

A HOST OF CONTRADICTIONS

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree

Master of Arts
In
English: Literature

by

Maha Nabil Abughannam
San Francisco, California

May 2017

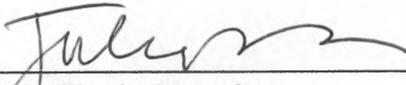
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Maha Nabil Abughannam
San Francisco, California
2017

A literary metaphor for the variable temper of the times, Mary's pregnant body was envisioned as a condition, a site, and as an occasion of fourteenth-century writing. In this thesis, I shed light on how Mary's pregnant *sidis*, or sides, figured fourteenth-century writing. Drawing on a diverse array of fourteenth-century Middle English texts—namely, *Cursor Mundi*, *The York Cycle Plays*, *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *St. Erkenwald*, *Athelston*, and the *Chester Nativity Play*—I demonstrate how Mary's contradictory “sidis” manifest both on and off stage, not only as a test of and a testament to the expressive power of human discourse, but also as a medium of expression and exchange, as a *wilde*, yet not *onkynde*, exemplar and exemplum for charitable literary activity.

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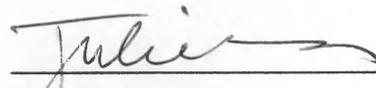


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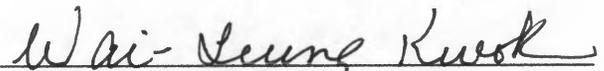
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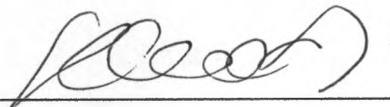
I certify that I have read *A Host of Contradictions* by Maha Nabil Abughannam, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English Literature at San Francisco State University.



Julie Paulson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English Literature



Wai-Leung Kwok, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English Literature



Shirin A. Khanmohamadi, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Comparative and
World Literature

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Mary as Literary Mediatrix in <i>Cursor Mundi</i>	7
2.1 Paraphrasing God.....	10
2.2 “throu þe wjif to wyn þe man”.....	17
2.3 Mary Lines of Communication.....	22
3. A Host of Contradictions.....	25
3.1 When Words Fail.....	27
3.2 “Owre handis may we wryng”.....	39
3.3 A Poor Host.....	44
3.4 Satan’s Play on Christian Charity.....	55
3.5 Historical and Social Contexts.....	67
3.6 “Marying” Contradictory Reading and Writing Practices.....	74
4. When Words Fail, Works Happen: Chaucer’s <i>Book of the Duchess</i> as Breakdown and Breakthrough in Christian Charity.....	80
4.1 Trading Sides.....	83
4.2 Telling the “Hool” Story.....	101
4.3 Hosting the Game.....	107
5. Mix and Make Mary.....	112
5.1 Passing the Time with Mary in Chaucer’s <i>Canterbury Tales</i>	112
5.2 Marital Remains: <i>St. Erkenwald</i> ’s Ghostly Groom.....	118

5.3 Til' Death Do Us Part: <i>Athelston's</i> Less Than Mary Ending	127
5.4 New Work.....	146
6. Making Sport of Charity.....	148
6.1 "Helpes her nowe for charytee": The Chester Cycle's <i>Midwife's Report</i>	148
6.2 Retractions	154
Notes.....	157
Works Cited	164

1. Introduction

Before the eyes of the audience stands the pregnant body of an actor. He is a person familiar to the audience, perhaps a local tradesman. At the moment, however, he is costumed in female garb and posturing as the Virgin Mother. Men are not women. Men cannot carry children. This man is not the Virgin Mother and Old Jerusalem is not located on contemporary English soil. For a space of time, however, the audience is asked to extend their faith, to believe in the impossible, to accept the “play world” as the “real world.”

Before Saint Joseph stands his wife Mary, heavy with child and defending her maidenhood. Sex is a precursor to pregnancy; therefore, she cannot be pregnant and virgin at the same time. But for the space of a lifetime, Mary demands that Joseph extends his faith, believes in the impossible, and accepts the play world as the real world.

To Joseph, Mary becomes an actor and he refuses to play along. How can Joseph believe Mary when her body is theatrically at odds with her utterances? If Joseph fails to acknowledge the line between the play world, where all things are possible, and the real world, circumscribed by laws inexorable and innate, he not only risks misplacing his faith and playing the dupe, but he also calls the validity of the law and the very foundations of his knowledge into question. Acknowledging that line, however, Joseph inadvertently falls into the very trap he tries to avoid.

Is the only test of faith, faith itself? Is faith—whether in the knowledge of things apprehensible or imperceptible—a glorified form of play, protracted, discretionary, and

volatile? Are there objective, unequivocal, and universal means for determining where the stage ends and where it begins, or is the suspension of disbelief a prerequisite to engagement in a socially constructed, notational network of proximate and marginal realities where nothing and no one can actually be known, defined, or said to exist with any degree of certainty? “Could it be,” as David Wallace postulates, “that we emerge only in the cracks when words fail to perform as we have come to expect them to?” (3).

In the York play *Joseph's Troubles about Mary*,¹ words fail to register the presence of Christ. Regarded, as in the Christian tradition more broadly, as being simultaneously Man and God, Jew and Christian, Father and Son, Lord and Prince, Husband and Wife, Christ is neither here nor there. His presence does not just “emerge . . . in the cracks” (Wallace 3); it catalyzes them. The pressure that Christ, Word made Flesh, exerts on language is more than mere mortal discourse can withstand. He bursts language at the seams and fragments into subjectivities. In his nascence, Christ's presence is especially volatile. Yet unborn, he not only fails words, words fail him, as he cannot speak for himself or to the virtue of his mother. Others read Christ, others write him, and not one person can convince the other to read or write him any differently.

On one side of Mary's belly, we have Joseph who maintains that Mary's narrative is nothing more than “wordis wilde” (139). Decoding Mary's pregnancy from a literal, “eye for an eye” Old Testament frame of reference, he reads Mary's “sidis” as a sign of sex (102). On the other side, we have Mary, who declares that Joseph is “begiled” (214). Decoding her pregnancy from a figurative, New Testament frame of reference, she

asserts that her “sidis” are a sign of divine grace. Meanwhile, Christ, silent host and silent party to their literary exchange, hovers gracefully, as a sign of salvation, yet gracelessly, as a sign of sin, between his parents, a couple divided over the contradictory, yet complimentary terms of Christian Charity.

In this study, I shed light on how fourteenth-century poets and playwrights played host to the Host by channeling the unborn Christ as a model for authorship. Drawing on a diverse array of fourteenth-century Middle English texts—namely, *Cursor Mundi*, *The York Cycle Plays*, *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *St. Erkenwald*, *Athelston*, and the *Chester Nativity Play*—I demonstrate how Mary’s contradictory “sidis” manifest both on and off stage, not only as a test of and a testament to the expressive power of human discourse, but also as a medium of expression and exchange, as a *wilde*,² yet not *onkynde*,³ exemplar and exemplum for charitable literary activity.

Although my work takes a different shape, it builds on many of the ideas Sarah Beckwith develops in her study of the Cycle Play performances, *Signifying God*. In *Signifying God*, Beckwith makes the case that mystery theater should be understood as “sacramental theater” (59). Beckwith is most interested in how “theatrical forms of life,” such as the vulnerable body of an actor playing Christ being hoisted upon the cross, simulate the “irreducible tension between visible and invisible in the sacrament” (60). According to Beckwith, “It is in the drama of appearances and disappearances, exits and entrances, absences and presences, signification and reference in theatrical forms of life

that the question central to sacramentality itself is asked: How do we encounter a glorified God who has withdrawn himself from our sight?" (73).

In an otherwise positive review of *Signifying God*, Kathleen Ashley calls attention to "the skimpiness with which specific plays in the York Cycle," "non-Passion plays such as those of the Old Testament sequence of the Nativity of Christ," are "treated relative to the development of the theatrical argument about sacramentality" (835). Ashley's critique establishes two important points. The first is that Beckwith's argument is primarily theatrical. This is indicated by the fact that Beckwith rarely factors in or refers to the actual text of the plays in order to establish her argument. It's surprising that Beckwith hardly engages with words as a "theatrical form of life," especially given the role that The Word plays in setting the stage of Christian salvation history. This brings us to the second of Ashley's points, which deals with Beckwith's treatment of the Old Testament and Nativity plays. Given the semiotic connection between Mary's pregnant belly and the Eucharist, it seems that Beckwith might have looked more closely at the York Cycle's *Joseph's Troubles about Mary* play for insight into how the playwrights raise and address "the question central to sacramentality itself...How do we encounter a glorified God who has withdrawn himself from our sight?"

However compelling, Beckwith's argument for "sacramental theater" suffers from a lack of close literary analysis. Without this literary analysis, the real significance of her work goes largely unrecognized, as "sacramental theater" seems more like a way of characterizing mystery theater in a general sense rather than in the specific senses which

the plays imply. Through close textual analysis, this study investigates how *The Fall* plays and how Mary's body factor into Beckwith's equations of theatrical sacramentality. I put her work in perspective by establishing a wider frame of reference that includes but is not limited to medieval drama. Tracing this network of connections, I reveal how fourteenth-century poets and playwrights derived and developed writing strategies for signifying God out of the language of the Virgin Birth. Beginning with the early fourteenth-century biblical paraphrase *Cursor Mundi*, I provide a window into how it was and came to be that by the late fourteenth-century, writers had rendered Mary's pregnant body into a sacramental figure of writing.

The aim of this study is to convey a stronger sense of the relationships that fourteenth-century writers establish between pregnancy, reading, writing, and salvation. In *The Pregnant Male as Myth and Metaphor in Classical Greek Literature*, David Leitato "attempt[s] to trace the image of the pregnant male in classical Greek Literature" (1). He argues that "this image, deployed in myth and metaphor," such as in Plato's "famous description, in the *Symposium* particularly, of thought as a metaphorical form of 'giving birth,'" or as in the metaphor of the philosopher as intellectual midwife, "originates as a way to figure paternity and, by extension, 'authorship' generally—of, for example, ideas, works of art, and legislation..." (1). In this study, I show how fourteenth-century writers such as the *Cursor*-poet, the York and Chester playwrights, Chaucer, the *Erkenwald*-poet, and the *Athelston*-poet, translated Mary's miraculous pregnancy into a

metaphor for literary activity as well as into a paradigm for thinking rhetorically about questions of authorship, the expressive power of language, and creative license.

This study also seeks to convey a sense of why Mary's pregnancy resonated so strongly with fourteenth-century writers and their audiences. The Virgin Mary's expectant form, as well as the domestic crises to which it gives rise, provided a convenient metaphor for the temper of the times. The political poems of the late fourteenth-century describe an ominous world that is spiraling out of control, unsteady and unreliable. As one poet puts it, "Thys warlde ys varyabyll,/ No-thing þer-in ys stable" (Robbins 148;13-4). The proverbial pregnant moment, middle ground, and bigger picture, the Virgin Birth provided a concept and context for mediating a period characterized in the literature of the day as one of transition, instability, mixing, gestation, and flux.

2. Mary as Literary Mediatrix in *Cursor Mundi*

This chapter takes a close look at the key, but neglected role that the Virgin Mary plays as literary mediatrix to the host of marriages which the *Cursor*-poet seeks to realize in the early fourteenth-century Middle English biblical paraphrase *Cursor Mundi*. The *Cursor*-poet argues that going “thorw þe wijf,” meaning poetry, “to wyn þe man,” meaning both God’s personal favor for himself as well as the ears of his general audience, is not an inherently satanic writing strategy, despite the fact that Satan uses this strategy to facilitate the crime of Original Sin (Morris 743). God went through the “wijf,” being the Virgin Mary, in order to “wyn” mankind from the debt of Original Sin. Following in God’s footsteps, people addressed their prayers to the “wijf,” rather than directly to God himself, in order to “wyn” His ear. A human vessel for the divine Word, Mary was not only a spiritual mediatrix, but also a literary mediatrix. Her body, which married divine spirit and human flesh, provided grounds for “Marying,” so to speak, contradictory forms of discourse – in this case, scripture, the Word of God, and romance, the words of Man – in a complementary way. Extrapolating from scripture and from the teachings of theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas, the poet makes the case that his literary activity constitutes a form of charity work, as it provides people with the unique opportunity to express their twinned likeness to God, a likeness both literal and figurative in the wake of the Incarnation, through a twinned medium—language—and a twinned

process—storytelling—involving twinned participants—authors and their audiences—in a doubly rewarding and mutually beneficial way.

In the *Prologue*, the poet identifies two language gaps which his work seeks to address. Firstly, his work fills the need for a vernacular paraphrase of the Bible in Middle English. Secondly, his paraphrase aims to tackle the gap between the Word of God and the man-made “rimes” that “Man yhernes...for to here” (1), “romans”(2) and “Storis als o ferekin thinges” (21), such as those told:

Of Alisaundur þe conquerour;
 Of Iuly Cesar þe emparour'
 O grece and troy the strang strijf...
 Of brut þat bern bald of hand...
 O kyng arthour þat was so rike...
 O ferlys þat hys knyhtes fell...
 [Of] tristrem and hys leif ysote...
 O Ioneck and ysambrase,
 O ydoine and of amadase... (3-5, 7, 9, 11, 17, 19-20)

An oft-quoted passage, the poet's list of romances is hardly ever considered within its immediate context, a discussion of language gaps, and its broader context, a large body of creative work based on scripture, and “organize[d]...around the life of the Virgin Mary” (Johnson 107). The poet's list of romances winds up being something of an index for his

biblical paraphrase. The poet's inventory of romances marks his intent to use a popular vernacular—the language of romance—to tell salvation history.

There are many problems associated with the poet's proposed writing strategy of using the language of romance to tell salvation history, not the least of which concerns the implication that he takes the devil as a model of authorship. The poet is all too aware of how his intended writing strategy mirrors that of the devil in Eden, who goes “throu þe wjif to wyn þe man” (743). The poet's recounts of Original Sin and the Cain and Abel story suggest that, in blurring the line between poetry and scripture, the poet feared blurring the line between human and divine authorship. He did not want to be accused of “making his maker.”⁴ The poet sought to produce a morally edifying, yet entertaining text capable of holding its own against the immensely popular romances. But by pursuing this aim, was he not claiming the authority to fill in for God? Was he not in effect presuming to make the Word flesh using the carnal language of romance?

Besides establishing a difference between playing God and paraphrasing him, the poet also needed to prove that he was justified in using poetry as a vehicle for the Word of God. Lee Patterson explains, “There is hardly any area of life—whether it be political, institutional, intellectual, spiritual, or artistic—in which medieval people did not legitimize their activity by reference to transcendent values and first principles. Medieval culture understood its own activity as the effort to ground itself upon a divinely authored originality” (18). As we will see, the *Cursor*-poet legitimized his literary activity with

reference to the doctrine that God created Man in his Image, the logic of Catholic prayer, and the Virgin Mary's intermediary body.

2.1 Paraphrasing God

The poet addresses the question of what God's resemblance to mankind entails very early on in the text. In the first 400 lines of the poem, he directly invokes St. Augustine's teachings on the mechanics of creation. In his *City of God*, St. Augustine writes of God's work:

For we are not to conceive of this work in a carnal fashion, as if God wrought as we commonly see artisans, who use their hands, and material furnished to them, that by their artistic skill they may fashion some material object. God's hand is God's power; and He, working invisibly, effects visible results. (12:23)

The poet paraphrases Augustine's argument, reiterating that God, in contrast with his creatures, does not need to physically sweat and toil to see His will expressed:

Bot þou sal nocht þou vndirstand
þat he wroght al his werc wit hand,
Bot said wit word, and als son
All his comament was don,
Suiftliker þen hee may wink,
Or ani mans hert mai thynk.
Als clerkes sais þat are wis. (336-42)

Unlike man, who must actualize his words and thoughts through his labor, God's will actualizes itself through his language, "wit word," and not "wit hand" (338, 337). God creates mankind through divine discourse, "wit word" rather than "wit hand" (338, 337). Remarking on what the transfer from word to form constitutes in the relationship between God and mankind, the poet compares man to God "Als prient of seel in wax es thrist" (556). In other words, if God were a seal, mankind would be like the impression left by the seal onto wax. As an imprint of God's image, Mankind cannot work as He can, cannot say "wit word" and have their "comament" performed, but as we find, the poet does not extend this limitation to thought itself (338, 339). That is to say that, although humans must perform physical work to see their wills expressed, the intellectual work they perform in their minds has divine attributes.

In the Cain and Abel scene, the poet transposes God's dialogue into Adam's character, suggesting that mankind's line of thought is modeled after divine discourse. Adam asks Cain, "Quar has þu left þu broþer abel?" (1093). Similarly, God poses the question, "'Caym, quer es þi broþer abel?" (1123). By contrast, in the scriptural account of the Cain and Abel story, God alone addresses Cain. The poet's innovation would probably appeal to the romance readers he seeks to entertain, as it effectively places God's Word within the realm of human experience and vice versa. Adam's participation encourages the audience to approach the Cain and Abel story as a family drama. As a didactic commentary, the poet's innovation amplifies the deference due to fathers, who are likened to God the father, while simultaneously reminding parents and their offspring

of their mutual obligations to God and by extension to one another. The poet's innovation also speaks to his comparison of man to God "Als prient of seel in wax es thrist" (556). Adam and God's likeness of discourse constitutes both an interpretation and a dramatic expression of the Christian belief that man was created in the likeness of God.

In *Cursor Mundi*, the essence of mankind's resemblance to God is intellectual. This is an idea that we can find in the writings of Aquinas. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas writes that since "A thing is said to be perfect in so far as it attains its proper end" and "it is charity that unites us to God, Who is the last end of the human mind," then the "perfection of the Christian life consists radically in charity" (I-II, 184, i). In *Cursor Mundi*, the mind lays the basis for the charity-based relationship between God the Father and His children, mankind. It also lays the basis for relationships between human fathers and sons, such as between Adam and Cain. Consider, for example, the connections which the poet establishes between charity work and intellectual work in his telling of the Cain and Abel story.

The Cain and Abel story is about charity. Each brother presents God with an offering, but God only chooses to accept Abel's charity. Abel's offering vanishes; it is seized, at will, by God's invisible hand. Cain's offering, however, is left behind as a visually palpable sign that something is amiss with Cain's invisible intentions and ideas about what charity work constitutes. God's rejection of Cain's offering is an explicit demonstration of the fact that the bond of charity between Himself and Cain has been broken. Once this bond of charity is broken, Cain is placed at a remove in discourse from

both of his fathers—God and Adam—who both confront him with the same question: Where is your brother Abel? This question, which is supposed to remind him of his charity-based obligations toward his fathers and his brother, has an ironic effect on Cain. As both God and Adam share the same discourse, Cain presumes that they share the same level of omniscience. Highlighting the parity of their discourse, Cain offers God and Adam the same replies. To Adam, Cain derisively replies, “Quen was I keeper of þi childe?” and continues to dissemble, “Of him can I sai þe certain nan, Bot he to brine his tyde be-gan” (1096-8). Likewise, he mockingly retorts to God, “I wot...I can nought tell, Aske his fader quore he be, For he was nought bitan to me” (1124-6). The position Cain takes is that if God and Man are intellectually alike, then the discourse of both fathers, the spiritual and the corporeal, can be treated equally.

In addition to responding to both fathers with similar replies, Cain simultaneously attacks God and Adam, blurring the boundaries between them. When Cain tells Adam that he is not Abel’s “keeper,” he doesn’t use Abel’s name. In contrast with the Biblical account, Cain also doesn’t use the phrase my “brother’s keeper.” Instead, he refers to Abel as a “childe,” foregrounding the father and son relationship. Adam is not the only father implicated in this relationship. One of the reasons why Cain uses the epithet “childe” to refer to Abel is because he wants to refer to Abel in the abstract sense of being a “childe” of God. Knowing full well that Abel has died at his hands, Cain tells Adam that if he wants to know Abel’s whereabouts, he should ask God, since God is the one who is supposed to be watching over him. What Cain implies is not only that both

God and Adam have shirked in their paternal duties, but also that they both share a blind spot: conflating the difference between divine omniscience and the human faculty for deductive reasoning, Cain assumes that both God and Adam are equally deficient in their ability to read and to discern.

Cain simultaneously pokes fun at both his human father and his Heavenly Father by suggesting that the equally negligent and blinded pair might fill each other in. Since both of his fathers write alike, Cain assumes that both of his fathers must read alike as well. Cain's faulty conclusion is emphasized by another of the poet's deviations from scripture. In the Bible, Cain's motives for killing Abel are left ambiguous. In *Cursor Mundi*, God directly confronts Cain with a question of motive. He asks, "Qui has þu broþer nu slain?" (1128). Cain reads God's rhetorical inquiry as a glitch in omniscience. He takes God's question at face value, answering, "I wot...I can nought tell, Aske his fader quore he be, For he was nought bitan to me" (1124-6). An extremely literal reader, he treats God's question as a sign that God is not intellectually superior to him rather than as a demand that he take responsibility for his action. If God truly knows, then Cain does not see why God needs to ask; rather, Cain believes that God needs to ask because He is just as limited as Adam in His ability to read his mind.

In calling God's bluff, Cain fails miserably. As the poet puts it, "Caym sau his sinne was knaued,/ And that the erde had it schauede,/ And sau that gain-saying was nan" (1161-3). The language of show and tell, of seeing and "saying" that the poet uses to describe Cain's tragic epiphany highlights the viscosity necessary for the human mind

to process information. Cain has to be visually confronted by his own human limitations in order to realize that God has seen his sin all along. Unlike God, Cain's sight is carnal. He has to literally see his sin—Abel's dead body, carnal evidence of the murder he committed, must literally out—in order for him to recognize that while he may have been able to “gain-say” Adam, he could never “gain-say” God.

What Cain discovers is that divine and non-divine discourse are not equal to one another. God's ability to read extends to thought itself. God only frames his discourse with mankind around rhetorical inquiries in order to set a paternal example, in order to leave behind a body of imitable work which is accessible to His creatures. God models a human line of inquiry, but he is not dependent on human modes of communication. On the other hand, Adam has to use questions to try and prompt a confession out of Cain. Even then, he is limited in his ability to verify the authenticity of Cain's replies. The poet, for example, describes how the “þe fader and þe moder bath,” being Adam and Eve, “to blam þe broither was þam laith” since they could not be positive of Cain's guilt (1101-2). Their limited ability to read Cain's thoughts creates a huge margin for error. Adam senses Cain's sin the moment he takes a look at him: “Quen his faþer eie vupon him kast,/ A shying of his hert vte brast,/ For mistrouing hadd he þan sone/ þat he sum wickedness had done” (1087-1090). However, Adam understands that the “shying of his hert” is not equivalent to divine omniscience. The “shying of his hert” is not sufficient to establish Cain's guilt. He requires one body of evidence—literally Abel's—to establish a case against Cain—and he needs another—Cain's confession—to fully substantiate his

hypothetical account, thereby eliminating all trace of reasonable doubt. The burden of physical proof that Adam and Eve carry, part and parcel of the physical burden of original sin, incapacitates them. Were it not for God, almighty and all-knowing, who intercedes with an indisputable show of physical evidence, then Abel's murder "had euer ben hid" from his parents' sight (1107). Cain could have gone on "gain-saying" Adam and Eve the way that Adam and Eve once tried to "gain-say" God, except that he would have gotten away it (1163).

The contrasts which the poet draws between the multiple father-son relationships in the story allow him to elaborate on the relationship between God's Word and his human interpretation of it. The poet does not want to inhabit the role of a Cain character who imagines that he might "gain-say" God. Cain reads God's rhetorical questions as signs of glitches in omniscience. Through Cain, the poet anticipates the type of reader who might criticize him for the creative liberties he takes as a paraphraser of God's Word. Cain represents the type of writer who would exploit the opportunity to fill in for gaps in God's Word, biblical omissions such as, for example, the question of Cain's motive for murder.

The poet draws a parallel between himself and Adam, who signifies God by modeling His discourse and His line of inquiry. This parallel allows him to account for his extrapolations to scripture. There are many questions—of motive, method, emotional response, and interpersonal impact— that are left open to interpretation in the scriptural account of the Cain and Abel story. Like Adam, the poet understands that he cannot

allow the “shying of his hert,” his own personal proclivities, to overtake his reading of scripture (1088). By comparing himself to Adam, the poet suggests that his extrapolations to scripture are the product of a divinely authorized line of inquiry. The poet’s work may be guided by his “hert,” but it is governed by his intellectual connection with God. Thus, he offers his audience educated guesses and hypothetical explanations based on the available evidence.

Unlike Adam, the poet begins his investigation with reliable testimony—the Word of God—and a sacred body of work—the Bible. Yet, he still shares in Adam’s struggle to justify his conclusions. Like Adam, the poet is only human. Just as Adam acknowledges his human limitations as a mediator and judge, he too must acknowledge his human limitations as a reader and a writer. The poet does not aim, like Cain, to play God. Rather he seeks to conform, like Adam, to His Image. His position is that God is the privileged interpreter of His own work. If the activity of paraphrasing the Bible spiritually appeals to the poet, it is because it presents him with a means to strengthen his charity-based, intellectual bond with God and with his fellow man. The poet characterizes his work as a form of charity, as his paraphrase glorifies God and reminds His children of their mutual obligations to Him, and to one another.

2.2 “throu þe wjif to wyn þe man”

Whereas the poet uses the Cain and Abel story to set parameters for how far readers and writers can stretch their likenesses to God, he uses the story of Original Sin to explore the relationship between male and female discourse, which he likens to the

relationship between theology and poetry. In his *Prologue*, the poet indicated his intent to use the language of romance to communicate the Word of God. The poet uses the story of Original Sin to articulate the case against the marriage of poetry and theology. During this figurative, legal discovery phase, the poet investigates the rhetorical scene of the crime in order to establish the prosecution's line of argument against his intended writing strategy of going "throu þe wjif to wyn þe man" (743).

Drawing on the Fall of Man narrative, the poet demonstrates that while mankind as a whole was created in God's image, men and women share different degrees of resemblance. Adam speaks in paraphrases of God, imitating His line of inquiry. On the other hand, Eve does not ask any questions. As we discover during her exchange with the devil, she answers with whatever she has been told. When the devil approaches Eve in paradise, he overwhelms her with interrogatives: "womman, tel me now qui/ þat 3ee ette nocht al communli/O paradis of ilk a tre?" he demands. "And wat þou quarfor?" he continues. "And wenis þou þat it be sua/Sum he has said yow?" he persists (758-60, 766, 769-70). The devil wants to know what Eve thinks the reasons are why she can't have any fruit from the forbidden tree. She answers by relating God's commandment that she is not to eat from it else she will "dei" (768). The devil continues to quiz Eve multiple times before he explicitly asks her whether she actually believes in the answers she gives him. She replies, "certes, ya!" for the second time in the course of the conversation, conveying the sense that she is not thinking of her answers, but repeating them by rote (772). A fainter impression of God, Eve is highly impressionable. When the devil tells

her that God prevents her from eating from the fruit because “he ne wald 3ee were parigal til him,” Eve accepts his testimony without any hesitation or inquiry (773-76). The implication is that Eve, like a blank page, is easily imprinted. She does not possess the intellectual faculty to reason through the devil’s “trecherie,” which is why the devil approaches her instead of Adam with his tall tale (730).

The devil also approaches Eve because he understands that women possess a sensual and seductive allure that overcomes Man’s reasoning. In a discussion on *Genesis ad Litteram* by St. Augustine, O’Meara explains, “Someone else less spiritual and intelligent had to be found to succumb to such a temptation. . . . Adam, Augustine speculates, could not be and was not misled by Eve’s words, but, like Solomon later, he was undone by love” (80). Adopting this philosophy, the poet remains faithful to scripture, choosing not to invent a dialogue between Adam and Eve wherein she persuades him to eat the forbidden fruit.

The only evidence that the poet provides as to the details of their omitted exchange is the personal testimony which Adam gives to God after the couple’s sin is discovered. Adam argues that Eve “es to wite” entirely for his sin. “Ful thrali first sco bedde it me,” he explains (880). He repeats this defense— “For sco me bed” —once more in the next line (881). Adam’s defense implies that he had no will in the matter of Original Sin. If the devil had approached him with the same proposition, he would have been able to see through it. But with Eve, his intellect is useless. It would not have

mattered what she said or how she said it, he would have been compelled to follow her bidding as he is in thrall to her discourse.

It would appear that the poet supports Adam's case. In contrast with the biblical account, in which God addresses Eve in even terms, God uses strong language to reprimand Eve in *Cursor Mundi*. "Qui did þou þus, þou fole womman?" He asks her (886). If he wanted to faithfully paraphrase the Bible, the poet could have stopped with the question, "Qui did þou þus?" Instead, he adds the epithet "fole woman." According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, the word "fole" means "foolish, ignorant; imprudent, unwise," and "ill-advised." *Fole* can also mean "sinful," "lascivious," and "libidinous." The poet draws on the multiple connotations of the word *fole* to characterize not only Eve, but women in general. By addressing Adam by name, yet referring to Eve broadly in terms of her biological sex, God implicates all women in her crime. Taking this position, the poet cites women as the root cause of disconnect in the intellectual bond of charity between God and His men. Women's wiles make extraordinary figures such as Samson, David, and Solomon witless. The intellectual likeness these men share to God is corrupted by women, who rule over them with rhyme rather than with reason.

The poet's attack on women rehearses classic arguments against poetry. Plato, for example, disapproves of poetry on the basis that it is an "imitation of appearances" and, therefore, "far removed from the truth" (*Republic* X). He compares poets to painters, as both are in the business of trading in likenesses. The painter produces a likeness or image of what he paints, and not the thing itself. Likewise, poets and storytellers use words to

produce a likeness or image of reality. Since artists don't see things as they objectively are, but as they subjectively appear to them, their likenesses are based on likenesses. If we take into account that the things themselves—Plato uses the example of a bed—are also figurations of abstract ideas and forms, then artists produce copies of copies of copies. According to Plato, in addition to producing work that is “inferior with respect to truth,” the poet also “appeals to a part of the soul that is...inferior” (*Republic X*). The poet “arouses, nourishes, and strengthens” the “irrational part” of the soul. He “consorts with a part of us that is far from reason,” the unbridled emotional part that seeks mindlessly for “pleasure,” for entertainment and self-gratification. Plato argues that people impressed by and acting under the influence of poetry live their lives at multiple removes from the divine truth; guided by falsehood, they become lesser copies of their ideal selves.

We can draw a number of parallels between the poet's portrayal of Eve and Plato's critique of poetry. By the poet's account, Eve is at a further remove from God than her counterpart Adam. God creates mankind in His likeness, but not everyone shares the same degree of resemblance. Eve is a likeness of Adam, who shares a relatively closer likeness with God. Since Adam is a copy of the part of God perceptible to the human senses, he is a copy of a copy of God. This would make Eve, like poetry in Plato's estimation, a copy of a copy of a copy. Eve is also a testament to the mysterious power that poetry, a fiendish and feminine art, has over men's senses. Eve “consorts with” the “inferior,” “irrational part” of Adam's soul. Adam might be intellectually superior to Eve,

but her feminine allure destroys his reason. Although her reading and writing abilities are weak, her discourse acts as an intoxicant. It wreaks havoc on Adam's sense of right and wrong to the extent that he, acting now in her likeness, mindlessly consumes the forbidden fruit, breaking his covenant with God. The poet figures this broken covenant as both a breakdown in charity and as a symbol of the break between poetry and theology.

2.3 Mary Lines of Communication

Having constructed the prosecution's line of argument out of his retelling of the story of Original Sin, the poet issues a provisional rebuttal, asserting that a symbiotic relationship between poetry and theology is not out of the question. Ultimately, he tries to convince the reader that the very same strategy which the devil uses to invade Eden and avenge himself against God— "How he suld at þe wif be-gin, And thorw þe wijf to wyn þe man" —should be employed in the telling of salvation history (742-43).

The poet's numerous exhortations to Mary serve as exhibits in his defense. They demonstrate that his writing strategy cannot in itself be immoral, as it is the strategy behind the intercessory logic of Catholic prayer. The language which the poet uses to dedicate his work to the Virgin Mary mirrors the language he uses to describe the strategy of going "thorw þe wijf to wyn þe man" (743). The poet explains that he wrote *Cursor Mundi* "For-þi blisce and þat paramour/ Quen i haue nede me dos socure/ þat saues me first in herth fra syn/ And heuen blys me helps to wyn" (69-72). Notice how the term "wyn" is here used in the same manner as it is later used to describe the Devil's tactic of "thorw þe wijf to wyn þe man" (743). The poet supposes that by dedicating his

verses to St. Mary, by, in other words, referring his case to her, he will have a stronger chance of entering heaven than if he devoted his verses to God Himself. Bernard Lord Manning explains, "The fourteenth-century discussions on the nature of prayer were closely connected with these Augustinian doctrines of salvation. . . The chief, if not the only, question about it was an extremely practical one: how can prayer be made most efficient? . . . To whom ought one to direct prayer? To the Father or to the Son or to Mary?" (175). The poet's paraphrase of the Original Sin episode demonstrates that Man is most effectively reached through Woman since he is susceptible to her persuasions. The poet seems to apply this satanic logic by pleading his own case through Mary, rather than to the Son or to the Father, the implication being that Mary, as a woman, would more effectively make his case before God and Christ.

The poet addresses this nefarious implication through his exhortations to Mary. The poet's exhortations to Mary allow him to juxtapose Old and New chains of transmission. Prior to the Incarnation, the line of communication between Man and God was hijacked by Satan. Satan went "thorw þe wjif," being Eve, to get to Adam, to get to God. God secures a new line of communication with his children by communicating His Word through Mary. He goes "thorw þe wjif," the Virgin Mary, who in turn delivers Christ, who preaches God's message to mankind. Acting in God's likeness, the poet submits his work to this chain of transmission. He goes "thorw þe wjif" by using the language of romance as a vehicle for theology in the way that the Virgin Mary acts a vessel for God. Word Made Flesh, Christ inherits his flesh from his human mother and

his Divinity from God. Thus, the poet signifies God by 'Marying,' so to speak, poetry and theology, romance and scripture, Word and flesh in the biblical paraphrase *Cursor Mundi* (338-37).

Whether or not the York playwright was familiar with the work of the *Cursor*-poet, the manner in which he worked out the details of signifying Christ demonstrates familiarity with the matrimonial writing strategy that the *Cursor*-poet espoused as well as with its Marionic justifications. The *Cursor*-poet proposed that the miracle of the Virgin Birth made the marriage of romance and scripture possible. As we will see, the York playwright was interested in how the *unkynde* marriage of contradictory forms of discourse could be used to simulate sacramental tension and to stimulate intellectual contractions capable of conveying Christ to and throughout the community.

3. A Host of Contradictions

In *Joseph's Troubles About Mary*, the yet unborn Christ trades hands between a husband and wife who cannot come to terms as to how he should be redeemed, as the verbatim word of God or human wordplay. By Mary's account, her pregnancy is a visible sign of "Goddis" invisible "sande" (216). Joseph, however, maintains that her pregnancy is the product of "wilde" human "werkes" (212). Mary's "sidis shewes she is with childe" (102). On this point, Joseph and Mary can agree. But the couple cannot agree on an answer to the question of "Wha has ben there" —God's figurative hand or a literal human penis (94). It does not occur to the couple to consider their pregnant exchange as an instance of Christ's hand at work.

Scholars often neglect to take account of Mary's failure to communicate Christ, placing an emphasis instead on Joseph's comic failures as a reader.⁵ Joseph is not, however, fully mistaken for reading Mary's pregnancy as a sign of sin rather than as a sign of divine grace. According to Christian scripture, Christ does not "...come to destroy the law, or the prophets...but to fulfill" (Matt 5:17). Christ is a living testament to the reality of Original Sin. He comes to fulfill the legal debt which mankind owe for the crime of Original Sin by offering his life in exchange. Mary's belly is, therefore, as much a sign of human sin as it is a sign of divine grace.

I propose that the playwright characterizes Mary's "sidis" as sides of Christ's story and as an example of his charity work in action (102). Moreover, I suggest that it is not Joseph or Mary, but rather the audience who is best situated to see how Mary's "sidis

shewes she is with childe” (102). Mary’s pregnant belly generates a visual breakdown in communication between a husband and wife who show, share, and embody the contradictory, but complimentary rhetorical “sidis” of the exchange which Christ makes for mankind’s salvation.

In the York Cycle, Mary’s pregnant belly becomes the site of a cosmic literary exchange that investigates the relationship between God’s hand and human hands in light of the Incarnation. The playwright stages a show of words, what might be described as a twin Incarnation, which tests the power of human discourse to make Word Flesh by means of storytelling. I argue that the playwright portrays Joseph and Mary’s domestic debate as a literary exchange inspired by Christ, a seemingly poor Host who mediates by being mediated and forges ties, such as between God and Man and Husband and Wife, by exacerbating generic tensions, such as between the Old Testament and the New Testament, sacred prophecy and *fabliaux* tales.

I also contend that the playwright takes the yet unborn Christ as a model of authorship. In her argument for mystery theater as “sacramental theater,” Beckwith states that “the question central to sacramentality itself is... How do we encounter a glorified God who has withdrawn himself from our sight?” (73). I propose that, for the York playwright, the ability to encounter Christ hinges, not so much on acts of faith, rather than on works of charity. The playwright styles his own charity work after Christ’s example by imitating Christ’s oxymoronic example of authorship. The York plays are associated with the Feast of Corpus Christi, which celebrates Christ’s real presence in the

Eucharist. Playing the role of intellectual midwife, the playwright uses Joseph and Mary's contradictory, but complimentary literary exchange to reproduce sacramental tensions, thereby helping to deliver Christ to the audience.

The audience also has their own charity work to perform. Joseph and Mary do not see eye to eye with one another over Christ because they cannot see eye to eye over the terms of Christian charity. In order for the audience to bring Christ to term for themselves, they have to intellectually broker Joseph and Mary's exchange. They fulfill their rhetorical side of the bargain by performing the matrimonial tie and transaction of Christian charity. By 'Marying,' so to speak, Christ's contradictory, but complimentary rhetorical "sidis," the audience, a mixed group of people with different perspectives and from different sides and sectors of the community, plays their hand in realizing what it means to "make Mary" and be married in Christ.

3.1 When Words Fail

Joseph fails to apprehend the real presence of Christ because he makes incorrect reading decisions regarding what statements should be taken literally and what statements should be taken figuratively. In *On Christian Teaching*, St. Augustine stresses:

. . . One must take care not to interpret a figurative expression literally . . .

For when something meant figuratively is interpreted as if it were meant literally, it is understood in a carnal way . . . As well as this rule, which warns us not to pursue a figurative (that is, metaphorical) expression as if

it were literal, we must add a further one: not to accept a literal one as if it were figurative. (160)

Joseph turns Augustine's rules on their ends. For one thing, he reads Mary's miraculous pregnancy carnally as a sign of sex. Indeed, he seeks her out for the specific purpose of learning the identity of the man "who gate hir that barne" (73). Joseph commits another rhetorical blunder when he reads Mary's paternity claim that God is the father metaphorically, as a show of words meant to delude him into suspending his disbelief after the curtain has already fallen. "We, why gab ye me swa/ And feynes swilk fantassy?" he asks Mary's attendants, when they corroborate her claim (142). Joseph further errs by reading Mary's paternity claim that he is the father literally. "With me fleshely was thou nevere fylid" he reminds her when she tells him that the child is "Goddis and yours" (104).

Joseph has good reason to deny a hand in Mary's pregnancy. Her story raises all sorts of red flags. Most importantly, it challenges the spiritual status quo, that is, the set of reading and writing practices derived from the Old Testament. Joseph has trouble reconciling his figurative likeness with God the Father with his human likeness to Christ the Son. Mary's pregnancy places Joseph in a precarious position. In the wake of the Incarnation, God has two hands, the one abstract and all-powerful, and the other human. By taking human form, God changes the terms of mankind's divine likeness, making it both a figurative and literal likeness. This change in terms, which makes the bargain for human salvation possible, compromises Joseph's ability to negotiate the difference

between the real world and the play world, God's invisible hand and human cunning. If Joseph makes an exception, suspends his disbelief, and takes Mary's assertions of miracle at face value, as literal truths, without holding them to the letter of the law, then the law becomes arbitrary and the entire world becomes a stage. Boundaries must exist; otherwise, there is no telling the difference between "Goddis sande" and human word play (216). What is to tell sacred miracle—the work of "Goddis sande" — from human masquerade if any woman who claimed to have become miraculously pregnant was, on principle of faith, simply taken at her word? Joseph cannot take Mary at her word without ignoring the facts of pregnancy, treating her speech as if it has divine agency, and treating the law as if it is subject to his own personal discretion. Mary's purportedly miraculous pregnancy blurs far too many boundaries for Joseph's comfort. And so he draws his line in the sand sticking what he knows rather than with what he would like to believe.

In this section, we take a close look at how Joseph's primary textual source of knowledge—the Old Testament—shapes his reading of Mary's belly. Joseph's fear of falling into "swilk fantassy" is the lead motivating factor behind his reading decisions (142). The "fantassy" which Joseph refers to has its roots in the Cycle's Fall sequences. Lucifer, Adam, and Eve fall into the fantasy that they can be on equal terms with their Creator. Instead of reading their relationships with God figuratively, they go "agayne kynde"; they read them literally, which is to say, in a carnal manner (13.209). Unlike Lucifer, Adam, and Eve, Joseph is careful to read his divine resemblance on God's figurative terms. In an ironic twist, however, Joseph's textual fidelity proves to be, not so

much his undoing, but his unknowing. As a consequence of his textual fidelity, Joseph fails to recognize Christ's presence. As we will see, Christ destabilizes the rhetorical dynamic between the Creator and His creatures which is carefully staged in the Fall plays, making it necessary to renegotiate the terms of Man's divine likeness.

The rebel angels are cast out of heaven because they, as God describes it, "in fantasies fell" (1.129). In the *Creation of the Angels and The Fall of Lucifer*, God singles Lucifer out for special honors, appointing him "als master and merour of" His "michte" and "berar of lyghte" (34, 36). Blinded by his "fayrehede," Lucifer understands his metaphorical relationship with God in a carnal way (129). He takes his "michte" and his "lyghte" at face value, becoming transfixed with what he physically looks like in the "merour."

The bemes of my bryghthode ar byrnande so bryghte,
 And I so semely in syghte myselfe now I se,
 For lyke a lorde am I lefte to lende in this lighte. (50-2)

The "bemes of" Lucifer's "bryghthode" burn "so bryghte" that it is possible for him to literally bask in his own "syghte," in his own physical reflection.

Lucifer's vain reading preferences might serve his interests, but his vanity works against his better interest because it impairs his judgement. Lucifer's lease on "michte," "lyghte," and heaven as an abode becomes null and void if he violates God's provision that he remain "stabyll in thoghte" (34, 36, 30). By placing such high value on appearances, Lucifer loses his wits. He correlates external beauty with social "power"

and standing (56). Seeing that he is “More fayrear be far than” his “feres,” he imagines himself worthy of praise and worship (53). He indicates his plan to establish himself “On heghte in the hyste of hewven” so that all the angels can bask in his glory (88). As he puts it, “Ther sall I set myselfe, full semely to seyghte,/To ressayve my reverence thorowe righte o renowne” (89-90).

Lucifer also correlates outward beauty with expressive power. He thinks that if his discourse looks and sounds divine, then it has divine agency. This conceit sets Lucifer and the rebel angels apart from the good angels—Seraphim and Cherubim—who properly “merour” God. As they are God’s mirrors, God’s “fayre face” is ever in Seraphim and Cherubim’s sight (76). The good angels are “fede with the fode” of God’s “fayre face” (76). Seraphim praises God with the remark, “To se thi fayre face es nought fastande” (80). For the good angels, God’s face is a visual source of spiritual sustenance and a visual means of spiritual communion.

Despite being visually palpable, however, God’s face is immaterial and abstract. As God himself points out at the beginning of the play, “My body in blys ay abydande/Unendande, withoutyn any ending” (7-8). God’s body compasses, surpasses, and exercises all creation. His body isn’t something that is carnally seen, but rather something that is figuratively reflected by His body of work—creations such as the angels that reflect God’s “lighte.” For the angels, God’s face is the “lighte” His Word shines over the universe. Thus Seraphim describes God in terms of the almighty language which has just made the angels and created the heavens and the earth from “noghte” (44):

A, mercyfull maker, full mekill es thi mighte
 That all this warke at a worde worthely has wroghte.
 Ay loved be that lufly lorde of his lighte
 That us thus mighty has made, that nowe was righte noghte,
 In blys for to byde in hys blyssyng. (41-45)

As “merroures,” the angels serve to appreciate God’s expressive power, his ability to “warke at a worde,” to “fullfyll” his “thoghte” at will, and to “byd” creation into being (42, 19, 20).

In the above passage, as in others, Cherubim and Seraphim mirror God by casting speech images of divine Discourse. In the play, God speaks using self-referencing, alliterative language: “I am maker unmade, all mighte es in me” (2). Seraphim reflects God’s “light,” treating the attributes of His speech as a point of devotional reference: “A, mercyfull maker, full mekill es thi mighte” (42). Lucifer, however, usurps divine discourse by using it to reference himself in boast: “All the mighte that es made es markide in me” (49). As St. Augustine puts it, “God’s hand is God’s power” (*City of God* 12:23). Lucifer’s vanity causes him to reach the incorrect conclusion that his hand can also be his power. He assumes that if his discourse is the very image or “schewyng” of God’s, then he too can actualize his desires solely by means of discourse (69).

But “all goes downe!” the moment Lucifer proclaims, “I sall be lyke unto hym that es hyeste on heght” (93, 91). Failing to perceive that his word-claims on reality are just for show, Lucifer falls for the show – for the ‘shimmer’ and ‘shine,’ the “gle” and the

'glitter' (69, 82). His vain-glorious discourse hits its peak the instant he believes that his word can perform his will at will. He falls the instant he believes that he can actually become God, commanding his cosmic expressive power, by virtue of the appearance of his language alone.

Although Adam and Eve are created "Eftyr [God's] schape and [his] lyknes," they act as mirrors for Satan, falling for his "saying[s]" and repeating his conceits (3.23; 5.101). Lucifer was banished from God's company because he thought to be "lyke unto hym" (1.91). In contrast with Lucifer, God "make[s] man lyke unto [him]" (3.34). He creates Man "Eftyr [his schape and [his] lyknes" (23). Yet, Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise for the same reason as Lucifer, for thinking to be "lyke unto" God. This is because Adam and Eve, like Lucifer, misunderstand the nature of their rhetorical relationship with God.

Every stage of Man's creation is used to demonstrate that the "schape" and "lyknes" which God and Man share is metaphorical as opposed to carnal. God takes precautions so that His new creatures do not read their likeness in a carnal way, thereby developing the vain belief that they might equal or surpass him. He, for instance, decides to create Man out of "the symplest part of erthe" in order to "abate hys hauttande chere,/ Bothe his gret pride and other ille,/ And also for to have in mynde/ How simpyll he is at hys making..." (3.27-30). The language which God uses to create mankind is also precautionary. In the preliminary stages of Man's development, God treats the words "lyknes" and "schape" as complimentary terms. God, for example, describes his plan to

create a “skylful best...Eftyr [his] schape and [his] lyknes” (22-3). In the passage in which he actually creates Adam, he places these complimentary terms in contradictory contexts. Immediately after God announces his intent to “make man lyke onto [him],” He “commaunde[s]” the “erthe” to “Ryse up...in blode and bane,” not in “lyknes” or “schape” of God, but rather “In schape of man...” (35-36). This disjuncture emphasizes the metaphorical nature of Man’s “lyknes” to God. It would only follow that if God meant for the terms “lyknes” and “schape” to be interpreted in a carnal way, then He would have commanded the earth to rise up in His “schape.”

The sequence of corporeal images which God uses to portray the stages of Adam’s creation point to critical differences in God and Man’s fundamental natures. These differences hold the key to interpreting how God intends for human beings to read their likeness to Him. Man is made out of “the symplest part of erthe” (27). His building blocks are “blode and bane” (35). Blood can be spilled, bones can be broken. Man’s body breaks down over time. As God puts it, “For als febyll I sall hym fynde/ Qwen he is dede at his ending” (31-2). Man is “simpyll...at hys making” and “simpyll” again when his body decomposes back to its primal element— “erthe” (30, 27). On the other hand, God is the “maker unmade” (1.2). His “body” is “withoutyn begynnyng” and “Unendande, withoutyn any ending” (1.7, 2, 8).

The differences between God’s body and Man’s body call attention to God’s role as creator, provider, and nurturer of mankind. Unlike God, the bodies of human beings are not self-subsisting and self-sustaining. God brings Adam and Eve to life. They

depend on Him for food, shelter, and guidance. Their food differs from that of the angels. The angels are nourished by the sight of God's "fayre face" (1.76). In contrast, God looks after Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve are reared under God's light. He maintains them with a diet of "Erbes, spyce, frute on tree,/ Beastes" and "fewles" (4.4-5). For shelter, he gives Adam and Eve "paradyce" as a "wonnynge" (4.7, 3). When God brings Adam and Eve into the world, He promises to guide and to educate them so that they have the tools and the knowledge to tend to and thrive in the world He has created for and entrusted them with. "Ille and gude both sall ye kone," he tells them, "I sall you lerne youre lyve to lede" (4.75-6). The relationship of God to Adam and Eve is that of a father to his children.

What God means when He says that He creates mankind after "Eftyr [his] schape and [his] lyknes" is that mankind is, metaphorically speaking, His offspring. Adam and Eve are a product of God's "loffē" (3.20). It is as a father that he seeks their "worschip": "Lovys me forthi, and lovys me ay/ For my making, I axke no mare," He says (3.66, 67-8). God "lede[s]" Adam and Eve by example (3.76). The "warlde" which Adam and Eve inherit is endowed with "Erbes and treys" and "All other creatours [that] multiply/ Ylke one in tender hower" (4.25, 22-3). This "warlde" which God expects Adam and Eve to "yem," meaning to care for and attend to, contains a lesson in what it means to act in God's "lyknes" (4.19, 18).

Humans are meant to nurture nature in a way that parallels the way that God nurtures them. "Looke," God instructs them, "that ye bothe save and sett/ Erbes and treys,

for nothyng lett,/ So that ye may endower/ To susteyn beast and man/ And fewll of ylke stature” (4.24-28). God’s instructions call attention to the difference between human and angelic modes of communion. Unlike that of the angels, the source of Adam and Eve’s communion isn’t visual light. In these lines, the word “looke” means to pay attention to and to look after. Humans commune with God, not by looking at Him, but by using their “skyll” to look after the world and after one another, just as God has looked after them (3.15). Adam and Eve are responsible for ruling over the world in light of God’s Word, in light of His revelation. By following His parental example, they show their love, conform to His “schape,” and act in His “lyknes.”

Despite the precautions which God takes with Adam and Eve, they wind up following Lucifer’s example rather than His own. In *The Prohibition of the Tree of Knowledge* play, God orders Adam and Eve to “Lay ye no handes theretyll” the “tre that beres the fruyte of lyfe” (85, 83). In *The Fall* play, Satan approaches Eve with the goal of seeing both her and Adam break God’s “bidyng” (116). Recall that God cursed Satan for imagining that his hand, like God’s, could be his power. This reality check doesn’t dissuade Satan who zeroes in on a strategy for seeing his will performed at word: storytelling. Satan “telles” Eve the following far-fetched “tale” (53):

To ete therof he you defende
 I knawe it wele, this was his skylle;
 Bycause he wolde non othir kende
 Thes grete vertues that longes thertill.

For will thou see
 Who etis the frute of goode and ille
 Shalle have knowyng as wele as hee. (45-51)

Having provided a set of false motives for why God placed a prohibition on the fruit of The Tree of Knowledge, Satan provides Eve with incentive for 'laying her hands' on the fruit: "yhe may wirshipped be," he tells her, and "To gretter state ye may be brought," if "ye will do as I schall saye" (55, 61-2).

Eager to level the playing field, Adam and Eve take their chances and "traste" in Satan's "techyng" (78). When they "Byte on boldly" from the forbidden fruit, their ambition instantly turns to "shame" (80, 106). The couple literally "see" that they have broken God's "bidyng" (116). Satan promised Adam and Eve full disclosure, but instead of becoming Gods by having "knowing as wele as hee," Adam and Eve gain knowledge of their physical nudity (110-12). The fact that they are "naked and all bare" becomes intellectually manifest to them as their bodies become subject to each other's visual scrutiny (134). It becomes clear as day that they have fallen for a show of words. Instead of fulfilling their responsibility of ruling by the light of God's Word, Adam and Eve fall for the temptation of commanding It. Like Lucifer, they misread their relationship to God. They imagine that their hands can be their power, which is to say that Adam and Eve presume, in vain, that their words might be on equal expressive terms with God's by "simpyll" sleight of hand (3.30).

In both Falls, the culprits exploit the use of their hands. The hand is meant to be an instrument of worship, a tool which allows God's creatures to perform His work, thereby expressing their relationships with Him. Instead of using their hands to express their "merroure" or "lyke" relationships to God, Lucifer, Adam, and Eve use their hands as a means of self-expression and self-fulfillment. Under the impression that the Word of God can be hijacked by "sympl" sleight of hand—by switching pronouns in prayers from "You" to "I" as in Lucifer's case, or, as in Adam and Eve's case, stealing away with a piece of fruit—God's creatures seize on the opportunity to become Gods in their own right, self-made and self-fulfilling.

As punishment, God banishes Adam and Eve to earth, where they will have to "swete and swynke" and "travayle for" their "foode" (5.61, 62). Gone are the care-free days of childhood when Adam and Eve woke to find the seeds planted and their table set. In paradise, their food was "all that" they could "see" (5). The "Erbes, spyce, frute on tree,/ Beastes" and "fewles" were so omnipresent that they took God's presence in vain, failing to keep "in mynde" His role as bread-maker and bread-winner (4.4-5; 3.29). Now, their "Lykyng for to eate" won't be fulfilled at a word (4.12). Food is no longer available for them "to take at [their] owen wyll" (4.14). Now, the beasts of the earth aren't going to magically heed their every call and order as willing "suggettes" (4.16). Adam and Eve must physically work for their food, from beginning to end, planting the seeds, toiling over the crops, sweating over the harvest, tending to and raising the livestock, before they

can reap the fruit of their labor, and even then, they must set the table with their own two hands.

3.2 “Owre handis may we wryng”

It is significant to the trajectory of both Fall stories as well as to the *Joseph's Troubles about Mary* play that *The Fall of Man* play closes with hand-wringing. “Allas,” Adam cries, in the play’s final line, “for sorowe and care,/ Owre handis may we wryng” (176). In a discussion on the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Anne Baden-Daintree explains that “In situations of extreme distress, anger or grief, both men and women exhibit behaviors of weeping, writhing, swooning, wringing of hands and the tearing of hair and clothing” (94). In the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, for example, King Arthur is so overcome with grief at the death of his beloved friend Gawain, that he weeps, wrings his hands, and kisses Gawain’s dead corpse, inadvertently smearing his beard with blood. Arthur’s men criticize him for failing to contain himself: “It is no worship, iwis, to wring thine handes;/To weep als a woman it is no wit holden!” (Benson 3977-8). Baden-Daintree proposes that while “it is tempting to see this scene as central to the undermining of his masculine identity,” Arthur’s gestures betray the “lack of self-consciousness that is part of the incoherence of grief” (94).

As in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, hand-wringing in the *York Cycle* serves as an outward expression of internal grief and turmoil. In contrast, however, the playwright portrays hand-wringing as an active gesture of self-containment. Adam and Eve broke God’s command to “Lay...no handes theretyll” the “tre that beres the fruyte of lyfe”

(4.85, 83). They did not suppress their juvenile hankering to over-reach. Identifying their over-reaching hands as the source of their shame and distress, they “wryng” them together. With their hands manacled together, Adam and Eve appear as if they are under a state of arrest. Their hand-wringing is a display of grief, but also of self-imposed bondage.

The fact that Adam and Eve’s very hands act as shackles is not incidental. Adam and Eve erred because they got out of hand. They did not hold fast to their word not to lay hands on the forbidden fruit. Their hand-wringing refers back to their dialogue with God in *The Prohibition* play. When the couple agree to “Lay...no handes theretyll” the “tre that beres the fruyte of lyfe,” God tells them “Looke that ye doe as ye have sayd” (4.85, 83, 80). Before The Fall, God’s injunction reads as a figure of speech. After The Fall, His injunction is taken literally. Adam’s lament, “for sorowe and care,/ Owre handis may we wryng,” is not a figure of speech. When Adam wrings his hands, he physically looks after his word, which is to say that he does what he says; his speech is in alignment with his body language. His speech is “sympll” in the sense that it is plain to see. He adopts the Platonic philosophy, to borrow Chaucer’s paraphrase, that “The wordes moote be cosyne to the dede” (I:742).

Besides failing to hold fast to their word, Adam and Eve also get out of hand in the sense that they let down their rhetorical guard. Idle hands perform the devil’s work: they tell far-fetched “tales” and “lesyngs” (13.192). Satan manages to lead Adam and Eve astray by exploiting the metaphorical capacity of language. The capacity of language to

work on the figurative plane is what makes storytelling and theater possible. However, the fact that literal and figurative language do not have to work in tandem means that “wordes” do not have to have any relation to the “dede” at all. On one level, then, Adam and Eve’s hand-wringing is symbolic of the tight relationship they mean to enforce between word and deed. On another level, their clasped hands can be seen as forming a kind of human shield against the threat metaphorical or otherwise unsubstantiated discourse poses to their relationship with God. Adam and Eve’s handwringing betokens the care they now take to secure themselves against words that are so out of hand, so far-flung and metaphorical, that they can only be performed by hand, by mere show of words.

Adam and Eve’s hand-wringing, therefore, can be read in multiple ways, including as a sign of shame, frustration, and creative repression, as an expression of rhetorical anxiety, and as an orientation or approach toward language. All of these interpretations have a bearing on Joseph and Mary’s breakdown in communication over her pregnancy. In one sense or another, Mary’s pregnancy leaves both Joseph and Mary wringing their hands.

Joseph’s Troubles About Mary opens with Joseph essentially wringing his hands in shame over an ironic case of over-reaching. Joseph seeks to “repente” for the unwitting role he played as a contender for Mary’s hand at the Temple (24). Of all of the “Unwedded men” who were gathered and asked to draw straws, it was he who “On heght helde in his hand” the winning draw (26, 29). Joseph blames his hands for his current

misfortune: his young wife is pregnant, and the child cannot be his. Old and impotent, Joseph feels he had no business marrying “a yonge wenche” (12). “Itt was to me a bad barganne,” he laments, “For reuthe I may it ay repente” (23-24). His shame over Mary’s pregnancy parallels that of Adam and Eve after they consume the forbidden fruit. Like Adam, Joseph “shames with his lyghame” (5:110): “For I am of grete elde,/ Wayke and al unwelde,/” Joseph declares, “Als ilke man se it maye” (5-6). “For shame,” Joseph asks, what sall I saie...?” (10). What Joseph points out here is that anyone with eyes to see can tell that he is creatively repressed. His body shows that he is clearly too old to sire children. There is simply nothing that Joseph can say to mask his shame which would not, like the proverbial fig leaf, only make his shame more evident. It is all that Joseph can do to wring his hands in shame as Adam and Eve did so long ago.

Joseph seeks closure by persisting in his “sympll” line of questioning: “But who is the fader? telle me his name” (178). Mary’s avowals of dual paternity, virginity, and miraculous pregnancy do not rest easy on his conscience. The Falls teach, as Chaucer would say, that the “wordes moote be cosyn to the dede” (I:742).⁶ They also teach that when words are not cousin to the deed, the kinship bond between God and Man breaks down. Yet, Mary indicates something different. She tells Joseph that her unborn child is “Youres, sir, and the kyngis of blisse” (159). Complicating matters, Mary asks Joseph to read his paternal connection with God backwards and sideways, which is to say that by her equation, Joseph is both a father to God and a father with Him. Mary also expects Joseph to take her at her word when she swears, “Forsuth, I am a mayden clene,” despite

the fact that she does not look after her word (208). For one thing, her “wombe,” which “waxes grete,” is at odds with her claim of virginity (5). As Joseph puts it, “Thy wombe allway it wreyes thee/ That thou has mette with man” (165-66). For another, her pregnant belly indicates, at least to him, that she has not looked after her vow of marriage.

Joseph is also highly attuned to the discrepancy between what he looks like and what Mary implies that says about him. The opening monologue he delivers on his “Wayke and al unwelde” body is an expression of the shame he feels to face his community, but it is also an expression of the humility he feels in the face of God. God created Man out of “the symplest part of erthe” and made him grow “febyll” in order to “abate hys hauttande chere,/ Bothe his gret pride and other ille,/ And also for to have in mynde/ How simpyll he is at hys making...” (3.27, 31, 27-30). The idea that God would have chosen him of all men, a man “of grete elde,/ Wayke and al unwelde” who epitomizes the frailty of Man and signals the reality of death, to serve as father to Christ in his stead doesn’t make any sense to Joseph. If God was looking for a role model and right hand, he would have placed his bets on someone that better approximated His “mighte,” someone younger, stronger, nearer to life than death. Yet, Mary repeatedly asserts that Joseph is the father and that, therefore, God did place his bets on him. It was fated that his hand would draw the right straw, and that in so doing, he would come “on heght” with God (29). Although he “ne wist what it ment,” he was actually seizing the opportunity to look after God with his own two hands (30).

All things withstanding, Joseph is tempted to believe Mary. The way that Mary looks, with her “wombe...waxen grete,” conflicts with everything that Joseph knows of her “meke and mylde” nature (95, 70). Moreover, Joseph is aware of the Messianic “prophicie” that “A maiden clene suld bere a childe” (61-2). The trouble is, Joseph doesn’t want to repeat history by allowing temptation to lead him astray of God. He doesn’t want to repeat the cycle. He over-reached once by marrying a “yonge wenche.” He doesn’t want to over-reach again, especially since this time, it’s in his hands to exercise good judgment and it’s not just his reputation, but also his salvation that is at stake.

3.3 A Poor Host

Joseph logically assumes that by exercising his good judgment, he can exercise his likeness to God. Mary’s miraculous pregnancy, however, makes it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction, “Goddis sande” from human wordplay. This is because Christ requires that mankind read and write their likeness to God in contradictory terms, both literally and figuratively. For Joseph and Mary, this proves easier said than done. Instead of coming to terms with one another over Christ, they wind up take their rhetorical “sidis” opposite him (102). Each convinced that the other is “beguiled” and telling a tale, the couple swap stories as a means of settling Christ’s account (137, 192). Their literary exchange pits seemingly contradictory frames of reference, forms of discourse, and modalities against one another in an exponential dramatization of the disjuncture between literal and figurative language that images mankind in relation to the

divine. On one side of Christ, we have Joseph who speaks for the Old Law. On the other, we have Mary, who speaks for the New. Joseph stands for justice. Mary stands for mercy. Joseph tells a *fabliau*. Mary tells a sacred prophecy. Joseph's sources have masculine attributes. Mary's sources have feminine attributes. Joseph represents the authority of written language. On the other hand, Mary represents the power of speech.

According to Mary, her pregnancy is the work of "Goddis sande" (216). Mary has two sources of evidence to verify her claim of divine authorship: her own word and the words of her female attendants. Mary, for example, makes oaths to the effect that she is a virgin. "Forsuth," she swears, "I am a mayden clene" (208). She also makes speech-claims of dual paternity. Her attendants corroborate her assertions of divine authorship and virginity with eyewitness testimony. "Hir kepars have we bene," testifies one of her attendants, "And sho ay in oure sight,/ Come here no man bytwene/ To touche that berde so bright" (119-22). Mary's other attendant provides a fuller eyewitness account:

Na, here come no man in there wanes,
 And that evere witsesse will we,
 Save an aungell ilke a day anes
 With bodily foode hir fedde has he,
 Othir come nane.
 Wharfore we ne wate how it shulde be,
 But thurgh the Haly Gaste allane. (123-29)

Like Mary, her attendants rely on the power of their own word to substantiate their narrative of events. By their logic, Mary's pregnancy must be miraculous because she became pregnant despite having no male contact. Decoding Mary's pregnancy from a New Testament frame of reference, her attendants read Mary's belly as a sign of grace as opposed to sin. "Joseph," says one of Mary's attendants in a reference to Original Sin, "ye sall nocht trowe/ In hir no febill fare" (99-100). As her attendants see it, Mary's belly isn't a sign of the primordial feebleness, or moral weakness, of Man. Rather, it is a sign that God's "grace with hir is gane" (131).

Decoding Mary's pregnancy from an Old Testament frame of reference, Joseph reads Mary's belly as a sign of sin. Like Adam and Eve, who only made their sin more obvious by attempting to camouflage it with clothing, Mary and her attendants' idiosyncratic discourse make the sexual reality of Mary's belly loom larger and clearer in Joseph's eyes. "We, why gab ye me swa / And feynes swilk fantassy," he demands (141-2). Joseph denigrates Mary and her attendants' testimony, writing it off as women's talk. He likens their orations to "gab," or gossip, and accuses them of chatting him up. The problem he points to is that their entire story is based on a case of hear-say. And so when Mary tells him that her pregnancy is the work of "Goddis sande," he replies, "Yha, Marie, drawe thyn hande," meaning stop talking (223).

Joseph's multiple admonishments for Mary and her attendants to stop talking allude to Original Sin. God ordered Adam and Eve to "Lay... no hands" on the forbidden fruit (4.85). Joseph reminds Mary of this prohibition will he tells her, "Yha, Marie, drawe

thyn hande.” What he’s telling her is that she is on very dangerous ground of encroaching, like Lucifer, Adam, and Eve once did, on divine discourse. Saying something doesn’t make it true—not unless you are God. Joseph also raises this point earlier when Mary makes the avowal, “Forsuth, I am a mayden clene” (208). He responds with the admonishment, “Nay, thou spekis now agayne kynde” (209). From Joseph’s perspective, Mary is out of line, not only because she speaks against the laws of nature, but also because she speaks as if she were God (209). “Sympll” sleight of hand cannot change the fact that God’s Word alone is endowed with the expressive power to be true by virtue of speech alone. Imagining otherwise would make one guilty of Lucifer’s conceit. If Mary and her attendants seek to verify their claim, they need to provide plain and “sympll” evidence, proof with real substance—not women’s “gab” or hear-say.

Joseph also finds fault with the “wilde” woman’s logic that frames Mary and her attendants’ narrative (12). “Na selcouthe tythandis than is this,” he remarks, “Excuse tham wele there women can./ But, Marie, all that sese thee/ May witte thi werkis ere wan:/ Thy wombe allway it wreyes thee/ That thou has mette with man” (160-66). Leave it up to women, Joseph basically says, to cover up the facts and cover up for one another in order to get their way. Try as they might to manipulate the facts, the facts in this case don’t lie. From the observation that “Save an aungell...Othir come nane” to visit Mary, Mary’s attendants reach the conclusion that her pregnancy must have been “thurgh the Haly Gaste allane” (125, 129). Joseph sees their conclusion as a non sequitur. He retells Mary and her attendants’ account of miraculous inspiration as a tale of bodily

insemination: “Thanne se I wele youre menyng is:/ The aungell has made hir with childe./ Nay, som man in aungellis liknesse/ With somkyn gawde has hir begiled,/And that trow I” (134-138). Might it not follow, Joseph suggests, and indeed be more rational to assume, that the angel wasn’t actually an angel, but an ordinary man with the gift of “gab?” As Joseph sees it, their so-called angel had managed to con them by making the same sort of superficial speech-claims that they were now making to him. For Joseph, Mary and her attendants’ eyewitness testimony doesn’t prove that Mary is a pregnant virgin. Rather, it proves that their eyes have deceived them.

Joseph refers their narrative to a masculine school of logic which plainly demonstrates the facts. In *The Metalogicon*, John of Salisbury explains that demonstrative, or syllogistic, logic “seeks methods [of proof] involving necessity, and arguments which establish the essential identification of terms that cannot be thrust asunder” (104). Joseph firmly draws what Salisbury describes as, “the line between possibility and impossibility” that predicates demonstrative logic (Salisbury 104). Acquainted with *fabliaux* stories along the lines of *The Decameron’s* “Second Tale,” where a friar deceives a maiden into believing he is the archangel Gabriel in order to have his way with her, Joseph summarily rejects the possibility of a supernatural intercessor. Rather, he informs Mary’s maidservant, “som man in aungellis liknesse/ With somkyn gawde has hir begiled” (136-7). Rather, he tells her, Mary was probably lured under false pretenses to commit adultery in “som wodes wilde” (67). Mary is with child; therefore, by necessity, she cannot be a virgin. As Joseph puts it, “Thy wombe allway it wreyes

thee/ That thou has mette with man” (165-66). Joseph is just being rational and reading the sign, Mary’s pregnant belly, for what it must mean in the rational world: sex. Since Mary’s body does not corroborate her testimony, Mary must either be lying or have been lied to; there are no other logical explanations.

Joseph’s incredulous reaction to Mary’s claim of a virgin birth registers his attempt to reinstate the rule or the letter of God’s Law. Holding fast to the Old Law of equal and exact retribution, of “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise,” Joseph enforces the Judaic standard of justice on signs (Exodus 21:24). The Old Testament philosophy of direct substitution leads Joseph to equate pregnancy with sex, and therefore to the verdict that Mary perjures herself. Where Mary’s body announces her transgressions, Joseph is convinced her words constitute a “balde” attempt to mask them (191).

Joseph cannot understand Mary and her attendant’s explanation for her pregnancy, that an “aungell has made hir with childe,” as anything but a veiled euphemism for fornication (135). He is morally repulsed by the figurative answers which Mary gives him when he pressures her to reveal the identity of Christ’s father. Mary repeatedly rephrases the same paradoxical answer: “Sir, it is youres and Goddis will,” “Youres sir, and the kyngis of blisse,” “But God and yhow” (168, 159, 188). The spirit of Mary’s metaphorical language carries Joseph back to the Fall of Lucifer and The Fall of Man. In the *Creation* play, God “graunte[s]” the angels paradise so long as they agree to remain “stabil in thoghte” (29-30). Unlike the good angels, Lucifer does not remain

“stabil in thoghte” (30). Rather, he “in fantasyes fell” by conflating figurative and literal language and attributing non-divine discourse with divine agency (129). Joseph perceives that Mary is on dangerous ground of repeating Lucifer, Adam, and Eve’s mistakes of falling into “fantasye” (129). He also senses that she, like Eve with Adam, threatens his own ‘stability of thought.’ “Se I wele youre menyng is,” he assures her, “But who is the fader?” he demands, insisting on a carnal reading of her pregnancy narrative, “Telle me his name” (134, 177). Instead of playing Adam’s part in an encore of Man’s Fall, Joseph rehearses God’s commandment in *The Creation of the Angels* play to remain “stabil in thoghte”: “...halde thee stille als stane” he commands Mary, proceeding to lay her body figuratively bare of its veil of metaphorical language (30, 193).

Ironically, by reading his likeness to God in the strictly figurative terms of the Old Testament, Joseph commits essentially the same crime of the flesh he ascribes to his wife. Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale* provides insight into Joseph’s error. Chaucer makes the notion of undressing God the subject of an extended gag in *The Miller’s Tale*, a *fabliau* comically described as “a legend and a life / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf” in a reference to the Joseph’s Doubting of Mary story (3141-42). In his *Miller’s Tale*, Chaucer toys with the idea of what might happen if St. Paul’s discourse on the veil obstructing God from the Jew’s line of vision were understood literally. Paul states that the Jews are “blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the Old Testament: which veil is done away in Christ” (Cor. 2:14). Chaucer’s Miller develops a graphic analogy that exploits the conceptual metaphor of clothing for spiritual blindness. “An

housbonde,” he preaches to his congregation of fellow pilgrims, “shal nat been inquisityf / Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf” (3163-64). Figuratively speaking, the phrase “Goddes pryvetee” is an inoffensive reference to the infinite mysteries of God. However, when “Goddes pryvette” and “wyf” are placed in the same sentence, the potential arises for the expression “Goddes pryvette” to be interpreted through the Miller’s physical, churlish frame of reference. The Miller perverts “Goddes pryvette” into a euphemism for divine genitalia and, in a comic turn, the dupe of *The Miller’s Tale* is later punished for daring to take a peep up God’s figurative skirt. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the expression “Goddes pryvetee” is a lesson in literally mismatching metaphors. The result is an inconceivable obscenity the likes of which St. Augustine warns against in his instructions “to take care not to interpret a figurative expression literally” and “not to accept a literal one as if it were figurative.” When physical nudity is made synonymous with divine mystery, shedding the veil is equated with disrobing God. This lesson in incongruous language surfaces in *Joseph’s Troubles about Mary*

Joseph’s interpretive mistakes cause him to misclassify the entire Incarnation story as both a fall and *fabliau* in progress. When he issues Mary the reprimand, “Therefore be noght so balde/ That no slike tales be talde,” for instance, he at once references the Fall of Man and the *fabliaux* (191-2). In contrast with the worm who urges Eve to “Byte on boldly” from the forbidden fruit, Joseph advises Mary to “be noght so balde” (80). Joseph implies that Mary has, like Eve, met with a worm, being the man who claimed to be an angel. Like Eve, she fell for his fictions, figuratively consuming the

forbidden fruit. Now her body, like Eve's, carries the tell-tale signs of sin. And, like Eve who unwittingly carried the worm's fictions to her husband, Mary is now being equally "balde" by spreading the false angel's "tales." Joseph associates "slike tales" with the *fabliaux*.

Mary's exhortations too closely mirror the tall-tales of scheming *fabliaux* wives who cite supernatural explanations for their ostensible infidelity, often with large success. In the *fabliau, Another Story About a Woman and Her Paramour*, for example, a wife persuades her husband to relinquish the authority of his sight despite having clearly observed her stealthy interlude with a lover (qtd. in Andersson). He did not see her yielding to her primal nature in the burgeoning woodlands. Rather, he saw her wither away and die in the future. Indeed, she laments, what he witnessed was the same sinister premonition that heralded the demise of her mother and grandmother, a premonition that now signals her own upcoming death. Despite the absurdity of her explanation and the various discrepancies and inconsistencies, her husband falls for her Orwellian mathematics and experiences remorse for his inconstancy.

When Joseph counters Mary's attendants' account of angelic intercession with the statement "Nay, som man in aungellis liknesse/ With somkyn gawde has hir begiled," he essentially reads and retells the Incarnation story as an example of "slike tales" (136-37, 192). From Joseph's perspective, the *fabliaux* are cousins to the fall narratives, cautionary tales created in their likeness that convey the consequences, namely social ridicule and marginalization, of failing to conform to the natural order and failing to

appreciate the distinction between miracle and masquerade, between the Word of God and human wordplay. Joseph believes that he has violated the natural order by taking a “yonge wife” despite being a man “of grete elde” (43, 5). The ominous emphasis he places on the difference in their ages is evident in the way that he talks about Mary’s pregnancy: “My yonge wife,” he states, calling attention to the discrepancy in their ages, “is with childe full grete” (43). Joseph also calls to mind the *fabliaux* when he tells Mary, “Thou art yonge and I am alde,” as a way of explaining her pregnancy. He writes off Mary’s miracle story as an opportunistic fiction meant to ensnare him in an altogether too familiar narrative yarn, where an old man like himself is inevitably cuckolded by his much younger wife, and taken as a literary conquest by both her and her young lover. As Joseph understands it, Mary produces a false sense of presence when she identifies herself as the Virgin Mother, her child as the Messiah, and he as its saintly father. Correcting her errors of identity, he draws a sequence of like relationships between: Eve, Mary, and the *fabliaux* temptress; the worm, Mary’s angel, and the *fabliau*’s cunning womanizer; Adam, himself, and the *fabliaux* dupe; and, the forbidden fruit, God’s word, and human wordplay.

Mary would like Joseph to decode his age and impotency from a prophetic frame of reference. When Joseph mentions his age, he always points out that he is beyond the age to have sired Mary’s child. Mary, of course, never claims that Joseph is literally the father of her child. She is not blind to the fact that, as Joseph describes it, “Thase games fra” him “are gane” (196). Rather, she suggests that Joseph’s eyes deceive him. “Joseph,

yhe ar begiled:/ With synne was I never filid...,” she tells him (214-15). Joseph reads his age and Mary’s belly as signs of sin, of moral feebleness, or weakness. He refuses to consider that his physical feebleness makes him perfect for the role he plays in the “prophicie” of a “A maiden clene [who] suld bere a childe” (61-2). If he were a virile young man, then he would be an unfitting spouse to Mary. The fact that his feebleness is apparent to the extent that “ilke man se it maye” is a good thing (7). It is a sign that his union with Mary is spiritual rather than carnal in nature. By Joseph’s account however, if any prophecy has been fulfilled, it is has to do with the bad bargain he struck when he, contrary to all the proverbial wisdom that the *fabliaux* have to offer, took a “yonge wenche” to “wyff” (12).

Joseph and Mary fail to reconcile Christ’s account between each other. Decoding Mary’s pregnancy from a masculine, Old Testament frame of reference, Joseph sees her belly as a sign of sin. Decoding her pregnancy from a feminine, New Testament frame of reference, Mary sees it as a sign of grace. Their breakdown in communication is demonstrative of the fact that neither frame of reference is capable or sufficient in and of itself to both convey and apprehend Christ. So long as Joseph holds fast to the Old Law, he can’t grasp Christ’s presence. So long as Mary is bound by the Old Law, she cannot signify Christ’s presence. Although Mary carries the Word of God, she does not command It. Her human speech is inadequate to signify Christ; her mortal words cannot do him justice. That fact that human words constitute her only means of signifying Christ’s presence leaves her grasping for straws.

Joseph and Mary's breakdown in communications shows that neither Joseph nor Mary's perspectives capture Christ in full. They only capture Christ's "sidis" (102). The couple don't succeed in bringing Christ to full term for one another. They only succeed in making Christ present in a medial way that visually parallels the medial attributes of Christ's presence in Mary's womb. At an impasse, Joseph leaves Mary's side to contemplate his options in solitude (67). The emphasis which Joseph places on fulfillment in the language that he uses to describe his need for rest is significant. "Here bus me bide full stille/," he says, "Till I have slepid my fille./ Myn hert so hevly it is" (242-45). With these words, Joseph falls asleep, his premonitory slumber symbolic of his yearning to be made whole by Christ and to be at one with him in the womb.

3.4 Satan's Play on Christian Charity

The spirit of disjunction that overtakes Joseph and Mary's relationship is exacerbated by the sudden conjunction between Satan's work in *The Fall of Man* play and Christ's work in *Joseph's Troubles about Mary*. Satan also has a stake in the storytelling contest over the meaning of Mary's pregnancy. By Satan's account, if Joseph and Mary's allegorical attempt to strike a bargain between the spirit and the flesh, the Old law and the New, the Fall and the Incarnation, the play world and real world, and the *fabliaux* and holy miracle fails, it is because Christ, paragon of Christian charity, compromises the integrity of their exchange.

Known as the Greatest Commandment in the Christian faith, charity, or the theological virtue of love, consists of two interdependent commandments. In Jesus'

words, the greatest and first commandment is that, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind." "And the second," he continues, "is like to this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets" (Matthew 22: 37-40).

Sollier explains:

The expression "to love the neighbour for the sake of God" means that we rise above the consideration of mere natural solidarity and fellow-feeling to the higher view of our common Divine adoption and heavenly heritage; in that sense only could our brotherly love be brought near to the love which Christ had for us (John 13:35), and a kind of moral identity between Christ and the neighbour (Matthew 25:40), become intelligible. From this high motive the universality of fraternal charity follows as a necessary consequence. Whosoever sees in his fellow-men, not the human peculiarities, but the God-given and God-like privileges, can no longer restrict his love to members of the family, or co-religionists, or fellow-citizens, or strangers within the borders (Leviticus 19:34), but must needs extend it, without distinction of Jew or Gentile (Romans 10:12), to all the units of the human kind, to social outcasts (Luke 10:33 sqq.), and even to enemies (Matthew 5:23 sq.).

The twin commandments of Christian charity consummate in the "prophic" of a "A maiden clene"—the Virgin Mary—who "suld bere a childe," both God and man, Word and flesh, as a testament to God's selfless love for mankind (13.61-62). Satan's parody of

the Incarnation—The Fall of Man—is essentially a twist on the twin commandments of Christian charity. Satan satisfies his two-fold envy of man and God by staging Original Sin, his preemptive contribution to the contest over the meaning of Mary’s pregnancy.

Satan instigates Man’s fall from heaven because he is overcome with “envye,” defined by the MED⁷ as “ill-will” or “hatred” generated by the “desire to equal or surpass others” (5.13). History repeats itself when God fashions a new creature to replace Lucifer as Lord of Heaven and Earth, Man. But God does not make Man equal to Lucifer; he makes Man to excel him in favor and regard. Satan’s “envye” stems from the discovery that God intends to take on the “kynde of mane” as opposed to “aungell kynde” (5.12, 7). Satan has implicit foreknowledge of what the Incarnation signifies: human as opposed to angelic salvation.

Despite their turbulent history, Satan never doubted that God would take “aungell kynde” (5.7). As Satan puts it, “we were faire and bright,/ Therefore me thoght that he/
The kynde of us tane myght...” (8-10). Satan’s retrospective glance at his prior beauty underscores the offensive quality of his present image. The language of offense—of being “dedyned” and “moffe[d]”—that pervades his opening monologue reflects on his offenses against God, which he now embodies, as well as on his dashed hopes of seeing his “faire and bright” image redeemed (2, 6). Although the reasons which Satan provides for expecting God to have taken “aungell kynde” seem superficial, he draws them out of the language of his own creation. God created Lucifer “als master and merour of” His “might” (1.34). For Satan, who reads his mirror relationship with God literally, the terms

of his creation contain the promise of angelic incarnation, and thereby, of a salvaged image. The Incarnation, however, makes it clear that God's brightness is forever out of his reach. Satan has to come to terms with the fact that he will never shine again.

Satan is "dedyned" because he cannot possibly share in Christ's Godhead. He has an intellectual meltdown when it finally hits home for him that he will never again "merour" God's brightness. "For woo my witte es in a were," he laments, "That moffes me mykill in my mynde... me thoght that he/ The kynde of us tane myght" (5.1-10). The following excerpt from St. Leo the Great's Christmas homily sheds insight into why Satan is intellectually undone by the realization that God is not of one mind with him:

Christian, recognize your dignity and, now that you share in God's own nature, do not return to your former base condition by sinning. Remember who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Never forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of the Kingdom of God.⁸ (qtd. in CCC:1691)

Christ is "head" and "body" of a community of which Satan can never be a "member." The Incarnation signifies that Satan has been figuratively and permanently expelled from God's thoughts. He will never be "rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of the Kingdom of God." Satan cannot hope to borrow on God's might and brightness again. He is confined to the dark space of his own disfigured and disconnected mind, eternally cut off from the lifeline of Christian charity, which, as Aquinas remarks, "unites" people "to God, Who is the last end of the human mind" (I-II, 184, i).

Having heard of God's intent to take human form, Satan is disturbed by the discovery that God is not an impartial author. It causes him "envy" that where God damned him eternally, He intends to show mankind charity. Satan's principle qualm with Christian charity concerns how God exploits it to bypass the rule of law, to take liberties with His Word, by basing salvation on an incommensurate and disingenuous principle of reciprocity rather than equal measure. Miri Rubin explains:

Some would say that selfless denial is the crux of charity, that it involves giving with no expectation of reward . . . gift-giving in the medieval community was also part of the symbolic articulation of social and personal relations, and is at any time an act of self-expression of the presentation of one's innermost values . . . Charity cannot be satisfactorily understood as a purely altruistic act since gift-giving is so rich in rewards to the giver. Gifts play an important role in maintaining social cohesion, peace, and order; they are major tools for forging friendships and alliances. With most social acts, gift-giving shares the quality of reciprocity and exchange, while, on a personal level, it portrays one's identity. Gift-exchange maintains a society in a constant state of debt, crisscrossed by a network of obligations and expectations of yet unfulfilled reciprocal gestures that bind it closely. (1-2)

Satan's orchestration of Man's Fall is a key part of the *York* playwright's overarching interrogation of poetry as gift and poets as gift-givers or, conversely, of poetry as con and

poets as self-seeking and self-glorifying opportunists. Satan's play within a play raises questions regarding the work of trading in likenesses, not the least of which concerns the charge that play, and Satan perceives Christ as an instance of God playing man, is false charity.

Satan comes to the garden armed with foreknowledge of Man's Fall and his salvation. He intends to show God that he is guilty of exploiting the rhetorical dynamic inherent to the twin commandments of charity in order to forge a relationship with His creatures. He devises a cunning strategy for amending God's scribal errors: playing God, he will fashion Man, and thereby God Himself, after his shape and likeness by turning his own narrative of descent into a prefiguration of the Fall of Man and the Fall of Man into a parody of God's incarnation. Imagining himself to be acting as God's "merrour," Satan plans to present God with a mirror account of the events that led to his banishment and disgrace. By telling Man's Fall and God's incarnation—or fall, as Satan would have it—as essentially one and the same story—his—with one and the same clearly discernible meaning, Satan hopes to equalize outcomes and, thereby, see justice done. As Satan puts it in his prologue to *The Fall of Man*, "My travayle were wele sette / Myght I hym so betraye,/ His likyng for to lette..." (19-21).

The way that Satan turns double entendres into single entendres in his opening monologue reinforces his hostility toward the twin commandments of charity. The language of setting which Satan employs in the lines "My travayle were wele sette / Myght I hym so betraye,/ His likyng for to lette..." alludes to the rhetoric of Creation

(19-21). One of the reasons why Satan believes that God miscarries justice in Man's favor is because he does not truly understand the nature of His likeness to His creatures. Rejecting God's theory of likeness, Satan puts his non-divine "travayle" on "sette" and equal expressive terms with divine discourse. In so doing, he suggests that God fails to realize that He is more than like His creation—God is His creation. If God's creatures are His figurations, signs signifying him, then His work more than reflects on Him. His work is Him.

By juxtaposing his fall with mankind's, Satan seeks to "betraye" or expose the fact that his work is actually God's work. First, Satan is not the author but a wielded word, a character or player in God's grand work. Second, he cannot be charged with cupidity—the movement of the soul away from God—for his fictions and what they inspire in others, since his false interpretations and counsel ultimately draw man closer into God's orbit. That is to say that Satan's fall leads to Man's creation, and Man's fall makes it necessary for God to redeem Man by incarnating and dying on the cross as Christ. Since, by virtue of his reasoning, Satan was necessarily fulfilling God's thought, then God more or less set him up by staging his fall as a pretext for man's fall and His incarnation.

Satan also means to "betraye" God, Adam, and Eve in the sense that he will reveal something about the true nature of their identities and relationships with one another: the likeness which they share is not a construct of charity, but acts of charity (20). In his statement, "My travayle were wele sette / Myght I hym so betraye,/ His

likyng for to lette...” Satan plays on the dual meaning of the word “likyng” to draw a connection between the art of trading in likenesses and the business of self-fulfillment or pleasure (21). His claim is that everyone, from God to Adam to Eve, is opportunistically after their own “self-liking.” Moreover, he implies that by denying this quality about their relationships with one another, they fail to know themselves. In an allusion to Mary’s pregnancy, which he considers a work of craft and deception, Satan wants to “lette” or pierce through their “like” delusions (21). This language of “letting,” of course, recurs in the *Joseph’s Troubles About Mary* play, such as when Joseph demands to know who “spill[ed]” Mary’s “faire maydenhede” (176).

In *The Fall* of man, Satan exploits the pregnant disjunction between literal and figurative language in order to, in Satan’s eyes, make God fall, thereby proving the false ultimatum that Christ is either a false, fallen messiah or that non-divine discourse has divine agency. Especially heinous to Satan’s Judaic “eye for an eye” sensibility is the philosophy that God, in light and in spite of his incarnation as Christ, can fulfill the law without destroying it. For one thing, the Old Testament teaches that the “Lord is one” (Deut. 6:4). If the “Lord is one,” then how can Christ also claim divinity without “abolish[ing] the Law?” (Mat. 5:17). For another, how can divine justice be considered just when God eternally damns Lucifer for reading his relationship to God carnally, but give mankind a chance for redemption, not only in spite of the fact they read their relationship with Him carnally, but based on the fact that they accept Jesus, a human being, as God?

While Satan is characterized as a crafty reader, the spotlight is put on his characterization of God as a crafty author. “In a worme liknes” and under guise of friendship, Satan approaches Eve in the Garden of Eden eager to “assaye” Christ’s “techyng”⁹ (22, 23). His goal is to satirize the *wilde* manner of speaking in which the lessons of the Old Testament and the teachings of the New Testament can possibly add up. On one level, the worm whose “liknes” Satan assumes represents his caricature of Jesus Christ (22). Satan deceptively identifies himself to Eve as a “frende” who has come for her “gude” (27). As he puts it, “And for thy gude es the conyng/ I hydir sought” (28). Satan’s use of the word “conyng” in this line is a pun on the word “con.” When he tells Eve that he has “come” for her own good, what he actually means is that he has come to con her by means of storytelling (28). Satan casts himself as Christ’s twin, assuming the persona of an angel of charity who bears the gifts of counsel and consolation. The con, or “lowde lesyng,” which Satan designs is a play on Christ’s teaching that he has not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (24).

Satan teaches Eve that in breaking God’s law prohibiting consumption of the forbidden fruit, that both she and Adam will find fulfillment. Subversively exploring Christ’s teaching to his own perverse conclusions, the worm explains that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge will not kill Adam and Eve; it will give them new life. Satan (as the worm) claims that God’s Law is nothing more than a tall-tale he schemed up to deter Adam and Eve from becoming “right als God” and “pere to Hym in allkyn thyng” (69, 70). Adam and Eve do not have to understand themselves on God’s terms. They are just

one bold leap of faith away from catapulting themselves up the cosmic ladder and ruling alongside the “hyeste on heghte” as equals (91). No longer subject to the law, Adam and Eve would not have to worry about being held to its letter. That is, they would not be violating or destroying their prior covenant with God—a bad bargain by the worm’s account—but sidestepping it to attain to their full potential, to, as the worm puts it, “gretter state” (61).

Satan’s show of words lures Adam and Eve into unwittingly playing him. Despite having some reservations about whether the worm “sais” the “soth,” her ambition to become a God in her own right, what might be described as her Luciferian “envye,” clouds Eve’s better judgment (74, 12). Acting in the worm’s likeness, Eve preaches the false doctrine of rhetorical equality to her husband, Adam, who in turn duplicates her dialogue with the worm. Once they bite into the fruit, they realize they have been conned. The fact that Adam accuses Eve of striking a “bad bargayne” suggests that he is now conscious of an alternate reading, or redemption, of the worm’s counsel (119). In an aside to the audience, Satan openly admits that the worm’s counsel is a flagrant lie. And yet, the worm does not literally lie to Adam and Eve. In a manner of speaking, the two-faced manner which Satan associates with Christian teaching, Satan tells the truth. Adam and Eve do become “right als God” and “pere to hym in allkyn thyng,” if one takes into account God’s plan to incarnate as Jesus Christ (69, 70). In a manner of speaking, they also become as “goddis and knawe al thyng” (104). The veil of bodily ignorance is lifted from Adam and Eve’s eyes. Moreover, Adam and Eve become intimately familiar with

the knowledge of things, being the physical parts of their anatomy. They see themselves as God has known them to be all along—"naked and all bare" (134).

The analogy of a "bad bargain" Adam uses to describe Eve's error, which is later used by Joseph as well in reference to his marriage with Mary,¹⁰ is important because it asks the audience to consider the falls that have occurred from a doubly economic and literary perspective, as the consequence of one-sided, poorly wrought, or otherwise ill-advised communicative exchanges (119). Implicated in this discourse of exchange is the language of Christian charity itself. Satan thinks that he has been partner to a "bad bargain" with God: Why should Christ claim full credit for fulfilling the law, when Satan fulfills it equally by using fiction, by using play, to give man the greatest gift of all, God in a hand basket? Satan does not see why he should be charged as a law-breaker and denied God's charity given that Christ presents mankind with the same bargain, the same *wilde* counsel espoused by Mary in the Incarnation, to "Byte on boldly" from the forbidden fruit (5.80).

Although Satan does not manage convince God to see eye-to-eye with him in the *Fall of Man*, he still means to make his case silently in *Joseph's Troubles*. Satan wants his audience to read Christian charity as divine cupidity in elaborate disguise. As he sees it, God preaches fulfillment while practicing disjunction. Satan thinks that comparison of his fall with the Fall of Man and the Incarnation narrative 'betrays' the fact that God takes creative liberties with his Word, that He indulges his own private liking, or epicurean desire for fanfare and play, under pretense of public charity and universal

goodwill. Satan supports his alternative reading of the Incarnation by suggesting that Joseph and Mary's failures as readers and writers are actually God's failures as an author.

Joseph's insistence on knowing the identity of the man who authored Mary's pregnancy plays into Satan's critique of divine authorship. Joseph is not interested in hearing Mary's side of the story or in taking part in "slike tales" by playing the dupe (13.192). He only wants her to tell him one thing—the identity of the man responsible for making her pregnant. In other words, Joseph does not want to hear Mary's tale; he wants to know who wrote it. There is no mystery for him in Mary's pregnancy; its meaning is clear. Mary's child is a visible byproduct of an illicit union. What real mystery he perceives concerns the question of authorship. Someone broke the law. Someone "fylid" Mary, as Satan conned Eve, under pretense of being an angel of charity (106). Someone spoke this *unkynde* chain of events into being, and Joseph wants to know who it is so he can attain a modicum of closure.

Satan's full account of the Incarnation is not for Joseph's eyes; it's for those who have the inside knowledge that God is author. It's for those who have inside knowledge of Mary's womb, the spectators. Satan wants his intended audience, human and divine, to see the Incarnation through his eyes. The inside knowledge that God is author fills the audience with a vain sense of closure – a kind of "hauttande chere" (3.27). If they would take a step back, put their hands aside, and "simply" look at "Goddis sande," then they would see that His signs don't add up. Mary's body is a sign of Original Sin. It is also a sign of divine grace. By Satan's equation, if one does the math, they should see that

Mary's belly sums up to a sign of divine injustice. It's not Mary's body that has been "fylid," but God's Word. As Satan sees it, Mary's belly proves that God has not been faithful to His Word. Mankind should not be secure in knowing that God is the author. They should feel more betrayed and confused than Joseph, knowing that the logic of Christian charity is corrupt. God is a "wilde" author (13.139, 212). If His work made any sense at all, then Joseph and Mary's communicative relationship would not break down—their marital bond would not just about sever—because they could not see eye to eye about the "wilde" terms of Christian salvation.

3.5 Historical and Social Contexts

Lucifer, Adam, Eve, Joseph, and Mary all share in the challenge of failing to see eye to eye with God. To different degrees and in different ways, these characters are placed or place themselves at a remove from the "fayre face" of God (1.76). This remove tends to extend itself when God is closest to their reach. Earlier, for example, we spoke of Christ being the head of a body of Christian believers of which Satan could not be a member since he, as God puts it, "never sall have grace" (1.133). Joseph is not excluded from God's grace, but Mary's body makes him feel at a remove from it. Mary's belly produces a case of two-fold estrangement, erecting a physical barrier between a husband and wife as well as between Joseph and God. When Joseph, for instance, asks Mary, "Wha has ben there?" he places her at an awkward removal from her physical person (94). Likewise, for Joseph, it is not Mary who is "waxen grete," but her womb (95). The separation, or better put, matrimonial anxiety, that pervades throughout the Fall plays and

in *Joseph's Troubles about Mary* speaks to communal anxiety regarding the logic and the action of the Eucharist.

In medieval society "... the language of religion provided a language of social relations, and of a cosmic order" (Rubins 1). The "heart" of this language was the Eucharist (Rubins 1). Christ sacrificed his life in order to fulfill the legal debt of Original Sin. Only through the blood and body of Christ, therefore, was salvation attainable. In the Bible, Jesus states, "For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me" (John 6:53). According to the teachings of the Catholic Church, the Eucharist is the blood and body of Christ which is referred to in these biblical verses.

The vanity that abounds in descriptions of the way that Lucifer, Adam, and Eve interact with their food reflects on vain understandings of what it means to take Communion. It would be, for instance, vain to presume that the Eucharist could be understood as a "symppl" act of consumption. From the Catholic perspective, the Bible itself warns against vain understandings of the Eucharist. It contains, for instance, the warning that "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the blood and body of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:27). Communion is by definition an intimate encounter with Christ which places believers in closer union with him by making them part of one and the same body. This encounter with Christ begins with the understanding that the exchange which Christ made

for mankind's salvation, the exchange which is reenacted at the Mass, not only characterizes him as a fulfiller, but actually effects his presence in the community. In order to be in Communion with Christ, the faithful must understand themselves as being an active part of Christ's charity-based exchange. Christ marries the faithful into one body by placing them into states of mutual debt with one another. By redeeming and fulfilling this network of interrelated debts that compasses every type of human relationship—such as between family members or people involved in work partnerships—believers made Christ present in their everyday lives. The communal body, with its mutually obligated members, signified Christ by acting as a living metaphor for his body.

In *Social Chaucer*, Strohm explains that the “metaphor of the social body or body politic...as a social theory...came to maturity in the fourteenth century” (4). He refers to Brinton's sermon as one example of how fourteenth-century writers used the metaphor of the human body to express the mutual obligations of community members. Brinton speaks about the spiritual, social, and economic relationships between people and between people and God in terms of the organic anatomical relationships structuring the human figure. He compares, for instance, the relationship between “kings, princes, and prelates” and the rest of the community to the relationship between the head and the rest of the human body (qtd. Strohm 4). Alternatively, he figures the “feet” of the body, “which support the whole,” as the “peasants and workers” (qtd. Strohm 4). A key idea behind the metaphor of a social body was that a community, like the human body, is the

sum of its parts and requires all of its parts to function together as a natural whole in order to attain to its full potential.

In the Fall plays and *Joseph's Troubles about Mary*, themes of disembodiment and estrangement register anxiety regarding the practice of Communion in the community. Lucifer, Adam, and Eve are examples of people who don't fulfill their sides of the bargain for salvation. They don't properly express their rhetorical relationship with God. They violate the covenants upon which their salvation rests at the first chance that opportunity presents itself. They are not so much interested in the welfare of the community at large as they are in fulfilling their own vain desires, their own self-serving work. Vanity and opportunism pose a threat to the stability and cohesion of the community. When Christ's blood and body are taken in vain, when people don't properly conform to his Image, when they don't fulfill their mutual debts and obligations to one another, when they don't look after their words, then the communal body starts to break down. Losing all spiritual substance, the communal body degenerates into isolated parts. Christ's blood and body unites people. Unless it is genuinely treated as the basis of social relations, rather than as a superficial social portrait or theoretical model, social relations fail.

Another aspect of the theme of estrangement or matrimonial anxiety concerns the logic of the Eucharist itself. Joseph is asked to see the blood and body of Christ through the discordant combination of Mary's words and flesh in the same way that believers are asked to see the blood and body of Christ in the Eucharistic blood and wine. Joseph's

dilemma alludes to Wycliffite grievances regarding the nature of the Eucharist and the doctrine of transubstantiation. Wycliffe contested the logic of the Eucharist. The fact that “the effect of consecration [was] not sensible” ran counter to his theological and philosophical principles (qtd in Vaughan 142). “What . . .,” he asked, “could move our Lord Jesus Christ thus to take away the power of judgment from his worshipers?” (qtd in Vaughan 143).

Although we cannot be certain of the level of proximity that the York Playwright had to Wycliffe’s writing, the York Plays suggest that he was familiar with the challenges which Wycliffe poses to the belief that Christ is really present in the Eucharist. In *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer*, Andrew Cole makes the case that “Wycliffism . . . is one of the central forces that shaped English literary history” (xiii). Drawing on the works of poets such as Chaucer and Langland, he shows how the “cultural hysteria about the ubiquity of heresy,” a “hysteria” promulgated at the 1382 Blackfriars Council, contributed to the dissemination of Wycliffe’s ideas into the sphere of the public imagination, turning Wycliffism into an “item of great and lasting interest” (20, xvi). I propose that the debate over Wycliffism is also a source of interest in the York Plays.

By drawing a connection between the Virgin Birth and the Eucharist, the playwright calls attention to the irony of the Wycliffite position. The Virgin Birth was a cornerstone of both Wycliffite and mainstream Catholic beliefs. Ironically, although the Wycliffites and the Catholic Church easily come to terms over the “menyng” of Mary’s

belly, they fail to agree about the “menyng” of the Eucharist (13.134). In one case, Christ is present in Mary’s womb, in another, in bread and wine. In both cases, the logic is the same: Christ “take[s] away the power of judgment from his worshipers.” Both the Incarnation and the Eucharist might as well be “lowde lesynge[s],” mere “saying[s]” crafted by opportunistic people, tale-tellers and con artists, seeking after their own *lyking* (5.24, 101). Why, then, are the Wycliffites fine with ignoring the carnal facts when it comes to the Virgin Birth, but intent on enforcing them when it comes to the Sacrament of the Mass?

The York playwright invites the audience to read the discourse of the Wycliffites as being cousin to Satanic rhetoric. Satan suffers from a powerful experience of intellectual instability when he discovers that God intends to take human rather than angel “kynde” (5.10). It “moffes” his “mynde” that his “thought” does not correspond with God’s (5.2, 9). Instead of aligning himself with God, Satan seeks to show God that His thinking is out line because it is not in line with his own. As Satan sees it, if God was just, then he would not damn the rebel angels, but treat Adam and Eve with mercy when they commit a like sin. Likewise, he would not punish any of his creatures for failing to discern fact from “fantasye,” given that the miracle of the Virgin Birth contradicts the facts of creation (1.129). Satan’s hypocritical crusade for justice serves as a parallel for Wycliffe’s epistemological challenges to the logic of the Eucharist.

By rejecting the Eucharist on grounds that God would not “take away the power of judgment from his worshippers,” the Wycliffites, whether they realized it or not, were

replicating Satan's claim that divine justice was unsound (Vaughan 143). For Satan, the key to 'betraying' God's "likyng" rests in demonstrating that his instability of thought is ultimately a reflection of the instability of divine authorship (5.20, 21). Satan, however, only pretends to be a champion of justice. After all, he is perfectly fine with the injustice of God favoring the angels by assuming angel rather than human "kynde" (5.10).

Likewise, the Wycliffites are also willing to countenance injustice, so long as it suits their "likyng," which is to say that they are willing to bend the facts when it comes to the miracle of the Virgin Birth, but not when it comes to the Eucharist (21). The implication is that neither Satan nor the Wycliffites are truly interested in justice. Their unstable equations of justice demonstrate that it is not God's authorship, but their reasoning which is flawed and unstable.

Approaching Wycliffe's question, "What . . . could move our Lord Jesus Christ thus to take away the power of judgment from his worshipers?" from a perspective which assumes the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the playwright investigates and invites the audience to share in the logic of the Eucharist (Vaughan 143). The York playwright is not interested in critiquing "Goddis sande" (13.216). Rather, he is interested in accounting for God's seemingly *wilde* thinking and Christ's seemingly *wilde* ways. He is occupied with the task of justifying the terms of human salvation, the *wilde* terms of Christian charity.

In *The York Cycle*, the *wilde* creative and social dynamics of storytelling, an art which relies on likenesses to achieve its ends, serves as the basis for a theodicy on why

God makes the *wilde* ritual processes of the Eucharist essential to communing with Christ and signifying his presence. God could have made the truth of Christ's presence universally discernable. He could have created a world that was transparent to one and all. Instead, He created a story world, a world of figurations, a world of likenesses. Since likenesses do not absolutely and universally express the values which they seek to convey, they can lead to breakdowns in communication. Why, then would God choose to position himself as a storyteller, to trade in likenesses, given the stakes and knowing full well that the figurative language of storytelling places His creatures, His readers, at multiple removes from the truth?

3.6 "Marying" Contradictory Reading and Writing Practices

Scholars often call attention to a particular binary opposition generated by one or more dramas in *The York Cycle*. In his study of the Cycle's depictions of the rural landscape, for instance, Chester Scoville observes, "Two dominant places—town and field—are insistently contrasted with each other" (176). Andrea Boboc focuses on how the juxtaposition of categories of work and salvation within the York Plays comment on the relationship between individuals and communities. A close look at the language of the York Plays suggests that, their local signification remaining intact, the manifold binaries mirror the overarching binary between literal and figurative language that is twinned or married in Christ.

The York playwright draws a connection between the Sacrament of Marriage, the Sacrament of the Eucharist, and the twin commandments of Christian charity. In

Corinthians, St. Paul explains marriage with recourse to Christian charity. He describes marriage as an exchange or bargain organized around mutual debt:

Let the husband render the debt to his wife, and the wife also in like manner to the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband. And in like manner the husband also hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud not one another, except, perhaps, by consent, for a time, that you may give yourselves to prayer; and return together again, lest Satan tempt you for your incontinency. (Cor 7:3-5)

For St. Paul, marriage is a state of being bound in charity. By definition of the Catholic Church, charity is love. When spouses fulfill their marital debts to one another, they perform a bond of love.

One of the links between the Sacrament of Marriage and the Sacrament of Communion is the element of debt. In a perfect act of charity, God sacrificed Christ, His son, to pay the debt mankind owed for Original Sin. Where the Eucharist enacts this transaction each time it is performed, marriage recapitulates it at a microcosmic scale. Eamon Duffy points out that, "The Host...was far more than the object of individual devotion, a means of forgiveness and sanctification; it was the source of human community" (93). The Host signified the bonds of charity, or love, that tied the community together as a whole.

In *The York Cycle*, Communion demands intellectual engagement and reciprocity. One has to see with charity, to witness and perform debts both paid and owed in the give

and take between the Old and New laws, the *fabliaux* and miracle, Mary's words and Mary's flesh. It is about the organic, living partnership between miracle and mirage, mercy and justice, faith and works, made possible precisely because paradoxes, cracks, and inequalities exist. Charity does not work as Satan would like it to, on the Old Testament principle of "eye for eye" and "tooth for tooth." Satan's charity is proven false because it lacks the reciprocity of love. It is pure chicanery as Satan seeks to cheat mankind out of God's grace in order to avenge his fall. The resentment Satan harbors toward God is doubly evil because it manifests in his ill will toward mankind.

One of the implications of Satan's play on charity, an implication which is not fully realized until *Joseph's Troubles*, is that storytellers as a whole are guilty, under pretense of charity, of replicating Satan's crimes against humanity: double-dealing, fraud, and forgery. Satan exploits the theatrical or figurative capacity of language for his own private purposes and not for the public good. In Satan's hands, fiction is not an instrument of social cohesion. Satan abuses the bond of trust that underlies the relationship between an author and his audience to further his own individual literary ends. He exploits the lapse in space, and time, and reason which predicates the exchange between a storyteller and his audience to break down spiritual and secular ties. The question presents itself, are the York playwright, the performers involved in the Cycle, and the audience involved in a sinful exchange that mirrors Satan's literary exchange with Eve in paradise? Is everyone involved in the performance of the drama guilty of

exploiting their eyes and their hands to approach God in a carnal way? To what degree and in what sense does sacramental theater claim to signify God?

The angel who rouses Joseph from his sleep to confirm Mary's testimony serves as a vehicle to address some of these questions. Joseph has no way of knowing whether the angel is an actor or not. Indeed, in reality, the angel *is* an actor—a man in “aungellis likeness,” as it were (136). What this indicates is that there is no “sympll” way of signifying Christ's real presence. The fact never changes that God, in his universal glory, is ineffable. Even when Christ is in Mary's womb, she is at an expressive remove from him. Her words are not sufficient to signify Christ.

Christ is depicted as a poor Host in the sense that, instead of fulfilling his parents's matrimonial *barganne*, he seems to drive a tangible wedge in their relationship. Christ is portrayed as a poor Host in order to share the logic of the Eucharist. Human and divine, Jew and Christian, husband and wife, Christ demands that God be understood in contradictory terms (13.23). The couple fail to strike a symbolic “barganne” over Christ because they cannot see eye to eye on the terms of exchange (23). Joseph and Mary's failure to strike a “barganne” over Christ gives rise to the question, how can Christ be fully and universally accessed, communicated, and conveyed by means of human discourse, when words can only do his “sidis” justice? (23, 102).

There is a *wilde*, interdependent element that must be present in Joseph and Mary's exchange in order for them to simultaneously receive and convey Christ's presence, and it's not faith. It's charity. I contend that the solution that the playwright

acknowledges for himself and offers his audience, who like Joseph and Mary at the time of her pregnancy, do not have the privilege of seeing or hearing Christ in his full corporeal form, rests in the opportunity to broker and to induce Christ by means and by proxy of Mary and Joseph's "contradictory," yet "functionally related" exchange (Hodge 3). Joseph and Mary's inconsistent readings and writings of Christ are not incompatible or, to put it another way, unjust and uneven. They fulfill each other in the reciprocal, but asymmetrical ways that a husband and wife fulfill their debts to one another in marriage, becoming something greater than the sum of their parts. They fulfill each other in the way that different parts of the social body fulfill one another to make the community whole. The audience is enjoined to celebrate Christ's Incarnation as a literary exercise in the art of Christian charity.

In *Joseph's Troubles about Mary*, Christ is locked and unlocked "wit word" and "wit hand," by faith and by works (Morris 338, 337). Christ is suspended by equal parts belief and disbelief, critical engagement and detachment, in a conversation between two people, a conversation mediated, sustained, and presided over by men in "aungellis liknesse," by playwrights and players (5.136). All the while, spectators are charged with being inspired by and inspiring breakthroughs through the examinations that happen between that which is said and unsaid, seen and unseen. Mary and Joseph's "contradictory" but "functionally related"¹¹ readings and tellings of Christ at once represent the playwright's effort to conform to God's image, to attain to a closer union with Christ, by imitating his authorial personae, as well as his intent to trigger this

breakthrough in charity and into the sacred, incomprehensible, unspeakable, and unspoken body of Christ (Hodge 3).

4. When Words Fail, Works Happen: Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* as Breakdown and Breakthrough in Christian Charity

Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* raises questions regarding the aims, ends, and methods of reading and writing, as well as about the consolations that these activities have to offer. *The Duchess* opens with a narrator afflicted by "ydel thought," "felyng in nothing," "sorwful imaginacioun," "melancolye," and "hevynesse" brought about by a mysterious "defaute of slepe" (4, 11, 14, 23, 25, 25). Incapable of deciphering his condition, Chaucer's narrator decides to "To rede and dryve the night away," escaping into the pages of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (49). Before relating the dream which overtakes him when he falls asleep, the narrator challenges the reader of his own poem to read it correctly by claiming that neither Joseph of Egypt nor Macrobius could "a-rede my dremes even" (289). Moreover, the dream itself explores the possibility of whether a woman, object of the black knight's sorrow, can be communicated and conveyed, and in this way made "hooly"¹² present, although she is dead.

Chaucer's inquiry into the "hooly" power of language takes the shape of a literary exchange between the narrator and the black knight, two men of unequal social status who suffer a breakdown in communication while attempting to verbally incarnate an absent figure, the black knight's dead love interest. Critics generally associate the knight's lady with Blanche of Lancaster, the late wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and father of Henry IV. The *Book of the Duchess* is typically either treated as a court eulogy written in her honor or as a commemorative offering at one of the annual

tributes John of Gaunt established in her memory.¹³ Both the occasion and the date of the poem's writing have implications for how *the Duchess* is read. If the knight's lady referred to in the poem is Blanche, then the opportunity presents itself to associate the poet-narrator with Chaucer and the grieving knight with John of Gaunt. The dating of the poem adds another dimension to this hypothetical historical allegory. If the poem was written in commemoration of Blanche, then it could have been written no earlier than the year 1369, which was the year of Blanche's death. As the poem is cited in one of Chaucer's later works, *The Legend of Good Women*, which is generally dated to the year 1387, *the Duchess* could have been written at any time during the 1369-1387 timeframe. If the poem was written before 1372, near to the time of Blanche's death and during the period before Chaucer began receiving annuities from John of Gaunt, then it becomes more likely that the poem was not only written in commemoration of Blanche, but that it was also composed in a vie to secure patronage from a powerful magnate.

Scholars have read the narrator and the black knight's exchange over the knight's lady as a vie for patronage, as a "test of language" (Jordan 52), poetry, and art to express and to console, and as a "lesson in literary communication" (Ross 31). Focusing on the Chaucerian connection between writing and philosophy, Robert A. Watson proposes that the "The remedy that the narrator seems to offer the knight resides in the orderly exposition of the circumstances of his love and his current grief" and that the cure for the narrator's own malady "may be to order" his "thoughts by writing." In contrast, David Aers suggests that the poem circumvents whatever rhetorical cures and consolations it

seems to confer. He ventures that, in *the Duchess*, “art, rhetoric, and language are finally consumed by the dreadful reality they have tried to control and make tolerable” (205). While Phillip Boardman holds that *the Duchess* does confer a measure of consolation in the sense that it “offers a celebration of the lady...and a commemoration of her relationship with the knight,” like Aers, he concludes that the “poem...suggests, nevertheless, that a poet...will not be able to offer words of comfort and solace” (577-78).

Contemporary readings, such as Boardman’s, of the literary tests, lessons, and consolations of *the Duchess* emphasize “Chaucer’s apparent failure to invoke-even to mention- the traditional consolation offered by Christianity, the hope of eternal life” (Boardman 567). In this chapter, I propose that, contrary to popular opinion, Chaucer does bring the consolations of Christianity to bare on his inquiry into the power of language to express and to console. I argue that Chaucer foregrounds his inquiry within a Christian framework by modeling the narrator’s malady and the narrator and the black knight’s reading and writing contest over the lady after the drama of Joseph’s Doubts in the mystery play cycles. Subtle cues, such as Chaucer’s preoccupation with the word as a source of wholeness or fulfillment, the narrator’s mysterious “heavynesse,” as well as allusions to Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, reinforce a trajectory of overt associations Chaucer makes to Christian concepts of fulfillment, Mary’s pregnant body, Joseph’s Doubts, and God’s transformation from Word to Flesh (14, 25). Clearest of these is Chaucer’s

portrayal of the narrator and the black knight's exchange over the knight's dead paramour as a re-figuration of Joseph and Mary's exchange over Christ.

In the previous chapter on the York Cycle's *Joseph's Troubles about Mary play*, I discussed how Mary's pregnant "sidis" generate a visual breakdown in communication between a husband and wife who show, share, and embody the contradictory, but complimentary rhetorical "sidis" of Christ (*JTAM* 102). In this chapter, I argue that Chaucer adapts Mary's pregnant "sidis" into a figure of writing in his *Book of the Duchess*. I propose that, whereas the narrator and the black knight's gendered exchange and the myriad bonds it compasses, including that of patronage, echo Joseph and Mary's freighted marital debate over Christ, the poem's askew narrative style enacts Christ's paradoxical authorial personae. The parallels which Chaucer draws between Joseph's troubles and the narrator's doubts bring Christian Charity to weigh in on the power of human discourse to express, to fulfill, to celebrate, and to console.

4.1 Trading Sides

The earliest allusions which Chaucer makes to the Virgin Mary's pregnancy become much clearer in retrospect of the narrator and the black knight's breakdown in communication over his lady. That said, these allusions include descriptions of the narrator's illness as well as the narrator's taste in reading. The narrator opens the poem with an extended description of the symptoms associated with his insomnia and depression. The language which the narrator uses to describe his insomnia and depression is embedded with references to pregnancy. The narrator, for example, describes his

condition as one of “hevynesse” (25). This “hevynesse” causes the narrator to physically feel “Alway in poynt to falle a-doun,” or always on the verge of tipping over (25, 13). As in the case of pregnancy, the narrator’s “hevynesse” is marked by a sense of fulfillment. According to the narrator, he is “Alway in poynt to falle a-doun;/ For sorwful ymagynacioun” (13-14).

Chaucer’s description of the narrator’s “ymagynacioun” as being full, or pregnant, with sorrow has a parallel in the classical Greek metaphor of male pregnancy for artistic expression. In *The Pregnant Male as Myth and Metaphor in Classical Greek Literature*, Leitato argues that the image of the pregnant male, “deployed in myth and metaphor,” such as in Plato’s “famous description, in the *Symposium* particularly, of thought as a metaphorical form of ‘giving birth,’” or as in the metaphor of the philosopher as intellectual midwife, “originates as a way to figure paternity and, by extension, ‘authorship’ generally—of, for example, ideas, works of art, and legislation...” (1). It is likely that Chaucer draws on the classical Greek metaphor of male pregnancy in his figuration of the narrator’s “ymagynacioun” as a poetic counterpart to the creative aspect of childbirth, the mind as a hub of creative activity, and the poet as intellectual midwife.

The language of pregnancy which the narrator uses to describe his creative malady is embedded with special reference to the Virgin Birth. An ironic allusion is made to the Virgin Mary’s pregnancy, for example, when the narrator states “...hevynesse/ Hath sleyn my spirit of quyknese/ That I have lost al lustyhede” (25-27). The fact that the narrator’s “spirit of quyknese” has been “sleyn” can be taken to mean that he has lost

his zest for life as well as his poetic or creative inspiration. An additional interpretation is that the ‘quickenings’ of spirit which the narrator describes deals with the quickening that occurs when a woman begins to feel her child springing to life and moving in her womb.

The “spirit of quyknesse” which the narrator describes can also be interpreted in Messianic terms. According to the Bible, “The first man Adam was made into a living soul; the last Adam into a quickening spirit” (Cor. 15:45). The “last Adam” which this passage refers to is Jesus Christ. This section from Corinthians is about the “glory of the celestial body” (Cor. 15: 40). Whereas Adam, the “first man” was “of the earth, earthly,” the “quickenings,” the “second man,” Christ, is from “heaven, heavenly” (Cor. 15:47). In the opening to *the Duchess*, Chaucer alludes to both the “first man” and the “second man.” The first man, “earthly,” is gestured to when the narrator discusses how “...nature wolde nat suffyse/ To noon erthly creature/ Nat longe tyme to endure/ Withoute slep and be in sorwe” (18-21). The second man, “heavenly,” is gestured to when the narrator discusses the “spirit of quyknesse” (20-22).

The passage from Corinthians on the first and the second man emphasizes that, while Adam was made from flesh and bone, this does not mean that Man’s body will remain “terrestrial” in nature (Cor. 15:40). Rather, it will be resurrected from sleep, it will be, in the “twinkling of an eye,” quickened after death, when the “last trumpet...shall sound,” and the “dead shall rise again” (Cor. 15:52). This is what essentially happens to the narrator when he awakens from sleep. While in his dream state, a hunting signal sounds, and then afterward, a castle “belle” strikes twelve, and then the narrator, in what

can be described as the “twinkling of an eye,” suddenly wakes up (1322). The narrator’s resurrection is marked by a quickening of spirit, as he is suddenly inspired by the spirit to write. This passage from Corinthians also has implications for the sense in which the poem commemorates the knight’s dead paramour, a possible stand-in for the historical Blanche of Lancaster. According to this biblical passage, for those who are a part of Christ’s “spiritual body,” death will have no “sting” (Cor. 15:44, 55). Rather, for the Christian faithful, “Death is swallowed in victory” (Cor. 15:54). Those who are quickened by Christ’s heavenly spirit can ask in boast, “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” (Cor. 15:55).

Focusing for now on the dual association of the phrase “spirit of quyknesse” with both the condition of pregnancy as well as with Christ’s heavenly spirit, we can begin to see how Chaucer builds on the relationship between pregnancy and Christ in order to establish a connection to the Virgin Mary’s pregnancy. The mysterious nature of the narrator’s morbid pregnancy ironically parallels the mysterious nature of the Virgin Birth. Like Mary’s pregnancy, the narrator’s pregnancy goes “agaynes kynde,” or nature (16). Although the narrator perceives that his rhetorical and male pregnancy is a side effect of the “defaute of slep,” he “can not telle why” he suffers from this “sicknesse” (34, 36). His condition is a mystery, even to him. The narrator’s pregnancy is rhetorical in the sense that it impedes his ability to creatively express himself through writing. His pregnancy gives him a case of writer’s block. Mary’s pregnancy is also rhetorical, but in a different sense. Mary is pregnant with the Word of God. Whereas her pregnancy is the product of

Divine inspiration, the narrator's pregnancy is the product of a lack of inspiration. The weight which the narrator carries, heavy and full of sorrow, makes him feel unwhole and unfulfilled.

Chacer explores the Christian theology of fulfillment in terms of the narrator's rhetorical male pregnancy. In the Bible, Christ explicitly identifies himself as the fulfiller. "Do not think that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets," Christ states, "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Mat. 5:17). There were numerous avenues for discussing Christ's identity as fulfiller in medieval Christian theology and culture. Christ was fulfiller in the sense that he, in fulfilling God's plan of messianic salvation, a plan which could only be understood in light of the Old Testament, both confirmed the continuity of divine revelation and completed the Christian faith. Hugh of St. Victor, for example, emphasized that "All Sacred Scripture is but one book, and this one book is Christ, because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ" (*De arca Noe*, 2,8 in PL 176, 642, qtd. in CCC: 134).¹⁴ Christ represented the fulfillment of prophecy and hope for redemption. Christ also represented the fulfillment of the Christian life and of the Christian community. Believers could only be made whole, both within themselves and as a part of a larger community of the faithful, through Christ whose blood bought mankind from damnation and who conferred membership to a spiritual community. Moreover, by imitating Christ's example of fulfilling the law, or obediently enacting God's plan, believers were fulfilling the precept of their faith to voluntarily act in accordance with God's will.

The Incarnation and the death and of Christ played were the focal points of the theology of fulfillment. Both events constituted the fulfillment of prophecies and covenants which Christian theologians read into the Old Testament scriptures to give the entire Bible a Christological focus. The Incarnation lent itself to motifs of fulfillment that were steeped in the imagery of pregnancy and the discourse of kinship. According to St. Paul "...when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those under the Law, that we might receive our adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" (Gal. 4:4-6). The Virgin Mary's pregnancy visually embodied the culmination of time, space, and revelation that had led up to the Incarnation and that would lead into Christ's death for the salvation of mankind.

The narrator's allusions to pregnancy, which is a state of fulfillment, as well the language of fulfillment which predominates the entire poem, have general reference points in the Christian theology of fulfillment and the classical Greek metaphor of childbirth for artistic expression, as well as a specific reference point in the Virgin Birth. Consider, for instance, the opening passage of *the Duchess*, when the narrator tells his readers that "sorwful ymagynacioun/ Ys alway hooly in [his] mynde" (14-15). These lines mirror one another in the sense that they reword the theme of fulfillment: the narrator's imagination is full, or pregnant, with sorrow and this sorrow is always fully in his mind. The term "hooly" here can be read in the sense of meaning full or whole as well as in the spiritual sense of holiness. Chaucer collapses these two meanings into each other

in a mirror-like way that plays into classical Greek notions of the mind as an image-making, or imaginative, mechanism.

This collapse allows Chaucer to draw a connection between bodily fulfillment, spiritual fulfillment, and the creative activities of reading and writing. This connection is activated when the narrator seeks for distraction, escape, and sleep in the pages of a book. The book which the narrator reaches for is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the sections which he decides to read tell the stories of Orpheus, Ceyx, and Alcyone. The story of Ceyx and Alcyone is about two lovers who are divided by death and eventually triumph over death when they are reunited in a metamorphized state as birds. Taking into consideration the parallel which Chaucer has just drawn between the narrator's condition and the quickening spirit of Christ, the narrator's decision to choose this story acts as an invitation for the reader to think about the relationship between the earthly body, the heavenly body, resurrection, and transformation from a simultaneously religious and rhetorical perspective.

The image is a significant theme in the chapter from Corinthians on the quickening spirit. The line which introduces the "first man," "earthly," and the "quickenings," heavenly "spirit" of Christ is followed by the injunction, "Therefore as we have borne the image of the earthly, let us bear also the image of the heavenly" (Cor. 15:49). This injunction finds a mirror in the story of Alcyone and Ceyx. Alcyone and Ceyx are in their earthly bodies when they are human. They are in their heavenly bodies when they, being resurrected and transformed, take to the sky as birds. Their love for one

another is so pure and sacred that it allows them to triumph over death in a way that parallels the way that Christ's heavenly body and love holds the promise of eternal life.

The theme of metamorphosis, as well as the fact the *The Metamorphoses* itself is a work of fiction, is also significant when thinking about the connection between the body, the spirit, and the creative activities of reading and writing. The narrator's reading selection demonstrates Chaucer's interest in the idea that works of poetry can be perceived as heavenly bodies. Chaucer's portrayal of the "mynde" as an image-making mechanism, or source of "ymagynacioun," foreshadows his intent to stage a test of the ability of the human imagination to enact a heavenly transformation, or metamorphoses, by means of literary activity (15, 14). For the time being, the emphasis is on the narrator's inability to transform his thoughts into writing, or, to put it another way, his words into flesh. In Christian scripture, Christ is described as the Word made Flesh (John 1:14). According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Word became flesh in order to reconcile Mankind with God, for the expiation of human sin, that mankind might know God's love, to provide a model of holiness, and to make mankind partakers of the divine nature by granting divine sonship through communion with the word (CCC: 456-60). The narrator's morbid pregnancy connotes a condition of stalled transformation: he cannot make his words flesh. Stuck in a pregnant, intermediary state where "Joye or sorowe" are all the same to him, and he cannot bring his body, his mind, or his pen to life, the narrator cannot expiate his sorrow, know love, or partake in his divine nature through literary communion.

When the narrator falls into the dream state, which can also be read as another pregnant and intermediary state, his ability to make word flesh is tested in a manner which parallels the drama of Joseph's Doubts. In his dream, the narrator meets and attempts to console the black knight, a man overtaken by sorrow at the loss of his beloved lady. Having suffered the death of a loved one, the knight feels as if he can never be truly *hool* again. Like the unborn Christ in the Joseph's Doubt's plays, the knight's lady can only be reconstituted, or made flesh, through language, a *wilde* substitute for the *hool*. To this effect, the knight's grief takes the shape of poetic laments, which he relies on to fill and embody the *hool* in his "herte" that death has left behind (556). This full *hool* in his heart, an invisible but deeply felt protrusion, weighs over the knight's "syde" as if it were a pregnant belly (557).

The imagery of "sidis" which Chaucer uses to structure the narrator and the black knight's exchange is modeled after the rhetorical "sidis" of Mary's pregnant belly in the Joseph's Doubts plays. In *the Duchess*, the narrator and the black knight, like Joseph and Mary, take their respective *sidis* opposite a half-present body that signifies closure and fulfillment. For Joseph and Mary, this half-present body is the body of the unborn Christ. Christ's body is half-present because it is an intermediary state of formation and visibility. In the case of *the Duchess*, this half-present body is represented by the invisible figure of a dead woman, the knight's beloved. The knight's beloved is half-present because it is not her body, but the impressions which her presence has left behind, such as on the black knight, which are accessible to the human senses. The knight's beloved is

also half-present because she dwells in an intermediary state of formation between the narrator and the black knight who, between themselves, attempt to make her wholly present, as Joseph and Mary try to do with Christ, by means of discourse.

Chaucer carves the sides of the Knight and the narrator's literary exchange over the Knight's lady out of the pregnant language of *sidis* that dominates Joseph and Mary's tale-telling debate over Christ. Like the narrator at the opening of the poem, the black knight is depicted in a state of sickness which is associated with pregnancy. A sign of the knight's sickness, for instance, is that he carries a "ful" weight "under" his "syde" (557). When the narrator discovers the black knight in a state of poetic lament, he encourages him to discuss his sorrow "Paraventure hit may ese" his "herte,/ That semeth ful seke under" his "syde" (556-57). The narrator suggests that he can help alleviate the knight of the burden he carries by sharing in the tale of his sorrows. He encourages the Knight to perceive of their exchange as a kind of cathartic reading and writing therapy, whereby he might console the Knight by acting as an audience to and helping him interpret and reformat his lofty account of love and loss in a clear and concise style. "Ye mowe preve hit," the narrator tells the knight of his literary skill, "by assay" (553). The knight responds by "lo[oking] on" the narator "asyde,/ As who sayth, 'Nay, that wol not be" (558-59).

The sideways glance which the knight directs at the narrator registers that the knight and the narrator have taken their opposite sides. The knight revises the terms of their proposed exchange, turning the narrator's challenge against him. "But who so wol

assaye himselfe,” he informs the narrator, “Whether his herte can have pite/ Of any sorwe, lat him see me” (574-76). Like Joseph, who looks on Mary’s “sidis” (*JTAM* 102) and sees sex instead of salvation, the narrator looks at the knight’s “syde” and sees another’s earthly love-sickness (558). By the knight’s account, however, his “syde” is a measure of the ability of the “herte” to “have pite.” Like Mary, who claims her pregnant “sidis” are a sign of divine Grace, the narrator maintains that his body language is a sign of human compassion or fellow-feeling.

Mirroring Joseph and Mary’s exchange over Christ, the narrator and the black knight assert their sides in a reading and writing contest to make the knight’s paramour flesh. In the previous chapter, I showed how Joseph and Mary struggle to come to terms over Christ because Christ requires that mankind read and write their likeness to God in contradictory terms, both literally and figuratively. Instead of coming to terms with one another over Christ, they wind up taking their rhetorical “sidis” opposite him (102). Each convinced that the other is “beguiled” and telling a tale, the couple swap stories as a means of settling Christ’s account (137, 192). Their literary exchange pits seemingly contradictory frames of reference, forms of discourse, and modalities against one another in an exponential dramatization of the disjuncture between literal and figurative language that images mankind in relation to the divine. On one side of Christ, we have Joseph who speaks for the Old Law. On the other, we have Mary, who speaks for the New. Joseph stands for justice. Mary stands for mercy. Joseph tells a *fabliau*. Mary tells a sacred prophecy. Joseph’s sources have masculine attributes. Mary’s sources have feminine

attributes. Joseph represents the authority of written language. On the other hand, Mary represents the power of speech.

As in *Joseph's Troubles about Mary*, the narrator and the knight's exchange over the knight's dead sweetheart simulates the creative tension between literal and figurative language that underlies the relationship between God and mankind, created in His Image and likeness. The pair embody competing forms of discourse and the competing interpretive processes associated with them. Representing himself as the voice of reason, the narrator cites the objective, masculine, and philosophical authority of Socrates.¹⁵ The narrator, for example, explicitly advises the knight to hearken to the example of Socrates who "counted nat three strees/Of noight that Fortune coude do"¹⁶ (718-19).

The narrator himself hearkens to Socrates' example by employing a Socratic line of questioning when speaking with the knight. Cicero explains that

The method of discussion pursued by Socrates in almost all the dialogues so diversely and so fully recorded by his hearers is to affirm nothing himself but to refute others, to assert that he knows nothing except the fact of his own ignorance, and that he surpassed all other people in that they think they know things that they do not know but he himself thinks he knows nothing, and that he believed this to have been the reason why Apollo declared him to be the wisest of men, because all wisdom consists solely in not thinking that you know what you do not know. (427)

The narrator applies the Socratic injunction that “all wisdom consists solely in not thinking that you know what you do not know” by assuming a Socratic pose of inquisitive ignorance. To this effect, the narrator opens his dialogue with the knight with what, how, where, and why questions. He, for instance, asks the knight questions such as, “Good sir, tel me al hoolly/ In what wyse, how, why, and wherefore/ That ye have thus your blisse lore...” (746-48).

Critics who take the narrator’s line of questioning at face value interpret the narrator’s ignorance as a genuine character flaw. The reading of the narrator as an obtuse character assumes that he engages the knight in dialogue without having already put the pieces together beforehand and realized that the source of the knight’s grief is the death of his lady. As Dieter Mehl explains, “The figure of the narrator has often been interpreted as a deliberate persona, the poet portraying himself as distinctly naïve and obtuse in order to break through the reserve of the mourning knight” (29). Debate does exist, however, over whether the narrator is “really...so dense as not to realize what the reader has gathered from the very first words of the black knight, namely that he laments the death of his lady” or whether the narrator “only pretend[s] to be ignorant for therapeutic reasons” (Mehl 29). I think that the element of uncertainty in the reader’s understanding of the narrator’s level of insight is significant to the rhetorical and thematic trajectory of the poem. Uncertainties about the narrator produce uncertainty in the reader. Both the internal audience, being the narrator, and the external audience, being the

readers of *the Duchess*, mirror one another in the sense that they fluctuate between self-certainty and self-doubt.

That said, it does not seem plausible to me that the narrator is so dense that he does not understand the cause of the knight's sorrow, being the lady's death, or the gist of the knight's poetic dialogue. I think that the pose of inquisitive ignorance that the narrator assumes is a "deliberate persona." There are indications that the knight perceives it as such in various parts of their conversation. The knight, for example, questions the sincerity of the narrator's Socratic pose when the narrator does not accept the knight's responses to his questions. When the knight uses the metaphor of a chess game to tell the story of his sorrows, the narrator refuses to accept the knight's explanation that his life is more or less over because his "fers," or queen, was "caught" (681). The narrator tells the knight to have "som pite on [his] nature" (715). When the knight replies, "No...I can not so," the narrator adopts a Socratic line of questioning (720). "Why so?" he asks the knight (721). The problem which the knight highlights about the narrator's question is that it is not actually a question, as he immediately follows it with a lengthy explanation of why "...noon a-lyve here/ Wolde for a fers make this wo!" (740-1). Underscoring the rhetorical nature of the narrator's question, the knight rhetorically repeats it. "Why so?" he asks (742). The black knight goes on to answer the question for himself. When he tells the narrator, "...hit is nat so,/ Thou woste ful litel what thou menest," he deflects the narrator's interjection by calling attention to the narrator's lack of self-knowledge (742-43). Instead of replying, "You know full little what I mean," the black knight replies,

“Thou woste ful litel what thou menest.” The implication is that if the narrator’s Socratic pose was genuine, he wouldn’t be angling for a particular answer. Rather, he would understand, as Cicero explains, “that all wisdom consists solely in not thinking that you know what you do not” (742).

The knight makes it clear that he cannot follow the example of Socrates who “...counted nat three strees/ Of noight that Fortune coude do” (718-19). “No...I can not so,” he responds to the narrator’s advice (720). In contrast with the narrator, who authorizes his reading with reference to philosophical, objective, and masculine bodies of knowledge, the black knight draws on figurative, subjective, and feminine bodies of knowledge. Whereas the narrator employs Socratic reading and writing strategies, for instance, the knight borrows freely from feminine frames of reference such as the *fins amour* of French poets like Froissart, Machaut, and Gronson. When the narrator first encounters the black knight, he finds him reciting a mournful “lay, a maner song,/ Withoute note, withoute song” (471-72). Drawing on the French *fins amour*, the knight uses clichés, stereotypes, and convoluted metaphors to try to make his lady fully present to the narrator. Calin explains, “It would be possible to quote a dozen books on Chaucer that habitually, consistently, and repetitively allude to the artificiality of French verse, the thin, conventional, inartistic French sources, their empty formalism, exaggeration, over-refinement, and over-subtlety, their pretty, topical, surface elegance, their artificial, conventional, pedantic sameness, their stiff conventions, modishly elegant and mechanical, based on dull, arbitrary, and inept artifice” (22). If we consider the black

knight's following attempt at poetic discourse in light of Calin's observations, we can better see why, for all its real sincerity, the knight's poem is far too generic to feel truly genuine:

Lord, hit maketh myn herte light,
 Whan I thenke on that swete wight
 That is so semely on to see;
 And wisshe to god hit might so be,
 That she wolde holde me for hir knight,
 My lady, that is so fair and bright! (1175-80)

The knight's poem depends on a rudimentary, surface rhyme for its appeal. The stock phrases which the knight uses to describe his lady, such as "that swete wight" and "My lady, that is so fair and bright," might be used to describe the object of any man's affection. These phrases lack depth and definition. They reveal very little about the woman herself. Although the knight manages to convey his love, grief, and admiration for his sweetheart, his poetry fails to do her justice. Words fail the knight, as words comically fail Mary—the more the knight relies on figures of speech to express her, the more he manages to undermine and fictionalize her presence.

While the narrator is not unaffected by the clumsy vulnerability of the knight's language, he thinks the knight guilty of evading the bottom line by retreating into what Hume might describe as the "circumambient gas" of romantic language (71). Like Joseph, the dreamer puts stock in material truths that can be plainly articulated. Adopting

a Socratic pose, he repeatedly confronts the knight with direct questions regarding the cause of his grief. But instead of receiving explicit answers, he finds himself on the receiving end of metaphors and allegories. The knight, for example, uses a chess allegory to recount his tale of love and loss. According to the knight, tragedy struck him when, during a chess game with Fortune, he lost his queen. As he puts it, Fortune:

With hir false draughtes divers
 She stal on me, and took my fers.
 And whan I saw my fers aweye,
 Alas! I couthe no lenger playe,
 But seyde, "Farewel, swete, y-wis,
 And farwel al that ever ther is!" (653-58)

By the knight's account, the loss of his queen ended his chess match with Fortune, which by extension ended his zeal for and whatever pleasure he might take from the game of life. Without his queen, the knight could hope to play no more.

Although the knight's allegorical outpourings of sentiment and remembrance ring true to the extent that they reflect on how he subjectively sees and experiences his dead paramour's absence and presence, they lack in clarity and reason. The narrator tries to use his insights as a reader to help the knight analyze, revise, and organize his account so that it matches up evenly, so to speak, with reality. Despite grasping the sentiment behind the knight's chess allegory, for instance, the narrator can't hold back from pointing out its

most glaring inconsistency: "...ther is noon alyve here/ Wolde for a fers make this wo!" (740-41). The black knight treats the loss of his *fers* as the end of the game:

And whan I saw my fers aweye,
 Alas! I couthe no lenger playe,
 But seyde, "Farewel, swete, y-wis,
 And farwel al that ever ther is!" (655-58)

Technically, the medieval game of chess did not end once the *fers* was taken off the board. Rather, the *fers* was usually one of the last pieces to go before the king was mated (Cooley 32). Instead of playing by the official rules of the game of chess, the black knight plays, sentimentally, by his own. If we assume that the narrator is too dense to grasp that the dreamer isn't literally talking about a chess match with Fortune, then his interjection that "...ther is noon alyve here/ Wolde for a fers make this wo!" reads as a joke at his expense. I read the narrator's interjection as an attempt to heal the knight by engaging with him on the level of metaphor. The narrator's interjection that "...ther is noon alyve here/ Wolde for a fers make this wo!" suggests that the narrator thinks that if he can get the black knight to shed the veil of figurative language and acknowledge the universal letter of the law, being the mutually agreed on terms of the game of chess, that he can make him "hool," thereby bringing him back, not only into the communal fold, but into the immediate world of the living (740-41, 553).

4.2 Telling the “Hool” Story

The Socratic line of questioning which the narrator adopts to help the knight see the bigger picture recalls Joseph’s interrogation of Mary. “Good sir,” the narrator tells the knight, unsatisfied with his chess allegory, “tel me al hoolly/ In what wyse, how, why, and wherefore/ That ye have thus your blisse lore...” (746-48). Much like Joseph, the narrator’s preoccupation with the material facts of the situation reveal the prominent role that Original Sin plays in shaping his consciousness. The narrator essentially reads the narrator’s tale of sorrow as a fall story, diagnosing the knight with a primordial case of falling into fantasy.¹⁸

The conversation which the narrator and the knight share in between their sideward glances alludes to the scene of Original Sin. The narrator’s talk of ‘easing’ the knight’s “fule seke” heart, for instance, reads as an awkward paraphrase of Satan’s prologue to the *Fall* of Man in the York Cycle (555-56). Foreshadowing Mary’s pregnancy, Satan states, “My travayle were wele sette / Myght I hym so betraye,/ His likyng for to lette...” (5.19-21). Just as Satan means to “betraye” that God, as author or image-maker, selflessly pursues His own “likyng,” Chaucer’s narrator seeks to show that the knight’s idealized portrait of his sweetheart betrays his own “likyng,” that is, his own partiality and subjective vision. Following in both Satan’s and Joseph’s footsteps, he aims to pierce through the knight’s romantic delusions in order to relieve him of the burden of his “ful seke” heart, the sickness here, as in the Fall stories, understood as one of falling into fantasy, as a malady of the “imaginacioun” (556, 14).

Having failed to mark the distinction between working “wit word” and working “wit hand,” the knight conflates literal language with figurative language, literature with reality, and generic values with universal truths (Morris 338, 337). In *Joseph’s Troubles About Mary*, Mary relies on the eyewitness testimony of her female attendants to prove her claim of virginal pregnancy to her husband. Likewise, the knight relies on eyewitness testimony, a subjective source of knowledge associated with the feminine, to lend credence to his claim that his beloved was possessed of extraordinary virtue and beauty. After telling a lofty “tale” wherein the knight waxes poetic about an idealized lady, he reveals that the lady he speaks of is none other than the woman upon whom “Was hoolly al [his] love leyd” (1034, 1036). After hearing the knight’s tale, the narrator exclaims, “I trowe yow wel!” adding, “Hardely, your love was wel beset,/ I not how ye mighte have do bet” (1042-44). The knight becomes defensive at the narrator’s remark, “Bet? ne no wight so wel!” he retorts (1045). As far as the knight is concerned, his lady’s beauty and virtue cannot be measured by human scale. The narrator’s remark that he doesn’t know how the knight could have done any better rubs the knight the wrong way because it implies that there is a woman out there better than his lady. The narrator tries to make amends with the statement “I trowe hit sir...parde!” (1046). The knight, however, becomes defensive at this statement as well: “Nay, leve hit wel!” he exclaims (1047). For the knight, something is amiss with the narrator’s repeated use of the word “trowe.” The knight would like to see the narrator replace the word “trowe,” meaning to understand, with the word “leve,” meaning to believe. The knight’s reaction to the narrator’s use of

the word “trowe” suggests that he feels that the narrator condescends to him. The narrator refuses to “leve” that the knight’s lady is, in an objective and universal sense, the perfect woman. Rather, he “trowe[s],” or understands that, in a subjective and personal sense, she seemed perfect to the knight.

The narrator’s statement, “I trow hit sire,” is, in effect, not so unlike what Joseph tells Mary’s attendants when they inform him that no man has entered their home since his departure “save an aungell...” (134). Joseph responds:

Thanne se I wele youre menyng is:
 The aungell has made hir with childe.
 Nay, som man in aungellis liknesse
 With somkyn gawde has hir begiled,
 And that trow I. (134-38)

When Joseph says that he understands what Mary’s attendants’ “menying is,” what he is saying is that although he thinks it is true that Mary genuinely believes that she has been visited by an angel, the truth which he “trow[es,]” is that her pregnancy is the product of sexual relations with a man. Likewise, when the narrator tells the black knight, “I trow hit sire,” it is as if he is saying “se I wele youre menyng is,” but I do not actually believe what you are saying is objectively true (*BD* 1046, *JTAM* 134). The black knight takes issue with the narrator’s remark because he does not consider his words a subjective account; he believes that his words carry objective value.

Echoing Joseph's criticisms of Mary's fantastic claims of a virgin pregnancy, the narrator emphasizes that personally saying or believing in the verity of something does not make it an absolute truth. The narrator, for instance, expresses doubt regarding the objectivity of the knight's portrayal of his sweetheart when he tells him:

I leve yow wel, that trewely
 Yow thoghte, that she was the beste,
 And to beholde the alderfaireste,
 Who so had loked hir with your eyen. (1048-51)

The knight protests that the contrary is in fact true: "Nay, alle that hir seyden/ Seyde and sworn hit was so" (1052-53). Yet the narrator takes the knight's protests as further evidence that the knight has confused his "syde" of the story with the *hool*. Ironically, the narrator does not realize that he is also guilty of confusing his *syde* of the story with the *hool*.

The narrator leaves the initial covenant that he makes with the black knight unfulfilled. When they first meet, the narrator makes the black knight the following promise: "For, by my trouthe, to make yow hool/ I wol do al my power hool" (553-4). Convinced of his literary "power," the narrator misreads the fine print of his own promise, imagining that his "trouthe" has absolute authority. But the narrator's "hool" power is literally incapable of signifying the "hool" truth. It can only signify one side of the story, one "syde" of the "hool." When the narrator's interrogation finally has the desired effect, and the knight reveals in plain and incontrovertible language that his

sweetheart “is deed!” it becomes clear that the narrator’s *syde*, just as the knight’s, cannot fully account for the dead woman’s presence or do justice by the suffering that the knight endures in her absence (1309). “She is deed!”; a part of the fabric of truth is now gone and can only be indicated through the fragmentary impressions, or likenesses, it has left behind (1309).

The allusions which Chaucer makes to pregnancy, Christ’s quickening spirit, and Mary’s rhetorical “sidis” in the Joseph’s Doubts plays adds another dimension to how the reader can interpret the ways that *the Duchess* commemorates the knight’s lady. If we connect the narrator to Joseph and the knight to Mary, then Blanche assumes the role of the unborn Christ. By associating the black knight’s dead sweetheart with the nascent Christ, Chaucer asks the reader to reconsider the finality of the statement that “She is deed!” (1309). Like Christ in the belly of his mother or in his Eucharistic state, the lady has always wavered between absence and presence in the eyes of others. Mismatched, subjective, and fragmentary impressions have always been the way that people have known her. Chaucer elaborates on this point through the narrator’s critique of the knight’s chess metaphor. The narrator asserts a peculiar distinction between the living and the dead in time and space when he tells the knight, “...ther is noon alyve here” as opposed, it can be gathered, from someone dead here or alive someplace else, that “Wolde for a fers make this wo!” (740, 741). The narrator fails to realize the role that the dead play as members of the community, refusing to factor them into the game. The death of the black

knight's sweetheart does not literally mean the end of the game. However, her loss affects every piece on the board.

Seeing the literary match between himself and the black knight as a posthumous game between the living over the dead, the narrator sees just one *syde* of the affair. In dying, the black knight's sweetheart has taken with her a *syde* or a piece of everyone that ever has or will exist. Just as everyone who met or heard of her perceives a side of her, she too perceived a unique and subjective side of them. In this sense, she has always existed inside and outside of herself. Her identity, as the identities of all people, is indefinitely bound up in the identity of others. Her death, then, has both personal and communal implications. If the living carry pieces of the dead and the dead carry pieces of the living, then her value does not end in physical death. The knight's loss is everyone's loss. Her death, and by extension the death of every human being, is significant because the dead have both individual and universal value which must be recovered if the communal body is to be restored.

In order for the narrator to begin his own recovery, he has to understand that the living are not fully alive and that the dead are not "hooly" dead. The narrator fails to realize how everyone "alyve here," including the knight, a figure of his imagination, and himself, especially given his dream state, dwells in an embryonic state between absence and presence, life and death, literature and reality, this world and the next (740). In the *Duchess*, as in the scene of Joseph's Doubts, ironic and interpersonal communicative exchanges duplicate the ironic and interpersonal qualities of the twin commandments of

Christian charity. Perhaps, as some have suggested, the narrator and the black knight represent the real-life figures of Chaucer and John of Gaunt.¹⁹ Perhaps, the narrator and the black knight constitute different sides of the narrator's subconscious,²⁰ where, for instance, the narrator represents a poet's reason and the black knight represents "the will and heart of the poet" (Robertson 465). The point is that closure is unattainable outside the bounds of Christian charity. Everyone's salvation, both inner and outer, private and public, paradoxically hinges on the death of just one person – in this case a dead woman given special honor by being cast as a Christ-like figure - and all people, living and dead, real or fiction, at the same time.

4.3 Hosting the Game

Chaucer establishes a "hidden" connection between the events of the dream and the act of writing. According to the dream vision, the *Roman de la Rose*, dreams are a space wherein "many things" are communicated "in a hidden way which may afterward be seen openly" (de Lorris 31). The narrator, however, has nothing explicit to say about what the dream means to him. After he wakes up from his dream, the narrator ends the poem in the space of ten lines. He describes how he woke up to find himself "lying in [his] bed" with the book he had been reading in his "honde" (1325, 1329). The narrator closes the poem by "openly" stating his intention to record it (de Lorris 31).

Thoghte I, `this is so queynt a sweven,
 That I wol, be processe of tyme,
 Fonde to putte this sweven in ryme... (1330-32)

Surprisingly, the narrator awakens, feeling inspired rather than dejected by the seemingly unsuccessful communicative exchange he shares with the black knight in his dream. The narrator literally rises to the occasion. A breakdown in communication not only manages to cure the narrator's writer's block, it becomes an occasion for writing a new work, *The Book of the Duchess*.

The narrator's literary activity prompts a number of questions. Why is a breakdown in communication an occasion for new work? What consolation did the dream offer the narrator? What lesson did it teach him? More yet, what consolations and lessons does the narrator imagine that a work replete with social breakdowns, psychological meltdowns, ironic juxtapositions, and lapses in time and space can offer its audience? I propose that, as in the story of Joseph's Doubts, the breakdown in communication which occurs in *The Book of the Duchess* signals a breakthrough in charity. Eamon Duffy has described the Host as "the source of human community" (93). *The Book of the Duchess* is a demonstration of how the reciprocal bonds of charity, or love, that unite the Christian community into one "hool" body through the body of Christ can be simulated through the reciprocal activities of reading and writing.

By drawing on the connections Chaucer establishes between the drama of the Virgin Birth and his *Duchess*, we can make deeper insights into the narrator's transformation and the "lesson in literary communication," to use Ross's words, which he learns from his dream and Chaucer practices in *the Duchess* (31). The narrator's desire for sleep, much like Joseph's in *The York Cycle*, represents a graceful retreat into an

embryonic space associated with Mary's pregnant body. Both characters fall asleep with their hearts heavy, seeking fulfillment and closure.²³ In the dream, the knight's absent-present lady is figuratively positioned as the nascent Christ. The narrator and the knight utilize competing reading and writing strategies to account for her absence as well as her presence. They embody the pregnant contradictions, juxtapositions, lapses in time, space, and memory, as well as the breakdowns in communication caused by her absent-presence in ways which parallel the story of Joseph's Doubts.

Chaucer acknowledges that the Falls, of mankind and of Babylon, may have broken down people and language into distinct *sidis* or pieces. But he also demonstrates how the Falls create and define an opening for charity. Mary's pregnancy does not change the fact that when words fail, falls happen. Christ's charity, in other words, does not subsist outside the sphere of justice or totally within the sphere of mercy. The narrator's critique of the knight's chess allegory sounds a reminder that there are fixed rules to the game, a status quo, which should not be violated. If the knight wants to ignore these rules by equating the loss of his queen with the end of the game, then he is essentially guilty of duplicating the high crime of "falling into fantasy." The process of making the black knight's sweetheart "hool" in her absence, for example, inevitably reduces her to her sides. She is either a work of the narrator's imagination or the knight's. Likewise, the narrator's quest for personal closure leads to a "fall" into sleep and a dream which breaks down into conflicting *sidis*.

Chaucer suggests that charity is not about ignoring or bending the rules of the game. It's about the stakes, the method, the aims, ends, and outcomes of playing. In the *Duchess*, we find *sidis* of stories. It might seem like a game to trade them. But in order to be at peace with oneself, one has to be at "piece" with others. Through the simultaneously personal and shared activity of playing and re-playing, exchanging and re-exchanging the *sidis* and pieces, there is hope of finding consolation and winning salvation.

Chaucer treats Mary's contradictory, but complimentary "sidis" as a figure of writing. In the previous chapter, I argued that the York playwright portrays Joseph and Mary's domestic debate as a literary exchange inspired by Christ, a seemingly poor Host who mediates by being mediated and forges ties, such as between God and Man and Husband and Wife, by exacerbating generic tensions, such as between the Old Testament and the New Testament, sacred prophecy and *fabliaux* tales. In the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer represents himself as an understudy of the gestating Christ by mimicking his authorial personae. Chaucer draws on Christ's holy model of authorship by duplicating his writing strategy by means of the narrator and the black knight's freighted exchange. Chaucer also represents himself as an intellectual midwife to the knight's lady, whom he associates with the unborn Christ as he is in the space of his mother's womb, absent yet present, conceived yet unborn.

Building on the literary connection between the Virgin Birth and Christ's example of perfect charity, Chaucer adopts an askew, self-effacing authorial pose that connects

literary activity with spiritual and social activity. In the *Duchess*, the breakdowns and breakthroughs which occur as a consequence of reading and writing mirror the breakdowns and breakthroughs that occur as a consequence of being at once an individual, made up of separate parts, and a part of a community, which too can be broken down indefinitely into different pieces. To this effect, the internal dimensions of the dream dimensionalize the outer structure of the narrative itself. On each side of the dream, the audience encounters different *sidis* of the narrator. From an even broader perspective, we can see the poem itself imagined as an embryonic space with poet and audience on either side.

The Duchess can be described as a space of gestation and inspiration, capable of inducing new work by means of its reciprocal consolations. Every seemingly “hool” structure can be broken down into *sidis*. What Chaucer underscores is the fact that *sidis* delineate Marionic spaces. The *Book of the Duchess* celebrates the different *sidis* of a woman’s death, perhaps John of Gaunt’s wife Blanche, while celebrating the different *sidis* of God. It’s a eulogy for life, love, and paradise lost in the give and take between the past and the present, but it’s also a celebration of all that which Charity confers: new life, a higher love, and paradise regained.

5. Mix and Make Mary

The aim of this chapter is to convey a sense of the diverse ways in which Mary's pregnant body figures as a metaphor for literary activity in the later fourteenth-century. Mary's miraculous *sidis*, which drew contradictory, yet complementary bodies of discourse into its orbit, not only set the rhetorical landscape for hosting Christ in the mystery play cycles. We can deduce, both from the mystery play cycles and from a narrative work such as Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* that her pregnant *sidis* also marked charity as an occasion and as a method for reading and writing, to borrow the *Erkenwald*-poet's phrase, "New Werke" (38). In this chapter, I propose that Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, *St. Erkenwald*, and *Athelston* should be considered among these "new works" in which Mary's *sidis* play a role.

5.1 Passing the Time with Mary in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

In *Social Chaucer*, Paul Strohm argues that Chaucer "use[s] the vehicle of a temporally and socially defined pilgrimage to inscribe a community of mixed discourse that models the possible harmony of a mixed state" (172). The possibility that Chaucer takes Mary's mixed *sidis* as a model for developing this "community of mixed discourse" warrants further investigation. Chaucer draws a parallel between the contradictory work models which frame the pilgrims' dually spiritual and recreational alliance and the contradictory matrimonial writing strategy of going "thorw þe wijf," meaning Mary's "mixed" and mediating influence, "to wyn þe man" (R. Morris 743). This parallel is established from the very start of the poem. He begins:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
 The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,
 And bathed every veine in swich licour
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour... (1-4)

The imagery which Chaucer opens his poem with is that of rebirth, restoration, and renewal associated with the fertile spring season. This springtime imagery is a generic marker of romance narratives. In other words, what happens “Whan that Aprill” arrives with its “shoures soote,” “Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breath,” and when “smale foweles maken melodye” is that romances take place (5-6, 9).

Chaucer cues his audience into reading his work as a romance by using the generic markers of a romance. In so doing, he builds up his readers’ expectations. Carol Fewster explains:

The validity of a genre name such as romance is dependent upon two conditions. Firstly, it must ‘work’ as a critical term – different texts are recognizable as belonging to the same group, in that there are a number of shared significant features. Secondly, it demands some evidence of contemporary awareness that different works are seen as belonging to the same ‘set’ or genre. The second condition is the more important, for it allows an exploration of the ways literary signals evoke audience expectations, then exploit and perhaps frustrate them” (2).

Chaucer places himself in a state of rhetorical debt with his readers by failing to reciprocate in kind. Instead of fulfilling expectations, Chaucer foils them by writing that “Whan” these things happen, “Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages” (12). This generic discrepancy, which suggests a contradictory, but complementary relationship between carnal and spiritual discourse, disrupts the flow of the narrative. It is at this point that the fertile, springtime imagery of rebirth and restoration that Chaucer opens with starts to register as a marker of the matrimonial discourse associated with the Virgin Birth. Besides its association with the romance, the spring season is also associated with Easter, a Christian celebration of Christ’s resurrection. Chaucer amplifies the matrimonial anxiety of the passage by drawing attention to the like, but different relationship between the Incarnation, which is typically associated with the Christmas season, and Christ’s resurrection, which is typically associated with the spring season.

Building on this matrimonial anxiety, Chaucer juxtaposes a storytelling partnership with the bond of Christian fellowship. This juxtaposition occurs when the pilgrims become storytellers. Strictly speaking, pilgrimage was an act of penitential satisfaction. That said, people went on pilgrimage for various reasons, including to appeal to and make thanks for the intercessory power of the saints. Chaucer makes mention of miraculous medical intercession and thanksgiving as a purpose for pilgrimage in the *General Prologue*, when he relates that pilgrims seek out the shrine of the “The hooly blisful martir.../That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke” (17-18). According to Richard Barber, “...the Church’s positive exhortations to seek out a heavenly doctor

rather than an earthly one...came to be regarding as an injunction to leave medical cures in the hands of God and His saints...even the most mundane recoveries were regarded as the work of higher powers, and might lead the sufferers to make a pilgrimage to record their thanks to ‘the holy blissful martyr, that had helped them when they were sick’” (64). The shrines of saints were sites where the boundary between the earth and the heavens collapsed, making miracles, such as recovery from spiritual and bodily illness, possible. By drawing on the feminine, intercessory powers of the saints, the pilgrims who visited these sites were essentially going “thorw þe wijf to wyn þe man,” as they could make their prayers to the saints, who could thereafter plead on their behalves with God.

This purely religious understanding of the strategy of going “thorw þe wijf to wyn þe man” is contrasted with the interpretation which the pilgrims apply. The pilgrims decide to pass the time on their way to St. Beckett’s shrine by exchanging stories. They decide to go “thorw þe wijf,” i.e. storytelling, “to wyn þe man,” or, that is, at least until they get to him. Colin Morris explains that medieval pilgrimage was seen as “a metaphor for the journey of the Christian soul” (2). What we arguably see happening in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are Mary’s *sidis* being explored as “a metaphor for” this “journey” (2).

The case could be made that the spontaneous storytelling contest which Chaucer’s pilgrims enter into alludes, as the narrator and the black knight’s literary debate does in his *Book of the Duchess*, to Joseph and Mary’s reading and writing contest over her miraculous pregnancy. Unlike *the Duchess*, however, the sphere of exchange in *The Canterbury Tales* is not limited to two socially disparate figures. In *The Book of the*

Duchess, the narrator and the black knight's literary debate revolves around making a dead woman *hool*²⁴ through the vehicle of language. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer multiplies, complicates, and fragmentizes Mary's *sidis* in order to generate a host of contradictory, yet complementary world views. The pilgrimage to St. Thomas Becket's shrine, a holy pursuit, gives rise to an unholy, in so far as it is not in keeping with the spiritual goals of a penitential pilgrimage, yet *hooly* storytelling alliance between people of different estates, occupations, and genders.

The pilgrim storytellers proceed to mix and make "Mary" by contributing their parts to a storytelling contest. As in *the Duchess*, Chaucer interests himself in the ways in which bodies of discourse can host people, such as by providing a window into their world view, and hold people host, such as when a character's identity seems both inscribed into and circumscribed by a particular genre of writing. The pilgrims' contradictory, but complimentary world views are embodied in the types of discourses they use to tell their stories. The knight, for instance, tells a courtly romance, the Miller a *fabliaux*. Sometimes a character is "Maryed" so closely to his/her discourse that it is difficult to tell where the character begins and his/her discourse ends.

Whether or not the pilgrims' storytelling contest, in which various forms of discourse are placed side-by-side, ultimately results in a smorgasbord of merry-making or a case of making "Mary" by producing space for rhetorical acts of charity, is open to question. Chaucer leaves the audience to ponder whether the pilgrims' reciprocal literary contributions constitute works of charity or works of *luste* and self-*likyng*. Mary's *sidis*

weigh over his authorial persona as well. Does Chaucer succeed, as intellectual midwife, in playing host to a *hool* and holy “community of mixed discourse?” Does the writing strategy of going “thorw þe wijf to wyn þe man” actually bridge the gap between *sentence* and *solace*?

These questions deserve further inquiry in light of Chaucer’s *Retractions*. In his *Retraction*, Chaucer “revoke[s]” his “worldly vanitees,” works “that sownen into,” or tend toward, “synne,” such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The House of Fame*, *The Legend of Good Women*, *The Book of the Duchess*, and *The Canterbury Tales* (1086-88). Chaucer’s *Retractions* imply a revised moral understanding of the strategy of going “thorw þe wijf,” meaning the rhetorical and intercessory body of the Virgin Mary, “to wyn þe man,” meaning salvation. Chaucer equates this writing strategy with an act of spiritual violation. Under pretense of performing charitable work by means of Mary’s *sidis*, poets defame and defile her rhetorical body in pursuit of “worldly vanitees.” This spiritual breach finds a parallel in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, wherein a knight rapes a mysterious damsel to satisfy his own lust, then appeals to the intercessory power of the Queen and seeks out the counsel of women in the attempt to evade punishment for his lascivious work. With an author like Chaucer, questions never really close. But, I think that his *Retractions*, which occur after the writing of “worldly vanities” has been done, registers a step in the journey of the narrative from works of charity to acts of contrition and confession.

5.2 Marital Remains: *St. Erkenwald's* Ghostly Groom

The *Erkenwald*-poet problematizes the notion that a “community of mixed discourse” can or even should constitute a cohesive whole. The specter of hybridity looms large in *St. Erkenwald*. An animate pagan corpse, a man of law from some bygone era, and St. Erkenwald, a contemporary Christian saint, participate in an exchange predicated on a miracle of coexistence. Idol-laden temples which once “temyd to þe deulle” are “clansyd” and rechristened as churches by Augustine of Canterbury in a historical prefiguration of the virtuous pagan’s baptism into Christianity (15, 16). The language of salvation and communal reincorporation which resonates throughout both of these conversion stories, however, is troubled by the narrator’s unstable portrayal of the effectiveness of the orthodox rituals which make conversion and communal reintegration possible.

The instability in the poet’s redactions of ecclesiastic work has generally been explained with reference to heterodox doctrines such as those of the Wycliffites,²⁵ the Pelagians,²⁶ and the Donatists.²⁷ I suggest, on the other hand, that the poem’s interest in the instability of ecclesiastic work is indicative of an overriding interest in the integrity of God’s work. I also propose that the poet investigates God’s work by adopting the drama of the Virgin Birth, and the matrimonial writing strategy with which it is associated, as a test model for his own work. Mary’s *sidis* play an important role in shaping the different sides of the poem as well as the manner in which the poet presents and addresses the challenges of hybridity and heterodoxy.

In *St. Erkenwald*, Mary's *sidis* take shape around the spontaneous discovery of an ancient pagan corpse that was locked away, as if in an embryonic space and in an embryonic state, "so depe into þe erthe" (45). The "New Werke," a probable allusion to the Incarnation, which heralds the emergence of a hybrid God and the New Church, that prompts the discovery of this "gost lyfe," a reference to the Holy Spirit, is the destruction of a pagan temple and the construction of St. Paul's Cathedral on its former grounds (38, 192). Instead of the expected fresh start which "New Werke" implies, the townsfolk dig their way to a dead end. Their work literally brings them into contact with a tomb. Inside the tomb, they come upon a figure Christ-like in his contradictions. They find an oxymoron: an uncorrupted corpse, "wyt-outen any tecche" and arrayed in princely garments (85).

One form of enclosure, the earth, gives way to another, the tomb, and both the object and the subject of enclosure become, as the Virgin Birth and the Eucharist with which it is associated, progressively more frustrating sources of mystery, confusion, and spectacle. "Mony clerkes wyt crownes ful brode" apply themselves to the task of deciphering the "roynyshe" letters bordering the lid of the coffin which is bolted down by a "sperle," but to no avail (55, 52, 49). Next, all the workmen of the city "laften hor werke and lepen" toward the sight of the spectacle, anxious to "loke on þat lome quat lengyd witinne" (68). The verb "loke" here is both pun and oxymoron. It has the dual meaning of looking and locking, the implication being that when divine mysteries are laid

out in plain sight, mysteries such as that of the corpse, Mary's pregnant belly, and the Host, they become even greater sources of mystery.

The sexton's order to "vnlocke þe lidde" of the tomb "and lay hit byside" emphasizes this point (68, 67). When the bolt is pried off and the contents of the tomb revealed, what is discovered is not an answer, but yet further mystery. As the narrator remarks, "...þen was wonder to wale on wehes that stonden,/ That myȝt not come to knowe a quontyse strange" (73-4). The spectators, rather than coming closer to 'unlocking' or approaching the meaning of what they are seeing, are plunged further into darkness. The atmosphere of wonder and confusion that overtakes the townsfolk overtakes the structure of the narrative itself. As Jennifer Sisk points out, the discovery of uncorrupted bodies is typically the generic marker of a saint's life.²⁸ The corpse, however, not only belongs to a pagan, but also to a pagan dressed in the clothing of a secular, as opposed to a spiritual, official.

The specter of hybridity in *St. Erkenwald* has roots "so depe" that it is inescapable (45). This specter, which manifests most powerfully in the figure of the virtuous pagan corpse, cleaves the structure of the narrative in two. The first section casts doubt on the 'old work' performed by St. Augustine of Canterbury. The poem's "New Werke" resurrects a spectrum of latent, matrimonial anxiety regarding St. Augustine's translation of pagan spaces into Christian houses of worship (38). Upon instruction from the Pope, St. Augustine (of Canterbury) travels to Sandwich charged with the task of reincorporating the land and the people into the fold of the Christian community. "Til"

Saint Augustine arrives, the public is described as being “peruertyd” by idolatry and polytheism (12, 10). The poet proceeds to list Augustine’s striking accomplishments in the region, that is, how he “prechyd he here þe pure faythe,” “plantyd þe trouthe,” and “conuertyd alle þe communnates to Cristendame” (13-14). But, what follows this unassuming affirmation of Augustine’s successes is a much lengthier and troubling look at his methodology. In what Sisk characterizes as “whirlwind transformations,” Augustine christens the temples and titles them “kyrkes” (89, 14). He has the idols “hurlyd owt” of them in acts of violent, and yet sanctified abortion, and substitutes them with saints (17). Next, Augustine plays the matchmaker, rededicating former temples to particular Christian saints by doing little more than creatively altering “hor names” (18).

The manner in which the poet narrates Augustine’s Christian renovation of the pagan temples has been a subject of increasing interest to scholars. Raymond P. Tripp suggests that the poet’s introduction is “less a history than a judgment of how Austyn went about his reforms, which he presents as hasty and shallow, little more than changing the signs on the door” (94). Christine Chism likewise emphasizes the linguistic nature of the conversion, paying particular attention to how the poet’s use of alliteration exacerbates syncretic tensions. Augustine is more than once shown to swap out idols for saints on the basis of alliterative similitude:

Pat ere was of Appolyn is now of Saynt Petre,
 Mahoun to Saynt Margrete opir to Maudelayne;
 Pe synagoge of þe Sonne was sett to oure Lady,

Jubiter and Jono to Jhesus opir to James. (19-22)

In *St. Erkenwald*, the aesthetic of transformation in the first scene is shown to be dangerously dependent on aural convenience rather than interior signification. The conflation of sounds draws the intrinsically discordant pairs into an external unity with one another that superficially disguises rather than accentuates what should be a jarring change. The awkwardness of Augustine's "hasty" attributions which prioritize sound even over gender can be taken to insinuate a monstrous marriage in the church between "Mahoun" who is given away to "Saynt Margrete" and between the "Sonne" who is "sett to oure Lady" (20, 21).

This matrimonial anxiety extends to the second and seemingly contradictory section of the poem, which takes place in the present and affirms the efficacy of the ecclesiastic work performed by St. Erkenwald, who successfully baptizes the pagan corpse with his tears. In the, *wilde*, mysterious space between these two episodes of work, however, all work ceases. The people of London leave their various occupations in a raucous, colossal exodus to see about the "fyndynge of þat ferly," being the discovery of the marvelous corpse (146). "Laddes leften hor werke," the narrator recounts, and "Ronnen radly in route wyt ryngande noyce" (61-2). In a striking example of hyperbole, the poet describes how "þer comen þidder of alle kynnes so keenly mon/ þat as alle þe worlde were þider walon wytin a honed-quile" (64-5). People from every walk of life, Burghers, Sextons, Clerks, Masons, Mayors, prelates, lords and ladies mix, but unlike in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, all discourse degenerates. All communication breaks down

as “alle þe worlde” is reduced to a primitive sound made as a part of a frenzied throng, to babel, to “a crye aboute the cors” (65, 110).

The breakdown in communication generated by the corpse’s discovery mirrors the breakdown in communication that occurs between Joseph and Mary over her pregnancy. Like Joseph, who finds a retreat from his trouble in sleep, St. Erkenwald also retreats into a figuratively embryonic state to ponder how he will rectify the “trouulle in þe pepul” (109). Erkenwald literally engulfs himself in the dark incomprehensibility of the situation, metaphorically assuming the condition of the entombed corpse. He secludes himself in his palace and “ditte[s],” or bolts, “þe durre after,” remaining there in prayer as the “derke nyȝt ouerdrofe and day-belle ronge” (116-117).

The prayer which St. Erkenwald makes for divine aid in easing social tensions references both the Incarnation and the Eucharist. He asks God to help him “In confirmynge þi cristen faith fulsen” by allowing him to “kenne/ þe myserie of þis meruaile þat men opon wondres” (124-5). This prayer for confirmation and fulfillment, which foreshadows the Man of Law’s full conversion into the Christian fold, echoes Christ’s statement that he has not come to abolish, but to fulfill the law (Mat. 5:17). The oxymoron ‘open wonder,’ which mirrors the language of ‘locking’ and ‘unlocking’ that pervades the poem, recalls the ‘open wonder’ effected by Mary’s pregnant belly and the Catholic Host. The fact that St. Erkenwald’s language brings Mary’s belly and the Host to bear on the “myserie” of the pagan corpse tells us that he understands these mysteries to be connected, both in terms of their mixed natures and their resolutions. The

Incarnation, the Eucharist, and the uncorrupted corpse in effect constitute paradoxes of mixing. As such, they join the ranks of a multitude of paradoxes of mixing with which the poet is engrossed, including the mixing of space, time, identity, the bodies of people, living and dead, and the mixing of bodies of work.

What makes it possible for these antithetical categories to mix and “Mary” is divine charity. This is why the question of divine charity weighs so heavily over the poem’s contradictory “sidis.” Once the townsfolk get to know the now animate pagan corpse, they are deeply affected by the knowledge that he has been denied salvation. The corpse reveals that in life he was a judge of great moral fiber, beloved and esteemed by the people for his honesty, consistency, and fairness. St Erkenwald responds:

3ea bot says þou of þi saule...

Wuere is ho stablid and stadde if þou so stre3t wroghtes?

He þat rewardes vche a renke as he has ri3t seruyd

My3t euel forgo the to gyfe of His grace summe brawnche...

Forþi say me of þi soule in sele quere ho wonnes

And of þe riche restorment þat razt hyr oure Lorde. (273-6, 279-80)

There are two ways of interpreting this passage. The first assumes that Erkenwald genuinely poses the question, “Wuere is ho,” being the judge’s soul, “stablid and stadde if þou so stre3t wroghtes?” In this reading, discussed by Grady and Sisk, Erkenwald mistakenly gives voice to the Pelagian belief that a righteous person enters the Kingdom of Heaven with or without the sanction of baptism based solely on the consequence of

his/her works. Tripp, on the other hand, identifies this as a moment where Erkenwald doubts the judge's testimony, where Erkenwald essentially asks him, "Well, if you were such a virtuous person, then why are you still here?"

I would argue that what is essentially being tested in this scene is not the Church's privilege or the judge's virtue, but rather God's truth. The pagan judge describes God as the supreme judge—"the ryche kyng of reson" and "ri3t" who "loues al þe laws lely þat longen to trouthe" (267-8). According to him, among the men God loves best are those unwavering in "mynnyng of ri3tes" (269). But, if God so loves reason, truth, and virtue, and the pagan judge embodies these traits, and exhibits remarkable consistency in his performance of the law, then why does God not exhibit this same virtue, this same consistency, by keeping his "sothe," cited verbatim from the Psalms by Erkenwald, that "þe skilfulle and þe vnskathely skelton ay to me" ? (277-8). As Kamwoski puts it, "...the judge is being held to the letter of the law regarding the necessity of baptism—a circumstance that he seems better able to accept than does his Christian audience surrounding his tomb, perhaps because he, himself a man of the law, has held true to the letter" (10).

Despite having held true to the letter of the law, the mysterious man of law cannot be saved, and thereby spiritually reborn, or "Maryed" into the Christian fold, unless God intercedes mercifully on his behalf. But the charity work which makes this marriage possible seems unreliable in its ability to consistently effect whole transformations. Sometimes, as in the case of St. Augustine of Canterbury's purification and consecration

of the pagan temples, this charity work seems to fail. The poet invites the audience to read problems of heterodoxy into this failure. However, the varying levels of ecclesiastic efficacy marking the two halves of the poem, rather than being taken to suggest some deficiency on Augustine's part to perform, can be taken as a failure on God's part to perform consistently, as God only "unlouke[s] þe leste of of His myȝtes" "Quen Hym Luste" (162).

The paradox of marrying the bisection between pagan temple and Christian church while at the same time realizing a divorce between them, and by extension the pagan and Christian communities which they metaphorically represent, alludes to the paradox which is at the heart of the claims of the Catholic sacraments, most notably the Eucharist. Miri Rubin describes how "In the name of the Eucharist some of the most humbling, and the most audacious, claims have been made: that God and humans could meet and unite, mix and merge, that a disc of baked wheaten dough could embody the saving body of Christ, that the lives of men and women, of cities and nations, could be encompassed, redeemed, transformed or forsaken through it" (1). What is fundamentally at stake in the poem's critique of the consecration of the temples is not only the essential nature of the temples, the rectitude of the particular ecclesiastic performing the ritual, or English identity. What is fundamentally at stake is the charity of the sacraments by which temple and church, pagan and Christian, past and present, the human and the divine, the Old Law and the New Law "Mary" to form "New Werke" (38). The chief problem has to do with the underlying polemics of Christian charity itself. This problem, which we saw

unfold in Satan's play on Christian charity in *The York Cycle*, deals with the divine prerogative, with the fact that God, as St. Erkenwald puts it, only "unlouke[s] þe leste of of His myztes" "Quen Hym Luste" (162).

5.3 Til' Death Do Us Part: *Athelston's* Less Than Mary Ending

According to Roger Dalrymple, spiritual "invocations" in romances "carry more semantic weight than their pithy character implies" (viii). This certainly seems to be the case in *Athelston*. The poem opens conventionally—with a seemingly generic invocation of God:

Lord that is off myghtys most,
 Fadyr and Sone and Holy Gost,
 Bryng us out of synne
 And lene us grace so for to wyrke
 To love bothe God and Holy Kyrke
 That we may hevene wynne. (1-6)

This prayer may seem "pithy," but it lays the poem's foundations. The poet begins with a reference to Original Sin. He acknowledges that everyone—both he and his audience—share in this sin together. Next, he asks God for a dispensation of grace so that everyone can perform his "wyrke." Work, then, begins with an acknowledgment of a mutual and preexisting debt. But it also begins with the understanding that the very act of working incurs debt—thus the need for a loan. You borrow in order to pay back and when you pay back, you borrow. By reciprocally incurring and fulfilling these debts, which people owe

to God and by extension to one another, they perform a spousal bond of both divine and brotherly love. This is how charity work works. What the *Athelston*-poet has just provided is a summary of the terms of Christian salvation. These are the ideal terms of “Mary-making.” The narrative proceeds to test these ideal terms against an imperfect reality of less than ideal “weddyd” partnerships, where everyone wants to borrow, but credit is in short supply.

Athelston is a tale about “foure weddyd bretheryn,” “of dyvers cuntré,” “That sybbe were nought of kyn” (10, 20, 12). As in *The Canterbury Tales*, these unrelated men are travellers who form a spontaneous fellowship²⁹ which centers on the work of delivering, reading, and exchanging discourse. The poet explains that “all foure messangeres they were,/ That wolden yn Yngelond lettrys bere,/As it wes here kynde” (13-15). As in *The Canterbury Tales*, there is also an emphasis on the dually spiritual and secular nature of their work partnership. This is indicated by the fact that the four men first encounter each other and swear their oaths of brotherhood near a wayside cross. The narrator tells us that “For love of here metyng thare,/ They swoor hem weddyd bretheryn for evermare” (22-3).

Another dimension is added to these men’s brotherhood when the “eldeste of hem,” Athelston, inherits the crown. Now King, Athelston gathers his fellow brothers in order to give them their “warysoun,” or reward (25, 39). He makes “the eldest brothir,” Wymound, who was apparently suffering from some financial difficulty, Earl of Dover, and “That other brother,” Egeland, a man of high reputation, Earl of Stone (40, 43).

Athelston also gives Egeland "...tyl hys weddyd wyff/ Hys owne sustyr, Dame Edyff" (46-7). Finally, Athelston makes "The ferthe brother," a "noble clerk," the Archbishop of Canterbury (49, 56). Although age is cited as a principle of distribution, it is not the deciding factor when it comes to the reward that Athelston bestows on each brother. But its mention foreshadows the budding of inequality in the measure of their working relationships with one another.

Once Athelston becomes King, these "foure weddyd bretheryn" "of dyvers cuntré," "That sybbe were nought of kyn" come to fill different, but complementary seats in one country's social and political system (10, 20, 12). Athelston becomes king. His brothers, Egeland and Wymound, become his vassals. Egeland also becomes Athelston's brother-in-law. Now spiritual head of Canterbury, Alryke owes his supreme allegiance to God and Church, and not to King and country. The framework of apparently equal and mutual obligation that structured the four brothers' original covenant of male marriage, a covenant with Old Testament undertones, is disrupted when these new and asymmetrical domestic, secular, and spiritual marriages, which are associated with the New Testament and the twin commandments of Christian charity, are put into effect.

This transition from old to new unfolds through re-figurations of Christian salvation history. Like Satan, to whom he is explicitly compared, Wymound, that "devyl of helle," develops "envye" as a consequence of new and closer unions (156, 79). It causes Wymound "woo" that Athelston gives Egeland his sister as a spouse and invites Egeland to his private chambers for private audiences (81). "Therat," the narrator tells us,

“Sere Wymound hadde gret envye” (79). The narrator provides a private look into Wymound’s Satanic line of thinking, reporting how, at the moment of “envye,” “...Sere Wymound hym bethoughte:/’Here love thus endure may noughte;/ Thorwgh wurd oure werk may sprynge’” (85-7). Like Satan, who slithers into the garden of Eden, Wymond concocts a plan to weasel his way into Athelston’s inner sanctum, where he invents a lie against his wedded brother. Wymond goes “thorw þe wijf to wyn þe man” in the Satanic sense of exploiting storytelling as a form false counsel. He pretends as if he wants to tell Athelston a wondrous story, “a swete tydande,/ There comen nevere non swyche in this lande/ Of all this hundryd yere,” but once he gets Athelston alone, he sets up a plot against Egeland, casting him as a Satan figure who intends to poison Athelston, causing him to “Sodaynly...dy” (124-6, 143).

This is a twist on the Original Sin story, in which the Devil claims that Adam and Eve will not die a sudden death from eating from the forbidden fruit. In another twist, Egeland twins the strategy of going “thorw þe wijf to wyn þe man.” Egeland also goes through the man to “wyn” the wife, implicating Dame Edyff, Egeland’s wife, in the crime. As Wymound puts it, “He dos thy sustyr to undyrstand/ He wole be kyng of thy lande,/ And thus he begynnes here trayne” (163-65). This fiction suggests that Egeland takes Satan as a model of authorship. In the Original Sin story, the Devil convinces Eve that eating from the forbidden fruit will put her and Adam on equal footing with God. Following in Satan’s footsteps, Wymound tells King Athelston that Dame Edyff is convinced into betraying him by the possibility of attaining to a higher status. The irony

continues to build when Athelston swears, "be Cros and Roode," "Meete ne drynk schal do me goode/ Tyl that he be dede;/Bothe he and hys wyf, hys soones two" (169, 170-2). The irony is in the fact that Athelston has already figuratively consumed the "poyson," he's already partaken of the forbidden fruit, by eating up Wymound's every word (166).

Once Athelston consumes this poison, he takes a perverse walk through the next episode of Christian history, the Virgin Birth. Athelston calls for a messenger and has a letter "immade fullyche thare" (187). This "fully made" letter is not full of grace, but full of false promises. Earlier, Wymound used the promise of a "swete tydande" to gain entry into Athelston's private chamber (124). Athelston uses the same strategy to lure Egeland and his family into his home. According to the letter, Egeland and his wife will see their innermost desires as parents fulfilled. Athelston invites the couple to his castle under the false pretense that he intends to make their sons full men by dubbing them knights. In a sense, Athelston postures as a Christ-like figure who comes to fulfill the law, and not to abolish it (Mat 5:17). His letter promises fulfillment, but its purpose is destruction, not only of Egeland's family, but of the law, or more precisely, of the tradition, of "comoun sent" (265). Once Athelston has Egeland and his family within his grasp, he imprisons them and plans their execution. Taking the law into his own hands, Athelston bypasses the mediating influence of parliament. He thinks that he does not need to go through anyone but himself to see Egeland's case tried and his account settled.

Athelston's pregnant wife, a Marionic figure, registers the need for mediation. The Queen pleads with Athelston on Egeland and his family's behalves, asking him to

refer the case to the proper public channel, being the “playne parlement” (266). She beseeches him:

Sere kyng, I am before thee come
 With a child, doughtyr or a sone.
 Graunte me my bone,
 My brothir and sustyr that I may borwe
 Tyl the nexte day at morwe,
 Out of here paynys stronge; (259-64)

Athelston takes affront with the way that his wife uses the language of pregnancy to assert her petition for charity. She, for instance, asks him to “Graunte” her her “bone” on the basis that she carries his child (261). Although they are not of blood relation, she also describes Egeland and his wives as “brother” and “sustyr” (262). This choice of words is important because it describes her relationship with them as being one in which they figuratively shared the same womb. Building on this association, the Queen speaks about their imprisonment as an extension of her own pregnancy. She compares their imprisonment to the pangs of childbirth, asking to “borwe” them “Out of here paynys stronge” (262, 264). Athelston does not “Graunte” his wife the “bone” she desires. He does not heed this call for charity. Instead, “With hys foot — he wolde nought wonde — He slowgh the chyld ryght in here wombe” (282-83). Athelston reciprocates by gracelessly kicking his wife in the stomach, thereby bypassing, not only the institution of parliament, but his own heir, the child that would fulfill his legacy.

The pun on the word “wonde” in this passage invites the reader to contrast this literal “miscarriage of justice,” as Elizabeth Ashman Rowe describes it, with the birth and crucifixion of Christ. On one level, “he wolde nought wonde,” means that Athelston showed no hesitation, striking his wife in a righteous rage. The phrase can also be read ironically as “he would not wound,” or cause injury or harm. The phrase “he wolde nought wonde” also refers to Christ’s wounds. Recall that Wymound has just finished swearing to the veracity of his fabrication “By Chrystys woundys fyve!” and “By Him that suffryd payne” (144, 168). Athelston uses the language of the Old Testament God when he attacks his wife for breaking his “comaundement” (28). But he breaks the commandments by committing a crime of passion. The implication is that by slaying his unborn son in the womb, a “knave-chyld” who is “iborn” dead, Athelston has perversely reenacted the Incarnation and Passion of Christ, who borrowed, to use the Queen’s messianic language, man from sin (289).

Moreover, by putting Egeland and his family in prison, a perverse embryonic space, and sentencing them to execution, which would actually make them martyrs, Athelston has also set the stage for yet another perverse Nativity and Passion. This nativity includes a perverse reenactment of Joseph and Mary’s paternity dispute over Christ, in which Alryke, much like Joseph in the York Cycle, hounds Athelston to tell him the “name” of the person who “made this grete lesyng,/ And who wroughte al this bale” (682, 664-5). It also includes a *Judicum Dei* as a double for the angel who comes to resolve the matter of Christ’s paternity in the Joseph’s Doubting of Mary story. To make

matters even more interesting, these monstrous Nativities have their figurative counterpart, or “weddyd brother,” in a later event in the story, the nativity of St. Edmund. Dame Edyff surprisingly gives birth to St. Edmund during the trial by fire scene to prove her innocence and Athelston rights his wrongs by making her child heir to the throne.

Furthermore, all of these monstrous nativities invite the reader to reread the scene of the original lie as a Nativity. Recall that Wymound develops “envye” because:

Bothe the Eerl and hys wyff,
 The kyng hem lovede as hys lyff,
 And here sones twoo;
 And offtensythe he gan hem calle
 Bothe to boure and to halle,
 To counsayl whenne they scholde goo. (73-78)

The distinction the narrator makes here between “boure” and “halle” is significant. The OED defines a boure as “An inner apartment, esp. as distinguished from the ‘hall,’ or large public room, in ancient mansions; hence, a chamber, a bed-room.” *Boures* were not only associated with privacy, but also with the female gender. For example, after the death of the king in the romance *Havelok the Dane*, the people of the kingdom grieved deeply, “Levedyes in boure, knictes in halle” (239). In *Athelston*, the *boure* is characterized as a feminine, womb like space in the sense that it suggests emotional, intellectual, and physical intermingling. It is contrasted with the masculine *halle* which is public and impersonal. The figurative distance between the *boure* and the *halle* is

projected onto the “weddyd” relationship Athelston shares with Wymound as opposed to Egeland. Wymound feels as if he has been cast out of the womb by being relegated to the *halle* while his brother and his family enjoy the king’s company in intimate quarters. The idea is that when he cons his way into this figurative womb, he defiles it with his pregnant lies.

Once Athelston gives credit to Wymound’s fabrication, the “Marying” of discourse comes to overload the narrative. It seems that every character, every event, every word spoken, every space entered, and institution applied to, develops an asymmetrical twin or “weddyd brother.” We have, for instance, Athelston the King, but we also have another Athelston, a messenger, by the same name. As we saw, we have two pregnant female characters, one that miscarries and another that gives birth during the *Judicum Dei*. Even the child which is born to Dame Edyff is in a sense a twin himself, as St. Edmund was both a King and a holy martyr. In *Athelston*, actions also have doubles. For instance, when Athelston disinvests Alryke for advising him to refer the matter to the “playne parlement,” Alryke counters his attack by interdicting England (448). For every “erly” there is a “late” (99). For every “boure” there is a “hall,” and for every “tour” a “toun” (77, 42). Even the “playne parliament” has a counterpart in the *Judicum Dei*. Then we also have the letters that are sent by various characters, which, like Wymound’s lie, claim to be “swete tydande[s],” but are actually double-sided plots to lure and literally entrap characters in perverse embryonic spaces – a prison, a trial by fire, fictive promises of seeing their greatest desires fulfilled or realized (124).

The list does not end there. King Athelston's very own characterization in the narrative is twinned. At the beginning of the tale, Athelston is described as a "good kyng and a ryche" (60). Once Wymound violates his inner sanctum, Athelston is presented in a deranged state of temper, "wax[ing] wrothe as wynde" and "as wood ferde" (453, 250). Athelston reverts from a noble Christian monarch to an uncivilized pagan king. He swears "othis be sunne and mone," sacrifices his unborn child to his temper, and disinvests Archbishop Alryke, who is charged with performing "Goddys werk" (456, 50).

This mixing and marrying reaches the point where even the narrator, who confuses his genres and his praises, cannot be trusted. The narrator's generic signals perplex the audience, who is unsure how to read the poem—as a romance, a nativity, or a *speculum principis*, for instance. One of the generic refrains which the poet uses is "In romaunce as we rede" (383). He implies, thereby, that he refers to a romance for his source material. But this generic marker winds up being a lure, not so unlike that which Wymound uses to enter Athelston's most private sanctum, his mind. A reader would expect to encounter a particular type of narrative based on the generic markers that the poet uses, perhaps something like the *Matter of England* romances³⁰ with which *Athelston* is currently grouped. According to Crane, the *Matter of England* romance "typically traces the loss and recovery of his [the hero's] inherited lands and titles, not through historically mimetic fines, inheritance duties, and petitions to the king, but through a glorious exile, a righteous and sometimes bloody return, and a marriage blessed with sons who extend their father's holdings in a cyclical repetition of his story" (23).

Athelston, however, does not have a central hero figure. Although Crane classifies *Athelston* as a *Matter of England* romance, she is quick to point out that “The problem of royal capriciousness is deeper here than in the main group of romances of English heroes, in that no baronial hero speaks for law in opposition to the king’s injustice— indeed, the romance has no hero in the familiar sense, since the story’s dominant figure, Athelston, must be overcome if justice is to triumph” (69).

It is interesting to look at contemporary debate regarding *Athelston*’s generic classification as being textually driven, which is to say that the poet aims to produce this conflict of opinion in and amongst his readers. Crane, for instance, reconciles the poem’s departures with the explanation that its “ambivalence” in “confronting the seigniorial losses of the later fourteenth century, emphasizes by contrast the remarkable assurance of the main body of works” (89). Inquiring further into this contrast, Nancy Mason Bradbury argues that, “For the poet, the erosion of baronial truth is also an erosion of heroism” (“Erosion of Oath-Based Relationships” 195). Meanwhile, William Calin proposes that Egelond or Archbishop Alryke might have hero potential (492). Taking a different position, Rosalind Field asks whether “the narrative is a romance” and whether “romances need heroes” at all (142). She thinks that the Nativity of Saint Edmund would have been a more fitting title for the untitled poem we now call *Athelston*.

The *Athelston*-poet seems to toy with his readers’ expectations through the exploitation of the generic signals that guide their readings of the poem. Whether or not romances need heroes or whether *Athelston* is a romance, the poet does employ the

generic signals of the romance. Putting aside the question of genre for a moment, the absence of a central hero, especially when we consider just how much this poem needs a hero, is striking. Just as striking is the fact that the poem, a so-called “romance,” takes a turn into legend territory when it becomes a site for the Nativity of Saint Edmund. While this is a sharp turn, it is not the only other turn that the poem takes. It’s worth pointing out, for instance, that if we understand *Athelston* to be a poem about everything that a king shouldn’t do, then it could also be read as a *speculum principis*, or a mirror for princes. The emphasis is not so much on how the reader ultimately decides to navigate and label the poem, but in compelling them to undergo a process. The generic signals that the poet uses misguide and confuse the reader who needs to continuously reread the poem and revise their assumptions to reconcile, or “Mary,” the fluctuations in discourse.

The narrator’s reading directions deliberately misdirect the reader, making them feel insecure in their ability to marry this jigsaw of a tale together. Scattered about the narrative, for example, we also find other refrains such as “And, as the story telles me” and “In book iwreten we fynde” (19, 21). Given his departures from convention, all of this conventional posturing, which is supposed to make the narrator seem less like a storyteller, and more like a messenger, conveying prewritten material that he cannot be held accountable for, only makes him appear more suspect. If *Athelston*’s narrator is unreliable, it is probably because he creates a double for himself, but does not himself seem “Maryed” or “weddyd” completely to the story. The narrator’s satirical, and certainly ironic style of narration undermines everything he says and just about

everything that happens in the story. For instance, key characters in the story, such as Athelston, the Archbishop, and the Messenger, who are all guilty of abusing language for their own ends, are strangely never taken to task despite the fact that the narrator's principle intent, in his own words, is to recount a tale of "Of falsnesse, hou it wil ende" (8). The narrator opens the poem with a prayer for God to "lene us grace so for to wyrke/To love bothe God and Holy Kyrke" (4-5). He suggests that the Archbishop should be a model for this kind of "wyrke," describing him in the best of terms, as a "noble clerk" who "Mekyl...cowde of Goddys werk" (56, 50). But, if the means justify the ends, Alryke is not opposed to trickery and deception. Alryke sends a message summoning Wymound to the castle with the lie that Egeland is dead when in fact Egeland is alive and Alryke plans to force Wymound to undergo a trial by fire. Like Athelston before him, he also has a letter drafted containing fictions and lures of fulfillment of the enemy's innermost desires. If this is the type of "werke" that the narrator models his own work after, then he deliberately casts doubt on his own credibility, thereby causing a rift in his "weddyd" relationship with his audience.

The fact that the narrative has no central focal point but rather sequence upon sequence of disagreeably "weddyd" spouses makes it difficult to understand what the poet means to achieve by means of this "Marying." The narrator racks up quite of bit of debt with his readers. He builds up, but does not fulfill generic expectations. He walks a fine line between destroying the law, that is, the traditional formulas of genre, and fulfilling them. Bradbury points out:

Athelston's ending lacks the usual reassurance provided by an accompanying marriage, coronation, or reinstatement of the rightful heir. A more conventional romance might end with a festive formula such as "Now they make merry and so should we," followed by a prayer for God's blessing. *Athelston* ends with an execution by drawing, hanging, and display of the punished body, followed by a prayer that all traitors may meet the same 'ending' and die by the same fiercely symbolic punishments. ("Erosion of Faith-Based Relationships" 194)

To build on Bradbury's observation, *Athelston* ends with re-marriages instead of marriages. The "cyclical repetition of history" that Crane associates with the *Matter of England* romances does, in a sense, occur. The narrative circles back as past relationships are renewed and reconciled. All the brothers, save the traitor Wymound, become *weddyed* brothers again. Egeland's wife and family rejoin him. The relationship between Athelston and his sister is mended. At the beginning of the poem, Athelston, an uncle's son, inherits the crown when his uncle dies "withouten ayr" (32). In what might be characterized less as a repetition of history than a recycling of it, an heir is announced, but he is Athelston's nephew and not his son. Ultimately, the narrative's ending calls its own assurance into question. It makes the reader conscious of the discontinuity of continuity rather than secure in the power of charity to bind contradictory, but complementary matrimonial relationships together. The reader leaves the poem not sure whether to "make merry" or "make Mary" and how.

One of the reasons why the ending, contrary to expectation, fails to provide a real sense of closure is because the hand of charity is coerced, not extended. When Archbishop Alryke advises the King to refer Egeland's case to parliament, Athelston disinvests him and threatens him with execution: "Wher I thee mete, thy deth is dyght; Non othir then schal it bee!" (463-4). It is not until the Archbishop excommunicates all of England and the knights threaten revolt, that two knights suddenly appear with the message that Athelston will accede to Alryke's wishes. Even then, Athelston refuses to reveal Wymound's authorship until Alryke threatens him with having to undergo the *Judicum Dei* along with everyone else. Athelston has to have his hand forced. The reversal wherein Egeland and his family are exonerated and Wymound is captured, occurs not because of Athelston, but in spite of him.

Just as important is the implication that if the hand of charity cannot be forced, it has to be contrived. It is, for instance, a false hand of charity that draws Wymound in for justice. Archbishop Alryke sends for a messenger and commands him to convey a false account of justice to Wymound:

Sey Egelane and hys sones be slawe,

Bothe ihangyd and to-drawe.

(Doo as I thee lere!)

The countasse is in presoun done;

Schal sche nevere out of presoun come,

But yiff it be on bere. (705-10)

Alryke, a man of God, uses Wymound's Satanic strategy of going "through the wife" against him. He does not see any other practical way to "Mary-make" other than forcing closure through contrivance.

This twisted take on "Mary-making" extends to the way in which Athelston's tyrannical behavior is accounted for in the narrative. Athelston is depicted on two sides. At the outset of the poem, he is described as a "good kyng" (60). After he metaphorically consumes the forbidden fruit, being Wymound's "swete tydande," he suffers a fall from grace and becomes an enraged tyrant (124). These two sides are reconciled through a transformation or rebirth that never quite occurs. Athelston does not undergo a *Judicium Dei*. He adopts Egeland's son as his heir in an attempt to balance the scales, but he himself is never brought to justice in order that he might meet with mercy and be transformed. Rather, he is involuntarily brought to terms by the threat of revolt. Athelston's sins are charitably swept under the rug by the "swete" sweep of the narrative.

What the poet critiques here are the discourses which contrive and propagate disingenuous paradigms of "Mary-making," such as the topos of the King's Ignorance. The King's Ignorance is a vein of discourse wherein the King is absolved of responsibility for his wicked actions on account of his ignorance; it's not his fault, as wicked counselors led him astray. Alryke's interrogation of Athelston alludes to the topos of the King's Ignorance. Alryke tells Athelston, "Now I have power and dignyté/ For to asoyle thee as clene/ As thou were hoven off the fount-ston" (676-8). Athelston is promised full pardon—that he will be as clean of sin as if he were a freshly baptized

baby—so long as he gives up the name of the wicked counselor that led him astray. Alryke basically tells him that he can either take up the matter of his guilt privately with him by giving him a name, or he can take it up publically with God, who will not be so merciful, in the *Judicum Dei*. Despite all the wicked work Athelston has done, work which is compared with the crime of Original Sin, someone else's name is the only spiritual confession and secular concession that Athelston is required to make to be absolved.

The poet problematizes a principle of exchange where people put work aside to make-merry under pretense of Mary-making. "Making Mary" isn't about passing the buck. Mary has "sidis." She doesn't have just one side. The Incarnation and Passion of Christ aren't celebrations of immunity but of community. Holding one man accountable for everyone's crimes, deceptions, and misconceptions is not what is meant by performing a bond of love in the community. Charity isn't a function of substituting one man's name for another man's work. Christ's example is one of assuming responsibility. Christ takes ownership of sin that belongs to everyone but him. This is the line of argument foreshadowed by the poem's opening invocation. Salvation is predicated on works of charity. Charity work marries people together, into a "weddyd" community of the faithful, by making them obligated to one another. But what happens to this matrimonial bond when people don't fulfill their side of the bargain? What happens when they don't acknowledge their debt? Or when the charity work they perform is false or less than ideal? What happens when revenge, a kind of pay back, is treated as a work of

charity? What happens when charity work, which is supposed to be organized around Mary's "sidis," is organized around the exchange of lies and deceptions?

Many of these questions are raised in relation to Archbishop Alryke, who is supposed to be a paragon of charity. He is ruthless in his quest to "borwe" his brother from execution. He lies and he does not seem impartial in his dispensation of grace insofar as Athelston is concerned. The terms of the exchange he arranges with Athelston—a name for full spiritual and secular pardon—are set at Alryke's discretion. This is his privilege as Archbishop. The problem is that, although he is always described in terms of his office, it is hard to tell if we should assume that Alryke is always acting on God's authority. Alryke's is so "weddyd" to his identity as Archbishop that it is hard to tell where God's work ends and his begins. If God's work and his work are one, then suddenly lies, deceptions, favoritism, and ruthlessness become expressions of spiritual virtue.

Alryke has a strong work ethic, and his hard work pays off. But how he gets the job done suggests that there is a harder price to pay. From the beginning to the end of the narrative, Alryke is described as a "noble clerk," regardless of how faithful or unfaithful he is to his word or God's Word. This observation takes us back to the poem's opening invocation which sets the terms of Christian salvation. Salvation begins with an acknowledgment of the debt of Original Sin. Alryke allows Athelston to blame the messenger, a strategy which does not work for Adam and Eve. God still brings Adam and Eve to account for their sin, even when they try and shirk responsibility for it by

identifying the person who provided them with false counsel. Indeed, the weight of their sin is so great that their children—the whole of mankind—carry it into posterity. The only thing that makes it possible for mankind to be delivered from this sin is Christ's blood. But the source of merry-making or making "Mary" in *Athelston* isn't Christ's blood. Rather, it's Wymound's.

We can read Wymound's gruesome execution as a kind of anti-passion. Christ's blood demands an acknowledgment of mutual debt. While his blood makes salvation possible, it doesn't mean that people aren't still required to work for it. But, in *Athelston*, the community washes its hands clean in Wymound's blood. It is a baptism of blood that makes Athelston, and by extension the entire kingdom, become "as clene" as if they "were hoven off the fount-ston" (677-8). Wymound dies a blood sacrifice for everyone's sins and shortcomings. The white elephant in the room, the reasons why it is difficult to make merry at the ending, is arguably this huge, but invisible debt that still needs to be paid off, but nobody is willing to acknowledge.

In *Athelston*, traditions of work predicated on an idealistic notion of rhetorical reciprocity fail. Geraldine Barnes explains that "By the end of the thirteenth century, the feudal tradition of *consilium* was established, in principle, and, ideally, in practice, as the basis for the relationship between governing and governed at both the personal and nascent institutional levels" (5). Members of the baronial class could exploit this tradition by feeding the king opportunistic fictions. On the other hand, the King could exploit the tradition of counsel to scapegoat accountability for his own private work. He could also

give his ear more to some than to others. More importantly, tradition notwithstanding, the king could do without counsel altogether. Jolliffe explains that "there was nothing but custom to govern the King and nothing but what influence or authority his own court could exert to enforce it; nothing but the counsel of his barons to prevent the suzerain's trust of power--justicia, districtio--from becoming the ungoverned, irrevocable will of one man" (5). Despite their practical failures, traditions of work based on an ideal of rhetorical charity have to stay alive in order for the system to have a fighting chance. These traditions are conceived and re-conceived by the readers and writers who keep them alive through extraordinary feats of fabrication, such as the romance. Thus the poem resigns itself to a *kynde* reality: it depends on and yet is defeated by the small, unlikely, ineffectual, questionable, and opportunistic works of rhetorical charity that realize a miraculous, but less than Mary ending.

5.4 New Work

While there are observable differences between the narratives covered in this chapter, there are also many similarities, including spontaneous gatherings, unreliable or otherwise contradictory narrators, and an overarching interest in the rhetorical relationship between God's Word and Man's work. They also revolve around breakdowns in communication between people from mixed social, religious, and cultural backgrounds that are bound together in voluntary and involuntary marital unions, such as pilgrimage, a storytelling alliance, a brotherhood, patronage, parliament, and even consecration, that produce invisible transformations in the nature of the characters'

relationships with one another and call attention to states of mutual debt. While these narratives vary in the degree and in the manner in which they establish Mary's *sidis*, they are interconnected in their overriding use of Mary's *sidis* as a model and as a "vehicle" for "inscrib[ing] a community of mixed discourse that models the possible harmony of a mixed state" (Strohm 172).

6. Making Sport of Charity

This thesis began with a look at how the Virgin Mary was invoked to solve the creative problems associated with paraphrasing the Bible. I showed how, in the early fourteenth-century, the *Cursor*-poet justified his work of paraphrasing the Bible with the argument that the Virgin Mary's miraculous body provided creative grounds for "Marying" contradictory bodies of discourse, the carnal romances and sacred scripture. Next, I argued that the mystery playwrights saw Joseph and Mary's domestic breakdown in communication over her pregnant belly as an opportunity to test the power of this matrimonial writing strategy to express Christ. Through close literary analysis, I demonstrated how they contributed to the development of a theory of composition wherein writers, acting as intellectual midwives to Christ, played host to his rhetorical contradictions *vis a vis* Mary's figurative *sidis*. We saw this theory at play in Chaucer's *Duchess*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *St. Erkenwald*, and *Athelston*.

Although it's been implied, I did not stress enough the polemics generated by the use and the misuse of Mary's body as a literary medium. This final and concluding chapter invites the reader to take a retrospective look at the texts that we have explored through the lens of the *Chester Nativity Play*,³¹ which rehearses and condenses these polemics in a literary assessment known as *The Midwife's Report*.

6.1 "Helpes her nowe for charytee"³²: The Chester Cycle's *Midwife's Report*

When Mary goes into labor in the *Chester Nativity Play*, Joseph leaves her side to "assaye" the city for midwives, despite the fact the he does not believe that their services

are actually necessary (469). Joseph predicts that just as Mary became pregnant “agayne kynde,” she will also give birth “agayne kynde,” “Withouten,” as Salome later puts it, any physical “teene or travayling” (472, 527). Once Joseph spots the midwives Tybell and Salome, he quickly propositions them. He asks if they, for “charytee[‘s]” sake, would voluntarily “goe with” him and “bee with” Mary “tyli day bee” (481, 478, 482). In exchange, he offers them the once in a life time opportunity to “save and see” God as well as the guarantee of immediate “paye” for their services (477, 484). Given his conviction that Mary’s labor will be labor-less, why does Joseph take it upon himself to hire midwives who won’t be performing any work at all? Furthermore, why does the Chester playwright encourage the audience to visualize Joseph’s “assaye” for midwives as a labor of lust, tantamount to the crime of sexual solicitation, rather than a labor love? I propose that these questions are meant to invite the audience to reflect on the bodies of work justified with recourse to Mary’s *sidis* and excused as “charytee” (481).

The Chester Post Reformation Banns of 1376 make mention of the “interminglinge” of “things not warranted by any writ” that occurs in the Chester plays “only to make sporte,” so that the “hearers” might be “glad[dened]” (Walker 12-14). This same term, “sporte,” is later used to excuse the “intermingling” of God’s Work and Man’s words in the Chester *Nativity Play*. The banns read, “The beirth of Christ shall all see in that stage./ Yf the the scriptures a-warrant not of the the mydwyfe’s reporte/ The authour telleth his authour, then take it in sporte” (94-96). The “intermingling” under question here is explored against a backdrop of intermediary figures, such as the authors

responsible for the material of the plays, midwives, and the Virgin Mary. This “intermingling” is also explored against the backdrop of the Incarnation, which calls Christ’s dual nature to bear on the relationship between God’s hand and the hands of human beings. There is something tongue-in-cheek about the way that *The Chester Post Reformation Banns of 1376* suggest that the audience make light of *The Midwife’s Report* as “sporte,” given the fact that the Chester playwright was, as we will see, actually taking poets to task for making “sporte” of charity (12). Joseph’s “assaye” for midwives, like the midwives’ “assaye” of Mary’s body that follows, skirts the line between “sporte” and charity work.

One of the criticisms that the Chester playwrights make about storytellers who cite charity as a justification for play is that, underneath it all, their so-called works of charity are really nothing more than empty gestures. The sexual undercurrent to Joseph’s exchange with the midwives points to the potential carnality of the tradition of work which Joseph performs. It’s not the purity of Joseph’s intentions, but the work ethic he represents which is being called into question. As we discover, it’s not the services, but the presence of the midwives that Joseph is after. An effortless labor, the Virgin Birth constitutes a challenge to the status quo of Original Sin by disrupting its consequences. But this does not mean that Joseph seeks to go “agayne” the “kynde” “manner” and customs of the local community by failing to hire midwives (474). As he puts it:

Marye, sister, I will assaye
to gett too middwives yf I maye;

for though in thee bee God verey--
 and commen agaynst kynde--
 for usage here of this cittye
 and manners sake, as thinkes mee,
 too I will fetch anon to thee
 yf I may any fynde. (469-76).

It is significant that Joseph solicits the services of midwives as a gesture of public goodwill, in order to “paye” his respects to the local community. Joseph basically goes on the hunt for an audience that will not be doing anything more than serving as stage props. The midwives are there for show. The implication is that Joseph is not really upholding a tradition of “charitee” work. Rather, he is upholding the appearance of it.

We get a stronger sense of how the Chester playwright equates works of charity with the sin of essentially prostituting Mary for the sake of show, by considering Joseph’s work in light of the unbidden work that Salome’s hands perform on Mary’s body. Joseph winds up receiving more work than he bargained for out of his arrangement with the midwives. The two midwives rehearse the Joseph’s Doubting of Mary story, taking their figurative *sidis* over Mary’s belly after the fact of childbirth. For Tebell, the fact that Mary delivers Christ “Withowten teene or travaylinge” is proof enough that a “marvelous thinge” has occurred (527, 526). Salome, on the other hand, has her doubts. By her reasoning, if Mary is truly the Virgin Mother, then she must literally be a virgin despite being a mother. Although Mary might have given birth “Withouten teene or travayling”,

the fact remains that “Was never woman cleane maye/ and chyld without man” (535-6). Salome won’t be fully convinced unless she can “assaye” Mary’s body for evidence that her hymen is still fully intact (537). Emboldened by the desire to know if it is, indeed, a “marvelous thinge,” Salome probes at the juncture of Mary’s thighs. Instantly, she meets God’s “vengeance” (544). “Alas, alas, alas, alas,” she cries, “mee ys betide an eyvll case!/ My hands bee dried up in this place,/ that feeling none have I” (540-43). Salome’s hands literally break down and she, like the narrator of Chaucer’s *Duchess*, is struck by a case of “felynge in nothing” (11).

The Chester playwright swaps contractions, which one would expect to accompany a normal labor, with a postpartum retraction. Salome’s work presents a graphic opportunity for the Chester playwright to critique the characterization of poets and playwrights as intellectual midwives to Christ as well as the writing strategy of going “through the wife to win the man.” The first connection to point out is that midwives, like poets, are in the business of working with their hands. Salome is overcome with the desire to “knowe” if “yt,” the creative instrument which authored Mary’s child, is truly a “marvelous thinge,” or an ordinary human penis (539). She tries to know “yt” explicitly using her hands, by literally “going through the wif,” the implication being that poets who label themselves intellectual midwives to Christ only fancy themselves performing gestures of “charitee” or public service (481). In reality, they are only servicing their own carnal desires and soliciting the same from their audiences. Consider that Salome and Tybell only wind up posturing as midwives. They don’t help Mary give birth. Instead of

helping to deliver Christ to the world, Salome uses her hand to defile Mary's body for the purpose of fulfilling her own intellectual curiosity.

The fact that the Chester playwright emphasizes Salome's "evyll case" in lieu of the other miracles they list as being performed on the day of Christ's birth conveys a sense of their priorities for the *Nativity Play*, as well as a sense of a shared understanding regarding the priorities of the Joseph's Doubting of Mary scenes in general (541). After Salome retracts her hands, takes back her work, and repents for her sin, her hands rematerialize and she becomes "whole" again (560). But it's not this image of wholeness that the Chester playwright ends the *Nativity Play* with.

The Chester *Nativity Play* ends with a retrospective look at the miracle of Salome's "roted" hand (719). In his closing address, the Expositor provides the audience with the moral to the miracle of Salome's "roted" hand. He explains:

when Sahome attempted to knowe
whether shee was a maye,
hyr hand roted, as you have scene.
Wherby you may take good teene
that unbeleeffe is a fowle sinne,
as you have scene within this playe. (717-22).

Self-critical of the tradition of charity work that he is involved in, the Chester playwright casts doubt on the show and tell strategy that provides for the structure of the play. The refrain, "as you have scene," which is repeated twice in this passage, is ironic given the

moral of 'seeing isn't believing' that the Expositor delivers to the audience. The Expositor's parting gesture of hand comes off as a sleight of hand. The miracle isn't in the charity Christ shows Salome when he heals her hand. Rather it is in the show of waste and decay that attends carnal transgression. The Chester playwright thus depicts charity work as a form of "playe."

"For usage here of this citty/ and manners sake," Joseph feels compelled to host a show. He borrows Tybill and Salome—as stage props, as an audience, and as actors—and the implication is that he does so, not only with his own money, but principally on charity's dime (473-4). Everyone borrows on Mary's body to perform their work. There is a lot of spiritual debt that gets racked up amidst the charitable exchanges which take place about Mary's *sidis*. Everyone is implicated in this debt. Joseph and the midwives' examples demonstrate the futility of trying to tell apart the people who host the shows, from the people who play in them, or watch them happen. Later, these debts will seemingly be paid off in another show, the *Passion of Christ*. But this show should only heighten awareness of an ever increasing debt that leaves everyone who has had a hand to play in it invisibly "roted."

6.2 Retractions

The strain of cynicism that runs through the Chester *Nativity Play* is something we have seen before. The Chester *Nativity Play's* *Midwife's Report* suggests that, under pretense of posturing as intellectual midwives to Christ, poets, playwrights, and their audiences make sport of charity. We saw similar criticism surface in *Athelston*, where the

matrimonial writing strategy associated with the Virgin Birth is characterized as an underhanded way for all parties implicated in literary activity to justify the reciprocal exploitation of the good-faith bonds of charity that sustain the community against social and spiritual breakdown. The contrast these two works establish between merry-making and “making Mary” is also evident in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, which juxtaposes a storytelling contest with a spiritual pilgrimage.

The lines of inquiry which these poets use to navigate Mary’s *sidis* suggests a figurative movement in the dynamics of the metaphor itself, from reading and writing as works of charity to reading and writing as acts of retrospective confession which evoke acknowledgment of wholly present and yet mutually unfulfilled debt. We can see evidence of this movement in the contrast between Chaucer’s *Duchess*, which ends reflexively with new work, and his *Canterbury Tales*, which ends with *Retractions* of works on moral grounds. We can also see this movement in rhetoric fully take place in *The Canterbury Tales*, which begins with a storytelling contest between pilgrims and ends with *Retractions*.

It might be helpful, and it’s certainly interesting, to think of Chaucer’s *Retractions* of works in terms of Salome’s retraction of hand in the *Chester Mystery Cycle*. Both are works which raise questions about the morality and the efficacy of journeying “throu þe wjif to wyn þe man.” There is also a comparison to be drawn between the priority that the miracle of Salome’s “roted” hand is given in the list of miracles recounted on the day of Christ’s birth and the list of works Chaucer decides to hold onto and to give away in his

Retractions. But the most immediate connection, one that figures in all of the texts examined in this study, has to deal with the idea of what a retraction signifies. When we consider what it is that the hands in these works retract from and out of, we should understand that we are being asked whether these retractions signal a retrospective re-understanding of storytelling as a form of confession, a ritual recapitulation of the “New Work” leading up to confession and contrition, or an end of charity work as we know it.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, references to the York plays will be taken from Clifford Davidson's edition of the text.

² *Wilde* (adj.): (a) lacking in restraint, undisciplined; unmanageable, recalcitrant; riotous, rowdy; headstrong, rash, impetuous; also, ill brought up, unruly;—used of a child...self-willed; also, obstinate; (b) out of one's mind, frenzied, mad; beside oneself with emotion (e.g., enraged, impassioned, etc.); also, distracted, bewildered; (c) perverse, wicked; lascivious, wanton; also, lusty; (d) without civilization, primitive; barbarous, savage; also, inhuman, brutish, beastly; of a tyrant, devils: cruel, vicious. For use of the term *wilde* in *JTAM*, see lines 67, 69, 139, 212.

³ *Kynde* (adj), definition abbreviated from the MED: 1. (a) In accordance with the ordinary course of nature, natural; (b) of bodily functions: normal, healthful; (c) innate, instinctive, characteristic; (d) required by nature, appropriate, suitable, proper; (e) of mental powers: native, inborn; ~ wit (craft, knowing, skill, understanding), natural reason (capable of discriminating useful from harmful, good from evil, of guiding conduct and constructing a natural philosophy); . . . also, the natural wisdom derived from the exercise of this faculty; ~ witted, possessing kind wit. 2. (a) Native; ~ land (country, place, etc.); ~ man, a native; ~ name, (one's) own name; (b) inherent, real, genuine; (c) unadulterated, uncontaminated, pure, complete; ~ caitiff, utter fool; (d) required by customary order, prescribed. 3. (a) Having rights by birth, legitimate, lawful; ~ heir [see heir 1. (a)]; ~

heritage, lawful inheritance; ~ lord, lord by right of birth; also, true lord, lawful lord, i.e., God; also, accustomed master; right of ~ birth, birthright; (b) related by kinship, akin; ~ blood, kinsfolk; ~ elder, ancestor; (c) hereditary. 4. (a) Having normal affections or disposition, well-disposed towards one's kin; also, dutiful, obedient; fig. of the heart and lungs; (b) concordant with the natural moral law, lawful, moral; (c) customary, normal. 5. (a) Benevolent, loving, affectionate, kind; (b) pleasing, acceptable, pleasant; of weather: favorable; of land: rich, fertile; 6. (a) Generous, gracious, noble; (b) honorable, constant, faithful, true; (c) brave, courageous, spirited; (d) wellborn; of gentle birth.

⁴ This is a paraphrase of Wycliffe's criticism on the Eucharist. "And thou then," he inquired of the ecclesiastic, "that art an earthly man, by what reason mayest thou say that thou makest they Maker?" (qtd. in Vaughan 157).

⁵ Rosemary Woolf, for example, remarks that "in the mystery plays the fabliaux world exists only in Joseph's imagination, while Mary still lives in the spotless and serene world of the Annunciation" (173).

⁶ See Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

⁷ Definition is taken from *the Electronic Middle English Dictionary* hosted by the University of Michigan.

⁸ See Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000.

⁹ See lines 78 and 105 for Adam and Eve's use of the term "techyng."

¹⁰ See *JTAM* line 23.

¹¹ See Hodge and Kress' *Social Semiotics* (1988). Hodge and Kress describe ideological complexes as "a functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world" that "represent the social order as simultaneously," and falsely, "serving the interests of both dominant and subordinate" (3). *Social Semiotics* is about how "inequalities in the distribution of power and other goods" manifest in forms and modes of communication. Putting aside the text's freighted social commentary, I find Hodge and Kress's concept of a "a functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world" useful to thinking about how medieval writers elaborate on the relationships between different forms of discourse, frames of reference, and genres in the late fourteenth-century Middle English texts I investigate (3).

¹² The Marionic language of fulfillment permeates the *Duchess*. The term "hoolly" appears 14 times in *the Duchess*. The variation "hool" is used once. The narrator's "sorwful imaginacioun" also plays into Chaucer's discourse on fulfillment.

¹³ Many early critics such as Kemp Malone (1951), Bronson (1952), Clemen (1963), and Muscatine (1966) choose to date the text to the year 1369, as close to the presumed occasion of writing as possible. But the *Book of the Duchess* need not have been composed in such timely response to Blanche's death. Having passed on account of the plague as her father and sister before her, Blanche was by all accounts mourned with great sincerity by her wealthy and immensely powerful husband John of Gaunt, Duke of

Lancaster and father of Henry IV. In commemoration of his late wife, Gaunt had a portrait of her set out in white alabaster upon her tomb (Anderson 157). He also established an annual tribute to her memory which included prayers to be read for her soul, church services, and alms to be distributed for the poor. Chaucer's poem have been produced at time of Blanche's death, but it also might have been a commemorative offering at one of the annual tributes conducted in her honor.

¹⁴ See Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000.

¹⁵ See Robert Watson's "Invention and Dialogue in the *Book of the Duchess*" for a detailed analysis of the role that philosophical authorities such as Socrates and Cicero play in the narrator and the knights' conversation.

¹⁶ It may be a coincidence, but it is interesting that the figure of speech that the narrator uses when he writes that Socrates "counted nat three strees/Of noight that Fortune coude do," is also used by Joseph in *The York Cycle*, when he laments about his marriage to Mary: "That thusgates nowe on myne alde dase/ Has wedded a yonge wenche to my wiff,/ And may noight wele tryne over two strase?" (11-13).

¹⁸ See Davidson, Clifford. In the *Creation* play, Lucifer and the rebel angels are banished from God's graces because they "in fantasyes fell" (129).

¹⁹ The *Book of the Duchess* has in great measure been understood *vis a vis* the historical event of Blanche of Lancaster's death. Condren asserts that "Though his poetry

usually frees itself of the fourteenth-century and requires for its appreciation only a deep knowledge of human nature, the Duchess seems to demand an understanding of its own time..." (195). Many early critics such as Malone (1951), Bronson (1952), Clemen (1963), and Muscatine (1966) choose to date the text to the year 1369, as close to the time of Blanche's death, the presumed occasion of writing, as possible .

²⁰ Condren also sees the characters as comprising two parts of the same person. For him, the *Book of the Duchess*' precise description of the black knight as a man 24 years of age wreaks some havoc on the theory that the knight is a poetic stand-in for John of Gaunt who would have been 29 years of age at the time. He proposes that the black knight is not John of Gaunt at all, but that the narrator and the Knight together represent "aspects of a single consciousness," that being Chaucer's eight years after Blanche's death and eight years before, and supports his theory with evidence that Chaucer might have been 24 in the year 1369 (208).

²³ In the York Cycle, Joseph remarks, "Here bus me bide full stille/Till I have slepid my fille./ Myn hert so hevy it is" (13.243-45).

²⁴ The relationship between wholeness and holiness plays an important role in Chaucer's *Duchess*. The poem is interspersed with references to, puns, and variations on the word "hool." See lines 15, 115, 324, 326, 553-54, 746, 751, 756, 766, 991, 1036, 1041, 1224, and 1269.

²⁵ Kamowski contends that the poem “constitutes an argument against major Wycliffite challenges to the efficacy and authority of the established Church at the end of the fourteenth century” (6). For Kamowski, the judge’s baptism is a moment of triumphant orthodoxy where an “insoluble dogmatic problem” identified by the Wycliffites is taken seriously and resolved: the Old law meets the New law and justice meets mercy by charity of the sacraments (10).

²⁶ See Gardy and Sisk who discuss how St. Erkenwald’s conversation with the animate pagan corpse invokes Pelagian ideas about the meritocracy of salvation.

²⁷ Sisk, for instance, proposes that the discrepancy between Augustine and Erkenwald’s ritual successes remarks on a Donatist viewpoint. The Donatists believed that the efficacy of sacramental ritual depended on the moral integrity of the priest performing the ritual, that is, on whether the priest was a member of the predestined spiritual elite. The fact that Augustine seems to botch his job of consecrating the pagan temples whereas Erkenwald successfully performs a baptism suggests that Augustine was not one of the predestined whereas Erkenwald was. According to Sisk, the Erkenwald-poet brings up Donatist theology, among other heterodox views, such as Pelagianism, to pose “oblique challenges” to orthodoxy (105).

²⁸ Sisk maintains that “*St. Erkenwald*, although an unusual representative of the genre, is best approached as hagiography” (93).

²⁹ See Nancy Mason Bradbury's *The Erosion of Faith-Based Relationships*.

Focusing on the significance of oath-based relationships in medieval society, Bradbury also draws a parallel between the messengers' fellowship and the storytelling partnership that Chaucer's pilgrims form.

³⁰ See Susan Crane's *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature*.

³¹ References to the Chester Mystery Cycle will be taken from the R.M. Lumiansky, R M, and David Mills. *The Chester Mystery Cycle*.

³² *Chester Nativity Play*, ll. 481.

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