a Krysten sawle
>
> A longande lym to þe Mayster of myste.
>
> […]
>
> So fare we alle wyth luf and lyste
>
> To kyng and queen by cortaysye."

["As head, arms, legs, and navel and all

Are parts of one person hale and sound;

Likewise each Christian soul I call

A loyal limb of the Lord renowned

[…]

"Just so in love is each of us crowned

A king or queen by courtesy."] (459-62; 67-68)

This explanation for the Maiden's unusual promotion does not at all please the narrator.

"Þyself in heuen over hyȝ þou heue, / To make þe quen þat watz so ȝonge" ["You set

yourself too high in this / To be crowned a queen, that was so young"] (473-74) the

Jeweler argues, clinging stubbornly to familiar, courtly ideals. "That Cortayse is to fre

of dede, / Ȝyf hit be soth þat þou conez saye" ["That courtesy too free appears / If all be

true as you portray"] (481-82) he insists, apparently blind to the arrogance of his

assertion. He informs the Maiden that the rank of a countess might be fitting for one so

young and uneducated, but certainly not that of a queen! This notion is too radical for

the *gente* Jeweler. It smacks of usurpation, or at least of utter foolishness.[165] It might

stand to reason that in a kingdom where pebbles are replaced with pearls his precious

darling might be made a queen, but this is not a kingdom he seems eager to inhabit. The

Maiden's promotion not only disrupts the mortal order in which he is obviously

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[165] Josephine Bloomfield discusses the narrator's investment in and obsession with hierarchy as well as his habit of confounding earthly and heavenly policy in "Stumbling toward God's Light: The *Pearl* Dreamer and the Impediments of Hierarchy" (*Chaucer Review* 45.4 (2011): 390-410).

invested, but also challenges his claims on her. For what rights can a humble Jeweler hold over a queen of heaven?

This disagreement leads naturally into a didactic speech from the Maiden, who turns to the familiar parable of the Workers in the Vineyard in Matthew 20. The young Maiden is comparable to a worker hired in the last hour, while the Jeweler, as an older Christian, is compared to a worker hired at the start of the day. The Master chooses to allot to each the same reward for their labor, regardless of the length of their employment (that is, of their Christian lives). Thus the Maiden is not only equal to her fellows, despite the narrator's protestation that she "lyfed not two ȝer in oure þede" ["lived in our country not two years"] and "cowþez neuer God nauþer plese ne pray, / Ne neuer nawþer Pater ne Crede" ["could not please the Lord, or pray, / Or say 'Our Father,' or Creed rehearse"] (483-85), but is also exalted as one of the one hundred forty-four virgins of the Apocalypse. In "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," Nicholas Watson addresses the troubling implications of *Pearl*'s doctrine not only for hierarchy-valuing members of court like the Jeweler, but also for members of religious orders. Earthly works are so thoroughly divorced from heavenly rewards in the poem that there appears to be little reason to pursue a contemplative life over an active one.[166] The Maiden, for all her orthodox teaching, has done nothing to deserve her rewards, and it is not surprising that her high honor in heaven, apparently due to the

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[166] Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," 302-303. See also Jim Rhodes's "The Dreamer Redeemed: Exile and the Kingdom in the Middle English *Pearl*" (*Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 16 (1994): 119-42) for more on the dreamer's involvement in the debate over earthly works and heavenly rewards.

fact that her virginity has been preserved through her early (perhaps infant) death, rankles the Jeweler. It is small wonder that he thinks her tale "vnresounable," insisting that "Goddez ryȝt is redy and euermore rert, / Oþer holy wryt is bot a fable" ["God's justice carries across the board / Or Holy Writ is prevarication!"] (590-92). The Maiden's tale of an egalitarian paradise is so foreign and disturbing to him that it overrides the legitimacy of her biblical illustration. He simply cannot – will not – believe her words. A heavenly king who will not abide by earthly hierarchical principles simply has no place in his conception of the universe.

The Jeweler's objections are met with more instruction from the Maiden, who expounds on the grace of God and likens the pearl on her chest to the Pearl of Great Price described in the Matthew 13 parable. This reference elicits an interesting response from the narrator, who takes the mention of the pearl as an invitation to comment on the Maiden's fair appearance and on her clothing: "Quo formed þe þy fayre figure? / Þat wroȝt þy wede he watz ful wys" ["Who made your gown? / Oh, he that wrought it was most wise!"] (747-48). The Jeweler's speech, with its close attention to the Maiden's apparel and appearance, is jarring in its superficial content and inappropriate placement. The spiritual matters on which the Maiden expounds at length are swiftly brushed away in favor of flattery. While his misdirection may be interpreted as a misunderstanding of the significance of the Maiden's reference to the pearl (the sign of the obtuse dream vision narrator), I believe it is equally likely that the Jeweler simply wishes to change the subject. His objections to her promotion have been met with skill by his guide, and he attempts to broach the topic from another angle without admitting his defeat. The

question at the end of his speech of admiration, "Breue me, bryȝt, quat kyn offys / Berez þe perle so maskellez?" ["What duties high, what dignities / Are marked by the pearl immaculate?"] (755-5), elicits the introduction of the Maiden's beloved, the "makelez Lambe"(757), and here the Jeweler finds his angle:

> "Quat kyn þyng may be þat Lambe
>
> Þat þe wolde wedde vnto Hys vyf?
>
> […]
>
> So mony a comly onvunder cambe
>
> For Kryst han lyued in much stryf,
>
> And þou con alle þo dere outdryf,
>
> And fro þat maryag al oþer depres,
>
> Al only þyself so stout and styf,
>
> A makelez may and maskellez."
>
> ["Tell me now, what is that Lamb
>
> That sought you out to become his bride?
>
> […]
>
> "Yet many a noble and worthy dame
>
> For Christ's dear sake has suffered and died;
>
> And you have thrust those others aside
>
> And reserved for yourself that nuptial state,
>
> Yourself all alone, so big with pride,
>
> A matchless maid and immaculate?"] (771-72, 775-80)

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Again, the notion of Justice is used as a ploy to undermine the Maiden's new state, the barrier between the Jeweler and his beloved. Jane Beal reads antagonism in the Jeweler's questions regarding the Lamb, a sense of romantic rivalry, particularly in his attribution of the adjective "makelez," or "matchless," to the Maiden, who accordingly rejects his description, allowing only "maskellez" as an appropriate descriptor.[167] Besides setting himself up as a rival to her matchless, flawless husband (or at least insinuating that the Maiden is too good a match for the Lamb), the Jeweler also reintroduces the specter of usurpation, once more suggesting that the Maiden has assumed a role to which she is not entitled, depriving others of their rights. She is imagined as a rival to countless other suitable matches for the Lamb, her acceptance of the role of bride signaling the dispossession of other pure maidens who suffered greatly for the cause of Christ, certainly much more than she did. This objection is easily answered, as the Maiden makes no claim to be the only bride of Christ, causing the Jeweler's accusations that she has prevented others from enjoying special unity with the Lamb to fall flat. It is a weak ploy, but one which reveals much about the narrator's mindset and motives. Words for him are tools to attempt to reorder a world that is foreign and unsettling. He is not interested in gaining knowledge, but enacting change: he wishes to blot out the radical scene before him and restore the heavenly order to the familiar, conservative one he knows. But, although he is active as an Interlocutor, his words do not hold such power. He directs the conversation, but every objection is met by sound, orthodox teaching.

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[167] Beal, "The Pearl-Maiden's Two Lovers," 19.

The narrator's conversation with the Maiden leads to questions about her dwelling-place; here his half of the discussion is once more marked with rather earthly, superficial concerns (What sorts of homes do the brides of the Lamb inhabit? What are they like?). His request that the Maiden guide him to her home suggests poorly-concealed guile: an attempt to breach the river barrier and be reunited with his loved one. While the Maiden immediately detects the narrator's wish and reminds him that the barrier is not to be crossed, she does agree to guide him to a place from which he can view New Jerusalem, and here we reach a moment of uncharacteristic silence as the narrator describes the splendors of the heavenly city.[168] The description, notable, as John Bowers has argued, for its projection of Ricardian court culture onto the heavenly order, leads up to the final, fatal act. Words have failed the narrator in the past, and the awesome sight of the city, it seems, leaves the Jeweler without any argument to make. His desire to be reunited with the Maiden, however, has not yet deserted him. His final, desperate decision leaves no more room for attempts at persuasion. The time for action has come:

> Delyt me drof in yʒe and ere,
>
> My manez mynde to madding malte;
>
> Quen I seʒ my frely, I woulde be þere,

---

[168] Rosalind Field argues that this scene, which many critics have considered out-of-place in the poem, is the poet's attempt "to combine the vision of St John the Divine with that of his own not-very-sanctified narrator" ("The Heavenly Jerusalem in *Pearl*," *Modern Language Review* 81.1 (1986): 7-17, at 7). I find this argument to be interesting and convincing, both because of the shared dream vision setting of *Pearl* and the Apocalypse and because of the ways, demonstrated above, in which the *Pearl*-narrator presents the Jeweler explicitly as a sort of flawed mystic, an anti-John who does the opposite of what any good visionary would be expected to do.

Byȝonde þe water þaȝ ho were walte.

I þoȝt þat noþyng myȝt me dere

To fech me bur and take me halte,

And to start in þe strem schulde non me stere,

To swymme þe remnaunt, þaȝ I þer swalte.

[Moved by delight of sight and sound

My maddened mind all fate defied.

I would follow here there, my newly found,

Beyond the river though she must bide.

I thought that nothing could turn me round,

Forestall me, or stop me in mid-stride,

And was I would from the nearer ground

And breast the stream, though I sank and died.] (1153-60)

The narrator makes it clear that the splendor of New Jerusalem and of the Lamb are not what motivate him to attempt to cross the river; it is the sight of Maiden herself, and the Jeweler's uncontrollable desire to be near her. He has been repeatedly warned of the impossibility of their union, a fact which underscores the desperation of his act, along with his admission of a nearly suicidal attitude during the undertaking. The Jeweler recognizes that his aggressive behavior is "not at [his] Pryncez paye" (1164); accordingly, he is ejected from his position on the river's shore, his dream vision disrupted by waking. His disruptive words had been tolerated throughout his visionary

experience, but his attempt to subvert God's will is not. While he lives, the Maiden will

remain beyond his reach, beyond the river that separates life from death.

Why does the Jeweler experience this dream at all? The immediate result of his

encounter is so dismal that the experience seems rather cruel and pointless in the end.

The narrator appears to have learned little from his encounter; worse, he has been

tantalized with a vision of his lost Pearl and chastised by the object of his adoration

before being sundered from her once again. To his many sorrows an additional moment

of separation is added. It is difficult to describe the Jeweler as a Catalyst of his visionary

experience in the same way that Julian of Norwich can be. There is no evidence that he

has explicitly wished for instruction regarding the Christian response to grief, nor that he

has meditated over the nature of heavenly rewards – his focus throughout the poem is

emphatically earthbound. The beginning of the poem is occupied with the Jeweler's

grief at the Maiden's loss, obsession over her interment in the soil, and rejection of

comfort. "Þaȝ kynde of Kryst me comfort kenned, / My wreched wylle in wo ay wraȝte"

["Comfort of Christ might come to mind / But wretched will would not forebear"] (55-

56), he confesses shortly before launching into the dream sequence. This is the closest

the narrator comes to describing explicit spiritual contemplation leading up to the dream,

and even this short reference is marked by its rejection rather than acceptance. The

Jeweler's focus, rather, is on the earthly and the physical: he describes the Maiden's

burial site in great detail, establishes a specific temporal setting, and even broaches the

grisly topic of beauty's loss through physical decay. Given the setting established by the

Pearl-poet, I do not think it correct to label the Jeweler a Catalyst of his visionary

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experience, at least not in the sense described in Chapter III. While aside from his rash

decision to cross the river, the Jeweler does not appear to consider himself as an

unorthodox or reprobate character, his words and actions are nonetheless problematic,

and even during the post-awakening conclusion of the poem a good deal of his attention

remains centered on the Maiden, not the Lamb. While this is understandable given his

state of grief, the ultimate message of the poem is that attention to his eternal fate is what

will guarantee the Jeweler his reunion with the beloved (both the Maiden and the Lamb)

and everlasting joy. He does, however, show signs of repentance for his final, rash

decision, generously approving of the Maiden's happy resting place and reward despite

his initial jealousy and condemning his own willful actions which prevented him from

continuing in his visionary state and receiving more revelation. The final lines of the

poem, "He gef vus to be His homly hyne / Ande previous perlez vnto His pay" ["O may

we serve him well, and shine / As precious pearls to his content"] (1211-12), suggest that

the Jeweler is beginning to accept his role in the heavenly kingdom, marking the start of

an repentance arc which will end in his own transformation into a precious pearl.[169] He

did not explicitly seek out enlightenment, but the Jeweler seems likely to benefit from

his experience regardless of his initial motives.

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[169] See, for example, Lynn Staley Johnson's "The *Pearl* Dreamer and the Eleventh Hour" (in Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman, eds., *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the* Pearl-*Poet*," (Troy, NY, 1991), 3-16.), in which Johnson argues that the narrator's concluding reference to himself as a laborer suggests that he is aware of the connections between labor, harvest, and the Final Judgment (11). Thus, the Jeweler signals that his mind is on the transition from earthly to heavenly rule, and presumably will prepare himself accordingly for Judgment Day.

It is possible to discuss the poet's linking of the dream-frame with the dream proper as a kind of surrogate catalysis, and it is characteristic of English dream visions to indicate some degree of continuity between the frame and the dream. In *Pearl*, this continuity is obvious: the Jeweler grieves the loss of the Maiden, and his dream is consequentially occupied with correcting his grief response as well as his imperfect beliefs regarding the connection between earthly works and heavenly reward. Given the literary nature of the poem, the causal relationship may be described as an artificial one. The poet wishes to compose a work in which loss and grief are central; a narrator is constructed in order to facilitate the discussion of the problem of grief, and is imbued with a biography and personality to match the task. In a non-biographical dream vision, the poet is the true Catalyst of the vision, not the narrator. In *Pearl*, the poet chooses not to give the dreamer even the appearance of willingly initiating his visionary experience. This would spoil the central character that the poet has established: a bereaved man whose grief-fueled questions and confusion allow for many important doctrinal issues to be discussed at length. In the same way, I will argue, William Langland creates in *Piers Plowman* a central character whose own chief imperfection, his lack of knowledge, and whose questions, however much they frustrate his guides, facilitate a good deal of the educative passages of the poem. Whether or not this flaw is meant to represent William Langland in a self-deprecatory autobiographical light is immaterial. Will the narrator may be slow-witted, but William Langland the author certainly knows what he is doing.

Piers Plowman

Piers Plowman is, in some respects, among the most realistic of the late medieval

dream visions. The work is not structured neatly with a distinct beginning, middle, and

end; stylistically, it differs profoundly from the carefully-constructed work of the *Pearl*-

poet (contrasting with the latter's link-word patterning, precise numbering of stanzas,

and so on). It is comprised of a series of visionary scenes united by the dreamer's

central quest – to find Dowel – which tend to begin as abruptly as they begin, and which

are twice interrupted by "inner dreams" which resemble the tendency of dream

sequences to comingle with and interrupt one another in a hallucinatory fashion.[170] The

dream series is apparently psychologically-motivated by the waking concerns and

anxieties of the dreamer, particularly as they concern salvation and the spiritual value of

his life's work.[171] Despite the features mentioned above, which would suggest that the

dreams belong in Macrobius's category of *insomnium*, their content runs the spectrum

from the prophetic to the apocalyptic as Will's spiritual journey progresses.[172] They are

clearly more than the after-effects of a day's unresolved events to be treated with

Pertelote's laxatives. The loosely-connected dreams are united by the dreamer's

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[170] I will base my reading of *Piers Plowman* on the B-text, with exception to references to the famous "autobiographical" passage found in the C-text.

[171] For more on the dream psychology of *Piers Plowman*, see Chapter 7 of Constance B. Hieatt's *The Realism of Dream Visions* (The Hague, 1967).

[172] See Richard Kenneth Emmerson's "The Prophetic, the Apocalyptic, and the Study of Medieval Literature" (in Ed. Jan Wojcik and Raymond-Jean Frontain, eds., *Poetic Prophecy in Western Literature* (London, 1984), 40-54).

spiritual development, his journey from a life of slothful[173] self-satisfaction to insight

and repentance.[174] They span a lifetime, charting periods of vocational training, spiritual

drought (Will's forty-five year pursuit of Fortune), poverty, and gradual self-awareness

brought about by the pursuit of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. While, as discussed above,

there is no conclusive proof that *Piers Plowman* should be read as William Langland's

autobiography (despite his decision to give the narrator the suggestive name of Will), it

is to be read as the *narrator*'s autobiography, a journey from worldly preoccupation to

hope of heavenly bliss.[175]

What do we know of the dreamer's life? He is at least forty-five years old,[176] and

is beginning to feel his age. Passus XIII of the B text paints a sorry picture of his life

after Fortune's abandonment:

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[173] I would draw attention to the description of Sloth in Passus V, who in many ways evokes the character of the dreamer. He is a mediocre member of the clergy (V. 415-21) in financial difficulties (V. 422-28; 440). The final reference to begging is particularly suggestive, as the dreamer's mendicancy following his "wasted youth" chasing Fortune has made this way of living a necessity. The reference to his lying abed with a mistress (V. 410) not only evokes the dreamer's choice to forsake the clergy through his marriage, but also refers to the excessive sleep/lying in bed associated with sloth. The dreamer, of course, spends nearly the entire poem in a state of sleep, even nodding off during Easter mass. Elizabeth D. Kirk notes that slothfulness is above all associated with a parasitic existence in *Dream thought of* Piers Plowman ((New Haven, 1972), 59), an issue which comes up explicitly with regard to the Dreamer's lifestyle in the C-text (VI. 1-104).

[174] See, for example, Elton D. Higgs's "The Path to Involvement: The Centrality of the Dreamer in *Piers Plowman*" (*Tulane Studies in English* 21 (1974): 1-34), which traces the dreamer's spiritual journey through his eight dreams. See also J. V. Holleran's "The Role of the Dreamer in *Piers Plowman*" (*Annuale Mediaevale* 7 (1966): 33-50) for more on the centrality of the dreamer to *Piers Plowman*.

[175] See Míċeál F. Vaughan's "'Til I Gan Awake': The Conversion of Dreamer into Narrator in *Piers Plowman* B" (*Yearbook of Langland Studies* 5 (1991): 175-92), which emphasizes the gulf between Will as narrator (writing after reaching an enlightened state) and Will as dreamer (who is struggling after truth, but imperfectly so). Thus, Will the narrator tells his autobiography through his role of Transmitter of the life-long succession of dream visions.

[176] Because the forty-five years refer to the span of Will's pursuit of Fortune, I think it reasonable to assume that these years should be added to those years spent more profitably (before his abandonment of

And I awaked þerwiþ, witlees nerhande,

And as a freke þat fey were, forþgan I walke

In manere of a mendynaunt many yer after,

And of þis metyng many tymes muche þouȝt I hadde:

First how Fortune me failed at my mooste nede,

And how þat Elde manaced me, myȝte we euere mete[177]

[And with that I woke up, my wits almost gone,

And like some one under a spell I started to walk

In the manner of a mendicant, many a year after.

And about this dream of mine many times I had much thought,

First how Fortune failed me at my greatest need,

And how Old Age menaced me, if we might ever meet] (XIII. 1-6)[178]

Despite an early interest in becoming a member of the clergy, he has apparently

abandoned this vocation, but attempts to make a partial return as a mendicant. This

decision, however, appears to be motivated as much by poverty as by sincere intentions;

Fortune's departure means that he must now support his family through begging, and

working as a lay clergyman provides a semi-legitimate reason to do so.[179] He is married and has fathered a child, life choices which suggest that Will had, at one point, intended to abandon his calling to the clergy permanently. The appearance of his unflattering alter ego, Haukyn, or "Active Life," in Passūs XIII-XIV underscores Will's failure as a would-be lay clergyman. Haukyn complains that he finds no success in either of his two vocations, minstrelsy and wafer-making, just as Will's own career does not bring him worldly or spiritual gains.[180] His prideful claims to holy living through poverty carry no weight, for his poverty is a result of unfortunate circumstances, not his own choosing.[181] Like Haukyn, he wears his own spotted cloak, soiled through hypocrisy and prideful living. He joins the ranks of the perplexed, imperfect dream vision narrator alongside *Pearl*'s Jeweler, although, like the Jeweler, he does not lack the potential for reform. Such dream vision narrators, however, do not attain enlightenment overnight. Indeed, Will's development occupies the poem up to its final words.[182]

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[179] It is important to note Will's anxiety over the legitimacy of his vocation and his choice to make a living through begging, which manifests strongly in the C-text's autobiographical passage (Passus VI, 1-104). For background on readings of this passage (both those which find in it strong condemnation of Will's lifestyle and those which find in it approval of Will's decision to avoid manual labor), see George D. Economou's "Self-Consciousness of Poetic Activity in Dante and Langland" (in Lois Ebin, ed., *Vernacular Poetics in the Middle Ages* (Kalamazoo, 1984), 177-98).

[180] Lawrence M. Clopper, "The Life of the Dreamer, the Dreams of the Wanderer in *Piers Plowman*," *Studies in Philology* 86.3 (1989): 261-85, at 280-81.

[181] Clopper, "Life of the Dreamer," 277-78.

[182] I favor Míċeál F. Vaughan's analysis of the B-text's closing phrase "til I gan awake" (XX. 387), which suggests that Conscience's cry for Grace is carried from the dream through the dreamer's awakening and into his waking life, signaling the final (and only) moment of conscious repentance ("'Til I Gan Awake,'" 184-87). As Vaughan notes, prior to this moment the dreamer's acts of repentance occur within the dream-world, and therefore cannot be applicable to the real world. Even the Easter mass scene ends abruptly in sleep, right before Will can actually participate in the ritual.

Structurally, *Piers Plowman* functions not as a single dream vision but as a series of eight dream visions (with two imbedded dream-within-dream visions). James F. G. Weldon charts these visions in "The Structure of Dream Visions in *Piers Plowman*," noting that despite the unusual number of visions in the text, they can still be described in terms of the traditional dream vision framework: they have a (short) prologue, dream sequence, and moment of awakening.[183] Despite some tenuous links with the tradition of courtly love, including displays of admiration toward Meed and Lady Holy Church in Passūs I and X[184] and the expected temperate setting in the opening description of the Fair Field of Folk,[185] *Piers Plowman* differs greatly from *Pearl* and other courtly dream visions. It is set in a specific, earthly locale, Malvern Hills, not in an otherworldly paradise. It is concerned with court politics and policy, certainly (as is demonstrated in the debate between Conscience and Lady Meed[186]), but does not make much use of courtly literary conventions aside from a basic adherence to dream vision structure. Its satirical matter (particularly at the beginning of the poem) calls for realistic, occasionally grotesque imagery, such as the description of Glutton in Passus V, who in the throes of indulgence is described thus:

Hise guttes gonne to goþelen as two greedy sowes;

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[183] James F. G. Weldon, "The Structure of Dream Visions in *Piers Plowman*," *Mediaeval Studies* 49 (1987): 254-81, at 254-56.

[184] Weldon, "The Structure of Dream Visions," 265.

[185] Kirk, *Dream Thought*, 16.

[186] Helen Barr, for instance, connects Lady Meed with Alice Perrers, the unpopular mistress of Edward III, in "Major Episodes and Moments in *Piers Plowman* B" (in Andrew Cole and Andrew Galloway, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to* Piers Plowman (Cambridge, 2014), 15-32, at 17).

He pissed a potel in a *Paternoster*-while,

And blew his rounde ruwet at his ruggebones ende,

That alle þat herde þat horn helde hir nose after

And wished it hadde ben wexed wiþ a wispe of firses!

[His guts began to grumble like two greedy sows;

He pissed four pints in a Paternoster's length,

And on the bugle his backside he blew a fanfare

So that all that heard that horn held their noses after

And wished it had been waxed up with a wisp of gorse.] (V. 340-45)

This is not a pretty description for a courtly dream vision, and certainly falls out of place in the company of courtly literature such as *Pearl*, *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Parliament of Fowls* (with exception to the speech of the lower birds), and the like. Rather, *Piers Plowman* joins *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* as a subgenre of dream poetry which addresses politics and problems of the court without adopting the language of courtly literature.[187] Even as *Piers Plowman* leaves earthly politics behind in favor of matters of theology and spiritual development, his language remains distinct from that of the courtly mystics and *Pearl*, despite the fact that the roles of his narrator and the structure of his poem resemble theirs.

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[187] Kirk describes the use of personification in Meed's story as "simply rhetorical shorthand for literal reality" (*Dream Thought*, 44). This is a good explanation of the way in which satirical matter is approached in portions of *Piers Plowman* as well as in texts such as *Wynnere and Wastoure*, and helps to distinguish this subgenre of dream poetry from those which make use of traditional, courtly tropes and language.

In the use of various allegorical figures as guides, however, *Piers Plowman*
strongly adheres to dream vision tradition dating back to the *Roman de la Rose*. As in
the *Roman*, he is led and instructed by numerous guides, including Dame Study,
Ymaginatif, and Piers Plowman himself. These guides make no effort to spare Will's
feelings in their instruction, enforcing over and over his role as the obtuse narrator.
Dame Study is introduced in an acerbic speech to her husband, Wit, whom she faults for
tossing his pearls of wisdom before Will, the intellectual swine:

> "Wel artow wise," quod she to Wit, "any wisdoms to telle
>
> To flatereres or to fooles þat frenetike ben of wittes!" –
>
> And blamed hym and banned hym and bad hym be stille –
>
> "Wiþ swiche wise words to wissen any sottes!"
>
> ["Well, aren't you wise, Wit," she said, "to speak any wisdom
>
> To flatterers or fools that are frenzied in their wits?"
>
> And upbraided him and blamed him and bade him be still,
>
> And to stop speaking to sots such wise words] (X. 5-8)

Although her words are much harder (and more comical) than those of the Pearl Maiden,
it is notable that both of these literary guides recognize and draw attention to their
companions' flaws in less-than-gentle terms. This lies far outside the experience of the
courtly mystics, such as Hadewijch, whose own shortcomings are addressed with stern
love, but no trace of mockery. Even Piers Plowman becomes impatient with Will's
numerous questions regarding the posts that prop up the Tree of Charity:

> "Now faire falle yow, Piers!" quod I, "so faire ye discryuen

The power of þise postes and hir proper myȝte.

Ac I haue of þouȝtes a þreve of þise þre piles –

In what wode þei woxen, and where þat þei growed,

For alle are þei aliche longe, noon lasse þn ooþer,

And to my mynde, as me þynkeþ, on o more þei growed;

And of o greetnesse and a grene of greyn þei semen."

"That is sooþ," seid Peirs, "so it may bifalle.

I shal telle þee as tid what þis tree highte.

The ground þere it groweþ, goodness it hatte;

And I haue told þee what hiȝte þe tree: þe Trinite it meneþ" –

And egreliche he loked on me, and þerfore I spared

To asken hym any moore þerof, and bad myn ful faire

To discryue þe fruyt þat so fair hangeþ.

["Now fair befall you, Piers," I said, "so fairly you describe

The power of these posts and their particular strengths.

But I have thoughts by the thousand about these three props,

Within what wood they grew and whence they came,

For they are all alike long, none littler than another,

And to my mind – it seems to me – they must have grown from one root;

And they seem of one size and of the same green hue."

"That is so" said Piers," and such may be the case.

I shall tell you at this time what the tree is called.

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The ground it grows in, goodness is its name;

And I have told you what the tree is called: it betokens the Trinity."

And he looked at me irritably, and therefore I refrained

From asking him any more about it, and bade him very courteously

"To define the fruit that hangs so fairly on it."] (XVI. 53-66)

Will's dogged focus on the physical qualities of the props and speculation on their composition resembles the Jeweler's focus on the material aspects of his surroundings in his dream (such as the logistics of New Jerusalem). Piers's frustration seems to stem from Will's insistence on missing the point of the tree's allegorical significance; by asking detailed questions about the posts' composition, he signals that his focus is trained not on their symbolism, but on their status as physical objects. Piers's curt reminder that the tree refers to the Trinity constitutes an effort at correcting Will's flawed analysis of the image by directing him away from the material and back to the allegorical. Accordingly, Will refrains from his literalistic questions and requests that Piers define the tree's fruit symbolically (which he does happily). Their guides' peevishness toward Will and the Jeweler serve as reminders to the audience of the narrators' imperfections, signaling that their words are to be taken with a grain of salt. Despite their visionary settings, they are not to be read in the same way (or with the same reverence) as the narrator of a mystical text might be. Any authority that narrators of mystical texts may possess is in these works shifted entirely to the dream vision guides.

Due to the length and complexity of dream vision episodes in *Piers Plowman*, I will proceed by briefly visiting select episodes as they appear in the B-text of the poem in order to analyze the development of Will's roles as narrator in the poem. As in Hadewijch's *Visionen*, Will's involvement in the matter of his dreams generally shifts from passivity to activity over the course of the work. He begins the poem as an observer and a describer of highly-allegorical scenes, but over time he engages more and more in conversation with other figures in his visions, including guides. As we will see, as an Interlocutor he resembles the narrator of *Pearl*, and with him diverges from the normal practice of the mystics. While Mechthild is characterized by her imposition of will on her visionary surroundings, the Jeweler and Will repeatedly sow discord through willful expression, whether driven by confusion or hostility. Will is generally more eager than the Jeweler to assume a submissive role as student and to acknowledge his guides' authority, even if he struggles to keep up with their instruction. From time to time, however, his stubbornness overcomes his desire to gain knowledge toward the discovery of Dowel, and he interrupts instruction with objection (most memorably, through the repeated cry of "Contra!"). A key development in his progress, I will argue, occurs when Will begins periodically to break from the role of Interlocutor in order to take up the pen and record his visions.

The Prologue of *Piers Plowman* begins on a familiar note; the narrator wanders Malvern Hills on a May morning, and, finding his surroundings pleasant and restful, lies down on the bank of a brook and is lulled to sleep. He finds himself in a rich dream setting, beholding a field of folk between a tower and a dungeon. Here the poem

diverges from its seemingly courtly setting, for the inhabitants of the dream world are jarringly realistic. The crowd is comprised of minstrels and clergymen, pilgrims and beggars, jostling among one another in the everyday dealings of life. The King appears, along with Kind Wit, the first of many allegorical figures who populate the dream poem. The fable of the mice and the belled collar plays out, establishing the satirical tone through which the worldly dealings of the field will be approached in the upcoming passūs. With the beginning of Passus I, the first of Will's guides, Lady Holy Church, is introduced.

Will's role in the poem has thus far consisted of Witness alone, but the introduction of his guide allows the audience to gain some insight into his performance as an Interlocutor. Having been met by Holy Church, Will immediately asks for an interpretation of the scene before him. He is answered straightaway: "'The toure vp the toft,' quod she, 'Truþe is þerinne, / And wolde þat ye wrouȝht as his worde techeþ" ["The tower on the hill-top," she said, "Truth is within it, / And would have you behave as his words teach."] (I. 12-13). Regarding the other major landmark, he is told "'That is þe castel of care – whoso comþ þerinne / May banne þat he born was to bodi or to soule" ["That is the Castle of Care: whoever comes into it / Will be sorry he was ever born with body and soul."] (I. 61-62). Will asks for his lady's identity, receives an answer, and upon being instructed on Truth, asks for clearer instruction "'By what craft in my cors it comseþ, and where'" ["Through what force faith is formed in my body and where."] (I. 139). Here, Will receives the first of many rebukes by his guide for his slow-wittedness, signaling to the audience his lack of authority and knowledge. Still, as in *Pearl*, his

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blunder results in edifying instruction on "kynde knowing," Truth, and the path to

salvation.[188] Will's readiness to expose himself to his guides' ridicule is thus a

productive quality which usually functions without overt acts of disruption, unlike the

Pearl-narrator's frequently combative contributions to his conversations. He takes an

active role in his spiritual education, eagerly requesting more information wherever his

understanding is lacking. Will's request that Lady Holy Church instruct him on how to

tell Truth from False leads to the extended allegorical debate between Meed and

Conscience, during which the complex and problematic role of reward on earth is

discussed at length. Will remains quiet during these scenes and bears witness, as well as

during the confession of the seven deadly sins and the introduction of Piers Plowman.

Finally he wakes up, he explains, due to the loud fervor of Piers's argument with the

priests who deliver to him the doomed pardon.

The vexing crux and related scholarly debate sparked by Piers's tearing of the

pardon highlights one of the shortcomings of our narrator; while he does fulfil the role of

Witness, he does not assume the role of Interpreter at any point in the poem. All

interpretation of scenes comes to us second-hand through Will's guides; and where no

authority figure provides an explanation for scenes or images, readers are left to make

sense of them on their own. If his guides refuse or neglect to provide instruction, as in

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[188] See Susan E. Deskis and Thomas D. Hill's "'The longe man ys seld wys': Proverbial Characterization
and Langland's Long Will" (*Yearbook of Langland Studies* 18 (2004): 73-79). Deskis and Hill point out
that Will's characterization as a foolish man facilitates "a much more lively, vigorous, and memorable
exchange between Will and Lady Church than would be permitted by a more decorous dialogue" (75), and
argue that Will's physical description as tall and lean plays into contemporary stereotypes which link
tallness with stupidity.

the case of Piers Plowman's reticence regarding the three stakes propping up the Tree of

Charity,[189] the audience, too, remains in the dark. In this respect, Will is again

comparable with the Jeweler, who also, while faithfully recording his vision, offers little

in the way of an explanation for its significance. This is a less noticeable trait in *Pearl*

than in *Piers Plowman*, as the work presents fewer enigmas to its modern audience (the

most conspicuous unanswered question is initiated by the dreamer when he neglects to

define explicitly his relationship with the Maiden). Both narrators are occupied with

processing the knowledge they gain through the events that unfold before them and their

conversations with their guides[190]; they lack the authority to supplement their guide's

interpretations for the audience. This is not to suggest that William Langland himself

did not understand or have a set purpose for including the scenes that would puzzle his

audience six hundred years later. It is entirely possible that scenarios which make little

sense to a twenty-first century reader would be quite transparent to a fourteenth-century

one. It is equally possible, given the number and variety of versions of *Piers Plowman*

in circulation, that in the process of revision William Langland created holes and

inconsistencies in his plot, or failed to resolve issues which arose during the poem's

composition, thus erecting a sizable barrier to the modern reader accustomed to

coherent, self-contained narratives through constant cultural exposure to the novel and

similar media (films, television series, and so on). Elton D. Higgs, for example, points

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[189] For discussion of the confusion caused by the props and possible explanations for them, see Nicholas Jacobs's "The Three Props of Langland's Tree of Charity" (*Medium Ævum* 82.1 (2013): 126-32).

[190] Jennifer L. Sisk terms these modes of visionary engagement as dramaturgic and interrogative ("Paul's Rapture and Will's Vision: The Problem of Imagination in Langland's Life of Christ," *Chaucer Review* 48.4 (2014): 395-412, at 395).

to differences between the pardon-tearing scene in the B- and C-texts of the poem, arguing that Piers's tearing of the pardon reveals inclinations more characteristic of the narrator than of Piers himself (namely, a preference for individualistic, non-manual labor over community involvement and physical work), and that these inclinations are edited out in the C-text in order to eliminate any confusion caused by Piers's uncharacteristic behavior in the B-text (confusion which does indeed persist to the present day).[191]

In terms of his role as the Transmitter of the dream vision content, Will only explicitly addresses his composition of the text toward the end of the poem. This fact is usually taken as evidence of the narrator's growing maturity; it is only when he begins to understand himself and to advance to the more esoteric, apocalyptic material which characterizes the poem's closing passūs that Will begins to assume the role of author: that is, one with the authority to assess his visions as beneficial to a wider audience and accordingly record them for his readership. The writing episode takes place at the beginning of Passus XIX following his sixth vision, which includes Christ's death, the harrowing of hell, and the debate between the four daughters of God. Will is awakened from these images by Easter bells summoning him to mass, and the energy with which he gathers Kitte and Calote for the service following his recording of the dream (in contrast with the languor and lack of direction that characterizes his previous waking moments) can be, and often has been, taken as additional evidence of Will's spiritual advance. However, as Míċeál F. Vaughan reminds us, the Easter mass scene is insufficient evidence of Will's moral progress for an important reason: he falls asleep

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[191] Higgs, "The Path to Involvement," 13.

again before he can complete the important sign of his full participation in Christian community and all that it entails. He does not take communion, and, in fact, falls asleep right at the point "which marks in the mass a shift from instructive hearing of the Word to active participation by the faithful in the sacrificial action of the mass."[192] In other words, he does not move beyond the passive observation which largely characterizes his visionary behavior. And while he does assume one of the important roles of the visionary at this point in the poem, his writing activity does not mean that Will has attained the mystic's usual level of spiritual enlightenment or authority. Here, it appears to signal a general growing self-awareness and maturity, but not mastery of the content of his visions, nor mastery of the spiritual knowledge he seeks.

Finally, I would like to revisit the notion of the literary narrator as Catalyst of his experience. As I discussed in the *Pearl* section, considering a literary narrator's role in initiating a visionary experience is problematic in the absence of evidence that he or she is meant to bear any autobiographical resemblance to the poet. Ultimately, William Langland alone is responsible for sending the dreamer Will on his spiritual journey. Will cannot truly exert his will, for he does not exist outside the poet's imagination; his actions are controlled by William Langland's artistic choices, the poet's vision for his literary creation. However, in *Piers Plowman*, unlike in *Pearl*, there is explicit evidence of the author attributing catalytic qualities to the fictional narrator, particularly in his quest, initiated in the third vision, to find Dowel. This quest is marked by conversations with the friars in Passus VIII, Wit in Passus IX, Ymaginatif in Passus XII, the friar,

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[192] Vaughan, "'Til I Gan Awake,'" 181.

Clergy, and Patience in Passus XIII, and Conscience in Passūs XIV and XIX, all of which pertain to the dreamer's desire to find Dowel. His spiritual journey provides the foundation for the poem's often confounding organization of events. Thus, Will serves as a Catalyst in *Piers Plowman*; he may function as a stand-in for the poet, but the same can be said of any of his other roles (as Witness, Interlocutor, and Transmitter). His conscious, deliberate choice to pursue Dowel distinguishes Will from *Pearl*'s Jeweler, who experiences a vision which he did not seek out and which is not met with a welcoming attitude toward its instructive content.

Despite the Jeweler's lack of initiative leading up to his dream vision, however, both *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman* are distinguished by the spiritual status and progress of their central narrators. Morton W. Bloomfield's influential study, Piers Plowman *as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*, links the inclusion of apocalyptic content in Passūs XVIII-XX with Langland's focus on Will's spiritual journey.[193] The Harrowing of Hell and coming of the Anti-Christ occur in the final passūs of the poem, which had previously been occupied with dialogues on the pursuit of perfection. As the text progresses and Will receives and processes the teaching of his several guides, he approaches perfection, which ushers in the end of days.[194] Dowel leads to Dobet, and Dobet to Dobest. Will is by no means perfect by the closing passūs (as is evident from his slothful activity during the Easter Mass scene), but his guides' counsel is not in vain.

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[193] Morton W. Bloomfield, Piers Plowman *as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Jersey, 1961).

[194] Bloomfield, Piers Plowman *as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*, 51.

The audience journeys alongside Will the Everyman as he advances spiritually and approaches the coming of Christ, the savior-king.

The Jeweler's apocalyptic vision at the end of his dream likewise draws on the connection between perfection and the end of the world. The flawless Pearl Maiden and her company are revealed to occupy New Jerusalem, an awesome citadel ruled by the matchless Lamb, Christ. The Jeweler, however, is not allowed to cross the river into this city; he has not yet completed his life, nor reached the state of perfection required for residents of New Jerusalem. The closing stanza exhorts the audience to serve God well in order to advance to the status of precious pearls, worthy of entry into the celestial city. The general movement of both *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, from focus on the narrators' imperfections and relevant instruction to glimpses of the outcome of perfection – passage from an ephemeral world to an everlasting one – emphasizes the central characters' roles as journeymen. They are both also forced to focus on their roles in society, particularly their problematic impulses to resist social involvement in favor of individualistic tendencies.[195] This social focus, as Bloomfield has noted, tends to separate both Langland and the *Pearl*-poet from the mystics, grounding their narrators in earthly concerns even as the movements of their poems shift the focus from worldly causes to heavenly ones.[196] Unlike the ultimate apocalyptic visionary, John of Patmos,

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[195] That is, the Jeweler's resistance to the order of the heavenly community (in which all are parts of the body of Christ and therefore equally elevated in heaven) as well as his isolation from the social activities in the opening of the poem and Will's conspicuous absence from the Christian community until the closing Easter Mass scene (in addition to his resistance to manual labor in favor of his preferred mendicancy, which calls into question the legitimacy of his chosen place in society).

[196] Bloomfield, Piers Plowman *as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*, 105.

Will and the Jeweler offer no special revelations; rather, they struggle with problems of Christian community and spiritual status familiar to a wide audience, both religious and lay. This fact, in addition to the narrators' conspicuous imperfections, may help to explain why they provide no interpretations for the content of their dreams. For many of the important contemporary issues they touch upon, the original audience may have needed no further explanation.

Conclusions

The key difference between religious autobiographic and religious literary visionary texts, as seen in this chapter's analyses of *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, is the literary narrators' abandonment of the role of Interpreter for the audience. The key reason for this departure lies in the narrators' status as developing but conspicuously imperfect visionaries. Both William Langland and the *Pearl*-poet choose to instruct the audience through their narrators' failures of understanding, which lead to extended dialogues on spiritual and theological matters for the edification of the dreamer and the audience. The narrators of *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman* are not sufficiently spiritually advanced to serve as Interpreters of their works in the same way as mystics such as Hadewijch and Julian of Norwich do. In this respect, the authors of literary religious dream visions decline to emulate the writers of autobiographical visionary texts.

However, in many other areas William Langland and the *Pearl*-poet do write visionary characteristics into their literary narrators. As with the mystics, their dreamers exhibit a wide spectrum of passive and active stances which can vary over the course of the work. While the Jeweler's characterization is fairly consistent throughout his single

dream experience, Langland's Will serves as both passive Witness and active Interlocutor depending on the content of his various visions. Will is comparable to Mechthild and Hadewijch in that his visions are not received all together, but span a lifetime; accordingly, like these mystics, the nature of his visions, his spiritual development, and his participation shifts (although, as mentioned above, he does not develop into an adept Interpreter of his dreams, and thus lingers behind his mystical counterparts in spiritual maturity. Even the young Hadewijch outperforms Langland's Will). Will also takes a role in initiating his visions through his pursuit of Dowel, just as Julian prays to receive the three graces before receiving her famous revelations.

In the upcoming chapter, I will compare the features of narrators in secular literary dream visions with those in religious dream visions. Of particular interest, given the results of this chapter's analyses, will be secular narrators' roles (or lack thereof) as Interpreters of their visions. Along these lines, the trope of the obtuse dream vision narrator will be at the forefront of my investigation of these dreamers' behaviors and functions in their visionary settings, as well as the secular poets' methods of using their narrators' dream experiences in order to instruct their audiences.

CHAPTER V

THE COURTLY NARRATOR IN SECULAR LITERARY DREAM VISIONS

After having examined some of the patterns exhibited by narrators in both autobiographical visionary texts and late medieval religious dream visions, I will approach the final sub-category of visionary literature defined in this study: the secular literary dream vision. "Secular" for this purpose refers to works which take as their focus matters of the court and courtly practice (especially courtly love). It does not imply that the works of the poets studied here, Geoffrey Chaucer and his follower, Robert Henryson, are completely devoid of religious content or significance. Indeed, the ephemerality of worldly joys and the ultimate pettiness of courtly values in the face eternity manifest conspicuously as themes in the works of both poets. It is difficult, given the centrality of the Church and Christian doctrine to both intellectual and everyday life in the Middle Ages, to find a medieval text which can be considered truly "secular" in a modern sense. Indeed, as I discussed in Chapter III, the heavy presence of religious metaphor used in the construction of courtly language and the religion of love prevents the worldly and the heavenly from ever being too far sundered in the texts analyzed in this study.

By way of qualification, therefore, in this study a "secular" text is one which the majority of the plot is concerned with the practice and problems of courtly life and love. The texts discussed in this chapter, *The Book of the Duchess* and the *Testament of Cresseid*, will focus primarily on the latter, although political texts such as *Wynnere and*

Wastoure, which deal with court policy and economic philosophy, are also included in this definition. In these works, religion often features in a moment of intervention toward the end of the poem, when a problem is resolved through the acceptance of heavenly principles and the denunciation of worldly cares or adherence to courtly behaviors. Thus, while Henryson's Cresseid is guilty of a breach of courtly doctrine through her betrayal of the faithful Troilus and pursuit of a new lover (or lovers, depending on whether rumors about her behavior can be believed), she ultimately, like Chaucer's Troilus, recognizes the fickleness of Fortune and the ephemerality of worldly joy and pain. The poem ends with the writing of her testament (an act which represents the final stripping away of her earthly goods and identity) in preparation for death. A work like *Pearl*, on the other hand, is occupied with theological problems throughout in addition to the narrator's central problem: his own bereavement and the overwhelming pain which prevents him from appreciating the significance of the Maiden's heavenly elevation or maintaining a focus on his own afterlife in the New Jerusalem. In other words, in the dream visions of this chapter, religion mainly features (when it does at all) as the *solution* to a problem, whereas in the visions of Chapters III and IV, religion manifests as the *central problem*, for which the solution is heightened spiritual knowledge or revelation.

Chaucer and the Dream Vision Tradition

Geoffrey Chaucer is the author of some of the most well-known dream vision poetry of the late Middle Ages: *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The House of Fame*, and *The Legend of Good Women*. I will focus upon the *Book of the*

Duchess in this chapter; all four, however, can be considered secular, and take for their focus matters of courtly culture and love.[197] The narrators of Chaucer's poetry have been the focus of a good many scholarly studies, particularly as they relate to the late medieval trope of the obtuse narrator. John Finlayson draws upon one of Chaucer's important literary sources, the *Roman de la Rose*, noting that despite critical attention to their well-defined personality traits (particularly those which indicate humor or simplicity), Chaucer's narrators actually play a more muted role in the dream visions than is typically recognized, at least compared to the very central narrator of the *Roman*, whose personal romantic quest drives the plot of the vision (or *Piers Plowman*'s Will, whose spiritual quest for perfection unites his numerous dream sequences). They are humanized through their comic natures, but remain detached to some degree from central matters.[198] At the center of the *Book of the Duchess* is John of Gaunt's surrogate, the knight or Man in Black; Chaucer's narrator exists to facilitate the elegiac visionary sequence, but he is not the subject of it. Again, in the *Parliament of Fowls*, the narrator serves to spy on the gathering of the mating birds. The three tercel eagles and the formel for whose favor they compete stand out as royalty among the birds, and the noblest of the three is often read as representing Richard II, who was at the time courting Anne of Bohemia (alongside Charles of France and Freidrich of Meissen). Thus, the narrator again serves to further consideration of another courtly event in which he cannot directly

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[197] See Michael St John's *Chaucer's Dream Visions: Courtliness and Individual Identity* (Aldershot, 2000), which reads each of the four poems in terms of contemporary politics, court culture, and courtly ideals.

[198] John Finlayson, "The *Roman de la Rose* and Chaucer's Narrators," *Chaucer Review* 24.3 (1990): 187-210, at 208.

participate aside from muted commentary, provided at a respectful distance.

Nevertheless, Chaucer's narrators display varying degrees of participation in visionary events. The narrator of the *Parliament of Fowls*, for example, is shown to be a "thinker" who limits himself to the edges of the central action as an observer, while the narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* is a "doer" who shares the center stage through his active conversation with the Man in Black.[199] Additionally, there are degrees of self-identification attached to Chaucer's narrators from poem to poem. The narrator of the *House of Fame* is called "Geffrey," a suggestive choice on Chaucer's part which raises the possibility that the narrator should be read as synonymous with the poet. The narrator of the *Legend of Good Women* is lambasted for participating in slander against women through his composition of *Troilus and Criseyde* and translation of the *Roman de la Rose*, direct references to Chaucer's oeuvre which again suggest a measure of equation between the poet and narrator. The narrators of the *Book of the Duchess* and *Parliament of Fowls*, however, lack any such defining moments, providing no reason to believe (or disbelieve) that Chaucer intends to represent himself through his characters, who can be read as educated (although occasionally confused or disoriented) everymen.

Because of the variation that exists among Chaucer's narrators, I will conduct my analysis of the *Book of the Duchess* by treating the narrator as a character distinct from the narrators of Chaucer's other dream visions (that is, I will not assume that he is to be identified as closely with the poet as the *House of Fame*'s "Geffrey" typically is). I will

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[199] J. J. Anderson, "The Narrators in the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Parlement of Foules*," *Chaucer Review* 26.3 (1992): 219-35.

also show caution in reading Chaucer's own personality or experience into his narrators. For example, I find no evidence to link any autobiographical event to the eight-year illness under which the *Duchess* narrator suffers, nor any occasion to extrapolate a disease in order to attribute it to Chaucer himself. In this instance, I will read the narrator's malady as a fictional characteristic which not only draws him into the poem's thematic focus on mental anguish and melancholy, but also drives his decision to read the tale of Ceyx of Alcyone, which unites the motifs of sleep deprivation and bereavement.[200] In other words, it is an artistic choice which fosters cohesion.

The narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* has been read as occupying two unusually differentiated modes: that of the sleep-deprived (and consequentially dull-witted) waking narrator and of the refreshed, perceptive dreamer.[201] Michael D. Cherniss reads in the narrator's flippant response to the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone (most notably, in his jocular decision to offer Morpheus the prize of a feather bed in exchange for much-needed sleep) evidence of typical late medieval narratorial stupidity,

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[200] While the eight-year disease has often been read in terms of lovesickness (perhaps out of an impulse to match the narrator's malady exactly with that of the knight), I do not find this reading to be well-supported by the description of his suffering in the text. More convincing is John M. Hill's argument that the symptoms of the narrator's illness, particularly his emphasis on lack of sleep, match those of melancholy ("The *Book of the Duchess*, Melancholy, and That Eight-Year Sickness," *Chaucer Review* 9.1 (1974): 35-50). It is not necessary for the narrator to suffer exactly as the Man in Black has; the unifying theme of mental anguish is sufficient. R. M. Lumiansky has argued that the narrator suffers specifically from the death of a loved one, pointing to linguistic parallels between his and the knight's speeches ("The Bereaved Narrator in Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*," in William A. Quinn, ed., *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems* (New York, 1999), 117-29). This argument I also find reasonable, as it avoids the typical poorly-supported and -defined prescription of love-longing and can be argued with demonstrable patterns in the text. Whatever the case (and I do not believe there is evidence enough to know for certain the nature of the narrator's eight-year illness), the general idea persists that the psychologically-tormented narrator is charged with consoling the similarly-disturbed central character.

[201] James R. Kreuzer, "The Dreamer in the *Book of the Duchess*," *PMLA* 66.4 (1951): 543-47, at 545.

particularly in the apparent glossing over of Ceyx's advice (which is ignored by both Alcyone and the waking narrator). The sleeping narrator, by contrast, appears to have processed and internalized Ceyx's advice to forsake grief and death in favor of consolation and life:

> "My swete wyf,
>
> Awake! Let be your sorwful lyf,
>
> For in your sorwe there lyth no red;
>
> For, certes, swete, I am but ded." (201-204)[202]

Accordingly, his role in the poem involves the consolation of the Man in Black, who is gradually guided away from his obscure references to his lady's death until he reaches the moment of crisis at the end of the dream sequence, for the first time revealing explicitly rather than in courtly euphemisms that "She ys ded!" (1309)[203]. Despite the importance of the narrator's conversational role in provoking this exclamation, however, he claims, in his waking state, to have no more understanding of the significance of his dream than he had of the tale which preceded his slumber:

> Y fil aslepe, and therwith even
>
> Me mette so ynly swete a sweven,
>
> So wonderful that never yit
>
> Y trowe no man had the wyt

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[202] All quotations of Chaucer's works, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from Larry D. Benson's *Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1987).

[203] Michael D. Cherniss, "The Narrator Asleep and Awake in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 8.2 (1972): 115-26.

To konne wel my sweven rede;

No, not Joseph, withoute drede,

Of Egipte, he that redde so

The kynges metynge Pharao,

No more than koude the lest of us;

Ne nat skarsly Macrobeus

[…]

I trowe, arede my dremes even. (275-84, 289)

I would suggest here two possible interpretations. Following Cherniss's lead, we might

decide that the narrator's inability to interpret his dream sequence is simply a sign of

confusion or ignorance. However, given that the narrator's claim not to understand the

significance of his dream must necessarily occur after it, and therefore does not take

place during the period of sleep-deprivation which marks his light-hearted and perhaps

misguided response to the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone, I would also propose that he may

be intentionally obscuring the meaning of the dream rather than returning to the

exhausted, befuddled state which he occupied before falling asleep. His allusions to

both Daniel and Macrobius suggest that the narrator is well-versed in contemporary

medieval dream theory. His assertion that two of the most famous masters of dream

interpretation would not be able to make sense of his own dream suggests either

egregious arrogance, ignorance oddly inconsistent with his level of education, or a sly,

rather self-deprecatory joke. Given the narrator's established sense of humor in the

feather bed passage, I contend that the last of these options is the most likely.

Furthermore, I would suggest that the feather bed passage may not be quite as stupid as critics have previously argued, but another bit of humor which suggests a playful personality, not the trappings of a dunce. The narrator's denial of his role as the Interpreter should, however, be noted. While many critics have suggested that his ignorance throughout the dream sequence proper is feigned, at no point does the narrator take up the role of the Interpreter of the dream; in fact, he actively denies it. This suggests a conscious rhetorical move on Chaucer's part.

Indeed, Chaucer's narrator appears to be as occupied with obscuring meaning as with clarifying the occasion for the poem's composition. The closing cryptic passage describing the dream setting has provided the strongest link to John of Gaunt and the death of his wife, Blanche (accordingly referred to as "White" in the poem):

> With that me thoghte that this kyng
>
> Gan homwarde for to ryde
>
> Unto a place, was there besyde,
>
> Wich was from us but a lyte –
>
> A long castel with walles white,
>
> Be Seynt Johan, on a ryche hil,
>
> As me mette; but thus hyt fil. (1314-20)

The biographical interpretation of this portion of the poem, with "long castel" referring to "Lancaster," "Seynt Johan" a reference to John of Gaunt's name, and "ryche hil" to "Richmond," is widely-accepted by modern critics to be correct, especially taken together with Chaucer's claim to have written a work called "the Deeth of Blaunche the

Duchesse" in the *Legend of Good Women*. The narrator's manner of encoding the occasion for the elegy is as obscure as the knight's laments. He stands in for Chaucer as someone who is "in the know" about the Man in Black's identity, but the audience is expected to fill in the missing pieces of information. Again, it is possible to read the narrator as either an ignorant Transmitter of cryptic information or as someone who is invested, alongside the poet, with softening the truth with a rather transparent riddle. For if the *Book of the Duchess* does indeed commemorate the death of Blanche, a courtly audience would certainly be aware of the event and would be capable of understanding Chaucer's closing references to Gaunt. If the veil between fiction and reality can be ripped so easily, why include it at all?

Chaucer's light treading here works in tandem with that of his dreaming narrator. The many "therapeutic" readings of the *Duchess* narrator's role interpret his repeated signs of ignorance and confusion as intentional efforts to provoke the Man in Black into "talking out" his personal loss until he can finally admit to the narrator and, most importantly, to himself that his fair White is dead.[204] Here the denial of the role of Interpreter is met with assumption of the role of an active Interlocutor who operates by asking a series of questions which, on the surface, indicate an extreme lack of awareness comparable with that of Langland's Will. The difference between the two, as stated earlier, is that Will is typically read as genuinely lacking in knowledge, his questions

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[204] See, for example, George Lyman Kittridge's *Chaucer and His Poetry* ((Cambridge, 1970), 51-52); Bertrand H. Bronson's "*The Book of the Duchess* Re-Opened" (*PMLA* 67.5 (1952): 863-81); Kreuzer's "The Dreamer in *The Book of the Duchess*"; and more recently, Arthur W. Bahr's "The Rhetorical Construction of Narrator and Narrative in Chaucer's the *Book of the Duchess*" (*Chaucer Review* 35.1 (2000): 43-59).

serving to help decrease his ignorance, whereas the *Duchess* narrator is very often

attributed with a veneer of naïveté which masks benevolent guile, his questions serving

to prod the Man in Black toward a more productive reaction to death which will initiate

a process of consolation advocated by Ceyx in the story's frame.[205] The strongest

evidence for his concealment of knowledge comes in his baffling oversight of the

knight's opening speech, made before the narrator reveals himself:

> "I have of sorwe so gret won
>
> That joye gete I never non,
>
> Now that I see my lady bryght,
>
> Which I have loved with al my myght,
>
> Is fro me ded and ys agoon.
>
> Alas, deth, what ayleth the,
>
> That thou noldest have taken me,
>
> What thou toke my lady swete,
>
> That was so fair, so fresh, so fre,
>
> So good that men may wel se
>
> Of al goodnesse she had no mete!" (475-86)

While this complaint does come in the form of a tuneless song and therefore might

conceivably be interpreted initially as a sign of general melancholy rather than as an

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[205] I will note here that the "aware narrator" reading is not unanimous, as demonstrated by Lee Bartlett's article "Sometimes a Cigar is Just a Cigar: The Dreamer in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*" (*Thoth* 15.1 (1974): 3-11). This reading of the *Duchess* narrator's role has, however, become increasingly unfashionable.

actual lament for a dead beloved,[206] the fact remains that the narrator is apparently unable to piece together the source of the knight's pain by re-visiting this song in the context of the knight's other numerous (if metaphor-obscured) complaints.[207] This is odd, and either bespeaks extreme obtuseness or a calculated show of ignorance, particularly given the narrator's explicit assurance that he could rehearse the song "ful wel" (473). Like the earlier allusions to dream theory paired with proclaimed ignorance of his own dream, the narrator's deliberate oversight of the significance of the knight's song suggests that his lack of knowledge is not to be taken at face value. I agree with Kittredge and many other critics that the narrator's "forgetfulness" here is contrived, his intent being to learn more about the exact nature of the knight's loss.[208] The knight, of course, neglects to add any solid details to the information that the narrator has already gleaned, although he does reveal the depths of despair which his courtly mode of mourning has encouraged him to embrace. The knight's courtly mourning, although befitting his (that is, John of Gaunt's) social status, drives him, like Alcyone, away from life and toward death. The conciliatory nature of the elegy, however, puts the narrator in a position of mediator who must delicately confront the dangers of excessive mourning and encourage the bereaved to break from it.

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[206] Larry Sklute suggests this explanation for the narrator's apparent ignorance in *Virtue of Necessity* ((Colombus, 1984), 31).

[207] For instance, the Man in Black's initial discussion of his woe with the narrator includes several explicit references to death. He claims to be a wretch "that deth hath mad al naked / Of al the blysse that ever was maked" (577-78); certainly this statement combined with the opening tuneless song should be sufficient evidence for the narrator to piece together the source of his sorrow.

[208] Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry*, 51-52.

Under the reading of the covertly intelligent narrator, the difference in social class between John of Gaunt/the Man in Black and Chaucer/his narrator is generally taken as the reason for the narrator's interrogative and therefore indirect approach to consoling the knight; given their differences in status and power, Chaucer's distancing is taken as a sign of deference and respect. [209] The narrator augments the Man in Black's wisdom and nobility by presenting himself as comparatively naïve and in need of instruction (despite the fact that we, the audience, are aware that he has access to a good deal more information than he reveals). The symbolic rather than direct references to Gaunt established in the closing of the poem can also be explained in terms of Chaucer's conscious rhetorical distancing. His narrator consoles the Man in Black by leading him away from his obscure, courtly references to death and his accompanying depressive and suicidal feelings; by patiently answering his apparently ignorant companion's increasingly pointed questions, the knight ironically becomes the guided rather than the guide. The absence of a traditional dream vision guide in the *Book of the Duchess* is notable, and makes the relationship between the Man in Black and the narrator even more suggestive. Although he takes the role of answering the questions, the grief-stricken knight is hardly in a position to impart wisdom or knowledge, and shows no particular desire to enlighten the narrator; he works to evoke the narrator's sympathy for his plight by describing his suffering and the characteristics of the fair lady whom he has lost, but these ruminations are just as motivated by courtly indulgence in grief as they

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[209] Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry*, 39. See also A. C. Spearing's *Medieval Dream-Poetry* ((Cambridge, 1976), 54).

are by the narrator's request for knowledge. There is no reason to believe that the

knight's topic of thought and speech would diverge at all if his partner were not present

(as is made evident by the initial tuneless death-song). In fact, his obscure language

works to keep the narrator distanced from the source of his distress, preventing him,

until the end of the poem, from offering any meaningful sympathy for the knight's loss.

I would suggest that the narrator plays the role of guide in the poem, serving as a

stand-in for Ceyx, whose advice to forsake the excesses of mourning is ignored by the

doomed Alcyone. Chaucer's exclusion of the tale's normal happy ending (the

transformation of the dead couple into birds) suggests that this solution to sorrow is

being purposely rejected; the bereaved should not be encouraged to seek happiness after

death (perhaps hastened by suicide), but to value his life and health. The tale of Ceyx

and Alycone is thus given an utterly tragic outcome, with no hope of metamorphosis or

happy afterlife to soften the blow. This message of self-preservation over self-

destruction is born out through the narrator's stubborn refusal to engage with courtly

rituals of never-ending grief, which culminates in the knight's frank, less-than-courtly

admission of loss at the end of the poem. The process of bringing the knight to this point

of admission (and breaking the spell of courtly mourning), however, must be enacted

carefully; the Man in Black must be presented as a courtly and admirable gentleman, his

adherence to his strict regimen of mourning understandable and even fitting given his

social rank and noble personality, despite the narrator's (and Chaucer's) implied

corrective to its dangers.[210] The narrator (and Chaucer) cannot be perceived as casting

judgment on their noble subject, nor of belittling the source of his distress. The process

of consolation must flow naturally from the knight's conversation with the socially-

inferior narrator, who cannot assume the typical didactic tone of the dream vision guide.

This is accomplished through a carefully-crafted conversational dynamic, with the

narrator assuming an active role while nevertheless maintaining a submissive attitude

toward his social better.

The target of the narrator's gentle criticism, as stated earlier, is a dangerous and

potentially deadly adherence to courtly impulses for self-destruction following loss or

deprivation of the beloved. In this context, Alycone's story serves as the cautionary tale;

by ignoring her husband's advice to come to terms with his loss, she succumbs to her

sorrow within three days of his final visit. As I discussed in Chapter III, sickness and

even death are expected outcomes of love-longing in medieval courtly literature, and

although there is no reason to believe that a medieval lover was any more likely to die of

sorrow than a modern one (literature, we suspect, lends itself to hyperbole in this

particular matter), the detrimental psychological and physical effects of grief and

depression are acknowledged both in the past and present. The knight's courtly

mourning manifests in his alarmingly sickly appearance, of which the narrator comments

Hit was gret wonder that Nature

Myght suffre any creature

> To have swich sorwe and be not ded. (467-69)

From the beginning of the poem, the theme of excessive mourning as an act which contradicts nature (that is, the right order of things) is made explicit. The sufferer's pale appearance is explained as an extreme imbalance of blood, brought about by his great sorrow:

> The blood was fled for pure drede
>
> Doun to hys herte, to make hym warm –
>
> For wel hyt feled the herte had harm –
>
> To wite eke why hyt was adrad
>
> By kynde, and for to make hyt glad,
>
> For hit ys member principal
>
> Of the body; and that made al
>
> Hys hewe change and wexe grene
>
> And pale, for ther noo blood ys sene
>
> In no maner lym of hys. (490-99)

The body's efforts to preserve the Man in Black's heart are again framed in terms of nature; the blood naturally rushes to the heart as a result of his great distress, but his body's prolonged and intense battle to save the knight's life has taken its toll on his appearance and his overall health. The natural impulse to preserve life reveals the knight's unnatural state of mind which has brought about his unnatural physical status. While sorrow is acknowledged as an expected catalyst of the knight's state (given the body's inherent mechanism for countering it), his role in prolonging his own physical

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state of crisis is made clear in the following conversation with the narrator. At issue in

the *Book of the Duchess* is not the knight's reason for experiencing sorrow, but the way

in which his allusive and obscure methods of expressing his grief tend to evade comfort

and prolong suffering. The narrator's stated purpose is to learn the nature of the knight's

suffering so that he can "Amende hyt, yif [he] kan or may" (551); the fact that his

partner is so aloof and uncommunicative throughout their conversation suggests not only

that the knight does not believe that the narrator can relieve his pain (as is evident in his

response to the narrator's offer of consolation: "Nay, that wol nat be"), but that he does

not desire to be freed from it. This self-destructive tendency fuels their largely unfruitful

dialogue until the final, cathartic moment.

Indeed, the knight's death-wish is so overt that, after naming Death as the source

of his woe, the Man in Black goes on to lament that he cannot follow his beloved into

the grave:

The pure deth ys so ful my foo

That I wolde deye, hyt wolde not soo;

For whan I folwe hyt, hit wol flee;

I wolde have hym, hyt nyl nat me. (583-86)

Combined with the knight's unnatural hue and state of health and mind, this statement is

cause to give the narrator (and the reader) much alarm. While the courtly expectation of

suffering illness and death due to separation from the beloved is ubiquitous in medieval

romance, the narrator cannot bring himself to approve of such morbid talk. In fact, the

knight's attitude is worrying enough that it spawns a lengthy riposte on the eternal peril

in which suicide would place the Man in Black. This speech ends with a markedly literal reference to the knight's earlier speech, in which the knight had lamented the falseness of Fortune, with whom he played at chess and lost his *fers*, or queen. This metaphorical treatment of death and sorrow is characteristic of the knight. The narrator, through his reply, "But ther is no man alive her / Wolde for a fers make this woo!" (740-41), both confronts his companion's obsession with death and takes a subtle jab at his insistence on speaking in riddles rather than plainly stating the source of his melancholy. The narrator's absurdly literalistic statement that "no one suffers this much over a chess piece" begs for a (justifiably perturbed) clarification: one which the Man in Black nevertheless withholds. The narrator's stubborn refusal to engage with the knight's courtly speech (by interpreting his metaphors or adopting his courtly register) constitutes a rhetorical strategy with the end goal of leading (or goading) the knight into plain-speaking. Thus, during the conversational sequence, the narrator's avoidance of the role of Interpreter takes on a strategic significance.

Following the discussion of the *fers*, the narrator once more prompts the Man in Black to reveal the source of his woe. While the knight responds that he will do so "blythly," his next speech once again avoids the question altogether, instead taking yet another excursion into the tropes of courtly language. Not only does the Man in Black identify himself as a follower of the religion of love, but his description of his initial meeting with the lady White follows to the letter the courtly medieval ideal of beauty. She is golden-haired and fair-skinned with

Ryght faire shuldres and body long

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> She had, and armes, every lyth
>
> Fattyssh, fleshy, not gret therwith;
>
> Ryght white hands, and nayles rede;
>
> Rounde brestes; and of good brede
>
> Hyr hippes were; a straight flat bak. (952-57)

His beloved could have stepped directly from the *Roman de la Rose*; hers is textbook courtly perfection. In addition to her beauty, she also, of course, possesses virtue, grace, and perfect manners. Her description, descriptive and lengthy as it is, however, does nothing to answer the narrator's question. The knight had again retreated into the familiar world of courtly love, abandoning his purpose. It falls to the narrator to re-direct his companion's focus, so he asks to hear about the knight's first speech with the lady, reminding him pointedly that

> "Ye han wel told me herebefore;
>
> Hyt ys no nede to reherse it more,
>
> How ye sawe hir first and where.
>
> […]
>
> "And telleth me eke what ye have lore;
>
> I herde yow telle herebefore." (1127-29; 1135-36)

The impatience in these lines is palpable, for the first time matching the Man in Black's impatience with his companion's obtuseness. The time has come to push more aggressively against the knight's evasions. The narrator's questions become more pointed and precise:

"What los ys that?" quod I thoo;

"Nyl she not love yow? Ys hit soo?

Or have ye oght doon amys,

That she hath left yow? Ys hit this?

For Goddes love, telle me al." (1139-43)

The narrator provides all the stock explanations for the knight's love-longing. The true source of the knight's sorrow is, of course, left off the list, prompting the knight to state it explicitly. Once again, the knight avoids the topic, instead telling another (typically courtly) tale of his lady's initial rebuff of his affections before accepting him as a lover. He thus exchanges one (significantly less) sad story for another, which, given its happy ending, prompts the narrator once more to re-direct his focus. "Where is she now?" he asks.

The stark contrast between the happy past and the dismal present forced by the narrator reduces the Man in Black back to his initial, troubled state. He attempts one final evasion:

"Allas that I was bore!

That was the los that herbiforne,

I told thee that I had lorne.

Bethinke how I seyde herbiforne,

'Thou wost ful litel what thou menest;

I have lost more than thou wenest.'

God wot, allas, right that was she!" (1301-06)

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The knight's repeated references to earlier points in the discussion make up one last effort to make the narrator understand without stating the cause of his suffering outright. "Think back to what I said before," he pleads, expecting his companion to put two and two together. The narrator, predictably, refuses to take the bait; maintaining his ignorant stance, he asks "Allas, sir how? What may that be?" (1308). Communication through the language of the court has been rejected; the narrator refuses to understand it. Left with no other recourse, the knight finally utters the forbidden words: "She is deed" (1309). Arthur W. Bahr suggests that this terse phrase may be read as a sign of the knight's exasperation at the narrator's utter inability (or unwillingness) to interpret his courtly language,[211] an intriguing possibility which speaks as well to the narrator's considerable rhetorical efficacy as does the usual reading of the knight's admission as a moment of catharsis. Whatever the case, the poem ends quickly afterward, suggesting that the conversation has reached the desired outcome, leaving little else left to be said. Courtly language has been abandoned, implying that the knight's matching self-destructive behavior will also come to an end.

I would like to linger a moment on the narrator's response to the Man in Black's final words. By way of consolation, his only response is "Is that youre lose? Be God, hyt ys routhe!" (1310). Given the length and intensity of the earlier conversation, this hasty conclusion can seem rather anticlimactic, the narrator's words of sympathy too brief and obvious to do much good. It is important, however, to think back to the frame story of Ceyx and Alycone in order to establish a context for his reply. Earlier I

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[211] Bahr, "The Rhetorical Construction of Narrator and Narrative," 54.

suggested that the traditional "happy" ending of the couple being reunited in the form of birds may have been omitted in order to prevent focus on the possibility of reunion with the beloved after death, particularly given the knight's suicidal tendencies, which the narrator takes pains to address. I would also suggest that the ending is omitted in order to subvert the traditional, often trite advice to the bereaved that he or she will see his beloved again in the afterlife (a notion which certainly gave the Jeweler little comfort). While the focus on the heavenly at the expense of the worldly is a common theme in medieval literature and thought (surfacing powerfully at the end of Chaucer's own *Troilus and Criseyde*), the *Duchess* narrator apparently feels no need to comfort the knight with this sentiment, just as the story of Ceyx and Alcyone, another tale of bereavement, is not softened by the optimistic vision of the pair continuing their relationship through metamorphosis. The knight's sorrow is raw and painful, and the narrator can do no more than to affirm that he has suffered a great personal disaster. The process of healing is not swift, and the Man in Black will not cease his grieving by the end of the poem. He may, however, escape his unproductive and harmful methods of mourning in order to preserve his own life.

In summary, the narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* follows those of the religious literary dream visions in assuming an air of ignorance and professing an inability to interpret his dream. This quality is reiterated in the conclusion of the poem, when the narrator decides to record his vision simply because it is "so quenynt a sweven" (1330), pointedly neglecting to assign it any particular significance for a wider audience and appearing to transmit his vision on whim or fancy rather than for any set

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purpose. Unlike the narrators of *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, however, the *Duchess* narrator provides subtle evidence that he does possess more knowledge than he reveals to the knight or (explicitly) to the audience, allowing for his behavior to be read in terms of a hidden agenda, namely the consolation (and, perhaps, physical salvation) of the knight. As discussed earlier, the narrator's peculiar insistence on projecting ineptitude and naïveté can be accounted for as a rhetorical strategy which helps the poet's speaker to distance himself respectfully from his social superior and approach a delicate matter indirectly, allowing for the Man in Black to abandon his courtly posturing and face the reality of his loss in an organic process. Thus, the abandonment of the role of Interpreter operates, as in the religious dream visions, as a powerful tool to further the purpose of the poem. In the *Book of the Duchess*, however, the narrator gives up his interpretive authority in order to guide a central character rather than to be guided.

Henryson's Subversive Vision

In the next dream vision, Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, I will look at a different version of narratorial Interpreter: one who believes to understand the content of his visionary experience perfectly, but whose interpretation is so problematic that it betrays a lack of understanding about himself as well as his story. Here, the obtuse narrator, through his lack of interpretive power, fails to gain anything from the content of the central vision; however, parallels between his and the heroine's personal failings and misfortunes suggest that, like the *Pearl*-narrator, his enlightenment may be a matter of long-term personal development despite the spectacular failure of his ultimate assessment of the poem's matter.

Robert Henryson has been lauded for his perceptive reading of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, as well as for the poetic skill with which he crafted his brief epilogue to the English poet's masterpiece, *The Testament of Cresseid*.[212] While in the past the so-called "Scottish Chaucerians" of the fifteenth century were formerly trapped in the shadow of Chaucer and typically read as imitators who could not transcend or even match the work of their literary father,[213] modern scholarship has begun to read the Scots makars as talented poets in their own right whose worth extends beyond their interest in the works of Chaucer.[214] Many critics have commented on Henryson's bold questioning of Chaucer's authority in the *Testament*, when the narrator follows his perusal of Book V of *Troilus and Criseyde* and its sequel in the "vther quair" with the lines:

> Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?
>
> Nor I wait nocht gif this narratioun
>
> Be authoreist, or fenȝeit of the new
>
> Be sum poeit, throw his inuentioun

---

[212] Critical reception of Henryson's *Testament* as Chaucerian work is generally favorable, particularly at the expense of John Lydgate's *Troy Book*, as C. David Benson discusses in "Critic and Poet: What Lydgate and Henryson Did to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*" (*Modern Language Quarterly* 53.1 (1992): 23-40). While defending Lydgate from accusations of poor writing and excessive augmentation of Chaucer's work, Benson does distinguish Henryson as a true poetic successor of Chaucer, while Lydgate is regarded as a talented historical writer and contextualizer.

[213] Florence H. Ridley addresses this literary prejudice in "A Plea for the Middle Scots" (in Larry D. Benson, David Staines, and McKay Sundwall, eds., *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, 1974), 175-96). Happily, much has changed in the forty years since the essay's publication.

[214] See, for example, Louise O. Fradenberg's "The Scottish Chaucerians" (in Daniel J. Pinti, ed., *Writing After Chaucer: Essential Readings in Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century* (New York, 1998), 167-76), which addresses the explicit manner in which the Scottish Chaucerians engage with Chaucer's work and examines the historical context for their exposure to and treatment of English verse.

Maid to report the lamentatioun

And wofull end of this lustie Creisseid,

And quhat distress scho thoillit, and quhat deid (64-70). [215]

The authority of Henryson's *Testament*, of course, relies upon the testimony of Chaucer (who would likewise point backward to his apocryphal source, Lollius).[216] Henryson's playful aside engages with questions of intertextuality and authority without committing to either option (that Chaucer lacks authority or possesses it). It does, however, quench any notion that Henryson writes as a slavish imitator of Chaucer's art. He builds upon it and engages with it, but he is not cowed by the English poet. Whether or not Henryson and his fellow Chaucerians saw Chaucer as a sort of Freudian father-figure whom they needed to challenge and supplant order to come into their own,[217] it would be a mistake not to take Henryson seriously as a reader and a poet capable of significant literary innovations.

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[215] All references to Henryson's works are taken from Denton Fox's *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (Oxford, 1981).

[216] See Sandra M. Hordis's "Metatextual Resistance in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*" (in Kathleen A Bishop, ed., *Standing in the Shadow of the Master? Chaucerian Influences and Interpretations* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England, 2010), 46-64.)

[217] See, for example, Nicholas Watson's "Outdoing Chaucer: Lydgate's *Troy Book* and Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*" (in Karen Pratt, ed., *Shifts and Transpositions in Medieval Narrative: A Festschrift for Dr. Elspeth Kennedy* (London, 1994), 89-108). Such readings ultimately stem from Harold Bloom's influential Freudian reading of literary "paternity" in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York, 1997).

Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* is notable as a dream vision without a central

dream sequence.[218] The closest he comes to fulfilling this expectation is in Cresseid's

disturbing vision of her trial, which is held by the classical gods appropriate to the

story's Trojan setting and ends in Cresseid's guilty verdict and punishment through

leprosy. This portion of the poem, if Henryson were a more traditional dream vision

poet, would comprise a dream within a dream (in a way, I would argue, it still does); as

it stands, it is the *only* dream of the *Testament*, yet it is not the "meat" of the story. The

central visionary sequence of the poem is not a vision at all, but consists of the narrator's

recitation of a reading he performs after being driven indoors by a springtime hailstorm

(this unusual combination of weather and season serves as an early signal of Henryson's

atypical approach to the dream vision genre). The narrator, an unnamed elderly

gentleman and despairing servant of Venus, is thus engaged in an activity conducive to

an enlightening or educative outcome, despite the lack of a visionary state. The "vision"

consists of the story of Cresseid, another one-time worshipper of the gods of love whose

devotion takes a disturbing turn after her disappointment in love and consequent

blasphemy of Venus and Cupid. Cresseid serves as both the center of the story which

occupies the narrator and, loosely, as his dream vision guide from a distance. The

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[218] See Kathryn L. Lynch's excellent analysis of Henryson's *Testament* in relation to the dream vision
tradition, "Robert Henryson's 'Doolie Dreame' and the Late Medieval Dream Vision Tradition" (*JEGP*
109.2 (2010): 177-97). I do differ from Lynch in that I consider the *Testament* to be a full member of the
dream vision genre, while Lynch reads it as "a kind of parasite on the body of the dream vision, offering
no new direction for the genre" (197). Despite Henryson's radical departures from the expected structure
(particularly in his omission of the central dream experience), the *Testament* still has a dream vision frame
and a central, "visionary"/educative sequence told by a narrator who fits quite firmly into the late medieval
obtuse narrator tradition. For these reasons, I include the *Testament* in this study as a unique member of
the genre.

narrator's roles in the story are thus characterized by passivity; he serves as a Witness and Transmitter of his reading experience, but does not perform significantly as an Agent or Interlocutor, as he is separated from Cresseid by impermeable barriers of time and reality. Through the dire consequences of her actions and her gradual redemptive arc, Cresseid's experience nevertheless serves as an object lesson to the narrator of the *Testament*, who, like Cresseid, betrays a weakness for carnal behavior and worldly comforts. The question, as for many of the obtuse dream vision narrators of the late medieval dream vision tradition, is whether or not the narrator will listen.

The narrator's attitude toward Cresseid and her plight is best described as one of detached pity and sympathy. While many modern readers have criticized Henryson or his narrator for Cresseid's unkind treatment in the *Testament*,[219] others have avoided labeling the poet or the narrator as misogynists, favoring a redemptive reading of the poem which focuses on Cresseid's spiritual elevation rather than on her harsh punishment.[220] These readings tend to take a kinder view of the narrator even as they

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[219] For criticism of Henryson's purported misogyny or problematic attitude toward women, see Susan Aronstein's "Cresseid Reading Cresseid: Redemption and Translation in Henryson's *Testament*" (*Scottish Literary Journal* 21.2 (1994): 5-22) and Felicity Riddy's "'Abject Odious': Feminine and Masculine in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*" (in Ed. Derek Pearsall, *Chaucer to Spenser: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, England, 1999), 280-96). For criticisms of the narrator, see Kevin Harty's "Cresseid and Her Narrator: A Reading of Robert Henryson's 'Testament of Cresseid'" (*Studi Medievali* 23.2 (1983): 753-65); William Calin's "The Dit Amoureux and the Makars: An Essay on *The Kingis Quair* and *The Testament of Cresseid*" (*Florilegium* 25 (2008): 217-250); and Catherine Cox's "Froward Language and Wanton Play: The 'Commoun' Text of Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*" (*Studies in Scottish Literature* 29 (1996): 58-72).

[220] See, for example, Chelsea Honeyman's "Narrative Afterlife and the Treatment of Time in Henryson's 'Testament of Cresseid'" (*Fifteenth-Century Studies* 35 (2010): 50-69); Lee W. Patterson's "Christian and Pagan in *The Testament of Cresseid*" (*Philological Quarterly* 52.4 (1973): 696-714); and Jennifer Strauss's "To Speak Once More of Cresseid: Henryson's *Testament* Re-Considered" (*Scottish Literary Journal* 4.2 (1977): 5-13).

recognize the limitations of his interpretive powers, and many have explicitly defended

him from charges of misogyny and malice.[221] I also tend to take the narrator's claims of

pity for Cresseid at face value:

> O fair Creisseid, the flour and A per se
>
> Of Troy and Grece, how was thow fortunait
>
> To change in filth all thy feminitie,
>
> And be with fleschelie lust sa maculait
>
> . . .
>
> I haue pietie thow suld fall sic mischance!
>
> . . .
>
> I sall excuse als far furth as I may
>
> Thy womanheid, thy wisdome and fairnes,
>
> The quhi[l]k Fortoun hes put to sic distres . . . (78-81; 84; 87-9)

Undoubtedly, the narrator's sympathy for Cresseid is mixed with revulsion at her

behavior; furthermore, his reliance on and perpetuation of other men's gossip[222] in order

to reach this stance opens him up to accusations of slander at the very least. I do not,

however, read the old man's prudish exclamation as evidence of calculated antagonism

toward Cresseid. His negative response to a woman's alleged promiscuity is not an

unexpected one considering medieval tendencies toward misogyny, particularly the

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[221] Robert L. Kindrick, for example, argues that the narrator has "profound sympathy for his heroine," contrary to other critic's distrustful readings of the old man's motives (*Robert Henryson* (Boston, 1979)).

[222] In lines 75-76: "Than desolait scho walkit vp and doun, / And sum men sayis, into the court, commoun."

widespread belief in women's proclivity for sins of the flesh. The narrator's attempt to

excuse Cresseid's sins is significant, considering the historical and cultural context (and

also considering the long tradition of hatred which haunts Cresseid's many literary

analogues[223]). I will argue, however, that his choice to condemn Cresseid's behavior

(ill-defined as it is in lines 75-76) while ignoring his own aspirations to lechery reveals

the narrator's participation in the tradition of the late medieval obtuse narrator, and casts

a doubtful light on his abilities as Interpreter of his nontraditional visionary experience.

It is true that the narrator does not act on any sinful inclinations. He does not,

however, shy away from describing his fleshly desires. Before being driven indoors by a

springtime hailstorm, the narrator complains that despite his devotion to Venus, he is

excluded from the rites of love:

> Thocht lufe be hait, ȝit in ane man of age
>
> It kendillis nocht sa sone as in ȝoutheid,
>
> Of quhome the blude is flowing in ane rage;
>
> And in the auld the curage doif and deid
>
> Of quhilk the fyre outward is best remeid
>
> To help be phisike quhair that nature faillit
>
> I am expert, for baith I haue assaillit. (29-35)

His prayers to Venus that she his "faidit hart of lufe scho wald mak grene" (24) remain

unanswered. Like the uncustomarily frigid and uninviting spring weather, the elderly

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[223] See Jamie C. Fumo's "Hating Criseyde: Last Words on a Heroine from Chaucer to Henryson"
(*Chaucer Review* 46.1 (2011): 20-38) for a summarization of the love-hate relationship associated with
Criseyde.

man's desires are out of place. He is old and cold, not young and warm. Furthermore, his regret for the loss of the "raging blood" of youth is called into question in another of Henryson's poems, *The Praise of Age*, which suggests that lustiness and hot blood present temptations and pitfalls for young men from which the elderly are mercifully immune:

> "The state of youth I repute for na gude,
>
> For in that state sik perilis now I see
>
> Bot full smal grace; the regeing of his blude
>
> Can none gaynstand quhill that he agit be;
>
> Syne of the thing that tofore ioyit he
>
> Nothing remaynis for tobe callit his,
>
> For quhy it were bot veray vanitee:
>
> The more of age, the nerar hevynnis blisse." (*Praise of Age* 17-24)

The *Testament* narrator's desires can therefore be read as unseemly for a man of his age as well as flagrantly carnal. His talk of blood and physic suggest that the fleshly aspects of love are on his mind, not those of courtly devotion and mutual affection. In this respect, he bears much in common with the perceived character of his story's heroine, Cresseid.[224] Two key differences, however, separate the narrator and Cresseid. First, Cresseid's promiscuity is merely alleged through

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[224] Many critics have noted the narrator's hypocritical lechery. See, for example Derek Pearsall's "'Quha Wait Gif All That Chaucer Wrait Was Trew?': Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*" (in Susan Powell and Jeremy J. Smith, eds., *New Perspectives on Middle English Texts: A Festschrift for R. A. Waldron* (Woodbridge, England, 2000), 169-82, at 174) and Denton Fox's *Testament of Cresseid* ((London, 1968), 54).

men's titillating gossip; it is not fact. Her only known alliances are with Troilus and Diomede. Secondly, her decisions are largely driven by forces outside her control: namely, the choice of the Trojans to trade her against her will for - Antenor, and her resultant position as a woman in an unfamiliar Greek camp without a strong male protector. She is characterized in her many analogues as "a woman unwillingly transferred from one man to another,"[225] and there is no evidence in Chaucer or Henryson's texts that Cresseid truly desires an emotional or sexual alliance with any man but her beloved Troilus; her dire circumstances in the Greek camp appear to motivate her betrayal of Troilus and assumption of Diomede's protection, not any inherent falseness or tendency toward prurience. Thus, despite the antifeminists' talk of women's frailty and sexual deviance, it is the male narrator, not his female subject, who can be truly described as a lecher. In the custom of the late medieval narrator, he never comes to this realization.

The narrator's inability to see himself in the subject of his story is made all the more notable by Cresseid's additional similarities to the old man. First, her punishment by the classical gods following her blasphemy against Venus and Cupid, infliction with leprosy, is represented as a change of humors which saps her heat and her moisture, infecting Cresseid with the cold, dry nature of Saturn[226] and Cynthia,[227] the gods charged with meting out her punishment.

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[225] E. Talbot Donaldson, "Briseis, Briseida, Criseyde, Cresseid, Cressid: Progress of a Heroine," in Edward Vasta, Zacharias P. Thundy, and Theodore M. Hesburgh, eds., *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner, C. S. C.* (Notre Dame, 1979), 3-12, at 4.

[226] Saturn is described thus:

Saturn touches on these changes explicitly while transforming her with his frosty wand:

> "I change thy mirth into melancholy,
>
> Quhilk is the mother of all pensuienes;
>
> Thy moisture and thy heit in cald and dry;
>
> Thyne insolence, thy play and wantones,
>
> To greit diseis; thy pomp and thy riches
>
> In mortall neid; and greit penuritie
>
> Thow suffer sall, and as ane beggar die." (316-22)

Leprosy is traditionally associated with a conjunction of Cynthia and Saturn,[228] as well as with cold and dry humors.[229] Coldness and dryness is also associated

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> His face fronsit, his lyre was lyke the leid,
> His teith chatterit and cheuerit with the chin,
> His ene drowpit, how sonkin in his heid,
> Out of his nois the meldrop fast can rin,
> With lippis bla and cheikis leine and thin;
> The ice schoklis that fra his hair doun hang
> Was wonder greit, and as ane speir als lang (155-61)

[227] Cynthia's description is marked by her leprous appearance, foreshadowing Cresseid's own transformation:
> Haw as the leid, of colour nathing cleir,
> For all hir licht scho borrowis at hir brother
> Titan, for of hir self scho hes nane vther.
> Hir gyte was gray and full of spottis blak (257-60)

It is also noteworthy that Henryson avoids describing Cynthia with moist characteristics, despite her traditional associations with coldness and moisture (see Fox, *Testament of Cresseid*, 33). This has the effect of keeping the imagery consistent between her persecutors and the now-leprous Cresseid.

[228] Marshall W. Stearns, "Robert Henryson and the Leper Cresseid," *Modern Language Notes* 59.4 (1944): 265-69 and Johnstone Parr, "Cresseid's Leprosy Again," *Modern Language Notes* 60.7 (1945): 467-91.

[229] Fox, *Testament of Cresseid*, 32.

with old age,[230] once more drawing together the narrator with Cresseid. The

young woman's infection with the disease, like the narrator's burden of old

age,[231] constitutes an excommunication from the religion of love. Her horrifying

disfigurement and dangerous ailment ensure that she will never enjoy a man's

love again; her spring is interrupted by an unnatural chill, and she is plunged into

a premature, fatal winter.[232] Cresseid's punishment assures that her special favor

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[230] Fox, *Testament of Cresseid*, 33.

[231] The exclusion of age from the practice of love is a common trope of medieval courtly literature, so I will give only two examples here. It is mentioned in Andreas Capellanus's *De Amore*, where the narrator (in a humorously literal fashion) dictates that men over sixty and women over fifty cannot enjoy intercourse:

> Aetas impedit, quia post sexagesimum annum in masculo et post quinquagesimum in femina, licet coire homo possit, eius tamen voluptas ad amorem deduci non potest, quia calor naturalis ab ea aetate suas incipit amittere vires, et humiditas sua validissime inchoat incrementa fovere, atque hominem in varias deducit angustias et aegritudinum diversarum molestat insidiis, nullaque sunt sibi in hoc saeculo praeter cibi et potus solatia.
> [Age is an obstacle, because after a man's sixtieth year and a woman's fiftieth, one can admittedly have sexual intercourse but one's sensual pleasure cannot lead to love. From that time onward our natural heat begins to lose its strength and the body's humours begin most powerfully to increase. This leads a man into various discomforts, and troubles him with the lurking presence of various illnesses. He has no worldly consolations except food and drink.] (Andreas Capellanus, *On Love,* trans. P. G. Walsh (London, 1982), 38-39).

Age is also counted among the tableaux of qualities excluded from the garden of love in the *Roman de la Rose*: "Bien fu uestue (e) chaudement, / Car ele eüst froit autrement: / (Ces) uelles genz ont tost froidure; / Bien sauez que c'est lor nature" ("Wel had she clad herselfe and warme, / For colde might els done her harme. / These olde folke haue alway colde, / Her kynde is suche, whan they ben olde.") (401-4) (Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meun, and Geoffrey Chaucer, The Romaunt of the Rose *and* Le Roman de la Rose, ed. Ronald Sutherland (Berkeley, 1968), 9). Chaucer's Middle English translation, quoted here, is found in the same volume).   It is clear from these examples that the unsuitableness of age to courtly practice is taken for granted in the influential literature of the time, even when the topic of courtly love is being treated ironically (as in Andreas). When this tradition is taken into account, the narrator's exclusion from the game of love due to his physical qualities parallels Cresseid's notably.

[232] The narrator responds to Cresseid's story by referring to it as "this doolie dream, this vglye visioun" (344), recalling the language at the beginning of the poem, "Ane doolie sessoun to ane cairfull dyte / Suld correspond and be equiualent" (1-2). The evocation of the springtime hailstorm, also characterized by coolness and dryness (Fox, *Testament of Cresseid*, 51), is not coincidental. In both cases, the sudden influx of cold and dry foretell a reversal of fortunes, the exchange of comfortable normalcy for hostility and tribulation.

as "flower of Troy" is revoked forever, and she is forced into social isolation as a member of the leper colony.

Two stages of Cresseid's story remain: complaint and repentance. The Complaint of Cresseid comprises an *ubi sunt*-style catalog of her losses. These items extend beyond the privation of beauty to include a good many mundane items of which the leprous, impoverished Cresseid is deprived:

> "Quhair is thy chalmer wantounlie besene,
>
> With burely bed and bankouris browderit bene;
>
> Spycis and wyne to thy collatioun,
>
> The cowpis all of gold and siluer schene
>
> . . .
>
> Quhair is thy garding with thir greissis gay
>
> And fresche flowris, quhilk the queen Floray
>
> Had paintit plesandly in euerie pane,
>
> Quhair thou was wont full merilye in May
>
> To walk and take the dew be it was day. . ." (416-19; 425-9)

Cresseid's longing for her bed and fine dishware may feel out of place when contrasted with the courtly qualities which have been taken from her, but they serve both to establish the extent of her fall from grace as well as her attachment to worldly conveniences. This section of the poem draws out another of Cresseid's similarities to the narrator, who is likewise characterized by his attraction to worldly objects and comforts. After being driven indoors, the narrator tells us that

171

I mend the fyre and beikit me about,

Than tuik ane drink, my spreitis to comfort,

And armit me weill fra the cauld thairout.

To cut the winter nicht and mak it schort

I tuik ane quair – and left all vther sport –

Written be worthie Chaucer glorious

Of fair Cresseid and worth Troylus. (36-42)

Henryson's narrator is described as a man who enjoys the finer things of life. Thwarted from his prayers for renewed sexual prowess, he turns to the fire, drink, and books. The chill of the winter (both literal and metaphorical) is thus artificially staved off; he is not, like Cresseid, forced to face his misfortunes without recourse to other worldly joys.

Unlike her narrator, Cresseid does not remain a static character. The materialistic, entitled young beauty of the poem's opening is daunted by the severity of her punishment, but the words of one of her fellow sufferers is sufficient to divert her gaze from past glories to present realities:

"…Quhy spurnis thow agains the wall

To sla thy self and mend nathing at all?

Sen thy weiping bot dowbillis thy wo,

I counsall the mak vertew of ane neid;

Go leir to clap thy clapper to and fro,

And leif efter the law of lipper leid" (475-80)

The practical leper serves as a guide to Cresseid, who accordingly learns to beg for her livelihood, assuming the role of the humble, impoverished outcast who depends on the charity of others for her survival. Critics have noted that besides its association with blasphemy and slander,[233] leprosy is also linked with spiritual purification in the Middle Ages. Robert L. Kindrick argues that lepers were viewed "with a mixture of horror and respect for their special status"[234] as sufferers undergoing divine punishment and purification. Sabine Volk-Birke notes that leprosy is terminal disease which allows the sufferer "a long time in which to think and to reform."[235] Indeed, some women mystics, including Catherine of Siena and Angela of Foligno, took particular notice of these sufferers, and were drawn by "the lepers' supposed conversion to the spirit necessitated by their very real physical deterioration."[236] Thus, despite her unfortunate circumstances, Cresseid's story does not end with Cynthia and Saturn's cruel infliction. Mere punishment gives way to Cresseid's personal transformation, culminating in her final meeting with Troilus.

Although neither former lover recognizes the other during this scene, Troilus's memory is stirred by his lost darling, now horrifically transformed through the progress

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[233] See Anne Marie D'Arcy's "'Into the Kirk Wald Not Hir Self Present': Leprosy, Blasphemy, and Heresy in Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*" (in Anne Marie D'Arcy and Alan J. Fletcher, eds., *Studies in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Texts in Honour of John Scattergood: The Key of All Good Remembrance* (Dublin, 2005), 100-20).

[234] Robert L. Kindrick, *Robert Henryson* (Boston, 1979), 136.

[235] Sabine Volk Birke, "Sickness unto Death: Crime and Punishment in Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*," *Anglia* 113.2 (1995): 163-83, at 170.

[236] Marion Wynne-Davies, "Spottis Blak: Disease and the Female Body in *The Testament of Cresseid*," *Poetica* 38 (1993): 32-53, at 32.

of her disease, and he makes her a generous donation of gold and gems. After Cresseid

learns the identity of her kind benefactor, she reaches a climactic moment of spiritual

anguish and transformation, exclaiming of her former lover:

"Thy lufe, thy lawtie, and thy gentilnes

I countit small in my prosperitie,

Sa efflated I was in wantones,

And clam vpon the fickill quheill sa hie.

All faith and lufe I promissit to the

Was in the self fickill and friulous:

O fals Cresseid and trew knicht Trolus!

[…]

"Because I knaw the greit vnstabilnes,

Brukkill as glas, into my self, I say –

Traisting in vther als gret vnfaithfulnes,

Als vnconstant, and als vntrew of fay –

Thocht sum be trew, I wait richt few are thay;

Quha findis treuth, lat him his lady ruse;

Nane but my self as now I will accuse." (547-53; 568-74)

This self-accusing speech is followed by Cresseid's composition of her will, the last

stripping away of her earthly goods and former identity. Her speech is notable both for

its acknowledgment of Troilus's lasting goodness and the elevation of eternal qualities

over the fickle turns of Fortune's wheel. Cresseid's former favor is re-conceptualized as

the product of chance, not as a reward she earned or deserved. Cresseid's blame lies both in her privileging of passing worldly delights and honors over lasting qualities (such as Troilus's faithfulness) and in her assumption of Fortune's defining quality – instability – over constancy and truth. Central to Cresseid's sins is a violation of courtly principles of honor and faithfulness. However, Cresseid's final renunciation of Fortune and her charms evokes the parting laugh of Chaucer's Troilus as he ascends from the earth and looks down with scorn at the frantic, heartbreaking, and ultimately pointless efforts below:

> And in himself he lough right at the wo
>
> Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste,
>
> And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so
>
> The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste,
>
> And sholden al oure herte on heven caste;
>
> And forth he wente, shortly for to telle,
>
> Ther as Mercurye sorted hym to dwelle. (V. 1821-27)

Given Fortune's (and Cupid's) role in Troilus's own cyclical progression from "wo" to "wele" and back again, the thematic connection between Chaucer's *Troilus* and Henryson's *Testament* is clear: Fortune is fickle and worldly gains are transitory. The pursuit of mortal love, although sweet, is inextricably tied to the cruel whims of Fortune, and is thus equally meaningless from an eternal perspective. Chaucer's narrator articulates the final message of the poem in strong terms, renouncing his role as the one

whom the "God of Loves servantz serve" and directing his audience's gaze from earthly to heavenly love:

> O yonge, fresshe folkses, he or she,
>
> In which that love up growth with youre age,
>
> Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte,
>
> And of youre herte up casteth the visage
>
> To thilke God that after his ymage
>
> Yow made, and thynketh al nys but a faire,
>
> This world that passeth soone as floures faire. (V. 1835-41)

Chaucer's narrator thus simultaneously resolves his own quandary, posed at the beginning of Book I, as a self-styled pope of love who nonetheless "ne dar to Love, for [his] unliklynesse" (I. 16). By learning from Troilus's tale and changing his allegiances, he leaves behind the unfulfilling pagan system of love and hopes for the everlasting rewards after death promised by the Christian faith.

The *Testament* narrator does not reach this level of enlightenment after telling his story. As I have demonstrated above, Cresseid's moral development and ultimate rejection of worldly goods and desires would suggest that the elderly narrator should end his poem in a similar manner to Chaucer's priest of love. However, the *Testament* narrator instead chooses to end his tale with a surprisingly short-sighted and shallow moral truism:

> Now, worthie wemen, in this ballet schort,
>
> Maid for ȝour worschip and instructioun,

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> Of cheritie, I monische and exhort,
>
> Ming not ʒour lufe with fals deceptioun:
>
> Beir in ʒour mynd this sor[e] conclusioun
>
> Of fair Cresseid, as I haue said befoir.
>
> Sen scho is deid I speik of hir no moir. (610-16)

This lesson is not applicable to the *Testament* narrator in the same way as Chaucer's moral at the end of the *Troilus* applies directly to his pope of love. Instead, it assumes a female audience and reverts to the antifeminist sentiment suggested in the elderly narrator's reference to Cresseid's "filth" and "fleschelie lust" at the beginning of the poem. The implication is that it is women who have to be warned away from Cresseid's false behavior, not men, and certainly not the narrator. The heroine's moral progress is utterly erased through this reading, and her spiritual development becomes no more than a footnote to a gruesome cautionary tale.

Why does the narrator behave in this manner? His status as a poor Interpreter of his "visionary" experience may help to explain the *Testament*'s notoriously unsatisfying conclusion[237]; this relies on the tradition of the obtuse dreamer, like the *Pearl*-poet or Langland's Will, who is simply too naïve or foolish to understand his dream or vision. I would suggest, however, that something a little more complicated is at work here. Lee Patterson argues that the narrator's final deflection of his story's significance for his own

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[237] Many critics have commented on the narrator's inability to see the applicability of Cresseid's lesson to his own life problems. Fox notes that the narrator resembles Cresseid's physical deterioration at the end of the poem, but her spiritual immaturity at the beginning (*Testament of Cresseid*, 53), while Volk-Birke reads his interpretation of the poem as a sign of obtuseness characteristic of Chaucer's dream vision narrators ("Sickness unto Death," 182-83).

life bears "a dismaying resemblance to Cresseid's strategy in her complaint," where her focus on the reversal of fortune and her resultant sorrows displaces any serious consideration of moral culpability or reform.[238] The narrator, under this reading, is stuck at the stage of complaint; he is not yet ready to emerge from the pit of self-pity and begin to consider the eternal hazards posed by his own indulgences in impure thoughts and fleshly comforts.[239] Like the Jeweler, he ends his story in a stage of limited understanding but potential growth. Parallels between the narrator's age and Cresseid's leprosy (particularly when paired with Henryson's portrayal of age's reforming qualities in *The Praise of Age*) suggest that the old man's physical limitations may serve to accomplish his spiritual rejuvenation despite his markedly dense interpretation of the story at the poem's conclusion. The narrator, like the former Cresseid, is stalled at a stage of complaint, and he shows little motivation to do more than mourn his abandonment by Venus and try to stave off his lack of pleasure with the substitute comforts of drink and the fire. The deflection of Cresseid's anti-materialistic moral suggests that he is not yet ready to accept that his days of love are over and to prepare for the end of mortal life and life everlasting thereafter. The unyielding aging process

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[238] Patterson, "Cristian and Pagan," 713-14.

[239] The narrator's curious misrecognition of his story's significance can furthermore be linked with Troilus, who in his final encounter with Cresseid is reminded of his lover, but cannot see past her deformities in order to realize her identity. This scene is explained in terms of Aristotelian psychology: "an image […] may be so deeply imprinted in a man's memory that his physical senses are deluded, and he may think that he sees the image in external reality, though it is actually only in his mind" (Fox, *Testament of Cresseid*, 46-47). Likewise, the narrator may briefly recognize the story's true moral; however, he just as quickly deflects it, re-writing and -directing it toward the portion of his audience with whom he is least likely to be included. Furthermore, both men, as Chelsea Honeyman has noted, overlook Cresseid the penitent, instead mourning the tragedy of beautiful, faithless Cresseid, "Sumytme countit the flour of womanheid" (608) who "was vntrew and wo is me thairfoir" (602). It appears to be the fate of Cresseid in Henryson's re-telling to be misread and misrepresented by the men of the poem.

paired with further contemplation of Cresseid's story may, however, serve to bring the narrator "nerar hevynnis blisse." By choosing to seek out comfort through the "uther quair," Henryson's narrator becomes an unwitting Catalyst of a valuable educative experience, one which will take time and honest self-reflection to have the desired purifying effect on his soul.

Conclusions

Through analysis of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, two more variations on the literary Interpreter are added: the narrator who relinquishes the role despite evidence that he is more aware of the significance of visionary events than he lets on, and the narrator whose interpretations are called into question by the content of the central narrative sequence. When considered together with Chapter IV's more straightforwardly obtuse narrators, a crucial difference between autobiographical and literary dream vision narrator is revealed. Mystics, as self-proclaimed recipients of direct communication with the divine, must understand their experiences to some degree before they can deem them fit for and transmit them to a larger audience; otherwise, their visions are incoherent at best, and sacrilegious at worst (indeed, a good many medieval mystics were persecuted for the contents of their visionary experiences; some, such as Marguerite of Porete, even lost their lives for their writings). Without comprehensibility and valuable spiritual content, the vision is not fit for popular consumption. Literary dream visions allow for departure from this model. The poet takes the place of the mystic as the one who bears and conveys knowledge related to the dream vision's significance. The narrator is thus freed from the

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responsibility of interpreting the contents of the vision; he or she may remain utterly ignorant, and the poet will still be able to lend the work coherence through the use of dream guides, plot machinations, and even the narrator's misguided statements and questions. The poet may choose for the narrator to abandon the role of Interpreter as a rhetorical strategy, either to facilitate exploration of a specific matter through dialogue (as in *Piers Plowman*) or to allow for the narrator to approach matters indirectly (as in the *Book of the Duchess*).

Whatever the reason for the narrator's refusal to interpret the dream content, the audience is expected to carry out any interpretive work necessary to achieve understanding of the plot. The audience of the *Book of the Duchess* is expected to make sense of the veiled references to John of Gaunt in order to discover the elegiac nature of the poem (and to understand why the narrator refuses to interpret courtly metaphor and insists on literalistic, plain speaking). For the mystics, the transmission of abstract, often confounding spiritual revelations to a wider audience presents enough of a challenge; there is no reason to further obscure the message by neglecting to interpret or clarify content when doing so is possible. In the literary dream vision, however, there are no new revelations to impart; the topics remain in familiar theological and courtly territory. An educated audience is therefore deemed capable of engaging more actively with the content of the vision, and often is prompted to do so by the poet. The role of Interpreter is passed from the narrator to the reader.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

This study, through systematic application of a schema for narrators' active and

passive participation in visionary events, has revealed patterns in narratorial behavior

while closing the artificial gap between autobiographical and literary visionary texts.

Both types of literature contain a number of possible variations on first-person roles.

Chaucer's witness in the *Parliament of Fowls* is markedly more passive than the narrator

of *The Book of the Duchess*. If one were to argue that Chaucer writes the same narrator

into each of his dream visions (a claim which, I have argued earlier, is impossible to

prove, however appealing the idea may be), it might be tempting to compare his fictional

visionary to Hadewijch of Antwerp, whose behavior in her series of mystical

experiences ranges from passive to active as she develops spiritually. The roles of

narrators in mystical and literary texts are thus drawn together through their diversity;

there is no set pattern of behaviors that distinguishes one from the other. In order to

perceive a difference, it is necessary to shift the focus from constellations of roles and

levels of activity to the distribution of one particular role: Interpreter.

For although one can identify instances of Witnesses and Transmitters,

Interlocutors and Agents (both passive and active), and even Catalysts regardless of the

biographical content of the visionary text, the role of Interpreter stands out as one

conspicuously absent in a number of non-biographical dream visions.[240] The narrator of

Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, despite plentiful evidence that he is more

knowledgeable than he appears, continuously insists on his lack of knowledge, denying

the audience of an explicit reading of his own strange adventure. Henryson's old man

claims to understand what his own visionary experience means, although a perceptive

audience can quickly call his interpretation into question (and, as modern criticism

reveals, often have). In these dream visions, the role of Interpreter is abused, if not

outright abandoned. The dream vision narrator proves insufficient to enlighten his or her

audience in the same ways as autobiographical mystics do.

I argue, however, that the role of Interpreter does not simply disappear in these

cases; rather, it is subtly transferred from narrator to audience. This is possible when the

subject of the vision remains in spiritual, intellectual, or cultural territory familiar to its

target audience. The mystic reveals special, hidden knowledge, which is often

painstakingly "translated" into language familiar enough to the mystic and his or her

audience to aid in comprehension and contextualization (such as the language of courtly

love); it is not in his or her best interest to leave content unexplained, as this may render

the writing incoherent or leave it open to unfavorable or even theologically-dangerous

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[240] I would like to note here that the presence or absence of the Interpreter role in the narrator cannot be
used to distinguish a literary visionary experience from an autobiographical one unequivocally. For
example, the narrator of the *Dream of the Rood*, if we are to accept the common classification of the poem
as literary, does interpret the significance of his vision for his audience, as discussed in Chapter II. The
prevalence of ignorant (or seemingly ignorant) narrators in literary texts, nonetheless, cannot be ignored.
The *Floure and the Leafe* serves as an example of how weakly the interpretive impulse tends to manifest
in the literary narrator. The *Floure* narrator has to ask her guide for an interpretation of the allegorical
events which unfold before her, and is afterward asked to make her observances to the Leafe
(fidelity/honor) or the Floure (flirtation/idleness). The narrator's choice to pledge her loyalty to the Leafe
suggests an interpretation for the audience of the visionary event's significance (the elevation of constancy
over frivolity), but is provided subtly and addressed to the guide rather than directly to the audience.

interpretation. The dream vision poet, however, is free of this responsibility. Working with content decidedly more down-to-earth than that of the mystics, poets enjoy an element of freedom in their dealings with the subjects of their texts, as well as with the roles typically assigned to the visionary narrator and to his or her audience. In fact, leaving the obvious unstated and obscured by allegory is a rhetorical strategy utilized by Chaucer in order to distance himself respectfully from the true subject of the *Book of the Duchess*, John of Gaunt and his dead wife, Blanche. Dream vision poets are, in a way, invited to "play" with established visionary conventions, and to draw their audiences into this play. This free transference of roles does, however, limit the audience[241] to those with enough knowledge to fill in the blanks left by the poet and his or her narrator. Chaucer's dream visions are written for a privileged audience with the social and cultural understanding necessary to tease out the courtly, contemporary matters at the center of his poetry. Langland's work not only demands knowledge of contemporary politics and events, but also a basic grasp of theological issues, particularly those pertaining to salvation.[242] The price of admission to the literary visionary's game is the knowledge which the narrator apparently lacks. Burdened with a reticent, confused, or incompetent Witness and Transmitter of events, the educated reader is forced to exert himself or herself intellectually in order to make sense of the text.

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[241] That is, the engaged audience; inability to interpret does not, of course, prevent anyone from merely reading a text without understanding it.

[242] Admittedly, Langland's demands were lenient enough to allow it to attain a best-seller status in the late Middle Ages, as the many extant manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* demonstrate.

The later Middle Ages saw the rising popularity of another genre which invited the audience to engage in a kind of play with the content of the books they read: the devotional text. Although it dampens the level of imaginativeness encouraged by its source text, Psuedo-Bonaventure's *Meditationes de Vita Christi*, in some important ways,[243] Nicholas Love's fifteenth-century devotional best-seller *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* nonetheless invites its readers to picture in detail (although with some measure of direction) events from the life of Christ as if they were present at the scene, rather than simply reading about it. Take, for instance, his directions to imagine the Annunciation:

> Now take hede, & ymagine of gostly þinge as it // were bodily, & þenk in
>
> þi herte as þou were present in þe siȝt of þat blessed lord, with how
>
> benyng & glad semblant he spekeþ þees wordes. And on þat oþer side,
>
> how Gabriel with a likyng face & glad chere vpon his knen knelyng &
>
> with drede reuerently bowyng receueþ þis message of his lord. (*Die Lune*
>
> 30-35)[244]

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[243] Michelle Karnes discusses Love's changes to Pseudo-Bonaveture's *Meditationes* in "Nicholas Love and Medieval Meditations on Christ" (*Speculum* 82.2 (2007): 380-408). While the audience of the *Meditations* is expected to achieve mystical union through means of the imagination, Karnes argues that Nicholas Love sees imagination as only capable of producing material thoughts on the life of Christ which cannot translate to spiritual sight. Through his revisions to the original imaginative exercises, Love also distances his audience from imagined biblical scenes; where pseudo-Bonaventure encourages his readers to picture themselves interacting with scenes from the life of Christ, Love recommends little to no interaction. Thus, "Love's simple souls will never proceed beyond [an] introductory meditative exercise" (387).

[244] Taken from Michael G. Sargent's *Nicholas Love's* Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*: A Critical Edition Based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686* (New York, 1992).

Love instructs his reader to translate "gostly" imaginings into a "bodily" scene so that the readers can see for themselves the scene of the Annunciation. Love's reader is thus invited to take a role, passive though it is, in an intimate scene of cosmic significance. Mary's private experience becomes a public visionary event through Love's prescribed devotional exercises. As in Guigo II's *Ladder of Monks*, reading leads to meditation, which would ideally (although perhaps not under Love's direction) lead to contemplation.

While there is no indication that Nicholas Love intended for his lay audience to interpret Biblical scenes independently of accepted authority (in fact, quite the contrary),[245] the heightened responsibility of the audience through the expectation that they participate in the text through the act of imagination is significant. The reader, through these devotional exercises, becomes a Witness of biblical scenes through the exercise of his or her imagination. Pseudo-Bonaventure's mystical exercises, filtered through and revised by Love for a lay audience, nonetheless require readers to assume a muted visionary stance through their passive presence in recreated moments of the life of Christ. Readers take in the scenes of their own creation, and Love, the authoritative guide, eager to enforce orthodoxy upon his audience, interprets their significance for his audience. This is a role which he is not willing to share with the reader, unlike Chaucer and his literary contemporaries.

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[245] See Sargent's introduction to his edition of Love's *Mirror*, which describes Love's anti-Wycliffite stance and the historical context for the *Mirror*'s endorsement by Archbishop Arundel and circulation (xliv-lviii). See also Elizabeth Schirmer's "Canon Wars and Outlier Manuscripts: Gospel Harmony in the Lollard Controversy" (*Huntington Library Quarterly* 73.1 (2010): 1-36), which describes how certain manuscripts of the *Mirror* demonstrate the controversy over Wycliffite teaching by containing amendments to the text which condemn or counteract anti-Wycliffite sentiments.

Margery Kempe's own intriguing devotional exercises (performed and recorded before Love's *Mirror* was written and circulated and certainly unencumbered by any of the *Mirror*'s restrictions on the contemplative exercises of the *Meditationes*) suggest the ways in which a reader more imaginative and self-directed than Love would approve of might assume additional visionary roles beyond Witness. In Chapters 6 and 7 of her *Book*, Kempe describes a meditation on the life of Lady Mary which moves beyond simple mental recreation of biblical events by casting Kempe in the role of a handmaiden, first to Saint Anne and then to Mary. She not only sees Mary grow from an infant into a young woman, but also witnesses the births of Christ and John the Baptist before accompanying the holy family to Egypt. To the roles of Witness and Transmitter she adds those of Dynamic Agent and Interlocutor. Kempe's behavior throughout the sequence is marked by her active engagement; for example, after the Annunciation she makes a request of the Virgin Mary: "'I pray yow, Lady, yyf that grace falle yow, forsake not my servyse'" (412-13).[246] Her request is approved, and later affirmed by the Virgin, who says to Kempe "'Yys, dowtyr […] folwe thow me, thi servyse lykyth me wel'" (417-18). Despite her servile behavior, Kempe's interaction with the holy family is marked by expression of and deference to her will. Although Kempe, as in many of the events in her *Book*, represents an extreme of contemplative practice and expression, she also demonstrates the ways in which devotional exercises can draw the audience into distant events, demanding participation and perhaps inviting an even more dynamic and idiosyncratic form of engagement than was originally intended.

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[246] All citations of the *Book of Margery Kempe* are taken from Lynn Staley's 1996 TEAMS edition.

These observations on the shifting and frequently augmented role of the audience of visionary texts lead to a set of questions: What is the role of the late medieval audience in relation to that of the visionary narrator, and when does the dynamic shift so that the reader is expected to assume roles typically performed by the narrator? What historical and social changes accompany this shift, and how does the increasing expectation of audience performance relate to lay devotional practices and theological inquiry? Of particular interest to my continued study of the visionary genre will be the relationship between audience participation in visionary accounts and the increasing upheaval of ecclesiastical and governmental institutions toward the close of the Middle Ages (exemplified by the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 and accompanying Wycliffite movement) and continuing into the early modern period. As late medieval individuals increasingly and violently question the authorities that had traditionally governed their lives and beliefs, does the tendency of the audience to share in the tasks of the narrator (particularly through the assumption of the authoritative Interpreter role) increase? And is there evidence of a reactionary backlash (perhaps represented by Nicholas Love's carefully-monitored devotional program) through which audiences have some or all these roles taken from them? This study will necessitate a survey of visionary texts which continues past the traditional border between the medieval and early modern periods, and will include a closer survey of the work of the Chaucerians and even later works of the (rapidly declining) dream vision genre such as Paul Bunyan's seventeenth-century classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*. Paying close attention to the social, ecclesiastical, and political shifts which accompany readers' roles (or lack of them) in visionary texts,

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my aim is to continue and enrich the present study by using the observations made on narrators' behavioral patterns in order to investigate the ways in which readers are expected to perform in texts across a selection of visionary sub-genres and time.

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APPENDIX A

TYPES OF NARRATORIAL STANCES

Active Stances

1. Physical interaction with the scene or characters (Agent)
   a. Performs actions without prompting from other characters, especially those which enact the agent's independent will (Dynamic Agent)
   b. Performs actions after prompting from other characters, or reacts involuntarily to events (Guided Agent)
2. Verbal interactions with characters (Interlocutor)
   a. Performs speech which demands or initiates some variety of action (for example, a verbal command) (Dynamic Interlocutor)
   b. Performs speech which acknowledges or affirms what has been said or done by an authority figure (Receptive Interlocutor)
3. Explanation of the significance of a scene or event to the audience (Interpreter)
4. Recording the visionary account for an audience (Transmitter)
5. Activity outside the vision which allows for the vision to occur (Catalyst)

Passive Stances

6. Listening to or observing a visionary scene or event (Witness)