GIFTS AND ECONOMIC EXCHANGE IN MIDDLE ENGLISH RELIGIOUS WRITING

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Chapel Hill
2009

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Abstract

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Gifts and Economic Exchange in Middle English Religious Writing
Under the direction of Joseph Wittig

This project examines how three Middle English texts—the poem *Pearl*, the long prose treatise *Dives and Pauper*, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*—use the language of gift-giving to imagine alternatives to the competitive cultures of English court and marketplace during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. I argue that early capitalism is only one of several modes of exchange available to late medieval writers, along with the gift-economy (first theorized by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss) and forms of mercantile exchange inflected by local markets and cultures of credit. The medieval writers considered in this project understand gift exchanges as creating relationships of loyalty, hierarchy, and mutual dependence. While two of the authors under consideration welcome such relationships as potentially fostering reconciliation between individuals and God, or individuals and each other, the third, Margery Kempe, sees divine gift-giving as a release from a hostile and oppressive mercantile culture. I argue that the use of these categories by Middle English writers enriches our understanding of economics through the possibility of exchanges informed not by self-interested competition but by generosity and reciprocity.
Acknowledgments

It is appropriate that a dissertation on money and gift-giving be especially open in its acknowledgments of debts. I have incurred many.

First, I am profoundly indebted to my grandfather, Albert Keim, whose unexpected financial gift in 2007 enabled several extra months of full-time research the next year. At the time, I still thought that money was the opposite of gift. His act of generosity made me examine my own presuppositions and ultimately changed the direction of this thesis as well as making it possible to write.

My director Professor Joseph Wittig read this work critically, kindly, and at times skeptically, and with an abiding generosity and patience. Thank you for everything. To Professor David Aers of Duke University I am also deeply grateful, particularly for his comments on chapter 1.

Gratitude is due to the Medieval Academy of America and the Richard III Society for supporting a portion of this dissertation (the chapter on Pearl) with the Schallek Award in 2006, to the Medieval and Early Modern program at UNC for a one-semester fellowship
in 2008, and to the department of English and Comparative Literature for two grants as this project neared completion. My department also sponsored a summer seminar on dissertation writing in the summer of 2006, and I am profoundly grateful to Mary Floyd-Wilson, John McGowan, and James Thompson for their kindness and help as I took part in the seminar while a new parent.

Mary Raschko and Sarah Lindsay intelligently discussed early drafts of every chapter, shared resources, and frequently opened up new ways to approach difficult ideas. Their insight and generosity has showed me what friendship among academics should look like. Rosalie Genova and Matt Harper helped me with the difficult task of revision at three crucial points: the beginning, the middle, and the end. For company during the act of writing, and friendship before and after, I thank Andréa Williams, Arseniy Gutnik, Britt Mize, Cindy Current, Elizabeth Kramer, Hank Tarlton, Jamie Lewis, Mary Raschko, Nancy Pennington, Nikki Jarrett, Rachel Martin, Sarah Lindsay, Tim Cupery, and Young Eun Chae. I must also thank a whole army of reference librarians and inter-library loan staff at Carolina, as well as Ellen Hampton, who took time away from her work at the reference desk of Baylor University to answer assorted research and technological questions. Blessed is the scholar who has an online reference librarian for a friend.

The following people gave generously of their time in order that I could get away to write: Jim and Barbara Keim, Jeff and Patty Harper, Shirley Sennhauser, Nancy
Pennington, Elizabeth Snoeyink. I cannot repay that debt, nor many others too great to
name. If I have omitted anyone else, it is through negligence rather than ingratitude.

Lastly I must thank Matt, who has taught me how to receive, and Lillian, who has
taught me how to give.
For my parents
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"Here I am, proud as a Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on! Cursed be that mortal inter-indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers. I would be free as air; and I’m down in the whole world’s books. I am so rich, I could have given bid for bid with the wealthiest Praetorians at the auction of the Roman empire (which was the world's); and yet I owe for the flesh in the tongue I brag with."

Captain Ahab, *Moby-Dick*

We do not really understand gifts. Our paradigm for understanding exchange is buying and selling, so much so that we consider our national economy to be what defines our communal and national well-being. On the other hand, gift-giving remains largely untheorized for us. The rules of etiquette—the explicit, rather than implicit, prescriptive rules that govern our social behavior—tell us that a gift is free and one-sided by nature, that it never has to be repaid, and that it is only truly a gift when given without expectation of a return. Scholars like Marcel Mauss have observed gift-exchanges in other cultures, but
too few of us have learned to understand his work as anything more than merely anthropological insights into the exotic practices of “primitive” peoples.¹

Yet we implicitly know something about gift-economies. At Christmas, when we decide what to give to a particular person, we must consider whether that person will give us a gift, approximately how much that gift might cost in money or symbolic value, what kind of gift on our part will be approximately equal, whether a given object might embarrass or please the recipient, and how to present it in a way that seems natural and spontaneous. When we receive gifts, we are ashamed if we cannot give a gift in return, or if our gift is too cheap or small in comparison. We don’t usually talk explicitly about the rules by which we make these calculations, but we make them.

This project seeks to trace the workings of gift-giving in late medieval English writings. Just as our own understanding of gift-giving at Christmas bears the stamp of mass-consumer capitalism—an ideology that obscures the meaning of gift-giving—medieval gift-economies were intertwined with multiple systems of logic, not always coherently: normal market practices of buying and selling; theological concepts of creation; the practices of penitence and absolution; concepts of a hierarchical society emergent capitalism. My project seeks to trace the ways in which these different systems of logic

interact with each other and with the idea of gift. In writing, I have asked three main questions. First, what forms of gift-economy were important in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries? Second, how do the writers under consideration distinguish gift-exchange from what the theologian John Milbank calls contract, and what I call mercantile exchange? Third, what social and theological work do gift-exchanges do in these texts? And lastly, can the language of gift-exchange provide us with alternative ways of thinking about relationships between people who tend to conceive of themselves as atomized individuals?

The questions I ask here are timely. Scholars in a wide range of disciplines have recently begun to research and reflect on gifts. The subject of my inquiry in this dissertation has come partly out of the philosophical and theological writings of Jacques Derrida and John Milbank, though as a literary historian I necessarily approach the topic in a very different style and with different methodological tools. My research also takes part in, and makes use of, the many conversations about gift-giving that have recently begun to take place among historians, anthropologists, and other scholars of medieval Europe.

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There is a place for literary critics in these conversations as well, and this project is a first step toward taking that place.

I understand my approach as a kind of historical anthropology. I have tried to figure out how medieval people thought: not necessarily how they would have explained themselves, but the structures of thought behind their words and actions. I strongly believe that literary critics must cultivate an ethical awareness in their work, or risk becoming solipsistic and irrelevant. I have therefore tried to use literary methods of analysis to generate historical, ethical, and theological knowledge.

First, some definitions. Ethical considerations of gift-exchange (or, as it is sometimes called among philosophers, the Gift) typically distinguish gifts from contractual exchange, by which they usually mean mercantile exchange. Mercantile exchange is about

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*Contractual exchange does, of course, include barter economies, but both medieval and modern Western societies depend on money to facilitate transactions, and so mercantile is equally accurate for my purposes, and more historically specific.*
the object of exchange. We calculate to the penny what we can give up in exchange for a particular service or commodity, and the exchange is formalized in the implicit contract of a sale. To get more than we give is considered a bargain, an advantageous transaction. Gift-giving is also a calculation, but not an exact one. The theologian John Milbank says that gifts are characterized by “asymmetrical reciprocity [and] non-identical repetition”; that is, by a mutual exchange of objects or benefits that are not exactly the same in worth.\(^5\) The reason is because gifts are not primarily about the object of exchange, but about the relationship between giver and recipient. The relationship is reciprocal; the exchange of gifts marks out paths of gratitude, friendship or kinship, obligation, loyalty, debt, humiliation. In the logic of gift-economies, to receive more than one gives does not make one rich. Instead it renders one deeply in debt.

Anglo-Saxonists have long recognized this discourse of gift within Old English poetry, but historians typically narrate the economic and social history of English culture as moving from a “primitive” gift-economy to more complex forms of capitalism relying on monetary exchange.\(^6\) Yet the language and practices associated with gift-giving maintained their power throughout the late Middle Ages in multiple spheres: as might be expected, in


the aristocratic and royal circles where English political power had traditionally lain, and in
the giving of alms for religious purposes, but also in forms of hospitality offered to
strangers, in particular to pilgrims, and most importantly for my study, in medieval
theological understandings of God’s relationship to creation and to his creatures. As a
result, the gestures of generosity could signify a variety of different meanings, depending
upon the context in which they were made.

Consider, for instance, John Brompton, a prominent merchant of Beverley. In the
summer of 1444 he made a will directing how alms should be distributed from his
possessions after he died. Many well-to-do people made similar arrangements in their
wills, but Brompton’s wealth allowed him to make especially lavish provisions for alms after
his death. Among other monetary bequests to local religious institutions and persons, he
left £3.6s.8d to buy wax candles for his funeral, and 36s. to buy russet clothing for thirteen
poor men who would carry those candles in the funeral procession and presumably pray for
his soul. Such a provision had several results. First, it showed Brompton’s penitence for

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any sins for which he needed to make amends. It ensured that his soul would be prayed for. But it also ensured that his funeral would be well-attended. In addition, it demonstrated publicly his charity and generosity in giving alms, in that it cast the poor men in a highly visible part of the ceremony. It also exhibited his social station in comparison to the recipients of his gifts, since it specified that the paupers who carried the candles be dressed in the cheap russet cloth which visually identified them as poor. And finally, it accomplished all this within a Christian ritual marking death, the state in which all ranks were supposed to be leveled.⁹

From this example of alms-giving, we can locate the social dimensions in which gift-giving in general might take place. Charitable gifts might be understood as gifts to God, demonstrating contrition or love. They might mark out theological or existential equality between souls, with a gift urged out of kindness and fellow-feeling. But at the same time, gifts could also inscribe hierarchy upon relationships. They could exhibit the wealth and standing of the giver to the public and contrast, explicitly or implicitly, the poverty and dependence of the recipient. Moreover, medieval theology conceptualized creation as God’s gift to humanity and even embedded gift-giving in the very center of its

soteriology by way of the doctrine of the treasury of merits, imagining Christ’s blood and
the good works of the saints as an infinite treasure entrusted to the Church, to be given
out to sinners who asked in the right way. The practice of indulgences, which at their
simplest were supposed to be a sort of exchange of goodwill gestures between the individual
and the church, were a logical outgrowth of this paradigm. That they so often turned into
the kind of corrupt purchase satirized by Chaucer and repudiated by Luther testifies to the
growing importance of calculation in late medieval theological and social thinking.

Each chapter of this dissertation looks at how the social and theological
ramifications of gift-giving play out in a particular text. Chapter 1 analyzes the fourteenth-
century poem *Pearl* in the context of aristocratic gift-exchanges. I argue that the central

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question is who the Pearl-Maiden belongs to, and how; while the narrator thinks of her as a precious object to be possessed and hoarded, the rest of the poem makes clear that she was his only temporarily, like the treasures that circulated back and forth among nobles and kings in the fourteenth century. Thus the narrator’s claim to absolute ownership cuts him off from both divine and human society unless he can resign himself to limited ownership and acknowledge his dependence upon a sovereign Giver.

Chapter 2 examines the A version of “Holy Poverty,” the prologue to the massive and massively under-studied fifteenth-century prose work *Dives and Pauper*, a didactic treatise on the Ten Commandments framed as a debate between its two eponymous speakers. The nameless Franciscan author frames his prologue to the work around the dichotomy of rich and poor in order to undercut that dichotomy. Modeling his literary style on biblical texts that equate wisdom with true wealth, he argues not just that voluntary poverty is the best condition of life, but that wealth means not power but profound dependence both upon God and upon the poor. He thereby invokes the possibility of a society informed by an awareness of mutual interdependence.

Chapter 3 examines how Margery Kempe, in the *Book* bearing her name, imagines the social sphere as a market and herself as a commodity on display. For her, the gift of divine forgiveness allows an escape from the need to constantly accumulate economic, social, and spiritual capital as a way of maintaining her social value. However, this gift does
not release her from the basic logic of mercantile exchange; throughout the text, the very public forms that her devotion takes condemn her to enduring a progressive debasement and devaluation.

Chapter 4 returns to the *Book of Margery Kempe* to consider how Kempe imagines the gift-giving linking her to God and to her fellow human beings. While she exploits the idea of a generous and loving God to cast herself as singularly chosen, she is also obsessed with the ideas of scarcity and loss. As a result, she never takes advantage of the potential to reconcile with others through a realization of interdependence.

In some ways the story that I am telling is a story of possibility and failure. Margery Kempe, the figure in this project who most self-consciously uses the language of gift, does so in a way that pits her singular self against a slanderous and larcenous world, giving her the upper hand in the spiritual realm when she cannot gain it in the social. Each of these texts is deeply aware of the ways in which gift-economies can produce and reinforce social hierarchy. Yet these texts suggest that such exchanges can also do constructive work by awakening gratitude, a sense of personal obligation, and a recognition that individuals are by nature limited, contingent, and deeply dependent upon each other for everything that they value.
Chapter 1:

*Pearl* in the Context of Fourteenth-Century Gift Economies

In 1401, Blanche, the daughter of Henry IV, married Ludwig III of Bavaria. Among the rich objects included in her dowry was a coronal, a crown characterized by tall fleurons or floral points and worn by a bride on her wedding day (Figure 1). Medieval Europeans regarded coronals as essential to the wedding ceremony. Many parish churches owned a simple one to be lent to brides whose families were too poor to possess their own; wealthy families might commission a goldsmith to make such an object if they did not already own one, and these might serve as part of the bride’s dowry.\(^{12}\) Blanche’s coronal, now in the Treasury of the Munich Residenz in Germany, was probably made in the 1370s or 80s and brought to London in 1382 by Anne of Bohemia, the first wife of Richard II.\(^ {13}\) Made of gold, precious stones, and pearls set in repeating patterns, it was probably made within ten years of *Pearl*. Its construction is intricate, and its materials are wholly precious. It is now one of the most familiar examples

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\(^{13}\)John Cherry, *Goldsmiths* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 47.
of fourteenth-century goldwork, perhaps simply because it has survived the melting and recasting that were the fate of so much medieval treasure.\textsuperscript{14}

The coronal of Princess Blanche can help us think about *Pearl* on a number of levels.

First on the most basic level, it gives us a visual reference for the crown that the Maiden wears:

“a pyȝte coroune ...Of marjorys and non oþer ston, Hiȝe pynakled...with flurted flowers perfet vpon.”  

Many commentators have noted that her crown signifies her queenship, but if it is a coronal it also signals that she is a bride—as her unbound hair suggests, and as the Maiden herself indicates later in the poem.

Second, the coronal can serve as a material analogue to the structure of the poem. The poem is made up of twenty stanza-groups, each containing five stanzas. Each stanza in the stanza-group ends with the same word or phrase, and many of these have to do with wealth and treasure: in the first stanza-group, “priuy perle withouten spot”; in the second, the word “adubbement” (adornment) or variations of it; in the third, “ay more and more,” a phrase which creates an effect of accumulation as it is repeated; in the fourth, “precios perles pyȝte”; and so on. The reiteration of these words creates an effect of elaborate adornment not only because of their repetition but because they appear in a slightly different context, and a slightly different form, at the end of each stanza. This aspect of the poem has been discussed by many critics.

Felicity Riddy points out that the late medieval English use of the word “jewel” describes any highly ornamented and precious object, not just items of personal adornment. Riddy argues

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16 Also noted by Thomas, *A Blessed Shore*, 56-7.
that both the dreamer’s daughter and the poem itself are “jewels” in this sense.\textsuperscript{17} Ian Bishop has noted that the closed nature of the poem—its last stanza links back to its first—is reminiscent of a rosary made of pearls, with each stanza standing for a single pearl. He notes, however, that the grouping of stanzas into fives militates against this interpretation, because fourteenth-century rosaries grouped their beads into decades, or groups of 10.\textsuperscript{18} On the other hand, Blanche’s coronal features pearls grouped in threes and fours, but on its fleurons the other gems are grouped in fives: four points and a center. If we were to imagine this coronal made “Of marjorys and non oþer ston” (l.206), the parallel would become apparent at once.\textsuperscript{19}

At the very least, the maker of the coronal and the maker of \textit{Pearl} have similar ideas about ornamentation through repetition and variation; but it is also possible that the object which the poem imitates is not a rosary, but a crown.

Third, the peregrinations of Blanche’s crown illustrate for us the networks of gift-exchange in the context of which both coronal and poem circulated. Aristocrats throughout the Middle Ages enhanced their own prestige and created ties of obligation and loyalty by


\textsuperscript{18}Ian Bishop, \textit{Pearl in Its Setting} (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), 30.

\textsuperscript{19}Bishop also notes the Renaissance sonnet-sequences known as coronas, crowns, or garlands, in which stanzas are connected by concatenation in the same way that they are in \textit{Pearl}; but since there are no known sequences until much later, this is just an interesting parallel. (Ibid.)
giving and receiving gifts of various kinds.\textsuperscript{20} Scholars of the Middle Ages have mapped the complex networks of gift-giving that bound together the aristocracy and religious foundations such as monasteries and churches.\textsuperscript{21} In the last ten years, however, there has been a marked shift away from the study of gifts to institutions, toward the study of the gift-giving that characterized later medieval social relations among the aristocracy.\textsuperscript{22} Kings and other high-ranking nobles frequently gave out valuable presents of lands and annuities to those who served them well, in other cases giving out material commodities such as wine, spices, or household goods. They received presents (usually in kind, and of considerably lesser value) from their social inferiors. On special occasions they might distribute or receive treasures of various kinds.

\textsuperscript{20}The influential anthropologist Marcel Mauss argued that gifts are central to most if not all cultures, and that their primary function is to bind social agents together through rituals of exchange. To be the giver in such an economy is to establish one's own prestige through largesse, and to establish the recipient in a dependent relationship to oneself. According to Mauss, the giver of a gift theoretically acts of his own free will, but there are deep consequences for refusing to engage in such transactions: a refusal to accept a gift is to symbolically refuse social relations. See Mauss, \textit{The Gift}, 8-18.


On New Year’s Day of 1382, for instance, John of Gaunt gave small, valuable tokens made out of gold and decorated with gems, enamel, or engraving, to the king and queen and to his friends. One received a gift, large or small, through the largesse of another. Small gifts frequently cemented relations of friendship and goodwill, while larger gifts could establish the recipient in a dependent relationship to the giver. For example, during Richard II’s 1396 visit to France, he and the French king’s brother, Duke Louis of Orleans, engaged in what was essentially a duel of gifts. Richard gave the duke a gold ewer and a hanap (a kind of fancy goblet), upon which the duke gave him a more precious ewer and hanap. Richard then gave him an ouche, an ornamental clasp, which he countered with a more beautiful one. Finally Richard stripped off his ruby ring and gave it to the duke, at which point the duke gave him a more valuable one, and left “with his head held high.”

Even if this exchange was at least partially planned in advance (otherwise why come prepared with matching ewers and goblets?), the pride of the French duke suggests that he perceived the exchange as a contest against the English king, and one which he had won with his more magnificent gifts.

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Such precious objects were especially powerful in a gift economy. While an object of
treasure might be bought or commissioned by a single patron, it was constructed to embody
both literal and symbolic properties which could be transferred to its owner through the
physical attributes of precious materials, intricate workmanship, and beauty.\textsuperscript{25} The value of
these objects could not be calculated strictly in terms of the quantity of precious metal
contained therein, so they lent themselves especially well to gift-giving in which the giver
desired to imbue the recipient with qualities embodied symbolically by the gift itself.\textsuperscript{26}

To understand \textit{Pearl}, we must understand the nature of ownership in the ceremonial
gift-economies of late medieval England and France. These existed alongside, and are
explicitly distinguished from, mercantile transactions: an exchange of goods motivated by a
desire for immediate gain, and characterized by exacting calculations as to the comparative value
of items exchanged—for instance, through hard bargaining in the marketplace, and sometimes
by the use of money to facilitate these calculations.\textsuperscript{27} Such behavior was seen as antithetical to
the spirit of gift-exchanges and inappropriate for a noble person. To possess treasures was

\textsuperscript{25}See the many essays in Elizabeth M. Tyler, ed., \textit{Treasure in the Medieval West} (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York
Medieval Press, 2000).

\textsuperscript{26}For the transfer of symbolic properties via goods, see Grant McCracken, \textit{Culture and Consumption: New
Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities} (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press,

\textsuperscript{27}Mauss, \textit{The Gift}, 22.
desirable, because to own them was in some sense to participate in their beauty and preciousness. But while medieval kings were expected to be magnificent—and did in fact use precious objects to construct their royal splendor—they were also expected, indeed obligated, to be generous.\textsuperscript{28} This is evident in the customs of patronage that surrounded kingship throughout the Middle Ages and the criticism that attended kings who failed to fulfill their obligation to dispense land, money, and privileges to their faithful servants. Treasure accrued its greatest benefits not when it was hoarded up or consumed, but when its owners gave it away. This was true even when the treasure in question had itself been given to the giver by someone else. Especially rich and beautiful presents might be given away again in other exchanges, in a public, ritual, and very acceptable form of regifting. For example, at Christmas of 1495, Jean de Berry gave King Charles VI of France a golden \textit{nef}, a model ship for the dinner table. Charles then presented that same \textit{nef} to Richard II in a public ceremony during the English king’s 1496 visit to France.\textsuperscript{29} Similarly, Blanche’s coronal crossed the English Channel twice within twenty years, accompanying two different royal brides across Europe as part of their dowries. Ownership of such precious objects was inherently transitory.


\textsuperscript{29}Stratford, ”Gold and Diplomacy,” 229.
The central metaphor of *Pearl* emphasizes the ephemerality of ownership and the importance of hierarchical social relations in a ceremonial gift-economy. The speakers within the poem contest the meanings of the metaphorical pearl. For the unconsoled mourner who begins the action of the poem by falling asleep in the garden, it carries the emotional value of the lost child. As he is reunited with her in vision, his continued use of the metaphor encodes not only a measure of his joy at reunion with her, but also a culturally sanctioned paternal possessiveness. The dreamer’s possessiveness toward his lost pearl is consistent with a stance of absolute ownership, not the temporary possession of a treasure that characterizes gift-economies. The poem depicts the dreamer’s emotions as deeply and movingly personal; but they are also individualistic in a way that opposes the social bonds necessary in both earthly and heavenly courts. The maiden in her turn resists the dreamer’s claims to possession, writing herself as the recipient of largesse from a courtly lord, constituted by social relationships of dependence, rather than as an essentially passive object whose value is ascribed to her by an owner.

I.

In *Pearl*, the dreamer’s characteristic posture is that of possessor, and it appears in a variety of forms throughout the poem. If readers remember any particular phrase from Pearl, it is likely to be one variation of the phrase that ends each of the first five stanzas of *Pearl*: “my
priuy perle withouten spotte” (24) or “my precious perle wythouten spot” (48). In fact, this phrase appears three times as “that precious perle without a spot,” twice with the “my” in front of it and once without. The word *my* or *mine* appears in the poem 96 other times, and about three quarters of these occur in the first half of the poem. It appears with particular frequency in the dreamer’s initial conversation with the Pearl-Maiden, where the dreamer emphatically claims the pearl as his. On the most basic level, the pearl metaphor is meant to suggest her value by comparing her to the Pearl of Great Price in Matthew 13.45-46, and such value, both in the parable and in the poem, is personal, measured by the perceptions of the one who seeks the pearl. But the persistence of this possessive pronoun, *mine*, suggests that the poet is after something much more nuanced than just a description of her value—personal or otherwise. He wants to evoke a particular mental and emotional attitude toward daughters.\(^{30}\)

The dreamer-narrator in Pearl is concerned not with utility or exchange-value, nor in the power that accompanies wealth, but with the particular value of the particular child, figured as a pearl, that he has lost. In such a metaphor, the dreamer does not seem avaricious or

\(^{30}\)The relationship between the dreamer and the maiden is of course deeply ambiguous, and scholars have long disagreed over how to interpret the dreamer’s statement that “Ho watʒ me nerre þen aunte or nece” (l.233). This article will assume that the relationship depicted between dreamer and maiden is that of a father and a daughter, though the dreamer is not necessarily to be identified with the poet himself. Many other possible interpretations have been suggested, ranging from the allegorical [Sister Mary Madeleva, *Pearl*: A Study in Spiritual Dryness (New York: Appleton, 1925) to the political [Bowers, *Politics of Pearl*] to the suggestion that the two are lovers [Jane Beal, "The Pearl-Maiden’s Two Lovers," *Studies in Philology* 100, no. 1 (2003): 1-21]. Lynn Staley has argued that the Maiden is a living daughter who has been placed in a convent of Minoresses; see Lynn Staley, "Pearl and the Contingencies of Love and Piety," in *Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry: Essays in Honor of Derek Pearsall*, ed. David Aers (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 83-114.
mercenary in his desire for the lost object, as he would if he imagined her as a piece of money; in fact, quite the reverse. First, and most obviously, the child-as-pearl emphasizes her beauty. His initial description describes equally well the beauty of a pearl and the beauty of a human girl as understood in the Middle Ages—small, round, smooth sides, luster, pure whiteness, arrayed in a beautiful setting. Second, the description emphasizes her rarity: “makellez” (lines 721ff). In the Middle Ages as now, it was very difficult to find two identical perfect natural pearls, due to the many variables in their production. The beauty and uniqueness of the pearl in this poem thus make it an immensely precious thing, to be treasured for its intrinsic qualities. The poem makes literal that old but true cliché that parents say: “my child is very precious to me.”

Obviously the dreamer intends the image of the pearl to reflect the value he puts on her. And yet other aspects of this metaphor ought to make the modern reader profoundly uncomfortable. Think for an instant about single pearls. They are small, portable, inanimate, losable, marketable (though the dreamer seems pointedly to ignore this side of the image); manipulable, since a jeweler could use it to ornament a piece of jewelry or clothing—but above all, inanimate. A pearl is a fundamentally different kind of thing from a lady, or a warrior, or a dove. The “my” in “my pearl” carries different overtones from the “my” of “my daughter”—which may be part of the reason why he never says “my daughter.” As the dreamer deploys it in the first half of the poem, the metaphor of the Maiden as pearl expands her value while
contracting her agency: as a daughter she may be ruled by her father, but as a pearl she is owned by him.

The directness of this claim of ownership makes good sense within the context of medieval English cultural understandings about family. All children, but particularly daughters, were subordinate to fathers (or, in the absence of a father, to the head of household) by virtue of their age, sex, and dependency. 31 The legal power of a father over a daughter was so great that scholars frequently simply assert that medieval law treated women as the possessions of their male relatives and guardians, 32 while the thirteenth-century English law treatise attributed to Henry Bracton draws implicit parallels between the power exercised by fathers over children and the power exercised by lords over their bondmen. 33 It is, in fact, this very subordination that makes the inversion of roles in Pearl so powerful (and for the dreamer, hard to swallow) when the maiden begins to teach her father. The male head of the household exercised a degree of control over his wife and children that we find abhorrent; in particular the


32 See, for instance, Sandy Bardsley, Women’s Roles in the Middle Ages (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2007), 130.

law allowed him to use violence to correct them and compel their obedience.\textsuperscript{34} It is equally true that medieval courts often considered rape to be less a crime against a person than it was theft of a man’s property: the chastity of the wife or daughter who was raped.\textsuperscript{35} Moreover, women were often the vehicles by which property passed between families, especially through arranged—and occasionally forced—marriages and through claims to wardship over heiresses. Feminist scholarship can analyze the power dynamic of this relationship, but it cannot—or will not—tell us what it feels like to be a patriarch. Our myth of the autonomous individual prepares us to sympathize with the controlled or resisting daughter, not so much with the controlling father. Yet in the character of the dreamer, \textit{Pearl} depicts with sympathy the internal emotional logic that underlay late medieval law.

Few fathers would have understood their possessiveness as power wielded for the sake of domination. They would have justified it instead as longing, need, even dependence, and all the more so when, as with this family dyad, it was exacerbated by loss.\textsuperscript{36} The dreamer does just this. He depicts himself as totally dependent upon her for happiness: “What seruez tresor

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{34}One man, accused of assaulting his wife with a knife, cutting her and breaking her knee, was acquitted because he was disciplining her. See Peter Fleming, \textit{Family and Household in Medieval England, Social History in Perspective}. (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 57-8.; Bardsley, \textit{Women’s Roles in the Middle Ages}, 139., 139.


\textsuperscript{36}My argument here owes much to David Aers, ”The Self Mourning: Reflections on Pearl,” \textit{Speculum} 68 (1993): 54-73, particularly 54-62.
\end{quote}
but garez men grete, / When he hit schal efte with tenez tyne?....When I am partlez of perle myne, / Bot durande doel what may men deme?” (331-32, 335-36) Those lines—“What does a treasure serve but to cause one to weep, when he loses it with anger and grief?”—articulate the dreamer’s basic understanding of ownership: a treasure is for the possessor, and its loss renders it useless altogether. The absence of the Pearl from him does not mean its presence somewhere else. It is nowhere else that matters.

This is a fundamentally different approach to treasure than that of either the jeweler he claims to be or the lord who buys such a treasure from him. A jeweler’s basic relation to gems was a transitory one; he or she might evaluate the gem, but did not keep it. At best the jeweler cleaned and brightened it, or placed it in a fine setting to show it off for someone else.37 Similarly, aristocrats obtained such objects to bestow upon their friends and followers. The treasured object passed out of the hands of both jeweler and lord, creating bonds of patronage and dependence between social agents. Moreover, when such an artifact was given as a gift, its real value was not its innate preciousness, though that could determine the

importance of the gift-exchange. Its real value lay in being exchanged rather than hoarded, for in exchange it could be transformed into reputation, prestige, and gratitude.

The central metaphor of the pearl, then, allows a crucial slippage between two kinds of attachment. From the perspective of the dreamer, the metaphor is one of deeply personal fatherly love and possessiveness. Yet other elements of the poem—the ornate crownlike structure, the paradisiacal setting full of precious stones, the emphasis on pearls as adornment, the dreamer's naming himself as a jeweler—evoke the larger social context of aristocratic gift-giving. In doing so, they critique by contrast the dreamer's legally sanctioned claims of possession. Treasures in a gift-economy are to be circulated, not hoarded; but the dreamer resists this, instead laying claim to the maiden in order to secure her to himself forever.

II.

The pearl-maiden herself, however, stands in stark contrast to the dreamer's metaphoric image of her. Covered in pearls she may be, but her actions could not be less like the passive, static object of desire visualized by the dreamer's description. First, her character is an active, vigorous interlocutor. Her very speech is full of commands, exhortations, and statements of judgment and fact. As one would expect from a character in the tradition of Lady Philosophy, her powerful words totally overwhelm the enervated dreamer, whose dialogue tends toward the emotional and expressive. Second, she actively analyzes and appropriates the
dreamer’s words in order to use them against him. When he blames fate for stealing his pearl (“What Wyrde hatz hyder my juel vayned...?” [249]), she adopts his terminology by calling herself “þy perle” in the context of correcting him (257, 409), then summarizes his claims to possession by saying that his words call “þy Wyrde a þef” (273), in effect changing what is “his” from the pearl, to the Providence who supplied her. She does this again about a hundred lines later:

“Bot my Lorde þe Lombe þur0yoghëlt Hys godhead,
He toke myself to Hys maryage...
And sesed in alle Hys heritage
Hys lef is. I am holy Hysse.
Hys prese, hys prys, and Hys parage
Is rote and grounde of alle my blysse.” (409-10, 417-20)

Previously the dreamer said “my Lord” at points when he is indicating submission to God (285, 362), and the maiden uses similar language. But on her lips, the phrase “my Lorde þe Lamb” (407, 413) is a wifely one. In fact, all the possessive pronouns in this stanza are carefully placed: notice the reiteration of “his” in this stanza—8 times, twice in one line and three times in another. If the dreamer has used “mine” earlier in the poem to mark her out as his property, here she uses “his” to mark herself out as possessed by another. She almost does not need to say, as she does in the last two lines, that Christ’s worth and nobility are the root and ground
of all her bliss. The structure and repetition in this stanza have said it already for her, and it is underscored by the two lines that use the same initial consonant H to alliterate. The dreamer’s language refers her back to himself; hers points to someone else.

Yet if the maiden highlights her possession by the Lamb, she also makes clear that she is possessed by a husband rather than by an owner. Her use of the pearl metaphor to describe herself is more or less perfunctory, coming in response to the dreamer’s use of that metaphor, while she describes her marriage to the Lamb in the language surrounding gifts of property within marriage in the English legal system. At marriage, a wife gave over all property to her husband, and she did not in turn receive his property. One text says that the wife “can have no property except in her dress”; everything belonged to and was controlled by her husband while he lived. A husband could give his wife more if he liked by securing property to her while he was alive, but it required special legal machinations. This seems to be what the Lamb has done for the Pearl-Maiden. She has been married to Christ, then made the legal possessor (“sesed in alle Hys herytage,” l. 417) of everything that is his. However, her ownership of his “heritage” only amplifies his absolute possession of her. The gift might seem to counteract a husband’s legal right to dominion over his wife, replacing her one-sided dependence upon him

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38The legal language here was first pointed out by P. M. Kean, *The Pearl: An Interpretation* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), 187, and has more recently been discussed in Andrew and Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 73, n. 417-8.
with some economic power within the marriage (and perhaps it did in many such historical cases); but it also reinforces the hierarchy of giver and recipient. Rather than establishing the maiden’s independence, the Lamb’s gift links her identity more closely with him, simultaneously honoring her and amplifying her dependence upon him in good Maussian fashion.

Along with the ways in which gift-giving practices inscribed social hierarchy upon its recipients, it also inscribed competition. As in the contest of presents between Richard II and the Duke of Orleans, the value of gifts could measure relative worth, with the person who gave the most valuable present winning the exchange by successfully indebting the recipient to himself. But in more one-sided exchanges, gifts might be sought out as depicting chosenness and preference; the king’s gift of a brooch, for instance, marked the recipient out as within the inner circle of his favor, and by implication excluded anyone who did not own and display a similar object. The dreamer is well aware of this fact, as his next question indicates: given the value of Christ’s gift, has the maiden supplanted the Virgin Mary’s status as queen of heaven? His question enables the maiden to give a picture of ideal heavenly social relations within the kingdom, where all the redeemed souls are kings and queens together, each wishes that the crown of the others were five times as precious, and there is no envy of the Virgin’s status because she is queen of courtesy. The defining feature of this society is its lack of competition for status and wealth between individuals, whose generous desire for each others’ advancement
is depicted as genuine, and who seek neither to profit from each other’s holdings nor to defeat each other in gift-giving.\(^{39}\)

It is interesting, then, that the dreamer’s response to this vision is its exact opposite. While the audience might expect the dreamer to accept queenship as Christ’s confirmation of the Maiden’s value (as in the dreamer’s initial use of pearl imagery to describe her), instead the dreamer challenges her account. He compares her reward with that of someone who has suffered through a long earthly life, described in terms that equally recall religious suffering ("penance," l. 477) and his own sufferings at the start of the poem ("bale," ll. 18, 87, 373, 478). He concludes that the maiden did not live long enough to earn them:

"Of countes, damysel, par ma fay,
Wer fayr in heuen to halde asstate,
Oþer elle3 a lady of lasse aray;
Bot a quene! Hit is to dere a date.” (489-93)

Coming so close after the maiden’s description of heaven, the dreamer’s response, though framed in terms of justice, looks suspiciously like envy. While he has longed for her and valued her above all else, he refuses to believe that she has an equal value in heaven, for to do so would

\(^{39}\)This picture of heaven stands in direct contrast to the culture of Ricardian court life as well as the dominant ethic of English society. See Richard Firth Green, Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), Aers, "Reflections on Pearl," 65, Rosemary Horrox, "Service," in Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 61-78.
undermine the value of earthly suffering, not least his own. Her reward can only be his detriment. For him the alternatives are solipsism and deep social competition.

III.

The maiden’s answer to this question, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, reframes justice by shifting the focus from the deserts of individuals to the grace of God. Drawn from Matthew 20:1–16, the parable compares the kingdom of heaven to the owner of a vineyard who recruits workers throughout the day, but in the end pays them all the same wages, a penny, regardless of how long they have worked. The landlord’s six calls for workers were traditionally allegorized either as the six ages of the world or as the six stages of the life of man, while vernacular sermons tended to use the parable to exhort listeners to labor hard at their allotted work. Yet as Mary Raschko points out, such interpretations minimized the uncomfortable central problem of grace in the parable, the disproportion inherent in paying both early and late workers the same sum of money (and by implication, the same reward of salvation for all believers, no matter how much or little they have served God)—a problem which both the original Gospel story and the retelling in Pearl play up.

Previous critics have discussed the parallels between the plot of the vineyard parable and contemporary discussions of wage negotiations, particularly the labor disputes surrounding the Statute of Laborers. But in the context of *Pearl*, the parable also responds to the dreamer’s assumption that social relations are inherently a zero-sum game by returning to the language of divine gift-giving. In the parable, wages agreed-upon by mutual consent become gifts given from generosity, substituting a gift-economy for a monetary one. As I have already suggested, gift-exchanges in the fourteenth century frequently functioned as markers of social hierarchy; the recipient of a gift might reasonably understand himself or herself as obligated to the giver. Gifts of this nature symbolically bound together not just elites but also different social degrees, making visible the hierarchy of service through an exchange of gifts which ranged from the token to the marketable.

By the time *Pearl* was written, England’s social hierarchy had partially transitioned from service obligations to contractual agreements. “Feudal” service to one’s lord had been characterized by an appeal to the relative social position of each party. In particular, one’s free or unfree birth might determine whether and how much work bondmen or vassals rendered to their lord, and the nature of the reward returned for those services. In contrast, in a

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commercial exchange of labor for wages, the price of the labor is explicitly determined by the laws of supply and demand. In anthropologist Daniel Miller’s words, “The amount of money received for a service rendered is not dependent upon who you are, but upon the abstract relations within which the service is performed, for example as wage labour. Money therefore tends to extend a concept of equality.” This is borne out in the way that English objections to labor spikes after the Black Death were accompanied by fear of revolution; in the minds of elites, a demand for uncustomarily higher wages was the same thing as overthrowing social order because it ignored the role of traditional social status in determining remuneration.

The parabolic laborers have worked assuming that they are entitled to a certain amount of recompense commensurate to their work, and choosing to work for him based on a contractual agreement, rather than being compelled to do so out of feudal obligation or personal loyalty. What upsets them is that the lord of the vineyard is not doling wages out based on the “abstract relations” of wage labor: he acknowledges the “couenante” with the earlier workers, but does not apply it to the later workers in the same proportion. But neither is he showing favoritism; the larger wages to the latecomers are not because of who those

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workers are (any more than it would be for the earlier laborers). Instead it seems to be because of who the giver is.

The complaining workers have understood their relation as one of wage labor and remuneration: the laborers and employer ought to be on some kind of equal terms because the wages should reflect exactly the worth of the labor. But the lord in the parable is behaving as though their relation is one of giving and receiving favors, and so to be governed by gratitude rather than calculation: he himself calls the wages “gyfte” (565). What they resent is the right of one person to dispense as he likes, rather than being constrained by contract—in other words, to treat this exchange as an occasion for giving gifts, rather than for calculating the exact worth of his employees’ work. For him to do so places him in the position of a benefactor rather than their employer, and they are bound to feel that not their labor but they themselves have been devalued by such an outcome.

The maiden obviously intends the dreamer to identify himself with the envious laborers, and in fact he does this. His response shows the importance of proportional remuneration, where he calls her version of the parable “unresounable.” For the Dreamer, justice is inseparable from calculation and comparison: to be paid according to one’s deserts does not simply mean receiving a reward, but a reward exactly proportional to one’s work. The

44For a fuller discussion of this point in relation to the labor crisis of the late 14th century, see Watkins, “Pearl and Late Medieval Individualism,” 124-36.
Dreamer amplifies this argument in 600-01 by noting that “euer þe lenger þe lasse [in werke], þe more”: the less one works, according to the Maiden’s pronouncement, the more one gets in proportion to the amount of work actually done. If everyone gets the same amount for doing good, he implies, why work any harder than your neighbor? The dreamer is objecting to an image of social life in which comparison is no longer useful for telling individuals apart or setting a value on their worth. In response, the Maiden affirms that each person receives exactly the same reward, for God “laueȝ hys gyfteȝ as water of dyche” (l. 606), since rather than being a miser, “Hys fraunchyse is large” (l. 608). In replying that everyone gets the same reward, the Maiden switches the focus of the debate from the rights of workers to the nature of God. And she builds it up nicely: rather than wages, the reward is God’s generous gift of “bliss” to everyone who submits to Him. In this context it makes less sense that those who served God longer should get more reward, because the reward—salvation—is not quantifiable. In fact, the whole language of gift-giving neatly shifts this discussion out of the realm of strict calculative/mercantile negotiation, in which money serves as an equalizer by allowing exact calculation of the worth of one’s labor, and into the realm of service, where lords reward faithfulness and service appropriately, but not calculatively, and where the prescribed response is mutual obligation and gratitude rather than exact computation of the worth of labor and reward. In the imagination of the poem, the demand for one’s rights translates into a withdrawal from social relations of generosity into an existence that is narrowly acquisitive,
individualistic and competitive. Moreover, the parable as the maiden tells it suggests that this kind of individualism ultimately leads not just to conflict within the market sphere, but within the very relationship that the dreamer is so anxious to preserve unchanged. For the maiden and the dreamer are both identified as workers in the vineyard, their ages identified with length of labor there. The maiden appears no longer as the possessed object which the dreamer wishes to keep for himself (competing with God for her presence and favor), but as a rival for Christ’s heavenly rewards.

IV.

I would like to return to the discussion of gifts and gift-economies with which I began this article. It should be clear by now that the imagined economy of Pearl rewrites gift-exchanges as well as everything else. Objects like the coronal of Princess Blanche embodied prestige and honor; they circulated among aristocratic courts to transport that prestige. But their circulation also marked out paths of hierarchy and patronage. To receive such a gift was to be recognized as singularly honored among one’s fellows. It was also to become deeply indebted to the giver. Within the logic of medieval gift-economies, the recipient’s proper response would be not to hoard up such gifts, but rather to give them again to someone else, as we see from the probable path of the coronal from Bohemia with Queen Anne in 1382, to the English royal treasury and ultimately back to the Continent in 1401 with the marriage of
Blanche, daughter of Henry IV, to Ludwig of Bavaria. Such objects circulated, they were not owned absolutely and irrevocably.

The dreamer of *Pearl* resists such circulation by seeking to keep hold of his daughter forever. Medieval readers from all classes of society would have felt sympathy for his attitude on a number of levels. First, their common culture of hierarchy and deference would make it easy for them to understand a father as entitled to make decisions on behalf of a child, even a grown female child, and as having a power over her that amounted to some form of control. Second, they would have been as sympathetic as modern readers are to the layer of emotional attachment and dependence which complicates the father’s power, nuancing it so that his possessiveness is presented as *primarily* the result of emotional attachment. They would have understood his grief as a normal and appropriate reaction to her loss. To figure her as treasure is to underscore her beauty and intrinsic value.

The emotional power of the poem depends upon the ways in which the dreamer’s perspective is understandable. But the writer of the poem clearly seeks to criticize this by showing that the metaphor of the girl as a pearl makes it easy for the dreamer to indulge a particular kind of possessiveness, to view her as his absolutely. He resists the idea of her queenship because it is something that sets her outside the paternal relationship. In a very real way, he wants the maiden to be taken out of the circulating economy of gifts between God and humanity. He is absorbed so deeply and exclusively in his desire for her that the claims of a
husband or a God to her can only be seen as competition for an already scarce resource. For him the personal is the opposite of the social.

In response the maiden puts forward an alternative mode of valuation in which the good of one is the good of all (non-competitive, cohesive, collective rather than individualistic). Rather than a dyad of lover and singular loved object, clinging tight to each other and actively excluding the outside world, she presents to him a “meynie,” a company, of the saved, all dressed the same and almost indistinguishable; a city full of inhabitants, and a Lamb whose wound signals that he himself has also sacrificed everything for others. This alternative exists only in paradise, but it serves as a counterpoint to both versions of valuation that the dreamer invokes: both the intensely personal, need-driven, even solipsistic orientation of the early stanzas and the comparisons by which a jeweler makes judgments of value—but which, the parable of the vineyard and the dreamer himself show, inevitably result in competition that cuts him off even from the pearl he so prizes.

In short, *Pearl* demonstrates both the possibilities and limitations of gift-economies for fourteenth-century English culture. On the one hand, such transactions open up the potential for social relationships based on gratitude and seeking the common good, and an escape from the isolation and competition of individuality. On the other hand, with gratitude came indebtedness, and so inevitably gift-giving itself inscribed hierarchy upon those who participated either by giving or receiving. In either case, the gift itself became almost
negligible, the means of forming social relationship rather than the end of them. It is perhaps
appropriate, then, that so few objects that functioned as gifts have survived to the present day.
Those made from the most precious materials—crowns, jewelry, and tableware—have long
been transformed into other shapes, while the less valuable have been consumed or lost.

The production of a poem such as *Pearl* (and the other poems of Cotton Nero A.x) suggests an aristocratic patron. If so, it means that the poem itself might have enacted the kind of circulation we see in other gift exchanges in the late fourteenth century: the poet produces a work of literature and presents it, perhaps ceremonially, to his patron in a gorgeous bound volume like the ones created for Richard II and other nobles. John Bowers points out that deluxe books were prestigious gifts, especially when they were covered with gems and goldwork.45 Such ornamentation placed them firmly in the category of luxury goods, like Blanche’s crown. Yet the poem was not simply its physical instantiation in the manuscript. On the material level the poem could be copied from its originating manuscript, by either amateur admirers or professional scribes, and disseminated to other owners. And it could circulate much more widely still: it could be read aloud to a whole group of listeners at once, such as the audience depicted in the Cambridge Corpus Christi MS 61 frontispiece that depicts

Chaucer reading his *Troilus and Criseyde* to a courtly audience.\(^{46}\) In other words, *Pearl* had the potential to circulate through 14\(^{th}\) century social networks much more widely than any precious object could. We can only guess at how the poem itself functioned as a gift within elite society, impeded as we are by *Pearl’s* existence only in one obscure and badly-executed manuscript, its apparent lack of attribution, and the total absence of reference to it or its companion poems by any other contemporary author.\(^{47}\) But its author understood gift-giving as central to both human social relations and divine grace; he must have understood it as central to literary production too.

\(^{46}\)Though Derek Pearsall warns against relying too heavily on the image as a factual depiction of Chaucer’s relationship with the court of Richard II, the picture nevertheless does suggest the possibility of command performances of such poems to aristocratic patrons. See Derek Pearsall, "The "Troilus" Frontispiece and Chaucer’s Audience," *Yearbook of English Studies* 7 (1977): 68-74; also Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, 58-70.

Chapter 2:

Wisdom, Dependence, and Charity in the Prologue to *Dives and Pauper*

The very title of *Dives and Pauper* suggests its relevance to my study, drawing attention as it does to the economic status of its two characters. Evidence from another manuscript of sermons, MS Longleat 4, indicates that this title was assigned by the author himself (who refers to the text as “dives et pauper” and claims it as his own previous work). The title obviously foregrounds wealth, and its lack, as a central concern in the moral status and formation of its audience. For my purposes the most important part of *Dives and Pauper* is the prologue, entitled “Holy Poverty,” which is an extended discussion of wealth and poverty within theological and social contexts. “Holy Poverty” begins in a sermon-like style and

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48 For a description and discussion of the manuscript, still privately owned and as of yet unedited and unpublished, see Anne Hudson and Helen Spencer, "Old Author, New Work: The Sermons of MS Longleat 4," *Medium Ævum* 53 (1984).

49 “Holy Poverty” exists in two versions, the A and B versions. According to Priscilla Heath Barnum, the differences between the two are as follows: the A version is longer, depicts Pauper as among the voluntarily poor and probably a Franciscan mendicant, defends voluntary poverty at length and with vigor, and contains more academic language, while the B version is an edited and shortened version of A, oriented not toward Franciscan poverty but toward the involuntary poor, presumably in order to frame the prologue, as well as the huge work which follows, for a wider lay audience. This chapter will focus on the A version of “Holy Poverty” because of its interesting slippages between different senses of the category “pe pore.” Priscilla Heath Barnum, ed., *Dives and Pauper*, vol. 1:1, 1:2, 2, O.S. 275, 280, 323 (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society,
morphs into a debate between the eponymous speakers, one a voluntarily poor mendicant (presumably, though not explicitly, Franciscan) and the other a wealthy layman. The debate is at first acrimonious, later more friendly, often somewhat academic; and while the thrust of the debate is always didactic, by no means does Pauper get all the good points. In this chapter I will argue that the dichotomy of rich man/poor man apparent in the Latin title invokes and

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50 The literary tone and quality of *Dives and Pauper* militates against its being meant for dramatic performance (a suggestion made in G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 543-5. For one, there is no action, really; the dialogue begins as debate in the prologue, but much of the time Pauper is answering at length Dives’s short questions or comments, especially in the main body of the work. Pauper gets most of the airtime. His style is preacherly, with an eye to both church doctrine and its practical applications. Some of his sharp observations about the effects of wealth on social obligation, for instance, show a keen attentiveness to the relationship between individuals and society (what he calls “þe wor[ld]”). I would go so far as to suggest that Pauper speaks for the author, making the most powerful rhetorical points and voicing the central concerns of the text. This is not a text that tries to preserve ambiguity. In this way it differs deeply from other medieval debate poems (which scholars typically resolve on one side or the other, while the arguments that take place over them indicate that the poems themselves are much more ambiguous), and is perhaps more akin to the tradition of philosophical dialogues, in which one of the speakers gradually assumes a didactic role. See Thomas L. Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990).

Yet the characters, particularly Dives, are developed more than we might see in a philosophical dialogue. Dives begins by speaking in an abusive and insulting voice against the beggar, and while this aspect of his voice is gradually steadied and humbled, he can still sound quite assertive when he disagrees with some point Pauper is making. There are also idiosyncrasies of viewpoint, as when he advocates the destruction of images used in worship. Moreover, throughout the entire text of *Dives and Pauper*, Dives is given some depth and character. He is an educated and intelligent interlocutor; he often uses the scholastic “sed contra” to begin his objections, his questions are invariably to-the-point, and he is sometimes left unconvinced by Pauper’s arguments. It is tempting to conclude that Dives represents the “leve frend” addressed in the Longleat sermons, probably the rich lay patron described by Hudson and Spencer (Hudson and Spencer, ”Sermons of Longleat 4,” 227.). The author then would probably not be coextensive with Pauper, the roving mendicant preacher pictured in chapter 1 of “Holy Poverty,” but a household chaplain or member of a local Franciscan convent, living in quite different material and economic circumstances than his textual avatar.
exploits biblical wisdom literature, bringing it into the vernacular; that the author’s early
appeals to scripture frame the central dialogue as a form of economic exchange; and that the
author ultimately sees economic exchanges, rather than the traditional trifunctional model of
orders, as central to the structure of society.

I. GENRE AND SCRIPTURE

In light of recent scholarly interest in vernacular scripture, Dives and Pauper is a deeply
important text because of the ways in which it uses biblical texts. The Holy Poverty section
provides the rest of the work with a theological and scriptural frame for the lengthy didactic
discussion of the Ten Commandments. It begins by quoting Proverbs 22:2, “dives et pauper
obviaverunt sibi utriusque operator est Dominus,” immediately translated as “The ryche man

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51 The central point of contention is whether Arundel’s Constitutions shut down the production and reading of
vernacular scripture in England after 1409 by declaring that all translations had to be ecclesiastically approved. For
the original and highly influential argument, see Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-
Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409,”
Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Ian R.
Johnson (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). This has been contested by Fiona
Somerset, "Professionalizing Translation at the Turn of the Fifteenth Century: Ullerston’s Determinacio,
Arundel’s Constitutiones," in The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity, ed. Fiona Somerset and
Nicholas Watson (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Books
under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England (Notre Dame, IN:
University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). See also Raschko, "Rendering the Word: Vernacular Accounts of the
Parables in Late Medieval England".
and the pore metyn hem togedere; God is makere of hem bothyn” and then glossed: “for he made bothe ryche and pore and boughte hem bothe wyt his blod wol dere....” (50)

Structurally, the initial scriptural text immediately sets up expectations that the whole following text is a sermon, explaining and glossing the text which began it. And in fact, on a technical level this does happen. All of “Holy Poverty” is centered on the dichotomy of rich and poor highlighted in the initial quotation. The prologue rings a series of changes on the argument that rich and poor are spiritually equal, beginning with the first gloss which uses the economic metaphor of redemption to collapse distinctions of earthly class (only to resurrect and redefine them later). And yet there is reason to believe that while the primary literary model for “Holy Poverty” may be the sermon, a strong secondary model is the Bible itself. The text shows its author’s knowledge of and engagement with the Bible not simply as a source of moral and theological authority but also as a source for literary elements.

It begins by positioning itself within the biblical genre of wisdom literature. On the structural level it depends upon pairs of parallel constructions that invoke the characteristic poetic structure of the Hebrew poetry of the Bible. The very title and first line of the book is an example of this, since the verse quoted is one of many in the book of Proverbs where dives and pauper are paired in parallel constructions.52 But the text uses parallelism in other ways.

For example, chapter one emphasizes the identical earthly sufferings of both rich and poor man in birth and death, in a series of descriptors that plays up pairs: “nakyd and pore, wepyng and weylyng,” “nakyd and pore, wyt bytter peyne, wit mechil dred, sorwe and care, clad in a doolful wede, wol febyl array.” (51) Such parallel constructions, and particularly rhymes, were common features of Middle English sermons. But their abundance in chapter one combines with a concern for themes typical of biblical wisdom literature. Characteristic ideas in books such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the apocryphal book of Wisdom—all quoted in the first chapter of “Holy Poverty”—include a focus on human good, including wisdom, long life and the acquisition of wealth; and upon the equality of all in suffering and death. Ecclesiastes, for instance, affirms that human society is marred by oppression and injustice, particularly on the part of the rich and powerful; and, to balance it out, that all human activity, whether is ultimately rendered meaningless by death. The proverbial pairs in “Holy Poverty” play up the theme of equality between the rich and poor before God or in death (12:5, 21:23-26, 27:19), and Psalm 49, generally recognized as belonging to the genre of wisdom, which calls upon *quique terrignae et filii hominum in unum dives et pauper*, “All you that are earthborn, and you sons of men: both rich and poor together” (49:2).


54For more discussion of the elements of wisdom literature, see Bruce Metzger and Michael Coogan, The Oxford Companion to the Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 802-3.

55Ecclesiastes 2; 3:16-18; see also Bruce Chilton et al., eds., The Cambridge Companion to the Bible, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 291-3.
unity of rich and poor in their powerlessness against the misery of birth and death. But the Middle English author amplifies Ecclesiastes by suggesting that the rich and poor, though united in existential suffering, are divided from each other in an agony of suffering and enmity between birth and death. The poor man must meekly beg from the rich for his livelihood, while the rich man answers abusively with accusations of thievery and uselessness. The picture created here of human life is a bleak one: the suffering which all human beings share does not unite them in sympathy, but rather amplifies their economic differences into hostility and distrust.

Individually, any one of these similarities between “Holy Poverty” and biblical wisdom books might simply be coincidence. But taken together, they suggest that the Middle English writer had thoroughly internalized the generic and structural elements of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, taking them not just as an authoritative source of theology and devotional knowledge, but as a literary model for his own work on right living. Rather than simply relaying scriptural knowledge through the intermediary of his text, he actively appropriated literary and thematic elements.\(^5\)\(^6\) A comparison with works such as Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Christ* may be helpful. Love wrote the *Mirror* to replace vernacular gospels.

\(^5\)\(^6\)The writer himself says that both lay and clerical audiences should have access to scripture in English “for iche man & woman is boundyn aftir his degree to don his besynesse to knowyn Godis lawe þat he is bondyn to kepyn” (1:327). He makes similar comments elsewhere (*Dives and Pauper* 2:64, Hudson and Spencer, "Sermons of Longleat 4," 227–33.)
for lay readers. As such, he sought to retell and reframe narratives of the life of Christ so that they would guide readers’ emotions, coaching them in the scripts of ecclesiastically sanctioned affective piety. In contrast, *Dives and Pauper* assumes its readers’ familiarity with the Bible in the way it plays upon the conventions and themes of wisdom literature. It appeals directly to the intellect and experiences of its readers. Its dialogic format creates a give-and-take between the voice of authority and an active listener and debater, drawing readers into a process of investigation where the answers are not always satisfactory. *Dives and Pauper* integrates the readers into the process of instruction, casting them as active, intellectually engaged inquirers rather than passive recipients of experience.

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58There is, however, little evidence that the author of *Dives and Pauper* relied on vernacular translations himself. His translations from the Latin Vulgate are strikingly different from the same verses in the Wycliffite Bible (and, for that matter, the Douay–Reims several centuries later). As Barnum points out, his translations are flexible, idiomatic, and elegantly done (“Introduction,” in Barnum, ed., *Dives and Pauper,* ”Introduction,” 2:xxxi–xxxv).
The author began writing “Holy Poverty” with the wisdom books in mind. His direct quotations show an important consequence of this preoccupation: the idea that wisdom is itself a form of wealth. The initial text in “Holy Poverty” comes from Proverbs 22, a section intensely concerned with distinctions between rich and poor. The verse preceding it in the biblical passage, “melius est nomen bonum quam divitiae multae super argentum et aurum gratia bona” (“A good name is better than great riches: and good favour is above silver and gold”), was glossed by Ambrose as affirming that the wise person was the truly rich one. The same passage contains several other proverbs urging the rich to be generous to the poor. Similarly, the verse that Pauper cites from Wisdom (7:5) occurs in the middle of a passage in which the narrator asks God for the gift of wisdom, preferring it to all riches (et divitias nihil esse duxi in conparatione illius) and comparing it favorably to gems and gold. Since the Middle English text chooses biblical quotations which, in their original context, draw parallels and contrasts between wisdom and riches, it is likely that the original writer, for whom the whole Bible must have been familiar, is at least subconsciously drawing a contrast between the wisdom of the “Holy Poverty” speaker and the material wealth of his interlocutor. The Middle English text thus incorporates and draws upon biblical language of wisdom as the true riches,

more valuable than literal wealth. To a reader familiar with the Bible, such quotations would suggest that Pauper, who claims to have become poor for Christ, is the wealthier of the two debaters. The text works hard to bring out the importance of the reversal: here it is the poor person, the one bereft of political and economic power, who possesses the more valuable resource of wisdom.

It is important to notice, however, that the transmission of wisdom from Pauper to Dives is not a mercantile transaction. The emphasis on gift in the first chapter—the gift of alms, God’s gift of literal wealth and status (an extension of his gift of creation) to Dives, and the death of Christ on the cross—suggests that the transmission of wisdom-as-wealth marks out the boundaries of a gift-economy, so that even wisdom, so often associated with worldly living in the biblical text (and associated by medieval commentators such as Aquinas with the theory of politics, physics, and ethics—hence utility and use-value⁶⁰), here ends up primarily valuable inasmuch as it creates bonds of obligation and gratitude between the giver and recipient. Again, the pattern is one of reversing the normal hierarchy. Pauper, in possession of this wisdom, is immediately in the superior position of gift-giver, and Dives must be slowly made aware of this reversal in order that he may accept being instructed, and thus accept being indebted to Pauper. The return of alms can only be paltry in comparison—and indeed, later in

the prologue Pauper claims that any alms he receives from Dives are no more than he deserves (byre).

II. THREE ESTATES, TWO CONDITIONS?

Much has been written about the medieval three-estates model of society which entered usage in the eleventh century and appeared in English chronicles and sermons throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The estates were divided by their function: those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. It is generally agreed that this model never reflected the complexity of actual medieval society, but it had a rhetorical power that lingered on in some parts of Europe until the French Revolution. Like other medieval

metaphors for society—the metaphor of the body made up of a head and constituent members, used in texts ranging from the epistles of Paul to Coriolanus, and the metaphor of the ship—the three-orders model avows the necessity and interdependence of every estate, but affirms social inequality as a basic principle of human society. In fact we may go so far as to say that inequalities of rank, ability, and property are necessary to this model. Georges Duby writes of it:

“the order of the whole world is based on diversity, on the hierarchical disposition of ranks, on the complementarity of functions. The harmony of God’s creation results from a hierarchized exchange of respectful submission and condescending affection.”

Subscribers to such a system believed that order and hierarchy were the basic organizing principles of the universe. Those writers who subscribed to the three-estates model also appealed to divine justice to justify the inequalities between the estates. Some claimed that peasants were the lowest of the low; others dealt with the problem of inequity by idealizing laborers as good folk, close to God through their simplicity and work. In either case, they thought that because God had ordained each person’s estate, it was wrong to try to overthrow

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62 For a description and discussion of the ship and body metaphors, see Antony Black, Political Thought in Europe, 1250-1450 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 14-18. See also the various essays in Denton, ed., Orders and Hierarchies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe, particularly Spencer Pearce, “Dante: Order, Justice and the Society of Orders” (33-56) and the final pages of Maurice Keen, “Heraldry and Hierarchy: Esquires and Gentlemen” (94-109).

63 Duby, The Three Orders, 34.

64 See Paul Freedman, Images of the Medieval Peasant (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 133-56, 204-38.
that order. They were even suspicious of people like merchants who sought to raise their estates individually.\textsuperscript{65} Discussions of the three-estates model usually began by endorsing interdependence and went on to describe and justify differences of function. For example, Wimbledon’s sermon on the parable of the laborers in the vineyard explains, “\textit{þese statis beþ also needful to þe chirche þat non may wel ben wiþouten oþer....every staat shul love oþer and men of o craft shulde neiþer hate ne despise men of anoþer crat siþ þey beþ so needful euerych to oþer.}”\textsuperscript{66} Only after Wimbledon establishes the necessity of each estate to the others does he go on to urge members of each estate to mind their own business.

\textit{Dives and Pauper} likewise employs a model of divisions. But the division here is not trifunctional. In “Holy Poverty” the threefold order is not even mentioned. In fact it is studiously sidestepped. In chapter 2, Dives asks Pauper a series of questions about his origins, estate and degree. In chapter 1, Dives explicitly challenged the preacher’s rights to beg and preach, so his new interrogation sounds as though he is seeking to place Pauper within the social order in order to decide how much credence to give his words. But Pauper evades this attempt. His responses to Dives’s questions shift the discussion away from the particularities of his social station and toward establishing his authority as a teacher of religious doctrine and

\textsuperscript{65}Duby, \textit{The Three Orders}, 333–5.

\textsuperscript{66}Ione Kemp Knight, ed., \textit{Wimbledon’s Sermon, “Redde Rationem Villicationis Tue”: A Middle English Sermon of the Fourteenth Century} (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Pres, 1967), 64–6. Wycliffites used the same model, though some departed in key ways from the traditional exposition of it; see Barr, \textit{“Horny Hands of Toil,”} 134–7.
practice. As in the beginning of the prologue, he draws on scriptural quotations to frame his self-description: his country is Paradise, from which Adam’s sin has banished him and all mankind, so that he is now a pilgrim seeking the heavenly city; he was born free “as othere been” but has become a servant for Christ’s sake (this much quoted straight from 1 Corinthians 9:22) to “alle meen ryche and pore” to gain the souls Christ bought, and like Saint Paul, whose epistolary self-descriptions Pauper has taken as a model for his own, he goes into some detail about the sufferings he endures as he begs to support his work (53). He answers the question of degree and estate by referring to God “þat maky0yoghëltt the ryche of the pore and the pore of the ryche” (53), which emphasizes the possibility of reversal for both groups. There is no mention of a middle class or third category. Pauper adds that God values humans differently than they value themselves, suggesting that it is illusory to judge one’s own worth by normal social standards, and concludes with a quotation from 1 Timothy 3:13, that he who serves God gains a good degree. But, he adds, almost as an afterthought, his estate is that of a poor beggar, excluded from normal society and from ordinary life. His self-identification as pilgrim combines with the profuse quotations from the Pauline epistles to produce a picture of himself as impoverished, transitory, and preaching. Pauper’s evasion of the degree question is a clear indication that he does not find “degree” a useful category. Instead, here and throughout the text he deploys the categories of rich and poor. Here, of course, it is poverty which gets an extended treatment, but throughout “Holy Poverty” he describes “rychesse” with equal color
and weight. Who exactly “the rich” are is always a little unclear: in the prologue neither
Pauper nor Dives mention rents or inheritance that might specify Dives as aristocratic, nor do
they mention public service, trades or occupations that might locate him as clearly mercantile,
or the rich man’s own productive activities such as public service or trade. The binary shifts
the focus away from occupation (those who work versus those who pray or fight—with prayer
and fighting both being seen as more desirable and elegant options) to a yes-no proposition:
are you needy or not? Pauper expands the dichotomy only into sets of other paired opposites:
those in pride and those who are low; and the wicked and the good (who don’t seem to map
directly onto the previous pairs). Such pairs emphasize the potential for reversal. The prideful
may be humbled (in a move similar to discussions of Fortune’s wheel, though here God, not
Fortune, is responsible for the change) while the wicked may become good.

We should stop for a moment to consider whether the binary model used in this text is
at all useful. The rich/poor distinction does not map onto the three-estates model with any
kind of coherence. If the three-estates model reflects inadequately the socioeconomic nuances
of social life in fourteenth and fifteenth century England, the rich-poor model simplifies them
even more. On the other hand, a text like Wimbledon’s Sermon deploys the three-estates

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67 Evidence from the Longleat manuscript suggests that the author was under the protection of a powerful patron
because of his views on vernacular translation of scripture; if we do take Dives to stand in for the “leue frend” of
the sermons, then he may very well be a person of high degree. But Dives and Pauper does not make that clear.
model as a way of imagining society, but it does not adhere rigidly to the model; there is room
in the sermon not just for “presthod, kny3thod, and laboreris” but also for “acremen...
bakeris... makeris of cloþ... marchaundis,” as well as “servant oþer a bond man...a iustise oþer a
iuge.”68  Wimbledon uses the trifunctional model in order to invoke ideas of societal order,
but he does not treat it as exhaustive.

The great advantage of the rich/poor binary used in “Holy Poverty” is that it allows the
author to do away with the hierarchical principle that governed medieval societal metaphors.
The three-estates model grouped people by what they did—pray, work, fight—and ordered
these groups according to the worth of their occupations. While proponents insisted on the
interdependence of the three, they could not escape affirming that some occupations were
nobler than others, and deserving of more resources. The focus on occupation also effectively
distracted from the question of inequality and poverty; the poor were conveniently those who
labored at dirty and disgusting jobs. By avoiding the three-estates model, the author of *Dives
and Pauper* draws attention to the experience, rather than the work and worth, of humans.

Rich and poor can be imagined as opposed opposites, rather than as a vertical stack. Rich and
poor can change places as their financial situations change; they are not defined by a static,
socially prescribed status. Their relationship can be imagined as conflict-ridden rather than as

mutually supporting. They can have a debate, as in fact they do in this work, and there is
certainly no suggestion at the beginning that they are interdependent in the sweetly
harmonious way suggested by users of the tripartite system. Rather, rich and poor are at odds.

There are other things to notice about this binary. The text is not at all specific about
how these states came about. Moreover, it carefully avoids the idea that God “ordained” these
states. Rather, God gave them. This seems like a small distinction but it pushes away the idea
that social status was determined by God’s justice (and thus some form of order in the
universe). Instead, there is an emphasis on God as maker of all things. This suggests a
contingency, rather than an inevitability, about social status. If social status is not ordained but
given, it can also be taken away: “thynkyȝt þat God mygte a mad me as rych as ȝow.” (52)
The emphasis is not on the order of society, but on God’s control over it.

Pauper is not trying to get Dives to move out of the social classification in which he
exists. Indeed, in the Longleat sermons he says that preachers should look for “speche of
vertue and of wisdam... amongis men of value [more than among the common people].”69
And, as we shall see in a few pages, he assumes that Dives cannot, or ought not, to leave his
estate to become poor like Pauper. This fact—Dives’s inability and unwillingness to follow the
way of what he calls “the hye perfeccioun of excelencye,” voluntary poverty—is what triggers

69 Hudson and Spencer, ”Sermons of Longleat 4,” 228.
the entire rest of the treatise, as an explanation of how to follow “the lesse perfeccioun” of living righteously in the world (66). But if this text falls short of advocating economic equality, it absolutely does not shy away from attacking assumptions that accumulating money is the pinnacle of freedom and power.

This attack begins in chapter 3 of “Holy Poverty,” at a point when Dives seems suitably willing to accept the didactic authority of Pauper. The rich man has ceased to ask questions about Pauper’s “worldly” standing, beginning instead to engage with the actual content of Pauper’s preaching on poverty. And that teaching is fairly rigorous. Pauper cites numerous passages from the Gospels. He quotes the version of the Beatitudes found in Luke, “Beati inquit pauperes quoniam ipsorum regnum celorum,” rather than the spiritualized version, “pauperes spiritu” (poor in spirit) found in Matthew. He cites Christ’s promise of heavenly thrones for those who have left everything for him, and tweaks the admonition to “Make unto you friends of the mammon of iniquity: that when you shall fail, they may receive you into everlasting dwellings” (Luke 16:9) to read, “makyȝt the pore meen ȝoure frendys be the rychesse and the deuelshene of wyckyndesse þat the pore meen moun reseyuyn ȝow into duellyngys of endeles blisse.” (54) All this gives primacy of place in heaven to the poor; and the poor in question are those who have given up riches for the sake of Christ, rather than those who were born poor or made destitute against their will. Pauper attacks wealth as causing people to serve the devil. He follows this up with a close translation of the gospel
episode of the rich young man who asks what he must do to be saved, and to whom Jesus’s answer is, “If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me.” The story appears in all three synoptic Gospels; in the Vulgate, Luke calls the man princeps, while Matthew calls him and Mark say unus and quidam, respectively. Pauper uses the Matthean version. This allows him to avoid the overtones of social status latent in princeps and keep the rich/poor dichotomy as the dominant social division in the text. He concludes with Christ’s pronouncement: “‘It is more hesy,’ seyde he, ‘a chamel to pasyn be the nedelys eye þanne the ryche man to entryn the kyngdam of heuene…’ as anemyst man it is inpossible, but to God alle thyngge is possible.” (55)

Both in its original biblical context and in the mouth of Pauper, the story of the rich young man has a very clear and literal meaning: wealth interferes with righteous life, and it is hard for the wealthy to be saved. And the camel/needle coda very much confirms a literal and straightforward meaning to the episode, even enlarging the subjects of it from the singular, individual man, to all rich persons. This is consistent with Pauper’s earlier declaration that either “yow muste been pore or bey0yoghëltyn heuene of the pore 3yf 3e welyn comyn in heuene.” (54) Dives also understands it in this way, since he responds in fear, “þese woordys soundyn wol harde to myn vnderstandyngne and sone moun brynggyyn me and sueche uthere in despeyr.” (55)

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But at this point, Pauper’s argument suddenly goes in a different direction. Instead of snapping the jaws of his argument shut upon Dives—you must sell what you have, become poor, get into the kingdom of heaven—Pauper gradually mitigates the ethical command of the story by complicating its literal meaning. The rich man, says Pauper, is a camel, laden down with riches, who in order to enter into the narrow gate of Heaven must unload all the burdens on his back. Pauper, explaining that the “eye of the needle” was a historical entrance to Jerusalem, would seem to intensify the literal meaning: the loaded camel must be freed from all its packs before it can get through the gate, which seems to be similar to the command that the rich man sell what he has and follow Jesus. But, says Pauper, the rich man’s duty is not to become like his teacher by giving everything away. Instead: “And þerfore ȝȝ f ȝȝ wylt entryn the streyte ȝȝate of heuene þȝ muste vnbyndyn and losyn þin iarge of rychesse from þe and leyn it beside þe vnderfoote so þat þȝ be lord and mayster of þin rychesse, nought rychesse þin mayster.” (55-56) What Pauper does here is change the metaphor from one of disburdening to one of control, and so locate the problem of wealth not in ownership, but in use.

To be master of one’s riches, rather than to be mastered by them—this is something quite different from giving them away. Giving away means releasing them altogether, while mastering them suggests that one can have them so long as one values them less than one’s spiritual health. In fact, as Pauper goes on explaining the proper relationship between Dives and his riches, his argument mitigates more and more the radical literal sense of the text. He
began by calling riches “the deuelshene of wyckyndnesse” (54); he ends by warning, temperately, “Loue hem nought to mechil” (56). He began by warning, “goo and selle al þat þu hast” (55); he ends by advising, “Vnlose so þin rychesse from þe þat in Godys cause þu be redy to forsakyn al þat þu hast rathe þanne þu shuldist offendyn þin God...” (56). Pauper says that Dives must be ready to forsake wealth rather than offend God, but there is no sense that he must actually give it all away to the poor in order to be holy. Pauper takes away Dives’s wealth verbally only to reinstate it with conditions; then he quotes the beatitude again, this time the Matthean version, 

\[ \textit{beati paupers spiritu} \]

blessed are the poor in spirit. While he started out the chapter—and the book—by talking about literal poverty, he has now displaced it to the spiritual realm, concluding, “The bond of coueytise is wol strong and wol hard to losyn it from the ryche mannys coueytous herte” (56-7). Pauper allows Dives to keep his wealth while advocating that he should not love it.

Dives thinks this is much better. From one perspective, it certainly is. In chapter 4, Pauper does affirm the usefulness of wealth for good purposes. He takes care to affirm that “rychesse” itself is not intrinsically evil, and that rich men are not by definition excluded from God’s love. He lists the rich and powerful righteous men of the Bible, “for thoe ryche meen been nought lackyd in holy wry3t for here rychesse but for here wyckyd cruelties and mysvre of rychesse,” and goes on to cite St Ambrose saying that “defaugthe is nought in the rychesse but in hem þat connyn nought vsyn here rychesse in dewe manere...right as rychesse is lettyngge of
virtue to wyckydde meen, so it been helping of virtue to the goode meen (57).” The use of “rychesse” here perhaps suggests the condition of being rich more than it does the actual objects owned. In other words, Pauper’s real concern is not the things, but the people who own them. Correspondingly, poverty is not intrinsically good, “For more shrewys fynde I noone þannne pore beggerys þat han noo good, þat the wor[ll]d hatʒ forsakyn but þey nought the wor[ll]d” (57). Evil comes from the heart of the individual, according to Pauper, not from wealth itself or even from its concentration in the hands of a few. He also acknowledges here the distinction between those who have chosen to be poor and those who have not, but takes care to extend to the involuntarily poor the prospect of righteousness through patience. By locating evil in the user of wealth rather than in wealth itself, Pauper avoids making possessions symbolize or substitute for all the inward objects of love that need to be rejected or reordered. As a result, he steps away from externalizing evil in something outside the human heart.

Moreover, if Pauper were to understand Christ’s words to the rich man to be a universal dictum, and if he could convince Dives and his like to obey them, it would eliminate the ability of the rich man to be a benefactor to those who ask him for help (as Dives later points out on pages 63–4). It also preserves the distinction between rich and poor that Pauper has been so careful to maintain, allowing the possibility of righteousness to the rich while maintaining that the higher perfection of life belongs to the poor man. On a pragmatic level, what Pauper is advocating is probably necessary for the survival of a society. Yet at the same time there is
something unsettling in Pauper’s scaling-back of the radical, sweeping gospel command into something practical and restrained, of which Dives can approvingly say, “Þis speche is good and skylful” (56).

We see then that Pauper’s social vision does not entail anything like a wholesale abandonment of economic wealth by its participants. It is enough that Pauper is poor; Dives does not need to be. But if Pauper does not call for inequalities to be removed, he does nevertheless critique the system within which he moves. His central argument in chapter 4 is that poverty of any kind is better for the soul—safer, perhaps, since there are fewer temptations in poverty, and since a sinner who is poor will suffer the consequences of sin sooner than a sinner who is rich. Further, he claims that “the ryche man hatþ more nede þanne þanne the pore.” The poor man needs only food, drink, and clothes—the necessities—to maintain himself.

The rich man, on the other hand, has grand expectations attached to his position: he must maintain not only his body but also his “estaat,” his household (the word used is “mene” or train), his public honor, and his goods (58). Pauper emphasizes the rich man’s need for all kinds of coin and supplies, his dependence upon servants, tradesmen, lawyers, and aristocrats to maintain his position, and the public displays of pomp and generosity that are expected of him.

The rich man is deeply imbricated with his social surroundings: the expectations of others dictates his expenditures both on himself (“pellure and perre,” furs and jewels) and upon others, while he is deeply indebted to the people in every walk of life upon whom his state
depends, and without whose paid service he would have neither wealth nor the ability to
demonstrate his wealth. Social expectation dictates that the rich man must live like a rich man.
His good name is wrapped up in his displays of expenditure: “He þat meðil hað meðil
behouyȝt, and he þat lesse haþ lesse behouyȝt” (58) in a kind of worldly parody of Luke
12:48. Lastly, the rich man has to give to both his friends and his enemies—in the one case to
gain their help and in the other to ease their hatred. The bleak implication is that he must
rel[y] on bribes rather than on the personal loyalty or love that would normally define friendship,
and that money also stands in for an actual reconciliation with those who hate him, for such
peace is always dependent upon a further payment.71

Endlessly driven to demonstrate affluence while at the same time endlessly beholden to
those who make such a demonstration possible, the rich man is not delivered from, but rather
totally given over to, social expectations of generosity, expenditure, patronage, and display. In
contrast the poor man is free not just from the burden of wealth but from the social debts and
expectations that wealth incurs. He may have less material wealth, but he also has less need,
less expenditure either literal or figurative, and he is in less danger from happenstance, malice,
or spiritual failing. Pauper argues that riches make their owner vulnerable precisely because

71Compare Langland’s Lady Meed, whose gift “reconciles” the victim and perpetrator of violent crime to each
other without seeking real forgiveness and moral change (B version, Passus IV, and C versions, Passus III).
they enslave him to social obligation, entangling him in a net of obligations to spend, to give, to patronize, and above all to display his estate.

In making this point, Pauper turns upside-down the normal social system of valuation in which all these expenditures, displays and connections are useful, sought-after things. His rendering makes them sources of anxiety rather than sources of satisfaction. And this really seems to be his project throughout “Holy Poverty.” He promotes poverty as the ideal way of life not just to validate his own teaching authority (though I think that is a necessary side-effect of his arguments), but also to undermine a certain self-satisfaction in wealth, in which one assumes one’s social and spiritual status to be coextensive. Pauper instead brings to the fore all the ways in which Dives is dependent upon those around him, both high and low. In other words, Pauper’s project is to reduce the wealthy until they are as humiliatingly dependent as the poor.

III. WHO ARE “THE POOR”?

I would like to stop here to consider a question that this text does not make explicit: who are the poor that Pauper has in mind? There is hardly any doubt that the author was a Franciscan friar, though he never says so explicitly.72 Moreover, the preaching voice which

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begins the text monologically—what we would assume to be the authorial voice, since preachers do not typically preach in character—turns out to be Pauper, while what had seemed to be the author’s quotation of an angry rich man splits off into the character of Dives. It therefore makes sense that Pauper is also a Franciscan, whether he is the author’s self-representation or a separate character of whom the author makes use. If so, then the state that he is in is voluntary poverty, which is basically what he says in chapter 2: “Sumtyme I was free as othere been, but for Cristys sake...I haue mad me seruant to alle meen ryche and pore to seruyn hem of soule bote. And for my trauayl I begge myn mete and myn clothyng.” As if to confirm this reading, Dives wonders that such a learned man is willing to beg for his living (53). In chapter 3, Pauper tells the story of the rich young man, with its call to “selle al þat þu hast and ȝeue it to the pore folk and come and folwe me” (55), clearly a call to voluntary poverty.

73 The two debaters in Dives and Pauper are in the peculiar position of being quasi-fictional characters in a non-fiction prose treatise. As I observed earlier, Pauper voices the perspectives and opinions of the author, which would suggest that Dives is a sort of puppet interlocutor except that he does voice some good points, has characteristic opinions (analyzed in Barnum, ed., Dives and Pauper, "Introduction," 2:xxxvi-xxxvii.) and is not always convinced by Pauper’s arguments. There is therefore reason to treat him as a character rather than a convenient rhetorical device. It is even possible, though not provable, that he represents the words and opinions of the author’s patron, the “leve frend” of Longleat 4.

See A. C. Spearing, Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1-36, for a discussion of the narrative voice, and particularly a warning not to assume that all narratives are told by a distinctive narrator separate from the author.
Yet there is a certain ambiguity about his condition. In the first chapter, Dives accuses his interlocutor of thievery, destruction, and laziness (51-2), criticisms that were leveled at both involuntary beggars and at wandering mendicants. His complaints could describe all begging poor, both the mendicant religious and the involuntary poor: both solicit donations from those who have earned their own livelihood, neither labors for his own livelihood through normal husbandry, crafts or trade. At least initially, Dives seems to see all beggars as basically the same. In response, Pauper emphasizes the suffering of the poor and the rich person’s duty to pity and care for them:

[As Salomon sey3t, he þat dyspsy3t the pore folk, he dispysy3t and reprouy3t God þat made hem pore... Dyspyse nought, sey3t he, the hungry soule ne anggwysshe nought þe pore man in his myschef. Dyshese nought the herte of hym þat is in nede. Wytdrawe nought þin 3yte from hym þat is in anggwysshe and care. Cast nought awey the preyere of hym þat is in tribulacioun. Turne nought awey þin face from the nedy ne turne nought þinne eyne awey from the helpeles and the pore ne 3eve hym noo cause for to curse þe....hauy3t pyte on hem and thynky3t þat God myghte a mad me as rych as 3ow (52).

His response emphasizes the suffering, helplessness, and anxiety of those in need, implying that to them poverty is not welcome. His requests for charity equate his own need with the needs of the desperate, the involuntarily poor. Quoting a passage from the book of Sirach (4:1-6), he appropriates a self-description that in its original context urged respect for the sociological

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poor. The implication is amplified by the reminder that “God myghte a mad me as ryche as
tow,” negating the idea that the speaker had wealth but gave it up; now he implies that he was
created poor. In fact, throughout the prologue, the word pore oscillates between its
sociological and spiritual registers, obscuring who its referent really is. Sometimes it appears to
be the sociological poor, as when Pauper talks about sufferings and specifically addresses the
question of whether poor people can be guilty of covetousness (57–8). But at other times it is
clearly the voluntarily poor, as when Pauper reframes his begging for charity as a form of
evangelism: “I desyre more to wynne þe þanne þin good” (52). The stark rich-poor dichotomy
facilitates this; while Pauper is able to distinguish between “pouert wylfylly take for the loue of
God” and “pouert þat fally0yoghëltt to man a0yoghëltens hys wyl” (58), for the most part he does not. 75

This oscillation between voluntary and involuntary poor means that Pauper has at his
disposal the whole range of biblical texts urging compassion and justice for the poor.

Particularly important are the texts that refer to the “God þat made hem pore” (52). While on
the one hand, such texts suggest that the poor should stay poor rather than changing their
God-given estate, Pauper uses them in such a way as to suggest that if God made the poor

75Good historical discussions of poverty in the Middle Ages include Michel Mollat, The Poor in the Middle Ages:
Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Judith M.
Bennett, “Conviviality and Charity in Medieval and Early Modern England,” Past and Present 134 (1992), Sharon
poor, he made the rich rich. Moreover, God is on the side of the poor: he listens to and carries out their curses, he loves those who give cheerfully, and he will provide for them. At the end of chapter 1, Pauper quotes and reworks the lilies-of-the-field passage (Matthew 6:28ff, Luke 12:27ff) in order to make the point that Dives’s refusal to give alms is ineffectual—or at least insignificant—because the Creator of all will provide for Pauper as he does for the animals and flowers. In reworking the gospel passage to include not just lilies and grass but feathered birds, fish, “and alle thynge þat lyuy3t vpon erthe” (52), Pauper expands the scope of his dialogue with Pauper from a strictly human and societal matter, outward toward the natural world, clothed in beauty and wonder. All “lyfolde” come from God, says Pauper; not just the poor, but all creation is defined by its dependence on God for beauty, clothing, food, survival.

IV. ALMS, PAYMENT, AND CHARITY

In chapters 2-8, Pauper applies this thesis to human society. In chapter 2 he depicts his state of need as the result of ingratitude on the part of those who hear him:

“And for my trauayl I begge myn mete and myn clothing; oþir hyre aske I noon but þat ðey welyn freely 3euen for þe loue of God. And often I gete right nought for myn trewe seruyse but shrewydde woordys, hungry and thryst and mechil trauayl, noo thank but gret dispyght, mechil angyr, mechil maugre” (53).

Pauper here depicts alms as the “hyre” that his service deserves: while he asks people to “freely ðeuen for the þe loue of God” (53), he is repaid often with nothing, or with harsh words.

There is an interesting equation here between “hire” or wages and the alms that he solicits.
Alms in this figuration are not an unmerited handout, but “hyre,” the just return for his work preaching, though it is not quantified in the way that, say, *Pearl* quantifies the wages of the workmen in the vineyard. “Hyre” here is not payment, but a sign of gratitude on the part of those who have benefited from his “trewe seruyse.” In some sense Pauper imagines his preaching as a gift of service to his hearers, to be rewarded with gratitude and then with counter-gifts of provision. He and his hearers participate in a gift-economy in which wisdom and alms are exchanged.

The participation of humans in such exchanges with each other and with God is another sign that they are, like everything else, at base dependent. Dives and Pauper demonstrate one kind of exchange, the verbal debate, as they argue over whether riches or poverty is superior. It is not an even exchange; although Dives can quote scripture and introduces his objections with the academic “3et contra” (59, 61, 63), Pauper has at his disposal the entire tradition of medieval biblical commentary (as well as the author’s sympathy). In spite of this, his arguments in favor of poverty are largely negative. His later assertions that the poor are more blessed sit uncomfortably next to his initial pleas for pity on his suffering state.

Much more convincing is his attack on the blessedness of wealth. Central to this attack is a

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76Barnum’s notes to these chapters include a series of references to the Glossa Ordinaria and Latin authors including Augustine, Gratian, Bonaventure, Nicholas of Lyra, and others. She notes in her introduction that the author had almost certainly spent time in the Franciscan convent at Oxford, since he cites at least one commentary written by an Oxford friar and not available outside that convent’s library until the late 1400s (Barnum, ed., *Dives and Pauper*, “Introduction,” 2:xxv.).
leveling claim, that the rich are just as needy as the poor, just as dependent upon God but also just as, or even more, dependent upon other people. One good example is a verbal exchange that occurs in chapter 5, the first of four counter-attacks that Dives makes upon Pauper’s argument that “the ryche man nedyȝt more to beggyn bodily þan the pore” (60). Dives cites Solomon’s prayer, “ȝeqe me noo gret rychesse ne gret pouert,” to argue that poverty is not to be desired. In return Pauper argues that the correct interpretation of the passage from Proverbs is not “ȝeqe me neythir gret rychesse ne beggerye” (59) but “ȝeqe me nought rychesse and beggerye togedere” (60), interpreting “beggerye” as neediness in its broadest sense. Pauper plays with the difference between physical and psychological need, suggesting that the rich man’s need to uphold his “staat” is somehow equivalent to the poor man’s need to eat. Here, as in chapter 4, Pauper does not suggest that Dives should keep a lower standard of living and give the rest to the poor; he must uphold his public persona or incur social shame. But as in chapter 4 Pauper does underline that the rich man needs others to help him maintain his estate.

Dives then objects that the rich man can pay them, “and Þerfore it is noo beggerye but a comonaunt-makyng, payȝing, byȝing and selling” (60). In other words the legal transaction of labor for money takes away the aspect of dependence; the rich man is not dependent, because he can give an acceptable recompense for the help he receives. And this provokes Pauper’s most direct and aggressive attack:
We should note several things about this peroration. First, it is an attack on Dives’s implicit claim that he gives a return for help which beggars do not. In contrasting how rich and poor ask for help, Pauper frames both transactions as forms of exchange. He describes Pauper’s begging as aligned with nature, human kindness, and charity. On the other hand, he aligns Dives’s solicitation with self-interested greed and vice. The author uses this contrast to create two senses of the social sphere—a “natural” idea of the created social order as being conducive to feelings of compassion, pity, charity (here not supernatural but deeply natural, basic to human nature) and an idea of the sundering, unnatural self-interest of the market world.  

We might read this as placing the poor man within a world of obligations here understood as positive, natural, strengthening, within which his dependence and weakness become opportunities for others to exercise their natural ability to pity and give. In contrast the rich man as Pauper describes him is exploitative, selfish, and isolated from the natural society of

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77 We might compare the interplay of nature and kindness in King Lear.
need and kindness. Dependent he may be upon the labor of others, but this dependence does not keep him from accumulating at their expense.

Pauper’s problem is not with Dives’s desire to get. As we have seen, Pauper describes his own preaching as deserving of “hyre.” What Pauper objects to is the ideas of relationship that Dives’s actions imply. Dives’s claim that “we payin hem for here trauayl and for here good, and þerfore it is noo beggerye but a comonaunt-makyng, pay3ing, by3ing and selling” (60) suggests that the relationship between two parties in an exchange is ended with repayment—in other words that buying and selling are the paradigm for social exchange. This is why Pauper accuses Dives of giving only “for the loue of the peny.” He is guilty of viewing possessions as things to be valued for themselves, rather than circulated to establish and maintain relationships with those around him. Pauper, who asks “for the loue of God,” is more in line with the social order created by God.

If we understand gifts as not only not one-sided but almost by definition involving some kind of mutual exchange, we see in Dives and Pauper that alms as a form of gift-giving depends on very different assumptions about social relationships than do the aristocratic gift-exchanges modeled in Pearl. There the emphasis was on the giver and his generosity; gifts were given in order to reinscribe hierarchy by placing the recipient in a position of dependence and gratitude upon the giver or to requite some service done. Aristocratic gifts of this type were therefore by definition about vertical relationships.
In *Dives and Pauper*, on the other hand, the text emphasizes horizontal relationships between equals, where the rich person should be motivated by the needs of the poor—in other words, the gift is about the recipient, his needs and condition, rather than about his relation to a social superior. “Holy Povety” presents almsgiving as a form of leveling between rich and poor. This theme of leveling is supported by the fact that the text gives an initial description of rich and poor as being birthed and dying in the same pain, and that so much of the early chapters are devoted to proving that the rich are just as needy as the poor or even more so.

Yet there are significant limitations to this leveling. The poor are depicted only as beggars, never as givers—perhaps because the real emphasis is on the interests of religious mendicants. The poor man is described as needing to receive everything from the rich man in a way that, while not glorifying the rich man, makes his wealth totally necessary to the poor one. As a result, there is an implicit justification of wealth as the source of charitable giving: the rich can and even must exist in order to support the poor, their objects of charity.

In some contexts, to assert that the rich must stay rich to support the poor is a rhetorical move meant simply to shore up the status quo, a means of allowing the rich to stay rich in a way that lets them keep also the spiritual advantage of giving alms. In this context we might compare Judith Bennett’s suggestion that the economically marginalized in the late medieval and early modern eras might help each other out through fundraising efforts such as
the charity-ale or bride ale.\textsuperscript{78} For me the important aspect of Bennett’s article is her assumption that because much medieval charitable giving by monasteries and aristocratic households inscribed hierarchy, it necessarily also imposed oppressive power relations onto its recipients. Against these power relations she recovers charity ales as a form of collaborative, egalitarian mutual support among the poorer classes, rather like rent parties or bridal showers. Bennett’s historical evidence indeed makes the case that such support existed as a viable and important alternative to top-down charity. Yet what are the implications of reading all hierarchical charity as oppressive? Without income redistribution or forms of radical hospitality, doesn’t this interpretation of top-down gift-giving just suggest that the rich should not give, thereby cutting even the vestigial connection of noblesse oblige between rich and poor?

The forms of charity advocated in \textit{Dives and Pauper} seem to be an alternative to both strictly hierarchical charity of the kind practiced (sometimes quite stingily) by monasteries, noble households, and executors of wealthy willmakers, and the perspective articulated by Dives at the start, that beggars deserve no charity because they have earned none. Pauper argues that the rich should give to the poor because the two classes are united existentially in birth and death and united prescriptively by natural feeling and pity for each other’s suffering. They are essentially equals spiritually, and so the rich must help the beggar economically. This

\textsuperscript{78} Bennett, “Conviviality and Charity,” 23–4, 36–41.
argument disarms the force of the aristocratic gift; instead, the alms given by the rich man are egalitarian, a sign of fellow-feeling and implicit equality rather than of patronage and privilege. Moreover, the text is at pains to emphasize universal human dependence upon a God who gives. Dives attempts to spiritualize the meaning of this theological point: “Alle we been beggerys gostly, as sey3t Seynt Austyn, for we han noo good gostly but of Godys 3yfte” but Pauper neatly reverses it: “Ergo, we been alle beggerys bodily, for we han noo good bodily but of Godys 3yfte” (60). The text flattens out human hierarchical relationships of class and degree, replacing it with a common equality constituted by weakness and dependence upon God. This equality does not translate into social equality, but it has powerful implications nevertheless.

Throughout the rest of the prologue, Pauper continues to stress this point as he rebuts Dives’s attempts to prove him wrong. In chapter 6, Pauper claims that he has become poor to imitate Christ: “we [forsake rychesse of þis word] nought for presoumpcioun of oure holynesse but for dred of oure frelete and for his loue þat boughte vs so dere and forsoke hys lyf for oure loue and was pore and nakyd for loue of us” (61). He emphasizes that “we” (and here he clearly means the friars) take God’s gifts “wyt devocioun and thankyn God of al” but that they forsake what is not strictly necessary for their life (62). He asserts also that the friars forsake earthly lordship “for be weye of kende alle we been euene in lordshepe, as oure begynnyng and oure ending shewyt wel” (63)—again asserting that all people are equal by nature and that the
rich/poor divide is a tenuous, circumstantial, and even artificial one, created by God's fiat and not by some imporesnal justice.

Dives responds to this by trying to recover the importance of such a distinction, claiming that the rich are necessary: “ȝyȝhëltyf alle meen weryn as pore as þu art, þu shuldyst fare wol euel.” In other words, the sanctity these friars (and it is clear at this moment that the debate is about the mendicant way of life) claim as a result of their renunciation is actually dependent on the compromises that their donors have made by having worldly possessions. Without alms given by the wealthy, they would starve. Pauper himself has implicitly affirmed this already by not mandating that Dives become like him. But he nevertheless absolutely denies that the rich have any power of their own by reversing the argument upon Dives. “ȝyȝhëltyf alle meen weryn as ryche as þu art, þu shuldyst faryn mechel wers,” he argues, enumerating the mountain of arduous tasks that are necessary for Dives to live, not just as a rich man, but at all. In a biting series of rhetorical questions, he names the tasks of production, manufacture, and maintenance that support the lifestyles not of just rich men but of everyone: tilling the soil, plowing, reaping, herding, cutting and sewing clothes, miling, baking, brewing, cooking, smithying, building, cobbling, and more. Without them, Pauper says, “þu shuldist moun goon sholes and clothles and goon to þin bed meteles. Al muste þu þanne doon alone” (63). The main thrust of Pauper’s argument is a sociological and even economic one; he is intent on making the wealthy individual aware of his social context, and especially to show how the wealthy depend
on the labors, skills, and production of both skilled and unskilled workers. Wealth, he implies, produces an illusion of power and autonomy; in reality Dives’s money is valuable only because it connects him to a network that provides all the apparatus of affluence in exchange for his expenditure. If his workers were as rich as he, they would have no need to work for him...and he would be stranded in his opulent but unproductive house, coffers full but larder empty.

Even marriage would not help: “3yf þu haddyst a wyf, mechil woo shulde she han, and 3yf þu haddist noon, þu shuldist been wrecche of alle wrecchys. Þer shulde noo man welyn doon ony thing for þe” (63). Dives, then, is totally dependent upon the market. The workers who supply his goods and services in chapters 4 and 7 work for money. They are not obligated to do anything for Dives because of their social status or his, nor would they do it out of friendship or fellow-feeling. Pauper also conspicuously leaves out all kinds of merchants and purveyors from his list of crafts: the trades he mentions are ones that either produce some kind of good (field hands, brewers) or somehow process it (cooking, tailoring, smithying). He ends up by citing Augustine, “diues et pauper sunt duo sibi necessaria. The ryche man and the

79 In many ways, Dives’s situation is similar to the structure of mass consumer capitalism, in which households purchase all their essentials from and are totally dependent upon the invisible supply lines of transportation: think of the food, clothing, imported consumer goods, etc, brought from China or the fields of California in huge container ships or refrigerated trucks, to appear miraculously in our supermarkets and big box stores. Marketing and our own belief in individual autonomy play into the massive consumer mentality which obscures from us our own total dependence upon these supply lines. Individual households may farm or garden, but how many of us directly produce what we consume? The difference, of course, is that Pauper can name individual craftspeople producing the necessities and luxuries that Dives consumes so obliviously, while we can name only corporations for the most part.
pore been too thynngys wol needful iche to other,” adding, “And, as I seyde ferst, the ryche
man hatʒ more nede of the pore mannys helpe þan the pore of the ryche.” In this conclusion,
he expands the category of the poor to include anyone who is not rich—the bakers, brewsters,
and so forth whose work enables the lifestyle of the rich—though of course he is also harking
back to his earlier argument that the rich actually need the prayers and wisdom of the religious
poor like himself.

Dives’s counter-arguments have gradually gotten more theological in nature; his
arguments in favor of riches have moved from prudential wisdom, hoping to simply avoid need
at all costs, toward a serious consideration of human contingency, and finally to accepting his
own responsibility for caring for others (while still attempting to claim that his way is better).
And Pauper in turn replies to him with a mellower voice than he did in chapter 5, for instance.
In chapter 8, Dives is still trying to argue that it is better to be rich than to be poor, but he
now bases his claim on the rich person’s role as almsgiver: it is “more blisful to 3euen þan to
takyn. But the ryche man may betere 3eyun þan may the pore, for he hatʒ more qherof. Ergo,
it is more blisful to been ryche þan to been pore” (63). Pauper again deals with this argument
by locating God as the source of the rich man’s wealth: “as Seynt Gregorie seyʒt: Quanto dona
crescent tanto rationes crescunt donorum, The more þat ʒyfts encresyn, the more encreseyn
rekennynggys of ʒyfts” (64) and later, “takynge of ʒyfts byndʒt and / iargʒt the takere and
ʒeuyng dysiargʒt the ʒeuer” (65). The suggestion here is that the rich man’s wealth is a gift
from God, but not a free gift; by receiving it, the rich man puts himself into debt, and under
obligation to God. In comparison to how much he has received, the rich man gives far too
little away. Moreover, “God acceptyth the 3yfte for the man, nought the man for the 3yfte”
(64). The basic summary of divine gift-reception: what is rendered to God in no way puts God
in any kind of debt to the giver. The text imagines that such a gift is received rather as a token
of the giver’s intentions and fidelity to God. What is important is not the absolute value of the
alms the rich man gives, but its proportion to the sum total of his wealth; it therefore imagines
alms as a kind of counter-gift to God’s original gift of wealth, rather than as an originary gift
that can itself demand a counter-gift.

“Holy Poverty” is written with the assumption that all economic exchanges produce
relationships. The question is what kind? Dives begins by denying such relationships; for
him, begging is always predatory, while all that he himself needs can be bought. He thus
perceives no need for the teaching which Pauper offers, teaching which the text presents as a
form of the biblical wisdom the price of which is beyond rubies. Pauper’s job then is to
destabilize Dives’s assumptions. Pauper does not do this by attacking wealth itself as
intrinsically evil. Rather he takes aim at the rich man’s assumptions about what wealth means
for his social and spiritual status. Over and over Pauper’s strategy is to forcefully place the
wealthy in what he sees as their proper context. He understands this context to be not the
amount of their wealth compared to the poor, but their participation in two kinds of exchange:
first, the networks of economic production and exchange that supported wealthy households (he is cagily silent about whether he means aristocratic or wealthy mercantile households); and second, the gift-economy that linked God and human beings, in which all goods and personal attributes were seen as the largesse of God rather than the result of individual labor and deserving. Pauper uses both these contexts to bring out the dependence and contingency of a rich man’s lifestyle. He disarms, simply by omitting to mention, the strain of medieval thought that connected God’s differing gifts to differing classes of people as evidence of a divinely ordained hierarchy. Instead he uses the dependence of the rich—horizontally upon those who provide them with help in return for wealth, and vertically upon the God who endows them with money—to argue that the rich and poor are essentially equal, united by nature. Their common nature should therefore evoke pity in the rich person who sees the sufferings of the poor.
Chapter 3:

“‘An Ernest Peny of Hevyn’: Margery Kempe in the Fifteenth-Century Marketplace”

_The Book of Margery Kempe_ is remarkable among Middle English writings for its lively record of daily life among the middle class in the fifteenth century. The _Book_ depicts its protagonist’s financial concerns with remarkable detail: business ventures; the purchase of white clothes; fraudulent losses; gifts of money given by admirers and friends; the settling of debts before a venture out on pilgrimage; the hiring of guides, boats, and supplies for travel. In Sheila Delany’s words, “With account-book scrupulosity Margery registers every gift, whether alms, cloth for a dress, or payment for her stories.”

Ever since the 1970s, critics have been aware that Kempe both was shaped by her mercantile culture and exploited elements of that culture to resist constraints of gender and social status and to pursue her own spiritual agenda. Scholars such as Delany and Deborah Ellis have compared the _Book_ to Chaucer’s _Canterbury Tales_ (the _Wife of Bath’s Prologue_ and the _Merchant’s Tale_, respectively) to note the ways in

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which Kempe’s text depicts sexual activity and marriage as economic acts. David Aers likewise explores the deeply mercantile cast of Kempe’s spirituality, including her obsession with obtaining more and more pardon by means of pilgrimage, as well as the assumption that leaving more money for masses could release a soul from purgatory faster (in spite of the fact that a single mass was supposed to be infinitely efficacious). Aers comments that although this would seem to be a major contradiction in the practices of Kempe and her East Anglian contemporaries, “it simply was not a problem to those whose perceptions were organized around the production and exchange of commodities in their markets.” The central theme among all these critics is that Kempe uses monetary practices as a paradigm for all kinds of social relations and religious practices, that her understanding of social relations is constituted by mercantile practice and particularly the acts of buying, selling, and accumulating.

I would like to build on these studies by highlighting some other ways in which mercantile practice and culture influenced the religious ideas found in The Book of Margery Kempe. First, I will examine the ways in which Kempe’s text treats money as a universal

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83 Ibid., 82. In the next chapter I will argue that in fact the character of Christ and several human interlocutors problematize for Kempe the accumulation model of religious devotion, with mixed results.
measure of value, and the ways in which she imagined social and spiritual exchange in terms of mercantile transaction. In a culture where hierarchy and custom held significant authority, however, such assumptions could be problematic, and Kempe’s text shows a distinct awareness that this is so. In the second section, I will argue that the arena for such exchanges is the marketplace, and that by extension Kempe imagines all public space and public bodies as versions of medieval marketplaces. Third, I will argue that Kempe’s text emphasizes the centrality of slander as a form of ascetic suffering that corrects and answers the marketplace paradigm of public space.84

84 In the BMK so many anonymous characters can be identified, and so many historical details correspond with the other facts we know about late medieval English and European culture, that I cannot avoid the conclusion that the BMK is non-fiction; that is, that it accurately represents Kempe’s own understanding of what really happened in her life. In that respect I disagree with Lynn Staley’s analysis of the BMK as essentially a work of fiction, and therefore a work which shouldn’t necessarily be used as a source of historical information (see Lynn Staley, Margery Kempe’s Disenting Fictions (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 2–6.

However, I believe that Staley’s distinction between Margery the character and Kempe the author is a useful one because it captures two qualities of the text. First, it captures the nature of the BMK as essentially a literary text, constructed and fashioned rather than narrated naively. This has been confirmed by the many scholars who have located antecedents for Kempe’s mystical experiences in literary saints’ lives and the drama of East Anglia (for example Gail McMurray Gibson, The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 47–66, Samuel Fanous, "Measuring the Pilgrim’s Progress: Internal Emphases in the Book of Margery Kempe," in Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England, ed. Denis Renevey and Christina Whitehead (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 157–76, Katherine J. Lewis, "Margery Kempe and Saint Making in Later Medieval England," in A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe, ed. John Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 196–215. To affirm this aspect of Staley’s analysis is to affirm that the BMK has literary value, that its form holds meaning, and thus to banish forever (hopefully) the condescension and scorn that met the book when it was first rediscovered in the first half of the twentieth century, when it was interpreted as the effusions of a hysteric and madwoman. Second, the disjunct—less extreme than Staley would have us believe, but still present—between the authorial voice who dictated the story and the “creatur” whose story is being told, highlights the text’s dependence upon memory and hindsight. The BMK does emphasize the disjunct between them, but I understand it as a disjunct of chronology and development, not of factual status. I have therefore attempted to treat the BMK as a literary text: a text in which the retelling of a life was crafted and formed by its
I. SOCIAL EXCHANGES, MERCANTILE TRANSACTIONS

Throughout Kempe’s narrative, it is said of various people that they would not do X for anything. For example, in the episode of sexual temptation in book 1, chapter 4, a man who made a pass at her eventually rejects her offer of intercourse: “And he seyd he ne wold for al þe good in þis world; he had leuar ben hewyn as smal as flesch to þe pott” (15). Similarly, in

I have tried hard to bracket the question of how “genuine” Margery’s visions were. Some contemporary readers of the manuscript apparently saw them as divine, in the same way that Kempe saw them, and gave them credence and respect. (For a fuller discussion of the contemporary reception of the BMK, see the introduction and note to the original EETS edition of The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. Sanford B. Meech and Hope Emily Allen (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1940), xxxii-xl, Kelly Parsons, “The Red Ink Annotator of the Book of Margery Kempe and His Lay Audience,” in The Medieval Professional Reader at Work: Evidence from Manuscripts of Chaucer, Langland, Kempe, and Gower, ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Maidie Hilmo (Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 2001), 143-216.) In the years immediately after the manuscript was rediscovered, twentieth-century critics interpreted them as hysteria, and therefore to be dismissed [the full history of the reception of the BMK is recounted in Marea Mitchell, The Book of Margery Kempe: Scholarship, Community, and Criticism (New York: Peter Lang, 2005)]. Since the seventies and early eighties, critics have tended to understand them either as Kempe’s attempts to subvert, escape, or manipulate social and religious control over her in order to achieve or affirm her own desires, or signs that she bought into those same controls: in other words, read them primarily as her own political agenda. As will become apparent, I perceive some key differences between the instructions and affirmations Margery receives in her “félyngys,” and the actions and impulses she espouses as her own viewpoint. I see no reason to rule out the possibility of her having had authentic mystical experiences, but neither do I want to occlude the social and theological underpinnings of her text. I have tried to do justice to both those impulses.

85 The Book of Margery Kempe, page 77; hereafter BMK. All quotations are taken from The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. Sanford B. Meech and Hope Emily Allen (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1940), and cited by page number; I have also frequently consulted the very helpful TEAMS annotated edition: Lynn Staley, ed., The Book of Margery Kempe (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996). The searchable electronic edition, with updated notes, is available online at
book 1, chapter 30, the Englishman Richard refuses to lead her to Rome, saying, “I wold not for an hundryd pownd þat þu haddyst a vylany in my cumpany” (77). In the first case, Kempe’s putative seducer parallels his first hyperbolic refusal with a second, negative one: he would rather be cut to pieces. In this case the alternative evil is one that simultaneously encompasses fleshly destruction and fleshly desire. The imaginary violence performed upon his body bleeds into the cannibalistic incorporation of that body into cooking food—a good parallel for the lust that is the central sin of this episode and its humiliating punishment. The intensity of the unnamed man’s disgust can only be conveyed by an image of fragmenting violence to his body—a refusal coupled with his unwillingness to accept huge wealth. In the other cases where an offer of money is the imagined alternative, money is the norm, invisible and unquestioned. Throughout the rest of the book it is Kempe herself who uses this expression the most. As with the previous examples, Kempe’s usage is firmly hyperbole, and it is doubtful that she herself intends any literal meaning when she says in chapter 31 that “sche thowt sche wold not a lost þe ryng for a thowsand pownde,” or in chapter 58, “3yf I had gold j-now, I wolde 3euyyn every day a nobyl for to haue every day a sermown” (78, 142). Yet throughout the hyperbole there is a specificity of number and of coinage—a thousand pounds, forty shillings, a

http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/staley.htm. All references to marginalia in the manuscript have been checked against the list of annotations and rubrications found in Appendices A, B, and C of Parsons, "Red Ink Annotator," 164-216.
noble every day—that draws the reader’s attention back to the imaginary economic possibilities of such comparisons. Money is the metonym for both its transformative abilities to become another thing by exchange (and to measure the value of other things even when those things are explicitly denied to be objects of exchange), and for the resulting power inherent in possessing it.

These cases are, of course, hyperbole of a very ordinary kind, and one that English-speakers still use today (“not for a million dollars,” “not if you paid me”). But they also suggest, through negation, the degree to which mercantile cultures assume that money is the universal measure. One’s degree of desire or repugnance can be expressed by a comparison (even a failure of comparison) with a fortune because money measures human need or desire. By the time that Kempe dictated her *Book*, medieval philosophers had already articulated and elaborated on this idea:

The one thing that measures all things, according to the things themselves, is need (*indigentia*), which all exchanged artifacts have common to them, to the extent that all goods exchanged have reference to human need. In exchange, things are not valued according to the dignity of their natures. If that were so, a mouse, which possesses sensitive life, would be priced higher than a pearl, which is inanimate. But the price of things is determined according to how much men need them because of their usefulness.\(^{86}\)

Aquinas is here describing the exchange of goods and services in the marketplace described by Aristotle. Yet it is not hard to see how this marketplace principle could leak out of the market.

Human beings need and desire not only the goods and services available in shops and markets, but also intangible and unmarketable things: pleasure, status, power, honor, positions of authority, sex. Often such things that are supposed to be gained by non-mercantile means as various as inheritance, chance, judgment of personal merit, custom, friendship, or love; but if they can be measured by desire, then they can also be bought and sold. We call these things bribery, prostitution, and corruption.

If all this seems too obvious to warrant mentioning, it is only because modern Western cultures adhere to the same presuppositions. Corruption is a vice, according to our way of reckoning, but it is recognizable and understandable. However, in a culture governed also by ideas of intrinsic order (quality of birth, for instance, or a social structure ordained by God), the ability to measure everything by human desire for it entails a flattening out of certain kinds of important distinctions. Joel Kaye describes Aquinas as recognizing “that within the system of market exchange, essences and hierarchies have no place. They are, in fact, meaningless.”

From the perspective of an older order, the power of money could overturn custom and rights, abandoning justice for gain.

An incident from book 1, chapter 25 of the BMK illustrates this. In this chapter there arises a dispute between Saint Margaret’s Church, the oldest parish in Lynn, and two newer

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87Ibid. Discussions of the ideas of hierarchy which were invoked to describe and justify late medieval society include Horrox, "Service," 61-78, Coss, "An Age of Deference," 31-74.
chapels, Saint Nicholas’s and Saint James’s, over the right to baptize. The parishioners of the chapels wished them to have the same standing as the parish church and obtain a bull from Rome allowing one of the chapels to set up a font “so it wer no derogacyon to þe parysch church” (59). The prior who was in charge of the parish church opposed it, and the question went to court and eventually to the Bishop of Norwich. The issue, as the terms of the bull recognized, was the competition between the entities for status, for members, and especially the revenues that came in from public services such as baptism and churchings. Those in favor of a new font were attempting to break the monopoly that St. Margaret’s had on these particular religious services. Kempe’s narrative depicts this innovation as a threat to the custom-honored rights of the older institution. Here, in contrast to her usual deference to the socially prominent, Kempe describes the chapel partisans in harshly negative terms:

Þe paryschenys whech pursuyd weryn rygth strong & haddyn gret help of lordshyp, & also, þe most of alle, þei wer ryche men, worshepful marchawntys, & haddyn gold a-now, whech may spede in euery nede, and þat is rewth þat mede xuld spede er þan trewth. (59)

The conflict is set up as a struggle between wealth and traditional rights. The advocates of the chapel have the backing of elites, their own social standing, and economic wealth, their gold which “may spede in every nede.” The rhyme in this phrase is characteristic of other Middle English proverbs that link the power of money with corrupt social structures including the
courts of law. If it is not actually a proverb, it has the ring of one. It is also reminiscent of the refrain of the fourteenth-century poem London Lickpenny, whose rustic speaker seeks legal redress only to discover that “For lack of mony, I cold not spede.” In contrast, the parson who opposes them has a different kind of strength: the text says that he withstood them “manfully” with the help of those “whech wer hys frendys and louedyn þe worship of her parysch chyrch” (59). The opposition here is depicted as between the cold, naked power of money to buy anything, even justice, and a warm, manly, personal loyalty to custom and traditional order.

Town elites, including Kempe’s father John Brunham, during his tenure as mayor of Lynn, had opposed any new rights for the chapel, including the move to allow it a font, in the late fourteenth century. The conflict, therefore, was more complicated than the text would suggest. Kempe’s rhetoric, including that proverb-like invocation of traditional knowledge, aligns herself and her cause with older forms of social understanding in which custom and law

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88 For a discussion of these proverbs in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, see Elizabeth Harper and Britt Mize, "Material Economy, Spiritual Economy, and Social Critique in Everyman," *Comparative Drama* 40, no. 3 (2006), esp. 290-4.


are understood to embody the God-given social order. In contrast, she aligns her opponents with the critiques of money as corrupting, alienating and destructive of social order. Kempe stops short of saying that the rich opponents offered a bribe to the Bishop of Norwich, the judge of the matter; maybe their lawyers were just better. But coming so soon after the narrative lament over the power of money, the bishop’s compromise offer of a conditional font to the chapel partisans does sound like a confirmation of the proverb. Amplifying this impression is Kempe’s supernatural prediction of ultimate victory, which specifically highlights the importance of money in their opponents’ strategy: “‘Syr,’ seyd þe creatur, ‘drede 0yoghëlte not, for I vndyrstond in my sowle, þow þei woldyn 0yoghëlteve a buschel of nobelys, þei xuld not haue it.’” (59) Kempe’s divine inspiration allows her to predict the defeat of even the most powerful wealth.

In this case, Kempe only foresees the defeat of the chapel-partisans; her prayers are answered by no more miraculous intervention than the defeat of pride by its own overreaching. Because they “trostyd fully to han her entent be lordship and be proces of lawe,” the supporters of the chapel held out for a better offer than the bishop could give them. Greed and power are here aligned on the side of the bribers, not the would-be bribed: the avarice that (Kempe suggests) they rely on when offering a bribe is the characteristic that defeats their own

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91 For the equation of custom with the law of God, see Richard Firth Green, "Medieval Literature and Law," in The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), particularly 410-2. For the critiques of money as undercutting social order and creating alienation, see Little, Religious Poverty, 29-41.
judgment: “and for þei wold han al þei lost al.” (60) The agency of their loss is again occluded: what was the mechanism by which they lost their case? Is Kempe suggesting that God intervened miraculously, or did he act through the judge of the case who made a decision based on sound legal reasoning? It may be that Kempe expects her readers to know it already, but without that outside knowledge, the story ends relatively abruptly and mysteriously.

This episode gives us a sense of the ways in which Kempe’s world thought about monetary power as potentially dangerous. It also portrays very clearly, though obliquely, the competitive culture in which such power might be wielded. Kempe emphasizes that the partisans of the chapel were laying claim to the rights of the parish church. She speaks of the “sufferawns” of the parish parson in allowing the chapels to administer all sacraments except baptism and purification (itself not truly a sacrament but regarded with utmost seriousness by women especially at that time—see Kathleen Ashley?), and emphasizes that those who wish to make the chapels “lych to þe parysch cherch” were laity opposing the wishes of the clergy. From the start, then, she puts the disagreement in terms of usurpation: the oldest parish church is an entity with prior rights to liturgical monopoly, its overseer the parson allows some trespass on those rights, while the upstart laity (with neither the legal authority of priority nor the social authority of ordination) attempt to overthrow the status quo and make the other

92 Particularly when it was one’s opponents who were using it.
chapels equal by manipulating the authorities through a papal bull and money. In other words, the desire for equality is the ground of wickedness here. The coda at the end of the chapter underlines this again: “And so, blyssed mot God ben, þe parysch cherch stod stytte in her worship & æyr degre as sche had don iþ hundryd þer befoþ & mor, and þe inspiracyon of owyr Lord was be experiens prevyd for very sothfast & sekyr in þe forseyd creatur.” (60). The end of the debate, in other words, is the return to a God-sanctioned hierarchy of “worship and degree,” in which monopoly of liturgical function is equated with honor, and the diminution of the most prominent church’s rights is necessarily a “derogacyon.” There is no room at all in Kempe’s account of the situation to welcome other Christian bodies with a similar function, or even a sense that the chapel-partisans’ desire to have all sacraments offered in their chapel might be a laudable one.

In the chapels’ threat to Saint Margaret’s, economic interest and “worship” are intertwined. It is clear enough that there would have been competition between Saint Margaret’s church and the newer chapels. We know that late medieval parishes operated as economic entities, taking in huge amounts of revenue through tithes (by one estimate, between one quarter and one third of all English agricultural surplus), and serving as leasable property for a variety of religious professionals.93 Moreover, the christenings and churchings mentioned

here both brought in revenue in the form of fees. St Margaret’s Church’s monopoly on christenings and churchings guaranteed symbolic dependence of the chapels upon the church, even while it ensures that the revenue from these sacraments goes to the latter rather than to the former. The conflict is not simply about economic solvency for one church or another, but the intensity of this rivalry is amplified by the market context of Lynn, not just the competition of merchants for business but the competition between the bishop overlords of Lynn and its town council, the “community of Lynn,” for control of various franchises in Lynn, including the taxation of imports. At first glance, it seems that Kempe’s emphasis on “worship and degree” occludes the economic benefits of this status: when she talks about money in this story, it is as the wicked greaser of wheels, the other side’s weapon of choice. But in fact her focus on “degree” actually shows the connections between competition for status in a social hierarchy, and the economic competition between various religious organizations. Kempe strongly takes her family’s side of the debate, and the social prominence of the Brunham family is to some extent dependent upon the continued religious prominence of St. Margaret’s church.

It is this model of social relations that governs Kempe’s understanding of the relationship between her own parish church and the chapels. Kempe’s strong preference for

the family line on this matter—invoking customary law to maintain the rights and degree of
the church—suggests a strong sense of competition which was at odds with ideas of the
Christian church and charity. Legal ideals of rights, bolstered by social understandings of zero-
sum honor, have in this scene overtaken any theological understandings of a church beyond the
parochial, or of a social body governed by caritas.

It is important, however, to understand that Kempe uses a market understanding of
social relations to flatten out hierarchies that disadvantage her. The power of money has been
a central feature in criticism of what is probably the most well-known episode in the book, the
scene in which Margery Kempe and her husband John, traveling together, are discussing
Margery’s desire to have a celibate marriage.95 The biblical language of the marital debt plays
quite handily into this scene, in which Kempe gets her husband to free her from rendering him
the marital debt in return for paying his literal debts. The dialogue is not so much a
conversation as it is a sample of market-style bargaining, with John making offers and Margery
making counter-offers (subject, of course, to the approval of Christ, who appears as the
mastermind in engineering the situation so that Margery has the upper hand, the most to offer

95See, for instance, Delany, "Sexual Economics," 112-5, Aers, Community, Gender, and Individual Identity, 95-6,
Nona Fienberg, "Thematics of Value in the Book of Margery Kempe," Modern Philology 87 (1989): 139, Ellis,
"Merchant’s Wife’s Tale," 608-9, 11.
and the least to lose, in the negotiations). It is a bargain whose style, if not its substance, would not seem out of place in any medieval market. Deborah Ellis comments,

    Margery actually wins John’s acceptance of a chaste marriage by promising to pay off his debts...Once again it is her commercial role, her ability to barter herself, that influences her marital and religious behavior, and once again we see the distancing potential inherent in a merchant’s marriage, where money is a virtual metaphor—a peculiar instance of synecdoche—for loyalty and love.  

Similarly, Sheila Delany has read the scene as emblematic of the dehumanizing nature of medieval gender and class relations, where Kempe’s personal freedom, like the manumission of a serf from his or her lord, is available only for a sum of money. Delany buys into the medieval rhetoric of money as a contaminating, alienating force that breaks down and opposes personal social relations like the “loving relationships” she sees Kempe as lacking. In contrast, Liz Herbert McAvoy characterizes the scene as a “sexualised economic transaction in reverse,” in which Kempe’s ability to buy herself out of the degrading sexual economy of marriage indicates her ability to use the discourse of prostitution to her own advantage. Anthony Goodman suggests that this particular scene indicates the underlying affection between the two. John would have had legal and canonical support for rejecting her proposals altogether, or

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96Ellis, "Merchant’s Wife’s Tale,” 611.


punishing her corporally for disobedience if she continued to make them. But rather than invoking the marital hierarchy in order to achieve his ends, or using the force authorized by that hierarchy, John bargains with her as if they have equal status and equal rights: bargainers who act out of a mutual desire for profit. Note also that Christ is depicted as manipulating the market, so to speak: his actions (striking John impotent, commanding Margery to fast so that she can later give it up as a concession to John) are crucial terms of the deal that the Kempes strike with each other.

Throughout the book, Kempe’s basic orientation for all kinds of social interaction is strongly dependent upon individual achievement of worship and avoidance of shame, and her paradigm is one of accumulation and competition. It should therefore be no surprise that this same basic paradigm informs her approach to religion throughout the book. Consider, for instance, her reluctance to confess her unnamed sin in book 1, chapter 1, and her concern with atoning for it privately. Surely her reluctance could only stem from shame at the nature of the sin—a shame so deep that even at the point of death she was deterred from confessing because she feared the sharp words of her confessor. Central to her self-conception is the glory or shame her actions accrue from others. In the same way, Kempe emphasizes that she becomes a brewer not out of necessity but “for pure coveytyse & for to maynten hir pride”; the

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unreformed Kempe equates economic accumulation with a social value which paradoxically must maintain the previous “worship” of her family but which can only be achieved by her individual efforts. She describes her own past actions in terms of pride and ambition, but they could equally well be described in terms of competition for social standing: fantastically ornamented clothes meant to attract attention and demonstrate the “worschup of hir kynred.” She envies her neighbors who are equally well-dressed because she wants to be honored by all. The implication is that she can only stand out among inferiors. The ostentation of her “pompws array,” it seems, can compel those who see her to estimate her at her own valuation, even if it cannot compel their good will.

But Kempe’s narrative soon exposes the utter futility of trying to earn this social value. Although her flashy attire makes her “be þe mor staryng to mennys syght and hir-self þe more worshepd” (9), it prompts negative talk. And the business ventures described in chapter 2, meant to elevate her status, are failures. Reading chapter 2, what comes through clearly is the sense of wasted effort: the repetitive loss of batch after batch of ale, year after year; the stubbornness of the mill-horse that will not move no matter how much it is caressed, beaten, or spurred; and then the shame of having her failures broadcast throughout the town.

Chapter 2 ends with Margery’s turning away from worldliness toward penance and “þe wey of euyr-lestyng lyfe,” and the supernatural experiences that Margery undergoes in chapter 3 ought to signal a decisive conversion from all her previous motivations to something new.
The music she hears, the tears of devotion that she sheds afterward (described as “plentyuows & habundawnt,” words we will return to later), her new longing for heaven, and her loss of sexual desire for her husband, all stem from the same moment in time, a moment when she is doing nothing but lying in bed. They are gifts from God—unearned and undeserved. Yet Margery’s spiritual efforts in chapter 4 indicate that while the object of her desire has changed from external “worshepys” to heavenly things, her basic orientation has not changed. Although she sincerely mourns her sins, she still behaves as though it is her own efforts that will bring her inner holiness. In this way, Margery’s behavior in chapter 4 replicates the vainglory and presumption of chapter 2, but in spiritual rather than worldly ways. She believes that her bodily penance is enough to protect her from devils; she desires singularity through a special miraculous reaching of Christ’s hands to her. It is only after the humiliation of being tempted and giving in to adultery (though only in intention, a fact which preserves her from greater shame) that Margery is finally able to understand the smallness of her own abilities and the unimportance of her place in the divine economy. She does penance no longer under the delusion that it gains her something. Rather than striving to accumulate merit through her actions, Margery now must labor against temptation and despair. In its own way it is work as backbreaking and failure-ridden as her brewing and milling were.

*The Book of Margery Kempe* thus defines Margery’s vice of pride as the desire to earn one’s own social and spiritual worth in the sight of others. Kempe’s account of her early life
suggests that this desire can be corrected only through failure and subsequent humiliation.

This worth is integrally tied to money in two ways. First, the accumulation of money potentially leads to greater public value and importance, as seen in the domestic businesses intended to “maynten hir pride.” Second, social worth is imagined as a kind of currency, one that is in limited supply and therefore must be competed for: hence Margery’s concern that she be better dressed than her neighbors. In both cases, one must win (accumulate and compete) by one’s own efforts. We may compare this with the social status of merchants, who might inherit a limited form of social ascendancy from a family, but could not rely on either title or the income of rents to maintain their status and lifestyle. Instead they either had to build up fortunes for themselves over a period of years through their own work, or work hard to maintain the gains of previous generations.

What finally galvanizes Margery, and breaks the cycle of striving, failure, and humiliation, is the vision of Christ in chapter 5. The text recounts Christ’s first long speech to her, in which reminds her of his suffering and death on the cross for her and assures her that her sins are forgiven “to þe vtterest poyn.” These assurances, and the series of commands that follow them, seem to be direct answers to Margery’s previous religious concerns. In response to her endless labor to mourn her sins, Christ says that she is totally forgiven now, and that when she dies “wyth-in þe twynkelyng of an eye þow schalt haue þe blysse of Heuyn” (16-7). This section implicitly contrasts her earlier endless labor of weeping and mourning for
her sins with the swiftness of her promised arrival in heaven. Christ’s words replace the economy of striving and earning (winning) with an economy of gifts. Over and over in this section, he says, “I grawnt...I schal ȝe...”, heaping upon her gift after gift. Moreover, he emphasizes Kempe’s singularity (a topic we shall return to in the next section). However, this singularity is not a function of her own efforts or attributes, but of God’s gifts to her. (Elsewhere she reports that Christ will reward her for intention, but Christ is also the source of that intention—in other words he gives her the ability to serve him, but then rewards her as if she had served him of her own power.) Christ gives her commandments, and there is no question of her disobeying, but there is also no question of her obedience in any way earning her singular status. This scene occurs early in the BMK, but I would argue that it is central to the action of the whole manuscript. Forgiveness “to the uttermost point” is what Margery understands as setting her free from the arduous task of accumulating value to save herself from the sufferings of purgatory. It replaces reliance on individual effort and subjectivity with reliance on a gift-giving God.¹⁰⁰

This is not to say that she here abandons mercantile paradigms of salvation. Far from it! In fact, the first book is rife with mercantile imagery. A Dominican anchorite to whom she reveals this first feeling endorses her vision by calling it “an ernest-peny of Hevyn,” in token of

¹⁰⁰I will argue in the next chapter that the gifts so given are crucial to Kempe’s self-understanding.
future transactions (18). In chapter 8, Margery Kempe makes what is effectively a last will and testament, and the inheritance which she divvies up is entirely spiritual:

Than þis creatur seyd, “Lord, sythen þow hast forȝoghëltouyn me my synne, I make þe myn executor of alle þe god werkys þat þow werkyst in me. In prayng, in thynkyng, in wepyng, in pylgrimage goyng, in fastyng, er in any good word spekyng, it is fully my wyl þat þow zeue Maystyr R [her confessor] halfyndel to encres of hys meryte as yf he dede hem hys owyn self. And þe oþer haluendel, Lord, sprede on þi freundys & þy emnys & and on my freundys & myn emnys, for I wyl have but þi-self for my mede.”

“Dowtyr, I xal be a trew executor to þe & fulfyllyn all þi wylle, & for þi gret charyte þat þow hast to comfortyn þin euyn-cristen þu schalt haue dubbyl reward in Heuyn”(20-21).

To me this brings together the contradictions of my argument. On the one hand, she acknowledges that the source of all her goodness is God. On the other hand, to will one’s good works to someone else—not just to do good works or wish others well, but actually to partition them off, as if they were cash or something transferable—suggests that they are hers in some very tangible way. The metaphor is still profoundly mercantile, but the difference now is that she is no longer earning in order to maintain her own social or spiritual value. Her own value now established incontrovertibly, everything she earns from chapter 5 on is excess. She now earns to benefit not herself but others...and in the process actually accrues more for herself in heaven.

Elsewhere, deeds are similarly positioned as objects of exchange with even more strikingly detailed images. In response to one Canterbury monk’s harassment, Kempe tells the tale of the man who hires other men to insult him, who is then scorned by “gret men.” The
story is premised upon a direct equation between the words spoken to and about one, and the monetary market which governs so much of that world. The man in the story is even able to buy insults for himself. It ends with the sinner having the last laugh (quite literally in this case) because he has gotten something for nothing: “A, ser, I haue a gret cause to lawh, for I haue many days put syluer owt of my purse & hyred men to chyde me for remyssyon of my synne, & þis day I may kepe my syluer in my purs, I thank 0yoghëltow alle.” (28) The story conflates the well-being of his purse with his social victory, even though the main point is that he is turning their evil intentions into his own good. It is a funny story on a number of levels, though Kempe’s immediate and pointed application of it to her own situation puts rather a damper on the humor. It is also interesting because it occupies a strange position between exemplum and parable as a teaching tool. The meaning of the story is a useful contrast to the use of the parable of the vineyard in *Pearl*. Both stories depend upon their audiences’ understanding of normal market workings to make their point. However, while *Pearl’s* parable of the vineyard wreaks havoc on those normal market understandings (in a counterintuitive reversal, equal labor for equal pay is shown as a prideful refusal to accept gift-relations), Margery Kempe’s story underlines the correspondence between the two situations (between herself and the man who gets insults for free). In fact, the punch line of the story presses home the victory of the person who not only transforms the scorn of his neighbors into something valued and welcomed, but also gets the better of his interlocutors by getting
something from them for free. Without putting too much upon this one story, I would like to suggest that the tale assumes the mental priorities of one who is carefully monitoring expenditure, and for whom thrift is more of a virtue than the social appearance of liberality. Getting something for free is a triumph only for the person who is paying attention to her pocketbook. We see therefore that Margery’s book contains vital parallels between her theological understanding of her spiritual situation and everyday processes of mercantile exchange.

II. Public Spaces as Marketplaces

Let us turn now to the marketplace. I have argued that Margery Kempe conceptualizes her interactions both with other people and with God as accumulation (of either social value, measured in her social position relative to other people, or in the case of religious values, accumulating merits, in line with the theology of the treasury of merits, and having a much more absolute quality). Although her conversion and total pardon by Christ re-orient her toward accumulating merits for other people rather than herself, these events in no way change the basic mercantile imagery of her spirituality. Nor do they change her basic understanding of her own social worth as being constituted by the value that others place upon her, and in

\footnote{Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, 76-83. For more on the treasury of merits, see the original papal bull, Clement VI, *Extravagantium communium*, Lib. V. tit. ix Friedberg, ed., *Corpus Iuris Canonici*. See also Swanson, ed., *Promissory Notes*, Shaffern, *Penitents’ Treasury*, Swanson, *Indulgences in Late Medieval England*.}
particular the words that they speak about her.

But there is a more complex relationship between these two things. To return for a moment to one of the episodes discussed above, Margery’s early “huswifres” are notable less for the magnitude of their failure than for the gossip they occasion around town:

“þan summe seyden sche was a-cursyd; sum seyden God toke opyn veniawns upon hir; sum seyd [o thing]; & sum seyd an-oþer. And sum wyse men, whos mend was more growndyd in þe lofe of owyr Lord, seyd it was þe hey mercy of our Lord Ihesu Cryst clepyd & kallyd hir fro þe pride and vanyte of þe wretthyd world.” (10-11)

Kempe and the town share a common understanding of social standing as a zero-sum game: when one person gains more honor or prestige, another must necessarily lose some. Hence her envy of others with equally elaborate dress, and the town’s excited gossip about her failures—which they read as divine judgment upon her aspirations, and which they clearly anticipate and enjoy. For Margery Kempe the public and social sphere takes on many characteristics of the marketplace: it is an arena of valuation, where public opinion and the judgments of others determine the value of her religious worth and credibility. Yet at the same time, it is a place of deep danger. The narrative equates “the world,” the biblical term traditionally used for one’s social surroundings with all their temptations to acquisition and social esteem, with the people around her, whose “worship” she pursued so strenuously. In other words she makes a direct and literal equation between “the world” (as in the world, the
flesh, and the devil—all three of which she is tempted by during the first five chapters of the
first book) and her own town and community.

Kempe’s text depicts “the world” primarily in terms of its commentary on her own
actions. This allows Kempe to suggest and then dismiss unfriendly explanations for her own
conduct while also depicting her worth as constituted by the opinions of others. We see this
in her careful accounts of what other people say about her. In one very typical episode in book
2 of the BMK, Kempe accompanies her daughter-in-law to Ipswich and then, at Christ's
command, suddenly embarks on the same ship back to Germany with her. The text records in
detail the gossip about Kempe's behavior in Lynn. In so doing, it offers up, and then
discusses, several possible explanations for her conduct before concluding with the explanation
that the text endorses as normative. First, one explanation is her own disordered judgment,
gendered female ("a womanys witte," 228). This criticism is leveled at Kempe throughout the
Book, so it is a predictable one in this context. Linked with it is a pragmatic point of view
which blames Margery for "foly" in leaving without clothes or adequate preparation. Second,
some citizens of Lynn actually endorse her actions as "a dede of gret charite" because, they
assume, the spontaneous voyage is done out of familial kindness. The text rejects this
explanation too in favor of "þe wille & the werkyng of al-mythy God" (the explanation Kempe
herself clearly prefers), but why? Although the townspeople who offer this explanation are
approving, not criticizing, Kempe’s gesture, they are basically operating under a natural mode of
understanding human relations. For them the kinship bonds that already existed between Kempe and her unnamed daughter-in-law were of primary importance. Yet as Kempe narrates it, this too is inadequate, ascribing as it does both a power of choosing that Kempe does not really have (to go or stay as she wills) and a motivation for staying that appeals to human motivations rather than divine ones. For Kempe, the credit even of being thought caring toward her relative is inferior to the supernatural working of God, which takes away her agency even as it endows her with singularity.\textsuperscript{102} The text here uses the commentary of her neighbors to raise and then dismiss alternative explanations of her behavior which Kempe herself clearly understands as inadequate compared to her own self-understanding as supernaturally chosen and commanded.

Elsewhere, the BMK references these observers in similar ways. She terms them “\textit{þe pepil},” and they serve several literary purposes. First, as Lynn Staley notes, they reflect the spiteful crowds that called for the crucifixion of Christ and persecuted the early church.\textsuperscript{103} Moreover, the term “the people” suggests Old Testamental language for the Israelites who go

\textsuperscript{102}This is not to say that she is impervious to the obligations of family—far from it. On the very same page Kempe complains that her daughter-in-law objects to Kempe’s joining her “\textit{þat awt most to a ben wyth hir}” (228), and later the daughter-in-law, “\textit{þe whech was most bowndyn & beholdyn to a comforted hir yf sche had ben kende}” continues to offer opposition (215). Kempe’s explicit appeal to “kende” suggests here a reliance upon exactly the kinds of natural ties between relatives that she has earlier dismissed as insufficient explanations for her own behavior.

\textsuperscript{103}Staley, \textit{Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions}, 66.
against the will of the chosen prophet Moses. Next, they serve as a collective counterpoint for
the activities of the individual. And lastly, the people are a constantly watching, commenting
and judging commentary on Kempe’s actions—depicting the wrongheaded response to her
“felyngys” and serving as the worldly-minded contrast to her devotion. However, I think it is
not sufficient to say that Kempe is performing as upon a stage.\textsuperscript{104} If she is performing, it is
not for them—the performative aspects of her devotion are aimed at a heavenly audience rather
than a worldly one. She is not performing for her contemporaries, but the demonstrative
nature of this devotion means that she is very much \textit{on display} to them. The significance of
“the people” in her narrative is rather one of evaluation and judgment, trying to come to an
opinion about Kempe’s behavior and its significance to themselves (much as she herself
sometimes seeks confirmation that her feelings are accurate and truly sent from God). Their
voice frequently offers alternative readings of her behavior—illness, devil-possession, pride, and
so on—that serve as a counterpoint to the spiritual privilege that allows her and a few other
special figures in the book to see the true God-sent significance of what happens to her.

Outside observers for Kempe therefore take on a deep negative importance. On the one
hand, they are almost always hostile in their judgments of her, and Kempe interprets this as a

\textsuperscript{104}For readings of Kempe’s performative piety, see Gibson, \textit{Theater of Devotion}, 47-65, Claire Sponsler, "Drama
Lewis (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 129-44.
sign of their moral corruption or insufficient faith. On the other hand, just as before her conversion, she understands their valuations of her as being real measures of her social worth. Not for her the adage, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me."

Rather, names and slander are real hurts, done to her real self, which is constituted not just of her consciousness, but of her being in the eyes of others. This is perhaps why she finds it necessary to visit so many anchorites, priests, and bishops for approval. Over and over she tells about her feelings and carefully records the endorsement of these religious professionals.

Similarly the role of Christ in her book is primarily one of encouragement and affirmation: he reiterates her chosenness even, or especially, at moments when the people around her are hostile and disrespectful.

If “þe pepil” play such an important role in the BMK, the arena in which they and Kempe interact is the marketplace. This can be seen in chapter 77, where Kempe asks Christ to take from her the gift of uncontrollable weeping in public. She argues that it is a cause of sin in other people, and further that it causes her to be put out of the church during the reading of scripture and the sermon, which is very painful to her. She would rather weep alone for her sins and the sins of others, and be allowed to listen quietly to sermons. Jesus replies

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105 For an extended analysis of this aspect, see Olga Burakov Mongan, "Slanderers and Saints: The Function of Slander in the Book of Margery Kempe," Philological Quarterly 84, no. 1 (2005): 27–47, which strongly builds on the idea that Kempe intends to condemn her audience.
that he will not, and then explains that just as he sends various natural disasters (storms, winds, earthquakes) to do harm and create repentance for sins, so he means her tears to provoke others to greater devotion and sorrow of their own. Moreover he reminds her, “thow ofer men settyn lityl be þe, I sett but þe mor prys be þe.”

Sche seyd a-ȝen to owr Lord, "Now trewly, Lord, I wolde I cowde louyn þe as mych as þu mythist makyn me to louyn þe. ȝf it wer possibyl, I wolde louyn þe as wel as alle þe seyntys in Heuyn louyn þe & as wel as alle þe creaturys in erth myth louyn þe. And I wolde, Lord, for þi lofe be leyd nakyd on an hyrdil, alle men to wonderyn on me for þi loue, so it wer no perel to her sowlys, & þei to castyn slory and slugge on me, & be drawyn fro town to town eyuer day my lyfyme, ȝf þu wer plesyd therby & no mannys sowle hyndryd, þi wil mote be fulfilyd & not myn." (184)

The humiliation, vulnerability, and pollution inherent in this punishment harks back to the torture of saints, and Kempe chooses it for this reason. It aligns her, if only in fantasy, with the saints whose martyrdoms were being rewritten for new audiences during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by writers as local as John Capgrave in the Augustinian priory in Lynn, and his colleague Osbern Bokenham in Clare Priory.106

But her description of this fantasy is also remarkably similar to the public punishments that would have been meted out to criminals in England. Her fantasy of martyrdom is nakedness, being pelted with filth ("slory & slugge"), and being taken from town to town daily

for renewed exposure and humiliation. It thus resembles the public shamings that punished sellers of bad food or counterfeit products in towns throughout medieval and early modern England. Though the most common form of punishment for such offenses was monetary fines, public pillorying in all its forms was an important part of English civic life. People who stole, prostituted themselves, or sold tainted food might find themselves exposed in exactly the same way, dressed in their underclothes and held immobile in the stocks (or pillory?) to receive the jeers and physical abuse of bystanders. From the perspective of retribution, it was appropriate that harms against the civic body—especially harms done by fraud or theft—were punished publicly, thus returning equilibrium to the social order. James Masschaele makes the point that such public forms of punishment were not primarily about punishing the body:

“None of these punishments was intended to be physically painful; their utility as forms of chastisement was predicated on the shame offenders felt at being exposed in a powerless posture, a shame that was designed to be both punitive for the individual transgressor and admonitory for society at large.”

Passers-by might take advantage of the offender’s helplessness to throw filth, but that was a side effect of the punishment, or perhaps even a means of attaining the punishment’s real end:


108 The “hyrdil” she mentions was frequently used to display traitors on their way to execution, but Kempe does not seem to think that death is the primary torture here, nor does she mention death as the denouement of the scene. Instead her focus is on the humiliation of being exposed to public scorn.

109 Masschaele, "Public Space," 400.
to produce shame in the offender, presumably to humble him and forcefully remedy his presumption at defrauding the community whose health or safety he had harmed.

The other side of this shame is the lasting discredit that the offender would suffer by being exposed in such a way. Pillories were used not just to correct the offender’s own perceptions of her relation to the community, but the community’s perceptions of her as well by creating subsequent distrust among those who would witness this event. Displayed in public, she would be visible to everyone, and they would remember the spectacle. This tells us that the purpose of this punishment was to publicize the crime in such a way as to link it unavoidably with the criminal’s reputation in the public eye. This accomplished two ends: first, it served as a vivid warning for others who might be tempted to commit the same crime; and second, it publicized the fact of this particular criminal so that others could avoid doing business with her. In the words of Masschaele, “Sentences in the pillory entailed more than a few hours of humiliation; they destroyed reputations...In a society predicated on local, face-to-face relationships, they ensured that the private life of an individual would never be the same again.”\textsuperscript{110} Kempe, wishing for such humiliation, is effectively welcoming the deepest, most painful, and longest-lasting form of social denigration that she could receive short of bodily mutilation.

\textsuperscript{110}Ibid.: 405-6.
Kempe does not specify the location of her imagined display, but most pillories were located in the main marketplace of the city, and there were two such locations in Lynn. Lynn did have at least one pillory for exactly the kind of public punishments described above. The town had been a center of commerce since the late eleventh century; in addition to Tuesday and Saturday market-days and a yearly fair lasting three days, the goods brought in and out of its port fostered a thriving mercantile trade and several public building projects. Kempe’s daily and weekly trips to St. Margaret’s parish church would have taken her unavoidably through the main marketplace, located directly in front of the church and the guildhall of the Holy Trinity Gild, of which she was a member, and opposite the main Lynn warehouse of the Hanseatic League. The market in this location took place on Saturday, but one street over were the wharves where, every day of the week, merchants loaded and unloaded their vessels, paid customs, and got their goods ready for sale or further shipment inland. Travelers embarked and disembarked on the boats here, bound for Europe or elsewhere in England; in 1405 Princess Philippa and her entourage boarded ships bound for her wedding in Denmark.

This was presumably the place where Kempe found ships to embark on her occasional trips to other religious sites. The prosperity of Lynn was part of a larger East Anglian economic


113 See the map of late medieval Lynn in Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, xv.
boom taking place in the fifteenth century. Gail McMurray Gibson describes this boom and its impact on the area’s culture, especially the ostentatious church architecture meant to simultaneously advertise and atone for its sponsors’ wealth. So Kempe’s daily religious activities placed her in the very middle of Lynn’s economic and social center, the thriving nexus for local trade as well as the international shipping that gave Lynn its fame and prosperity. It is actually very rare that she ventures into the marketplace explicitly. When she specifically mentions the setting of an event, it is typically one of the other public spaces available to her: a variety of churches, both at home and abroad; the homes of the wealthy (those who host dinners), including the households of bishops, local gentry, and merchants; even the anchorhold of Julian and other anchorites. However, she continually behaves as though she is on display and ready to have her value assessed—as though she is a commodity on sale in the market. It looms so large in her consciousness as to be taken for granted.

III. Slander as Corrective

In light of this, we need to reinterpret our understandings of Margery Kempe’s characteristically attention-drawing behaviors. Scholars have rightly noted the ways in which

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114 Gibson, Theater of Devotion, 26-30.
Kempe fashions her autobiography as a saint’s life, modeled on previous women saints such as Brigitta of Sweden and Angela of Foligno.\textsuperscript{115} And these women themselves were part of the phenomenon of increasing interest of the laity in religious books: as Nicholas Watson points out, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries particularly, middle-class readers were the consumers of many texts originally written for cloistered religious readers, and in the process appropriated monastic spiritual practices and values for their own use.\textsuperscript{116} Such changes in reading habits necessarily alter the traditional societal divisions between lay and religious persons. But such a process could not take place without a profound transformation of meaning: the different context of location, social environment, and household organization allowed for very different interpretations of the same practices and principles.

To take one example, we may look at the varying receptions accorded to Kempe’s crying and roaring at the thought of Christ’s passion after her return to Lynn from her pilgrimage to Jerusalem in chapter 44 of Book 1. The narration emphasizes the interior nature of the thoughts which provoke her external manifestations of sorrow, placing her in line with other holy persons who did similar things. A later reader’s notation in the margin of the


manuscript reads, “so dyd prior Nort in hys excesse,” substantiating this interpretation of Kempe’s behavior by establishing a link between it and that of members of Mountgrace Abbey whom the readers of the text at that time probably would have known and respected, such as Prior Edward Norton. Yet the text also underlines the degree to which that interpretation of her behavior is determined by one’s religious context. Witnesses to Kempe’s roaring in Lynn did not identify her behavior with meritorious devotion but with demonic possession—“And many seyd þer was neuyr seynt in Heuyn þat cryed so as sche dede, wherfor þei woldyn concludyn þat sche had a deuyl wythinne hir whech cawsyd þat crying”—or with medical pathology—“Sum seyde þat sche had þe fallyng euyl” (105). Here and throughout the BMK, the inability of “þe pepil” to properly interpret Kempe’s behavior is presented as a sign that they are in sin and spiritually blind.

Yet weeping meant one thing in the enclosure of a monastery chapel, manifested by a man of long-standing religious commitment and status within the community, surrounded by other monks vowed to the same practices and at least theoretically aspiring to the same spiritual ideals (in fact all assembled at the daily office or mass for the same purpose). It meant something entirely different when done, as Kempe did it, in the middle of a Holy Thursday procession “among þe pepil” (174) in an ordinary parish church, by a woman of no religious

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authority and a reputation for prideful business dealings, showy clothes, and mental instability, observed by parishioners who must have known her from birth, whose daily life encompassed a great many factors other than the structure and ritual of monastic life, and who might have come to church for any number of reasons other than the strictly devotional. Though people of Kempe’s status often were pious, sometimes ostentatiously so, their behavior fit within a recognizable set of paradigms for religious devotion: attendance at mass (and presumably attentiveness to the service), praying, joining a religious guild, donating money for the building of churches or other religious edifices, perhaps taking vows after the death of one’s spouse. Kempe herself might read her falling and “boystows” sobbing as holy signs on the models of Dorothy of Montau and Angela of Foligno, but to observers in her own town these symptoms were so inappropriate as to be understandable as demonic possession, or perhaps less dangerous but just as serious, epilepsy (105). In either case, they interpreted Kempe’s manifestations as something socially infectious, something that struck fear and avoidance, not acceptance and love, into the hearts of those who beheld it.

I am here belaboring the point that the Book of Margery Kempe makes over and over: that there was a deep chasm between the way Kempe interprets her life and the way that those

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who witness it do. But what is so interesting is that Kempe herself seems to feel that the judgments of others is vitally important—perhaps to their own salvation or sanctification, but certainly to her own understanding of herself. She cares deeply what the public thinks of her. She will not change her own judgments, but she longs for those who witness her manifestations to understand them as she understands them. And yet almost from the beginning of her supernatural “dalyawnces” with Christ, the course of supernatural commands she reports having received are those likely not to bridge the chasm of understanding, but instead to make it deeper and wider. At the turning point of her conversion, in chapter 5, Christ’s speech to her promises complete forgiveness for all her sins, the gift of contrition, and then issues this command:

“Thys is my wyl, dowtyr, þat þow receyve my body every Sonday, and I schal flowe so mych grace in þe þat alle þe world xal mervelyn þerof. Þow xalt ben etyn & knawyn of þe pepul of þe world as any raton knawyth þe stokfysch. Drede þe nowt, dowtyr, for þow schalt have þe vycrty of al þin enmys. I schal yeve þe grace j–now to answer every clerke in þe loue of God...” (17)

The command to take the eucharist is inextricably linked to the references to “the world.” To take communion every Sunday—presumably in her parish church of Saint Margaret’s—certainly marked Kempe out as unusual, as most congregants communed once or twice a year. But what is less obvious, unless we imagine ourselves as present during that service, is the vivid physical way in which weekly communion would have marked Kempe out from the other parishioners of Saint Margaret’s. Every week she turned her back on the congregation to
approach the steps of the altar alone. For ten years after her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, all ears would have heard her sobbings and wailings as she knelt before the chancel screen; all eyes would be on her as the priest emerged from behind the screen to place the host in her mouth. The Easter Eucharist was considered “one’s rights,” the sign of adult membership in the community. In such a context, the sight of Kempe receiving every week, commanded, as she said, by Christ, and endorsed by the letter and seal of no less than the Archbishop of Canterbury, suggested that she was entitled to more than the rest of those present. In a town defined by mercantile and social competition, this was like a red flag to a bull.

Christ’s words, as Kempe relays them, confirm that to be thus singled out as an object of marvel is not a blessing in any earthly way: it is to be exposed to their envy and malice, symbolized by the painful gnawing of the rat in that wonderfully local image (one of the main streets in Lynn was named Stockfishrow Checker) which conflates the eating of Christ’s body in the Eucharist with the devouring of Margery’s selfhood by the hostility of her observers.

The Book of Margery Kempe depicts its protagonist as the cynosure of all, to be vilified or


120 Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 94.
vindicated, but above all to be evaluated by the onlookers. Aspiring to martyrdom, she draws a picture of herself exposed within the arena—yet the location is not a Roman coliseum but an English marketplace, and she is eaten up not by the jaws of a lion but by the negative words issuing from the mouths of her fellow townspeople.

The intense interest with which Kempe regards those who regard her is best interpreted as the consciousness of a person deeply formed by experiences in a marketplace of the kind that Masschaele describes, not just an arena for narrowly economic exchange but a public space of exposure, in which the judgments of one’s neighbors can result in material profit, social standing, spiritual respect and validation. We therefore see that the constellation of Kempe’s strikingly economic outlook, her interest in martyrdom, and her persistent concern with the value placed on her “felyngys” not just by religious authorities but by her neighbors and acquaintances, makes inevitable a kind of “martyrdom by slander,” in Gail McMurray Gibson’s offhand phrase. Throughout the book, Kempe constantly describes not only her doings but the reactions they provoke from those who observe her, from her servants’ commentary on her madness and healing in chapter 1, to the much later dinner in London where her fellow-guests laugh about her reputation for gourmandise disguised as asceticism,

121 Further, we should note that the grace poured out is not a grace that creates bonds of charity or reconciles enemies to each other, at least at first; rather, it ensures Kempe’s social and rhetorical victory over those enemies.

122 Gibson, Theater of Devotion, 47. See also Mongan, “Slanderers and Saints,” 27-8.
which has become so notorious as to have become a proverb. And Kempe cares deeply about these reactions. Her interior spiritual state, whether good or bad, abuts directly onto the external world. She depicts her actions as the object of scrutiny, comment, and criticism from an astonished, if suspicious, audience, not only at home in Lynn but in London, Lincoln, and throughout the continent. In fact, their commentary seems to be an integral part of her “bodily penawnce,” referenced over and over in the BMK. For example:

“And than was sche slawnderyd and reprevyd of mech pepul for sche kept so streyt a levyng....sche gat hir an hayr of a kylne...and leyd it in hir kyrtylle...Than sche had three yer of gret labowr with temptacyons which sche bar as meekly as sche cowde, thankynge ower Lord of alle hys geftys, and was as mery whan sche was reprevyd, skornyd, or japyd for ower Lordys lofe, and mych mor mery than sche was befortyme in the worshepys of the world.” (27)

Hunger, hair shirts, and slander are all on the same level for Margery. The suffering she endures from all three is what proves to her that she is on the right track spiritually, but throughout her book it is slander that receives pride of place as the suffering. On one hand, the very fact of her notoriety confirms that she is somehow extraordinary; she is news in the marketplace (just as she was when she wore fine clothes, to the mingled fascination and scorn of her neighbors). On the other hand, slander is such a torment to her because she understands her social value to be determined by the words spoken by others about her in public. In a world delimited by the model of the marketplace, she grasps quite clearly that her “self” exists quite as much in the value placed on her by others as in her own physicality. As a result it must be
castigated in the same way.

Many scholars have discussed the ways in which Kempe’s book models itself literarily on saints’ lives. Kempe’s asceticism is similar to the penitential practices of other holy women, but its emphasis on the suffering social self, rather than the suffering bodily self, is striking. Kempe’s vision of martyrdom is in fact extraordinarily consonant with the theological work that early Christian narratives of martyrs did in contrasting the power of a holy God with a corrupt social order. Rowan Williams, describing the martyrdom of Polycarp, writes:

“The martyr consecrates his body to be a holy place exactly as the bread and wine of the eucharist become the place where sacred presence and power are to be found. The expulsions of the Christian from the would-be sacred order of the Roman city or the Roman empire is the very moment in which the holiness of the Christian is perfected: holiness, in the sense not of exceptional goodness but of the active presence of a holy and terrifying power, is indeed identical with marginality in the terms of the empire. The holy place is the suffering body expelled from the body politic.”


125 Rowan Williams, Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 36.
In other words, what ultimately defined sanctity in early Christian writings was not a life lived morally, but the experience of suffering in conflict with the ruling authorities. Throughout the BMK, we see multiple depictions of Kempe being expelled from civic and religious bodies in exactly the same way—sometimes literally as in the case of ejection from the parish church. It is not her physical body, however, that is the center of this suffering. Rather it is her social self, the self as constituted by its relations with its servants, neighbors, fellow bourgeoisie, and social and religious superiors. While she receives endorsements from figures with as much authority as the Archbishop of Canterbury, as we have seen before “þe pepil” are a persistently suspicious, hostile, even potentially violent witness to what she understands as manifestations of God’s power in her. And we see her agonizing over this hostility, for she has not adopted a critique of the social order that would make this anything but painful. She reports that Christ holds out the promise of social redemption to her as well as spiritual, when he predicts that “þei” will recognize after Kempe’s death the manifestations of goodness that he gave her during her life (186). But the vindication he promises is deferred. Throughout the book we see that the present confirmation of her holiness is her mystical experiences, what she portrays as God’s singular works in her, confirmed by the Church’s authorized representatives (priests, recluses, and bishops), while the ultimate confirmation is the rejection of those works by “þe pepil” and their slanderous words about her.

What makes Kempe different is that for her the signs of holiness and presence have few
or no implications for her relations with other people: though she sees sexual continence and charity as laudable, the real signs of God’s presence and power for her are the unusual and inexplicable: tears, supernatural knowledge, “felyngys.”¹²⁶ Her understandings of holiness therefore are essentially centered upon the individual; civic bodies, the laity, and even many religious people in her narrative are depicted as hostile, envious, and competitive. The Church is likewise equated with its professionals, and its function is to endorse Kempe’s experiences and prove her authenticity.¹²⁷ In contrast, ordinary people are written out of participation, and it is never imagined as a community of even the most basic charity (compare the vision of heavenly virgins depicted in Pearl, where each rejoices in the other’s honor). We may note also that in fact Kempe’s mystical experiences set her up as “singular” in a way that equips her to claim a certain kind of religious validation. All she has done, according to this suspicious reading, is to remove herself from a realm of social and economic competition to a realm of spiritual competition with the same dynamic, the same pattern of behavior which “changes the

¹²⁶ Compare the discussion of the importance placed by the early church on sexual chastity and preservation even of unwanted life as a marker of the unique presence and help of God. Ibid., 37-9.

¹²⁷ David Aers discusses the way that Nicholas Love’s Mirror conflates obedience to church officials with the virtue of humility (Aers, Sanctifying Signs, 168-73). Exactly the kind of unquestioning obedience that she must give to the authorities, she must reject when dealing with “the people.” It is interesting that those who reject her authenticity are usually suspect morally in this book, except for a couple of traveling preachers.
terms but never the structure\textsuperscript{128}: spiritual terms rather than economic or social ones, but her spiritual honor still means someone else's denigration. Moreover, the form that her martyrdom takes—slander and social denigration—gesture toward identifying the Christian parish culture with the hostile Roman empire. It equates the voices of those around her—baptized Christian laypeople like herself, some clearly committed to a Christian way of living—with the swords and lions of Roman amphitheater. For Kempe there is no escape from social fracturing—her suffering does not lead to the reunification of a peaceful body of Christ or a community of saints, but to triumph over Christians who are enemies.

In the previous chapter, I suggested that Kempe depicts her early self as having been oriented toward a particular form of self-aggrandizement: accumulating money and social esteem (which the narrative indicates are tied together). Repenting of these activities initially meant that she switched realms, from the worldly to the spiritual, but that her basic orientation toward a self-interested accumulation of goods, literal or spiritual, guaranteed her failure. I argued that the central event in Kempe’s account of her conversion is the vision in which she sees Christ granting her forgiveness “to þe vttermest pount,” an immediate escape from purgatory after her death, and “contrysyon in-to þi lyues ende,” which presumably includes the weeping and wailing that are so characteristic of her (16–17). In this chapter I would like to examine Kempe’s rendering of divine gift-giving, which differs significantly from other versions we have seen. In *Dives and Pauper*, Pauper argued that the riches that Dives possessed actually rendered him as needy as a beggar, since he owed all that he had to God. For Pauper, a gift renders its recipient a debtor, abject and weak. Kempe also affirms that all she has is from God, but we see only verbal affirmation of the idea that she is thereby weak.
Far from behaving as a self totally dependent upon and subjugated to the power and largesse of God, Kempe understands receiving gifts from God as making her singular and special; gifts, for her, are tokens of intimacy and a particular love, rather than signs of her human finitude and dependence upon an infinite Giver. In chapter 86, Kempe’s Christ compares their relationship to a marriage, calling her “my derworthy derlyng... my blisseyd spowse ...myn holy wife” (213); her understanding of divine gift is oriented toward the context of marital intimacy that she depicts as the defining feature of her relationship with the divine. Kempe intends the spiritual gifts she receives to be read as markers of her chosenness and intimacy with God. The result of this intimacy—one wants to say exclusivity—is that it leaves room in her relations with other people for an ethos of possessiveness and immediate self-interest that is more consistent with mercantile exchange than with gift-economies. While she is self-consciously generous with spiritual goods, her approach to the material, and particularly to questions of self-interest, is always complicated. In some ways the story told in this chapter will be a story of failure, for Kempe has a profoundly different understanding of what it means to receive from God than do the authors of the other texts in this dissertation. These differences are visible in four elements of Kempe’s narrative: first, the narrative depiction of God’s gifts to her, and how they mark her out as special rather than as dependent and weak; second, the gift of tears, which work just like gifts in the other texts and not like God’s gifts to her; third, the gift of insight, the content of which betrays an ethos of self-preservation that is at odds with both the
aristocratic ideal of largesse and the theological ideal of caritas; and lastly, the loss and recovery of a valued ring, which brings together the contradictions inherent in Kempe’s depictions of gift exchange.

I. GIFTS AND HIERARCHY

In previous chapters, we saw that to receive a gift usually creates a sense of obligation or debt. Unconsciously or consciously, the giver gets “the upper hand” in the relationship until the recipient is able to give a counter-gift. When this principle is applied to the theological realm, as in *Dives and Pauper*, it renders human beings in a decisively subordinate position to God because they can never repay what they have been given. As a result, Pauper is able to argue that poor and rich are equally beholden to God, and so equally in need of help.

However, *The Book of Margery Kempe* does not adhere to this principle. Like *Dives and Pauper*, Kempe affirms multiple times that God is the giver of all things. Kempe’s text gives pride of place to the “felyngys & revelacyons” she reports (3). Although the extravagance of those revelations does tend to overwhelm the surrounding narrative, Kempe does in fact consistently frame them as sent from God. This is, of course, in the service of proving their authenticity and orthodoxy; but in the process, it also creates a key theological theme of the book, that God alone gives. This theme is amplified by the many authority figures in the narrative whom Kempe reports as emphasizing that her manifestations are gifts from Christ.
rather than anything that Margery can herself take credit for. In chapter 5 a local Dominican anchorite calls the promises of Christ “an earnest-penny of Heuyn” and urges Margery to “receyueth swech thowtys whan God wyl 3eue hem as mekely & as deuowtly as 3e kan” (18).

In calling her revelations an earnest-penny, the anchorite uses a term from contemporary labor practice; when an employer struck an agreement to use the services of a laborer, the employer might pay an earnest-penny, a kind of down payment to show good faith and an intention of following through with the agreement. It therefore signaled and promoted trust between the two parties. The anchorite combines this image with a more intimate and familial one, that of Christ as nursing mother to Margery. Together the two images make a picture of Christ tenderly providing nourishment and intimacy to Margery before she can do anything to merit these benefits.

The language of gift is especially obvious in places where Margery is being instructed how to receive properly. For instance, in chapter 18 a Carmelite friar warns her,

“I counsell yow that ye dispose yow to receyvyn the gyftys of God as lowly and meekly as ye kan and put non obstakyl ne objeccyon agen the goodness of the Holy Gost, for he may gevyn hys gyftys wher he wyl, and of unworthy he makyth worthy, of sinful he makyth rygtful” (41).

The friar emphasizes that it is God’s right to give gifts to whomever he wants to, and that these feelings are free gifts, not a payment or a reward. Note especially the caveat that God may “give them where he will”; this seems to be a clear rejection of her previous
competitive approach to human relations, suggesting that Margery must no longer believe that someone else’s gain is her loss. In the same chapter, the Dominican anchorite urges her to be “lome & meke & thanke God boþe of on & of oþer [feelings and the reproof of a confessor]” (45). Much later, in Assisi, an English Friar Minor approves her feelings and manner of life:

“Þan þe worshepful clerke seyd þat sche was mech beholdyn to God, for he seyd he had neuyr herd of non sweche in þis worlde leuyng for to be so homly wyth God be lofe & homly dalyawnce as sche was, thankyd be God of hys 3yftys, for it is hys goodness & no mannys meryte” (79).

Each of these instructors understands gifts from God as tokens of his greatness; Margery must receive humbly, as befits an unworthy creature who is blessed with such high and extraordinary gifts.

At first glance, the Christ in Kempe’s text seems to be reinforcing the same idea. He says, for instance:

“þow mayst not han terys ne swych dalyawns but whan God wyl send hem þe, for it arn þe fre 3yftys of God wyth-owtyn þi meryte & he may 3eve hem whom he wyl & don þe no wrong. And þerfor take hem meekly & þankyngly whan I wyl send hem, & suffyr pacyently whan I wythdrawe hem, & seke besyly tyl þow mayst getyn hem, for terys of compuncycon, déuocyon, and compassyon arn þe heyest & sekerest 3yftys þat I 3eue in erde” (30-31).

Notice the emphasis on God’s will as the deciding factor: gifts are “free,” given without regard to merit, and to whomever God pleases. Because these gifts have nothing to do with the deserts of the recipient, there is no injustice in being denied them. Moreover, when the gifts are temporarily taken away, it is so that “þu xuldist thynkyn in thy-self þat þu hast no goodness
of þi-self but al goodness comyth of me” (205). All of this supports God’s right to give to
whomever he wants. Yet Kempe’s Christ conspicuously omits her earthly advisors’ reminders
that she is unworthy of such gifts; while the gifts are given without regard to merit, he stops
short of saying that they are given to the unworthy. Instead, he reassures her of his love:

“Dowtyr, þer was neuyr child so buxom to þe fadyr as I wyl be to þe to help þe and kepe þe”

(31). Moreover, her position as recipient of his largesse in no way translates into a position of
humility or abject dependence. In fact, Kempe’s Christ asserts, he will treat his gifts as if they
are the result of her actions, not his. One example of this two-step is the following passage in
chapter 86:

“Dowtyr, for as many tymys as þu hast receuyyd þe blissyd Sacrament of þe Awter wyth
many holy thowtys mo þan þu canst rehersyn, for so many tymys xalt þu be rewardyd in
Heuyn wyth newe joyis & new comfortys. And, dowtyr, in Heuyn xal it be knowyn to
þe how many days þu hast had of hy contemplacyon þorw my 3yft in erth. And of alle
þat it so be þat it arn my 3yfts & my gracys wech I have 3ouyn þe, yet xal þu han þe
same grace & reward in Heuyn as 3yf it weryn of thyn owyn merytys, for frely I have
3ouyn hem to þe. But hyly I thanke þe, dowtyr, þat þu hast suffyrdd me to werkyn my
wil in þe & þat þu woldist latyn me be so homly wyth þe” (209-10).

According to Kempe’s text, it is the “3yfts & gracys” given by Christ that allow her to receive
the sacrament and to think and contemplate; by herself she could not achieve these things. At
the same time, she receives the credit for having done them “as 3yf it weryn of thyn owyn
merytys.” Similarly, her correct belief in the Trinity is his gift, but also deserving of his
reward:
“jis is a very feith & a ryght féyth, and jis féith hast ḫu only of my ȝyfte. And þerfor, dowtyr, yf ḫu wilt be-thynk þe wel, ḫu hast gret cause to louyn me ryth wel & to ȝeuyn me al holy þǐn hert þat I may fully restyn þerin as I wil my-self, for, ȝyf ḫu suffyr me, dowtyr, to restyn in þi sowle in erthe, beleve it right wel þat ḫu xalt restyn wyth me in Heuyn wyth-owtyn ende” (211).

Christ’s gift-giving is double, according to Kempe’s text: first, he has given her the experiences, feelings, and strength to have faith and to perform meritorious acts on earth. Her Christ emphasizes that she would not have them without him. But secondly, he promises that he will reward her for them as if they did indeed come from her rather than from him. She has the pleasure of being rewarded for something she has done only under his power. Furthermore, Christ thanks her not just for using his gifts as he intended, but also for letting him give them to her!

Kempe is careful to frame herself verbally as dependent upon God: all her “felyngys” come from God, while her use of “this creatur” throughout the book seems to affirm her status not just as created, but as so lowly as to be anonymous. But the Christ of her book negates this idea, as does the Virgin Mary who promises that “al þe worlde xal wondryn of þe” and urges,

“Be not aschamyd, my derworthy dowtyr, to receyue þe ȝyfteys whiche my sone xal ȝewyn the, for I telle þe in trewth þei xal be gret ȝyftyþ þat he xal ȝeve þe. & þerfore, my derworthy dowtyr, be not aschamyd ... no mor þan I was when I saw hym hangyn on þe Cros, my swete Sone, Ihesu, for to cryen & to wepyn for þe peyn of my swete Sone, Ihesu Crist... And þerfor, dowtyr, ȝyf þu wylt be partabyl in owyr joye, þu must be partabyl in owyr sorwe” (73).
The gift of weeping may be a painful one, says the Virgin, but it also unites Margery with the Virgin, Mary Magdalene, and the other witnesses to the Crucifixion in affective devotion.\textsuperscript{129} Her tears take her from lowliness to a central place in the drama of salvation, and cast her not as a weak recipient of grace but as a privileged participant.

The supernatural gifts which Margery receives thus strengthen her relationships with Jesus and the other biblical and hagiographical figures who appear to her. The primary characteristic of these relationships is their intimacy and even equality; Margery’s gifts enable her to participate as caretaker of the Holy Family, as daughter, mother, and wife to Christ, and as witness along with the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene of Christ’s crucifixion. While all her powers are gifts from God, she owes him nothing; rather, every gift that she returns to him—tears, holy thought, prayer, or pilgrimage—is cause for his gratitude and increased love for her.

II. THE GIFT OF TEARS

As we saw in chapter 1 of this dissertation, another characteristic of gift economies is an ethos of generosity. Gifts are not supposed to be hoarded after they are given, but rather

\textsuperscript{129}Affective piety in the BMK has been analyzed by many scholars, including Atkinson, Mystics and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe, Gibson, Theater of Devotion, Lewis, "Margery Kempe and Saint Making in Later Medieval England," Yoshikawa, Margery Kempe’s Meditations.
distributed freely, even profligately.\textsuperscript{130} The generosity doesn’t have to be disinterested; indeed, as the story of the gift battle between Richard II and the Duke of Orleans shows, the point of a gift is very often to demonstrate one’s generosity, and therefore one’s nobility and superiority. A gift economy comes about when the recipient then replicates this gesture, either by giving in the same way to others or by giving a counter-gift to the original giver. Margery’s tears certainly fit the picture of a gift given and then generously, even profligately, distributed to others. Yet as we shall see, they do not replicate the gesture of giving that she has described Christ as making.

Throughout the text, and particularly after her visit to Jerusalem, Margery’s tears are the central, distinctive feature of her piety. Although she says that she could not control them—as in chapter 77, where she asks to have them taken away—her tears nevertheless reflect her inner state of penitence. They are the outward and visible sign of the lifelong contrition that she feels, and they also align her with traditions of weeping in affective devotion among female mystics on the Continent.\textsuperscript{131} As such, immediate experiences can provoke them: a

\textsuperscript{130} For instance, Thomas Chestre’s Sir Launfal gives so profligately that he falls into poverty and has to be rescued by a fairy. His nobility is demonstrated by the freedom with which he gives, even if that freedom is also his temporary downfall. “Sir Launfal,” in \textit{The Middle English Breton Lays}, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 201-62.

longing for heaven, the sight of the Mass, a good sermon, a visit to a holy place, or, more irritatingly, the sins of those around her. Kempe’s text very often describes them in terms of their sheer magnitude: “Thys melody ... caused þis creatur whan sche herd ony myrth or melodye aftyrward for to haue ful plentyuows & habundawnt teerys of hy devocyon with greet sobbyngys & syhyngys aftyr þe blysse of heven” (11). “Plentyuows” and “habundawnt” are the adjectives most often used to describe them.

Kempe understands her own weeping as an activity that can earn merits: when making the will in which she disposes of her merits to her confessor and others, she speaks of “alle þe god werkys þat þow [Christ] werkyst in me... prayng... thynkyng... wepyng... pilgrimage goyng... fasting... any good word spekyng,” as though the voluntary and involuntary activities are equal (20). Elsewhere her weeping is equated with the preaching of her confessor. And, just as she feels free to distribute her merits to others because she no longer needs them, she also uses her tears on behalf of others. In chapter 12, she promises a monk who has sinned, “3yf I may wepe for 3ow I hope to han grace for 3ow” (26). She does weep, and in return receives both a list of the monk’s sins and instructions on how he may repent. She clearly

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the female followers of Christ wept as he was crucified [Atkinson, Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe, 149]. For a discussion of the ways in which Margery’s tears also mark out her identification with Christ, see Beckwith, “A Very Material Mysticism,” 207–10.

understands her weeping as a form of supernatural communication or earning of favors. In chapter 23, Christ tells her to pray for a woman who is about to die: “sche seyd a-ʒen, ‘Lord, as þu louyst me, saue hir sowle fro dampnacyon,’ & þan sche wept wyth plentyuows teerys for that sowle. And owyr Lord grawntyd hir mercy for the sowle, comawndyng hir to prey for hir” (53-4). Here the connection is implied rather than explicit; but it is in response to her prayer and then those “plentyuows tears,” that the woman’s soul is saved. For Margery Kempe tears seem to function as a medium of exchange, something given to God which God in turn requites.

Sarah Beckwith observes that the abundance of tears functions as “a veritable treasury of merit,” and indeed, it does seem as though the tears act like this; but the treasury of merits is supposed to be a treasury for the merits of the saints, upon which people without enough merits of their own can draw. Here Margery is generating her own merits by means of weeping, and distributing them too.

Margery is generous with the spiritual gifts she produces or receives from Christ, and generous with using her “dalyawns” with him to ask favors for others. Yet where her reception of supernatural gifts proves her identity as the specially beloved child and wife of Christ, her request that others may also receive somehow does not also frame those others as special. For example, chapter 57 relates the multiple occasions upon which Margery hears Christ say,

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133 Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*, 89.
"Dowtyr, aske what þu wylt, & þu xalt haue it." Her answer displays how extremely conscious she is of her special identity as intermediatrix between Christ and her fellow human beings:

"I aske ryth nowt, Lord, but þat þu mayst wel 3eyyn me, & þat is mercy whiche I aske for þe pepil synnys. þu seyst ofystyntymes in þe 3er to me þat þu hast forgovyn me my synnes. Þerfor I aske now mercy for þe synne of þe pepil, as I wolde don for myn owyn, for, Lord, þu art alle charite, & charite browt þe in-to þis wretchyd worlde & cawsyd þe to suffyr ful harde peynys for owr synnys. Why xulde I not þan han charité to þe pepyl and desiryn forgévenes of her synnes?" (141)

She asks for forgiveness for “þe pepil” in such a way as to highlight their need for it and her own Christlike charity in asking for it; a few lines later she marvels that a woman as sinful as she should

“haue so gret charite to myn euyn-cristen sowlys þat me thynkyth, þou þei had ordeynd for me þe most schamful deth þat euyr myth any man suffyr in erde, ȝet wolde I forgéyun it hem for þi lofe, Lord, & han her sowlys sauyd fro euyr-lestyngr dampnacyon” (141-2).

Margery’s words here bespeak not so much charity as self-conscious magnanimity, a gracious forgiveness extended for an offense that has not yet occurred! If she spoke to her contemporaries the way she spoke about them, it is perhaps not a stretch to imagine them wanting to ordain for her a shameful death. Margery depicts herself as the empowered beneficiary of God’s generosity; her own generosity, however, casts its targets as sinful and needy.

Another example of the way that Kempe casts the recipients of her help as lower than her comes in chapter 34, when her confessor in Rome gives her the penance of serving “an hold
woman þat was a poure creatur in Rome...as sche wolde a don owyr Lady” (85). Kempe’s account emphasizes the discomfort of this service: the lack of furniture and bedding, the fleas, the difficulties of fetching water and firewood “in hir nekke,” and the necessity of begging. Here, Margery’s self-congratulation on performing such menial tasks is mixed with disgust at the memory of it. She concludes the recital of her humiliations, “And, whan þe pour womans wyn was sowr, þis creatur hir-self drank that sowr wyn and þaf the powr woman good wyn þat sche had bowt for hir owyn selfe” (85-6). At the time of writing, Kempe still has not resigned herself to having had to give up that good wine to someone else. It is an unintentionally revealing moment.

What we see here is that Margery does not give gifts in the same way that she received them. While Christ’s gifts to her symbolized and created a relation of intimacy and mutuality, her gifts to others—particularly tears and the related offer of forgiveness—do not replicate that intimacy and mutuality with them. Rather, they consistently cast the recipients of her tears and forgiveness as sinful, needy, the beneficiaries of her generosity, and unable to return her gifts in kind. Thus, the gift-economy of mutuality which she claims was begun by God in her also ends with her; the gifts she gives to others inscribe not intimacy but lack.

III. PATRON SAINT OF SELF-PRESERVATION

It should be clear by now that Kempe’s versions of gift-economies do little to moderate
her vision of all human social relations as basically competitive and self-interested. She uses the existing language of gift, to bolster her own spiritual value in comparison to her peers, highlighting the parts of it which carried overtones of hierarchy while negating the possibilities for mutuality and interdependence among individuals. She also depicts herself as gifted with a supernatural insight. A sequence of incidents in chapters 23 and 24 illustrates that this insight is particularly keen with regard to monetary matters, so that her text renders Margery as a kind of patron saint of financial planning, specializing in helping people make major economic decisions. The content of these insights shows that she is deeply concerned with prudence and a kind of enlightened self-interest that is at odds with the ethos of generosity implicit in gifts.

First, in chapter 23, a vicar asks Margery whether he should leave his current cure and benefice or stay, “for hym thowt he profyted not a-mong hys parysshonys,” it seemed to him that he did not do any good among his parishioners (53). The mention of both cure and benefice underline the economic nature of his question: to leave his benefice would mean giving up its revenues. This particular priest seems to be interested in his parish’s spiritual welfare more than its revenues, but it would have been tempting to hire a curate at a lower rate while keeping the benefice technically his. Kempe depicts Christ’s answer as playing on the word *profiten* used by the vicar in his question. *Profiten* can mean both “to be spiritually helpful” and “to be benefited”:

“Bydde þe vykary kepyn stylle hys cure & hys benefyce & don hys diligence in prechyng
In the same way that Kempe’s Christ frequently promises her ample reward for her services, no matter how successful (and in some cases, even if she does not succeed in performing them at all!—see chapters 76 and 84, for instance), he here promises the curate reward for his labors regardless of the outcome. I think the narrator’s point is Christ’s generosity in equating intention with action, but the mark of this generosity is reward in proportionate return. In urging the vicar to do his duty, Margery appeals to his sense of self-interest.

Second, in chapter 24, Kempe can discern the bad intentions of a con man with a sob story, and successfully convinces a burgess of Lynn and his wife not to give him alms. Her canny assessment of the situation is not changed by the young man’s pleasant appearance and manner—he is said to be “an amyabyl persone, fayr feturyd, wel faueryd in cher & in cuntenawns, sad in his langage and dalyawns, prestly in hys gestur & vestur” (56), attributes that in other parts of the BMK win Kempe’s admiration and friendship—or by his appeals to the priest’s sentiment, vanity, and greed. Her distrust of him in fact resembles other late medieval English suspicions of beggars:

[She] seyd þei haddyn many powyr neybowrys wh cach þei knewyn wel a-now hadyn gret nede to ben holpyn & relevyd, & it was mor almes to helpyn hem þat þei knewyn wel for wel dysposyd folke & her owyn neybowrys þan oþer strawngerys whach þei knew not, for many spekyn & schewyn ful fayr owtward to þe syght of þe peypyl, God knowyth what þei arn in her sowlys. The good man & hys wyfe thowtyn þat sche seyd
rygth wel, & þerfor þei woldyn grawntyn hym non almes (56).

She credits God with her distrust of the young man, but the reasons she advances would not be out of place in a local court or a discussion of vagrants: the rich should give aid to their neighbors and those known to be deserving poor, rather than strangers whose appearance is their only testimony. Margery urges a discriminating and localized form of alms-giving, one that carefully protects the giver’s interests against the risk of wasting money on a scoundrel, while the young man’s eventual disappearance validates this perspective on vagrants. Margery’s friend the priest, however, falls for the young man’s flattery, amiability and good looks, and, tempted by the idea that he will be rewarded, lends the young man money.

Of course the priest never sees his silver again. In an exemplum, the moral of this story might be, “Don’t let your vanity and greed run away with you,” or perhaps, “Do not worry about the loss of your silver.” And Chaucer might have written the whole episode as a black comedy. But in Kempe’s hands, the episode is just a story with a moderately unhappy ending. Kempe’s narrative depicts the loss of the money as a real evil. The point of the tale is that the priest should have listened to Kempe and believed her feelings: “& þan he repentyd hym þat he had not don aftyr hir counsell” (57). The sequel to this story bears this out, as the priest’s increased faith in Kempe’s feelings results in his increased ability to detect fraud and larcenous

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intent. In this case the con game revolves around a book, conveniently far away, that the visitor
would like to sell to some “yong preste þat me thowt sad & wel dysposyd, þat he xuld han þis
boke be-fore any oþer man & for lesse prys þan any oþer man” (58). This time the priest,
advised by Margery, resists this one-time-only offer and even asks a series of cautious questions,
the stranger’s answers to which clearly indicate the fraud being perpetrated. Margery’s feelings
are confirmed as accurate, and the narrative attributes supernatural agency in her ability to
identify a liar. Again, an unknown outsider plays the role of tempter and flatterer, and
successful self-preservation is the sign of supernatural knowledge.

While the stories are told to support Margery’s claims of supernatural insight and
knowledge, they depict that knowledge being used in the service of the ethics of prudence and
thrift. The BMK tells both these stories with a degree of engaging detail that brings out the
basic psychological and economic hook of the events as well as Kempe’s satisfaction at having
thwarted a shyster, even secondhand. But it also equates lack of faith in Margery’s knowledge
with gullibility and economic loss. On the other hand, true faith can prevent wasting money,
and it can facilitate good investments: in the known, deserving poor, in commodities that can
be inspected before sale. Generosity and trust, according to Margery, have their place, but
enlightened self-interest is the first principle of exchange. Her advice thus reveals a basic
orientation toward prudence that aligns it, rather than charity, with virtue. Such an
orientation is more mercantile than it is generous.

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IV. MARGERY’S RING: TOKEN OR TREASURE?

Margery’s advice to others contains a basic affirmation of self-interest and prudence when dealing with one’s possessions. Self-interest also governs her own behavior at times. The best example of this is in chapter 31 of the *Book of Margery Kempe*, in which Kempe, while on pilgrimage in Rome, describes the loss and recovery of a ring she calls “my bone maryl ryng” (78). I do not know of any scholar who has written at length about the episode of the lost ring. Hope Emily Allen restricts her comments on it to the strictly historical, and Nancy Bradley Warren uses it as evidence that Kempe had considerable wealth at her disposal; other scholars tend to mention the ring only in discussions of Kempe’s marital imagery. I would like to consider the episode of the ring as an instance in which the spiritual and material aspects of gift-giving meet in a single object.

Kempe says that she had commissioned for herself a ring engraved with the words, “Ihesus est amor meus” (78). To commission a ring for oneself does not at first look like a form of gift-exchange. Yet she says that she had it made at Christ’s command, which, considering their relationship, is probably meant to be a close parallel to receiving such a token from a human lover or spouse. Moreover, the engraved ring itself participates in a long

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tradition of love tokens, a jewel of varying value inscribed with a sentimental motto and exchanged by lovers. For example, the Fishpool Hoard, hidden in 1464, contains two such objects. The first is an enameled gold brooch in the shape of a heart, inscribed on the back with the words, “Je suy vostre sans de partier” (“I am yours for ever”); the second, a gold and enamel locket in the shape of a padlock, inscribed “de tout mon cuer” (“with all my heart”).

Similarly, a fourteenth-century silver-gilt ring incorporates the motif of clasped hands, indicating a romantic context for its giving. Many pieces of jewelry exchanged in this way were probably not inscribed with markers of their romantic purpose, but it is clear that just as many were made specially for such exchange.

Perhaps a closer analogue is the mid-fifteenth-century Godstow Ring, which was probably owned by a Benedictine nun. The ring is a wide gold band, engraved with flowers, religious images, and inside, the inscription, “Most in mynd and in myn hert, Lothest from

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136 Such small items were very common, and many of them survive. See Cherry, Goldsmiths, 36-51, Richard Marks and Paul Williams, eds., Gothic: Art for England 1400-1547 (London: V & A Publications, 2003), 331-3, catalogue numbers 206-12.

137 Pictured in Marks and Williams, eds., Gothic, 331, no. 206. The Fishpool Hoard was probably owned by an aristocratic man involved in the Wars of the Roses; it was buried in Nottinghamshire and only discovered in 1966. It thus escaped melting and recasting, the fate of many other medieval goldwork, and provides valuable information about late medieval material culture.

138 An image and background information for this ring, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art, are available through ARTstor, accessed April 23, 2008.
you ferto depart.” The inscription equates romantic preoccupation with the beloved with the mental habits of contemplation that a female monastic might be expected to cultivate.

Because of the nature of the inscription, it seems likely that this is the ring that a nun received upon entering the convent, her wedding ring betokening her marriage to Christ—though as John Cherry points out, “it is a surprisingly splendid ring for one who presumably had taken a vow of poverty.”

Note that in all my archaeological examples, the inscription is written in the first person and addressed to the second person; moreover, in the case of the Godstow ring at least, the speaker is the wearer of the token. The inscriptions upon these objects turn the token of friendship or love into a communication between the two people. However, the inscription on Kempe’s ring is not of this kind. Rather than a communication between the two lovers (herself and Christ), her inscription is a statement casting Christ in the third person: Jesus is my love. Nancy Bradley Warren notes that this is “a statement of possession rather than of being possessed.” But it also changes the audience of the inscription, from Christ the lover to...

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139 Marks and Williams, eds., Gothic, 371, no. 252. We may compare the Prioress’s brooch in the Canterbury Tales; though the amor inscribed on that brooch is more ambiguous, Margery’s ring does provide a useful comparison. I was not able to secure permission to reproduce an image of the Godstow ring in time to depict it here.

140 In his catalogue description of this piece, in Ibid.

141 Warren, Spiritual Economies, 95.
some less specified reader. Perhaps it is simply a reminder to Margery herself. However, Margery does not specify whether the inscription is on the inside or the outside of the ring. If the inscription followed the pattern of the Godstow ring by being located on the inside, these words would be hidden to all but her while she wore it, and could function as a reminder of her love. But the inscription also has a proclamatory, rather than a hidden and intimate, quality. As the ring visible on her finger announces that she is married, the inner inscription, which is supposed to be the most private place for messages between lovers, becomes another site of announcement of their intimacy to the public.

This ring is deeply problematic not just as a text but also as an object. Margery has it made in obedience to a command from God, and it is meant as a token of their loving and “singular” relationship. However, the text gestures toward another possible interpretation when it underlines that she wore it only in obedience to his command: “for sche purposyd befor-tyme er þan sche had it be revelacyon neuyr to a weryd ryng” (78). Kempe is aware that to the outside beholder, a ring would be seen as a piece of adornment, drawing attention to its wearer’s social status and enhancing her beauty, and the more so because Margery had it made for herself rather than receiving it from another person. She is deeply aware of the disjunct between the external interpretation of the ring and its personal function as a token of divine love. This is why she insists so emphatically that she wears it out of obedience only. Similarly, she emphasizes its symbolic function as a love token in order to forestall any suspicion that she
values it simply as a beautiful and precious object: “Sche had mech thowt how sche xulde kepe þis ryng fro theuys & stelyng as sche went be þe cuntreys, for sche thowt sche wold not a lost the ryng for a thowsand pownde & meche mor be-cause þat sche dede it makyn be þe byddyng of God” (78). It is obedience to God, she says, that makes the ring so precious to her. Such assertions betray not just a certain defensiveness about the purpose of the ring, but also an interesting possessiveness about the physical object itself. Kempe is concerned not just about its loss on her travels, but about its possible theft by others. In other words, although she herself asserts that its only value to her is emotional, she is quite aware that others might find other forms of value in it. In fact, this suspicion frames the whole story.

When Margery wakes up one morning in Rome, the ring is mysteriously gone. She and the Italian woman with whom she is staying take candles and look for it. There is an ugly subtext implying that her hostess has stolen the ring. It is all circumstantial evidence: the woman’s sudden and “wondyrly” change of expression when she hears of the loss, “as thow sche had ben gylty,” her repeated requests that Margery forgive her and pray for her, which Kempe seems to interpret as an admission of guilt; and the note that while Margery was searching around the bed, “the good wife of the hows...bisyed hir to sekyn also abowte the bed,” where the ring is eventually found (78-9). Kempe stops short of accusing the wife of theft, but it is hard to tell whether the tale is supposed to be about the miraculous recovery of a lost and
beloved object, or whether it is about a woman miraculously stricken with remorse and surreptitiously returning stolen goods.

Margery’s fears and suspicions of theft highlight the importance of the ring to her. A token, however valuable, is just a token; it is not identical with the giver or with the relationship it represents. Margery’s preoccupation with the ring is somehow at odds with her stated preoccupation with the one for whom she wears it. Moreover, her anxieties are entirely consistent with that concern for self-preservation evidenced in chapters 23 and 24. Although she may not care about the ring’s function as an ornament, she clearly cares about its value, and correspondingly fears its loss. The overtones of suspicion in this story highlight Margery’s basic assumption that others want what she has, and that her job is to make sure they don’t get it without her permission. This is an odd attitude for a would-be saint to have, particularly one whose piety in other respects is Franciscan.\(^{142}\) If everything she has is a gift anyway, she might well be able to face the loss of a ring with equanimity and even joy. Instead she suspects the woman who has offered her hospitality of being a thief.

V. PILGRIMAGE AND POVERTY

As we have seen, gifts in *The Book of Margery Kempe* do not circulate in a gift-economy. At least, they do not circulate in similar ways among Christ, Margery, and the

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people with whom Margery interacts. While Christ’s gifts, particularly the gift of tears, inscribe Margery as chosen, special, and integral to the divine household, she passes on those gifts in ways that exclude the recipients from that chosenness while highlighting her own generosity: for instance, forgiving them for an imaginary persecution. Moreover, her generosity has definite limits, and those are most visible at points when she sees herself or her friends in danger of being robbed. She is happy to forgive “þe pepil” for killing her, but she will vigorously try to avoid losing a ring.

Why is this? One clue has to do with scarcity and abundance. Margery can be generous with the spiritual gifts given to her—the tears, supernatural knowledge, and the rest—because God has given them to her in such abundance. She can disperse them all she wants and never lack for more. Moreover, since she has been forgiven, she can be free with the merits she earns by these actions: she doesn’t need them herself. On the other hand, material things are in much shorter supply. And with her apprehension of material scarcity comes the fear of want and theft. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the episode of the lost and found ring occurs while Margery is on pilgrimage to Rome, because medieval pilgrimage represented vulnerability to poverty and danger.

Indeed, her neighbors and fellow travelers clearly wish that Margery were not quite so generous with her tears and sobbings; and in at least one instance she offers her supernatural insight to a woman who does not want it (chapter 19, p. 46).
In her study Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England, Susan Signe Morrison describes instance after instance in which pilgrims, both male and female, suffered robbery, theft, and physical violence.\footnote{Susan Signe Morrison, Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England (New York: Routledge, 2000), 57-61.} Well-to-do people might travel with a retinue and servants, but for most people, to be a pilgrim was to experience poverty. For the majority of those who undertook pilgrimages—and especially those who undertook ambitious ones such as to Jerusalem or Rome—travel meant taking oneself out of the normal social networks and economic safety nets of home, and so taking on at least temporarily the alienation from estate and community that Michel Moffat describes as characteristic of medieval poverty.\footnote{Mollat, The Poor in the Middle Ages, 5-7. It is for this reason that taking care of travelers, pilgrims in particular, was one of the seven corporal works of mercy: monasteries and private households sometimes welcomed them and many cities throughout Europe set up hospitals to accommodate pilgrims along with the sick and the local poor. For a discussion of hospitals in England and their role as both givers and receivers of charity, see Sweetinburgh, Role of the Hospital, particularly 88-96.} This is perhaps why Kempe so insistently records the exact amounts of money that she expends and is given during her travels: “xxvj schelyngys & eight pence” from the bishop of Lincoln with which to buy clothes, a noble returned to her by an irate traveling companion, sixteen pounds wrongfully withheld by another companion, “hir golde abowte twenty pownd” deposited with the legate in Rome (35, 70, 72). If she loses it, she does not have access to the systems of credit that would allow her to get more.
Scarcity and the threat of loss are therefore central concerns of Margery’s throughout the book, and she seeks to avoid them whenever she can, in ways that bring her into conflict with the ethos of generosity that is understood to inform gift exchange. Yet the imperatives to go on pilgrimage catapult her into the middle of scarcity. Kempe describes the various privations and anxieties of medieval travel in a realistic way. In a way her pilgrimage narratives can serve as a counterbalance to the idealized imaginary narratives of begging for the Holy Family early in her devotional life: in place of hot caudles, dinner at the home of strangers, or sour wine; in place of clean linen cloths, lice and the theft of sheets on shipboard; in place of a tender Virgin Mary, hostile and rejecting fellow English pilgrims (whose animosity is inexplicable to Kempe, though perhaps not to us).

Kempe depicts herself as constantly seeking help from others and often dependent on the gifts of others in the form of alms. The experience of such dependence and such charity from others might offer Kempe another possible way of understanding herself in relation to others; their care for her could serve as a counterbalance to the striving, backbiting and persecuting community of Lynn. Lynn Staley, for instance, reads these alms as “the outlines of an alternate society...a new society governed by none except spiritual law...predestined for blessedness.”  

Yet if this is so, Margery herself does not appear much changed by the

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146Staley, Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions, 64-65.
possibilities of such a blessed and charitable community, either at the time she receives their help or at the time she dictates the book in reminiscence. She reports with approval their willingness to help her, but she often couches her approval in terms that reflect, rather than oppose, the social distinctions that govern her social world. For instance, during her visit to the archbishop of York, she notes his daily distribution of pennies and loaves to thirteen poor men. He feeds Margery Kempe too, and “sent hir ful gentylly of hys owyn mees” (35). His hospitality measures his gentility just as much as it does his sanctification, and Margery receives his food as simply another sign of her chosenness. Because she steadfastly avoids understanding herself as dependent in any central way, she sidesteps the possibility of mutual interdependence with others.

CONCLUSION

In *Pearl* and in *Dives and Pauper*, we have seen the ways in which acceptance of a gift also implies the acceptance of a dependent relationship to the giver, either divine or human, who is then cast in the superior role in the relationship. The giving of a gift creates a debt that is never fully erased. As a result, this debt can inscribe social, spiritual, and moral hierarchy; but it can also carry with it the possibility of mutuality and reciprocity, relations of sympathy, loyalty, and love.

*The Book of Margery Kempe*, however, refuses to equate gift-giving with dependence
and reciprocity. In fact, Kempe persistently understands all the gift-exchanges in which she is involved as testifying to her singularity. When she receives gifts, the exchange makes her singular and special. When she gives gifts, the exchange makes her singular and special. In contrast with Pauper, who deploys the idea of dependence as a leveling mechanism that unites rich and poor in a common weakness and humility, Kempe depicts her dependence upon Christ as a singular status which differentiates herself in crucial ways from the people around her who in turn receive from her.

Kempe’s concern with singularity is visible in her pre-conversion endeavors to stand out in the crowd, and it continues in Christ’s initial assurance of forgiveness and chosenness, an assurance which is repeated throughout the text. While church officials are suspicious of the “synguler” privileges she claims Christ has granted her (such as wearing white, a color reserved for holy virgins), Christ himself applies the word to her in a positive way: “I have telde þe be-forc-tym þat þu art a synguler louer, & þerfor þu xalt haue a synguler loue in Heuyn, a synguler reward, & a synguler worship” (52). Yet being singled out to be the recipient of God’s lavish gifts does not in any way reduce her anxieties about scarcity in the material world.

Margery’s spiritual experiences may manifest themselves in bodily ways, but they do not significantly alter the logic of prudential self-interest which governs Kempe’s perceptions of the material world. She never ceases to be deeply concerned with how other people see her, and even the sufferings she endures from slander never change her mind about the importance of
her social value. In fact those sufferings contribute to her perceptions of the world as an essentially hostile one, in which Kempe is always under threat from those who would disparage her or take away her religious credibility, her sexual chastity, her freedom, or her possessions. In light of this, her assertions of singularity become another way of defending herself against the threat of others, while her use of gift-exchange ultimately denies dependence upon anyone other than Christ. The theme of singularity and the denial of social relation can provide Kempe an escape from social subjection (as a woman, as a layperson, as a wife), but at the cost of her ability to reconcile herself to the members of that society.

She identifies wholly with the characters of the biblical drama—Christ, the Virgin, Mary Magdalene, and others—but makes few substantial connections with the other individuals who populate her text. Margery Kempe never takes advantage of the potential that gift economies have to reveal the complex interdependence that characterizes human social relations. Because she does not, or cannot, acknowledge that she is ultimately dependent not just on an affirming Christ but upon other human beings, she is cut off from the possibility of creating human relationships based on gratitude and a real humility that is honest about its limitations. Unlike Dives, she is never able to be moved to sympathy and generosity by the sight of others, because she can never recognize her own lack in the neediness of other people.
The Franciscan theologian Bonaventure, commenting on Ecclesiastes, argues that the author of that cynical book of the Bible in reality neither hates the world nor urges his readers to hate it. Beryl Smalley summarizes his argument in this way.

[Bonaventure] compares the world to a wedding ring, which is given to the bride by her husband. If the bride should love her ring more than she loves its giver, this will displease him:

et hoc non potest sponsus non habere pro malo.

If, on the contrary, she should despise it, as a worthless gift, her contempt will redound on him. She must regard it as nothing relatively to her love for her husband and this will be to his glory. In a relative, not in an absolute sense, therefore, must we despise the world.¹⁴⁷

Bonaventure’s image of the world as a marital gift is a powerful one, encapsulating as it does the ways in which a literal object could transmit and stand in for a relationship, deriving significance from that relationship even though it is of negligible value in comparison.

Bonaventure makes explicit the problem at the heart of Margery Kempe’s concern for her lost ring. Her fear of scarcity, whether in the material or the spiritual realm, short-circuits her

ability to hold gifts lightly. She can only participate in a gift-economy when she knows she
will not lose by it.

The example of Margery Kempe points up a central concern for us as we consider gift
economies. If gifts are partly defined by a posture of generosity, then is there any place for self-
interest in them? The philosopher Jacques Derrida thinks not. In *The Gift of Death*, an
extended reflection on Mauss’s *The Gift*, Derrida eventually concludes that a real gift is
proffered without expectation of return. In fact, he says, any return actually invalidates the
original gift, so that the only real gift is one that is not known to be a gift: “For one might say
that a gift that could be recognized as such in the light of day, a gift destined for recognition,
would immediately annul itself. The gift is the secret itself, if the secret itself can be told.”¹⁴⁸

If Derrida is right, then in fact a real gift is impossible, since even gratitude is a return of some
kind. A real gift, for him, is always and only one-sided.

The texts in this dissertation have suggested otherwise. For them, in fact, the defining
feature of gift-giving is its reciprocity, and its great power is in revealing the need for such
reciprocity. It is precisely the consciousness of debt to God that the narrator of *Pearl* resists; it
is precisely the awareness that all of Dives’s splendor, power, and comfort stem from the work
of others that humbles him into accepting Pauper’s authority. To acknowledge a gift means

humility: debt, obligation, a recognition of finitude not just in others but in ourselves. In other words, gratitude, charity, and the ability to forgive.
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