NOISE & KNOWING IN LATE-MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Adin Esther Lears
January 2015

Noise & Knowing in Late-Medieval England
Adin Esther Lears, Ph.D.
Cornell University 2015

Does the aural texture of language obscure or enhance meaning? During the second half of the fourteenth century, socio-political and religious developments such as the proliferation of untrained clerics after the Black Death and the rise of the Wycliffite heresy brought the issue of sound's interaction with sense to the forefront of English culture as authors and poets sought to outline theories and practices of correct reading and interpretation. Drawing on both medieval literary theory and sound studies, I argue that the concept of 'noise' offers a crucial conceptual framework for the embodied experience of language as it was both performed and perceived in the Middle Ages. Recently, scholars informed by feminist and queer approaches to the body, have explored the tensions between cerebral knowledge (understood to be precise and communicable) and affect (a purportedly preconscious experience, rooted in the senses, and resistant to articulation). Historically, the opposition between these forms of knowledge and experience has been grounded in a gendered hierarchy that distinguishes the 'masculine' soul or mind, reflected in the meaning of language, and the fallen 'feminine' body, echoed in its sound. Responding to this influential paradigm, the texts I examine worry about imprecise meaning and seductive sounds, often characterizing readers who are excessively focused on language's physical properties as effeminate or otherwise 'irrational.' Yet despite this anxiety about effeminate sound, late-medieval authors also begin to embrace the noise of language as a realm of manifold forms of knowledge based in the experience of the senses. In claiming that noise is central to late-medieval conceptions of poetry, my work begins to chart the deep history of our troubled attitude toward the idea of the 'literary' and to the non-rational and 'effeminate' forms of knowledge that have long been thought to accompany it.

Biographical Sketch

Adin Esther Lears works on medieval literature and history, focusing particularly on medieval theories of reading and their gendered contexts, and has published scholarship on Old and Middle English poetry in *Viator* and the *Chaucer Review*. Her work on embodiment and sensory perception shapes her teaching, which features performance and dynamic reading practices in classes engaging with medieval literature, cultural and intellectual history, gender studies and sound studies, among other topics. Her investment in sound and the body has prompted an interest in other senses, especially the sense of humor.

For Karen, Jackson, and Rachel Lears

"The lyfe so short, the craft to long to lerne…"

Table of Contents

"What if the prison had an echo from the wall in front of them? Every time one of the people passing by spoke, do you suppose they'd believe the source of the sound to be anything other than the passing shadow?'

      - Plato, *The Republic* Book 7, 515b

"The sound must seem an echo to the sense."

      - Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism"

Introduction

World of Echo[1]

In his influential manual on the interpretation and teaching of scripture, *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine describes pagan poetry with an allusion to the biblical account of the prodigal son: "Within its pleasing covering, this husk rattles sonorous little gems; but it is the nourishment of pigs, not of men."[2] In Augustine's formulation, the noise verb, "rattle" describes the action of poetry's "husk," its superficial somatic aspects. Ultimately, he emphasizes how the pleasing sensual experience of language can overtake meaning, or in the case of pagan poetry, obscure a void in spiritual truth. To Augustine, the physical experience of language has the ability to overwhelm its signifying capacity, creating a sensory overload without meaning or purpose. Throughout his life and work Augustine struggled to separate and to reconcile the physical and mental aspects of language, famously employing the Pauline formulation that we can only understand spiritual truth "through a glass, darkly."[3] His invocation of the idea of noise here, variations of which occur through a wide range of medieval texts, as we will see, invites us to explore what I would suggest is the aural counterpart to this specular metaphor: the echo. How did medieval thinkers conceive of hearing through an echo, ringingly? More broadly, why might noise be an important concept with which to theorize medieval poetics?

Medieval conceptions of noise, I would suggest, were both similar and different to how we understand noise today. Beginning with R. Murray Schaeffer's 1977 book, *The Soundscape*, a text crucial to the emergence of sound studies, recent scholarship has highlighted the troubled

---

[1] For this phrase I am indebted to Arthur Russell's 1986 album of electronic cello and experimental reverberation. It was a happy coincidence to find the concept of the "Echoland" repeated in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake.*

[2] "Haec siliqua intra dulce tectorium sonantes lapillus quatit; non est autem hominum sed porcorum cibus," See Augustine, *De Doctrina* ed. and trans., R. P. H. Green (Oxford, 1995) 144. Translations of *De Doctrina* are mine, though I have consulted and at times borrowed from Green's facing page translations in this edition.

[3] "Per speculum en aenigmate." Augustine, *Confessions*, v. 2 of 2, trans. William Watts (Cambridge, 1912, reprinted, 1999) 84-85. Translations of *Confessions* are mine, though I have consulted from Watts's facing page translations.

place of noise as an undesirable byproduct of the increased industry and urbanization of modernity.[4] These modern associations between noise and aural waste, begin to help us understand medieval noise. But we might also ask about early terminology. The ancient languages of Greek, Latin, and Arabic contained no umbrella term to denote 'noise.' The words used referred to specific *types* of noises, for example, in Latin, a din (*strepitus*), a low rumble (*murmur*), the mooing or roaring of a particular animal (*mugitus*).[5] The first English uses of the word 'noise' in the sense that we use it today appear as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century. The Oxford English Dictionary tentatively suggests that vernacular forms of the word 'noise,' in Anglo-Norman, and Occitan as well as English, derive from the classical Latin *nausea* for "sea-sickness" or "upset," also linking the word to *noxia*, or "harmful behavior" and thus to "nuisance."[6] Middle English uses of the word "noise" refer to sounds that lie outside of the boundary of human reason, including the din of animals or devils, but also more broadly to loud aural eruptions: the clamor of popular dissent, the murmuring of public opinion and rumor, even official complaints, and judicial proceedings.[7] Such etymological links begin to suggest noise's associations with disorientation as well as gustation and digestion, processes that were intimately linked with medieval understandings of learning and comprehension, as in the Latin *probare* ("to taste," "to test") and *ruminatio* ("chewing," "thinking").

In the relatively few treatments of medieval noise, scholars have fixated on its associations with violence and disorder as an integral aspect of conceptions of noise in the

---

[4] For an important study of noise and its tie to modernity, see Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge, MA, 2002) 115-168.
[5] Burnett, Charles. "Perceiving Sound in the Middle Ages," Mark M. Smith, ed. *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens, GA, 2004) 69-84 at 70
[6] "noise, n.". OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press. 16 January 2013 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/127655?rskey=QmAvys&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.
[7] See Middle English Dictionary online, s.v., "noise" n. and "noisen" v.

Middle Ages.[8] The aggressive cultural associations with noise are important, yet, I argue, they are only part of the story. I want to draw attention to a different kind of noise, specifically the way that the idea of noise is used to frame philosophical, theological, and literary discussions of the physical experience of reading and interpretation, the somatic rather than semantic aspects of language. Medieval thinkers, I argue, were deeply preoccupied with a question that remains important to literary study and intellectual history today: does the aural texture of language obscure or enhance the meaning it aims to convey? In recent decades, poststructuralist thought has drawn attention to the materiality of language and textual production. The influential work of Jacques Derrida, for example, has highlighted the ways that the Western philosophical tradition has routinely dismissed the physical and material qualities of written language, while Roland Barthes has framed this materiality in terms of the noise or "rustle" of language.[9]

Yet as the above quotation from Augustine suggests, the interplay between sound and sense has been an important issue in Western thought from at least as early as the fifth century and the questions raised and explored in this dissertation might productively be brought to bear on any number of contexts and periods in the European Middle Ages. Here I will focus on England during the second half of the fourteenth century and into the beginning of the fifteenth, when two historical developments brought the issue of sound's interaction with sense to the forefront of the country's cultural and literary landscape. First, in the face of great depopulation after the Black Death, the England saw a proliferation of clerics without formal training or education, who offered prayer and pardon in exchange for money. Educated priests with

---

[8] See, for example, the articles in the special issue of *Exemplaria* devoted to 'noise,' especially Valerie Allen, "Broken Air" *Exemplaria* 16.2 (2004) 305-322.

[9] See especially Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, 1981), especially his essay "The Pharmakon," 95-171 and *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1974). See also Roland Barthes, *Bruissement de la langue* (Paris, 1984). Translated by Richard Howard as *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley, 1989).

"correct" spiritual understanding mingled with vagabonds who wandered the country whispering prayer, shouting sermons, and singing the psalms for worldly payment rather than true spiritual reward. The backlash against such perceived greed and opportunism was swift. Religious authorities denounced such performances as noisy or hollow speech, reanimating a long literary tradition of anticlerical satire.[10] Then, beginning in the 1380s, another major historical development emerged when the Oxford-trained theologian John Wyclif sought to reform Church corruption by teaching that correct spirituality involved attention to rational essences rather than external physical signs.[11] As we will see, for Wyclif and his followers, the "correct" way to listen to a text was to transcend physical experiences and absorb a more pure and essential meaning. In response, the authors I examine reassert the importance and value of the noise of language for its own literary pleasures, not simply as a vehicle for divine truth.

Critical approaches stressing the tension between semantic and somatic aspects of language have been influential in scholarship on medieval hermeneutics and interpretation. In response to the ahistoricism of the New Critics, D. W. Robertson argued that scholars had been reading medieval texts with a modern, post-Romantic viewpoint. Robertson aimed to reconstruct a more "authentically" medieval, and specifically Augustinian, way of reading medieval texts. His exegetical criticism worked to locate the edifying Christian meaning or moral, which appealed to the mind and soul of the reader and was aligned with the Augustinian notion of *caritas*. Augustine's notion of *cupiditas* encompassed the remainder of the text, which

---

[10] For more on the "new anti-clericalism" in England during this period, see Wendy Scase '*Piers Plowman' and the New Anticlericalism* (Cambridge, 1989).

[11] For a useful overview of Wyclif's philosophical realism, see "Wyclif, John (*d.* 1384)," Anne Hudson in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eee ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, September 2010, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30122 (accessed December 10, 2014). I will discuss the views on scriptural interpretation of Wyclif and his followers in greater depth in the Interlude between chapters one and two.

functioned merely as entertainment or physical pleasure.[12] In Robertson's point of view, moreover, this dichotomy was deeply gendered. He explains the deafness of Chaucer's Wife of Bath, for example, as a metaphorical deafness to the "spiritual sense" of a text, a function of her "rampant 'femininity' or carnality."[13] Thus the Wife's physical ear and hearing is aligned with her inherently "feminine" sensuality. In a critical paradigm I will interrogate in greater depth in my final chapter, the Wife contains no trace of the masculine principles that would allow her to understand the spiritual truth of a text. To Robertson, the Wife is a body without a mind or soul.

Despite the deep flaws of Robertson's exegetical approach, his aim to evade the reductionism of formalist interpretation and to reconstruct a more historically-situated medieval mode of reading was admirable. In practice, however, his relentless emphasis on *caritas* vs. *cupiditas* was reductive in its own way. Much important work has been done to challenge and revise Robertson's approach. Most significantly for my purposes, scholars like Carolyn Dinshaw have shown how women and "effeminate" figures were informed by misogynist correlations between text and feminine physicality and how interpretation was understood as a gendered act of masculine penetration upon a female textual body.[14] Similarly, Rita Copeland has demonstrated that historical and legal characterizations of unorthodox lay readers, both women and heretics, stem from related ideas about incorrect modes of reading, in which readers attend to the sensual experience of language rather than the meaning of the words.[15]

I extend this historicist work and link it to a renewed interest in formalism in medieval studies, which aims to revise the historical detachment of the New Critical interest in form by

---

[12] See especially D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, 1962).
[13] Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer,* 321.
[14] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, 1989).
[15] Copeland, Rita. "Why Women Can't Read: Medieval Hermeneutics, Statutory Law, and the Lollard Heresy Trials" in Susan Sage Heinzelman and Zipporah Batshaw Wiseman, eds. *Representing Women: Law, Literature, and Feminism* (Durham, 1994) 254-86. See also Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning* (Cambridge, 2001).

investigating the ways that medieval texts treat it on their own terms.[16] It is the formal and literary qualities of poetry that stress sound, sensation, and pleasure on a par with content, inviting a somatic textual engagement that threatens to render meaningful language into noise. Medieval thinkers, I argue, were deeply aware of this mode of reading. Authority was built on the communication of content rather than sensual experience and to clerical elites, who relied on the communication of spiritual truths to ensure their authority, such textual engagement was threatening. Such clerical preoccupations informed the work of many lay authors. I show how the noisy voices of those "effeminate" readers who attend to sounds rather than ideas—the perverse tongue of William Langland's allegory of Meed (a feminine personification of reward or money), for example, the roaring and wailing of the early fifteenth century East Anglian housewife, Margery Kempe, and the "jangling" gossip of Chaucer's Wife of Bath—are a logical outcome of clerical critiques of reading without reason.

At the same time, I ask what would happen if we took medieval efforts to control and contain meaning not only as a sign of their totalizing impulses toward reading, but also as an acknowledgment, however implicit, of textual polyvalence. In doing so I uncover a medieval understanding of the inaccessibility and inexpressibility—indeed the fantasy—of singular essence. In the face of this uncertainty, some authors, particularly among the clerical elite, struggle to fix or control meaning. To varying degrees, others including Langland, Chaucer, and the authors of various mystical texts, adopt hermeneutic and epistemological programs that embrace ambiguity, semantic play, and pleasure. In exploring this medieval emphasis on polyvalence and play with respect to linguistic sounds, I am influenced by medievalists who have drawn attention to non-totalizing views of medieval reading. Seth Lehrer, for example, has

---

[16] See for example, Seeta Chaganti, *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary: Enshrinement, Inscription, Performance* (New York, 2008) and Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Medieval Literary Theory: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago, 2013).

demonstrated how fifteenth century readers constructed Chaucer as a father-figure, casting themselves in the role of children, eager to consume his "cleere sentence" or moral lesson and referring to his poetry as "Brede and milke for children."[17] Such studies begin to suggest how it is Chaucer's readers, not he himself, who transmute his manifold *jangling* into clear articulation with a singular *sentence*. Similarly, Jesse Gellrich has shown how the cultural flexibility associated with the early modern period is actually grounded in medieval polyvalence: what Lee Patterson aptly calls a "discordant strain" in medieval culture itself.[18] Gellrich uncovers a tension in the Middle Ages between, on the one hand, monolithic and homogenizing epistemologies and modes of reading and, on the other, poetic fictions that encourage "a galaxy of possibilities for meaning" that could not be contained in the totalizing cosmologies of medieval culture.[19] I am in interested in the acceptance of manifold meaning in medieval poetry as well, but I want to ground my analysis in the very "discord" that Patterson offhandedly identifies, a polyvalence rooted in the sounds and sensory experience of language.

Noise, Language, and the Fall

In seeking the "correct" way to interpret texts, medieval thinkers from Augustine in the fourth century to John Wyclif in the late fourteenth made distinctions between a text's superficial exterior aspects and its universal inner essence. This division between outside and inside textual aspects was largely based on gendered hierarchies inherited from the classical Aristotelian and Platonic traditions, which elevated the 'masculine' soul or mind, reflected in the meaning of language, above the fallen 'feminine' body or matter, echoed in its sound. In other words, when

---

[17] Seth Lehrer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late Medieval England* (Princeton, 1993) 85-116 at 86.
[18] See, for example, Jesse Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction* (Ithaca, 1985). See also Lee Patterson's review in *Speculum* 63.3 (July, 1988) 664-67 at 664.
[19] Gellrich, *Idea*, 24.

early literary theorists speak of a text's superficial aspects they often emphasize its sounds, and specifically their largely pleasurable affect on the body. The interior essence of a text was aligned with reason, the reflection of God within man.

Scholars like Eric Jaeger have shown how medieval ideas about the inner and outer aspects of language were tied to understandings of the biblical Fall. To Augustine, Adam and Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden had marked a descent from the direct interior communication of knowledge to an indirect knowledge mediated through signs as they were perceived by the body. Before the fall, knowledge passed directly and simultaneously into intellect. After the fall, Adam and Eve discovered that they could only communicate with "the clumsy artifice of language and gesture," to borrow a phrase from D. Vance Smith.[20] As Jaeger points out, this loss of inner word did not introduce the problem of interpretation, but it exacerbated its difficulties.[21] The aim of understanding and contemplation for medieval thinkers was to return to an ideal state of interior rather than exterior perception.

To be sure, early Christians, including Augustine acknowledged that the "effeminate" sensuality of a text could serve an important purpose: to catch the attention of unlearned lay listeners, who might then be more inclined to latch on to the moral essence of a text for their own edification. In order for this transfer from the outer to the inner aspects of a text to take place it was imperative that the text's superficial aspects be in alignment with its interior essence, a point of view that resonated for centuries afterward, as it is attested in the eighteenth-century satirist and literary critic Alexander Pope's famous formulation "the sound must seem an echo to the

---

[20] Eugene Vance, *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln, 1986) 190-91.
[21] Eric Jaeger, *The Tempter's Voice: Language and the Fall in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca, 1993) 57. Jaeger agues that medieval thinkers used the biblical story of the Fall as a myth about language in order to undergird their theories of three discursive domains: doctrine, hermeneutics, and eloquence.

sense."[22] Authors who placed too much emphasis on the superficial aspects of their writing ran the risk of producing a text without meaning or didactic content. I argue that the idea of noise was consistently used to frame writing that placed an improper emphasis on the surface aspects of a text as well as the speech or exposition of those who were improper readers, attending to the superficial sounded aspects of a text rather than its "true" essence. Such 'bad' readers, who were excessively focused on the noise of language, were often figured as effeminate, childish, bestial or otherwise lacking the right powers of understanding.

Derridean readings of the fall have focused on written language as the quintessential signal of the materiality of the sign.[23] Yet early Christian philosophers and theologians, who ordered the five senses according to their degree of "spirit," a substance aligned with reason in opposition to the "accidents" of the body, might ask us to refine this view. Such taxonomies placed vision at the top as the most spiritual and thus rational sense. Hearing came next as a relatively spiritual sense. Stemming from Aristotelian notions of "broken air," sound had a

---

[22] Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism" Part 2, l. 365 in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* 8th Edition, ed. Lawrence Lipking and James Noggle, vol. C (New York, 2006) 2505.

[23] Derrida's early work stresses how the Western philosophical tradition from Plato through Rousseau to Sassure and Levi-Strauss has valued the spoken word over the written word as a form of communication closer to rational thought and cognition and thus more 'pure' than written language. While all language, even that which is spoken, is removed from is referent, written language is further removed, a sign of a sign. Drawing on the work of Plato, in particular the *Phaedrus*, speech is 'alive,' a "fertile trace." Without the animation of a speaker, written language is 'dead,' a "sterile trace" that disseminates meaning like "a seed scattered wastefully...." Derrida's critique of this metaphysics of presence does acknowledge the removal of spoken language from its referent, 'the thing itself.' Yet I think he glosses over an important acknowledgment of this dynamic, a disdain for the accidental sounded qualities of the *spoken* as well as the written word—their association with mortality, sterility, and dissemination—in the tradition of Western, and in particular Christian, philosophy. It is significant, for example, that Plato's myth of cicadas in the Phaedrus, which Derrida never mentions, invites us to question the danger of a spoken language that stresses sound over content. To Socrates, the sound of the cicadas offers a stoic exercise in the cultivation of mind over body. They posses the gift of song (Socrates explicitly compares them to the Sirens), but the reception of their voices is up to the body and minds of their human listeners. If these listeners are lulled to sleep by the cicada noise, their bodies have overtaken their minds in aural reception; they take only physical pleasure in cicada song. If these listeners resist the "siren song" of the cicadas, Socrates suggests, the cicadas might offer them something of value. See Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford, 2002). 45-7. For Jaeger's reading of Derrida, see *The Tempter's Voice*, 61-75.

greater degree of materiality, and thus "accident" than the highly exalted sense of vision. On the

other half of the spectrum, taste, smell, and finally touch were the most base and ungodly.[24]

In the culture of medieval England, with its cacophony of untrained preachers, its discord

and debate around "correct" spirituality, and its complex forms of aural and oral literacy, the

question of sound's interaction with linguistic sense was especially crucial as authors and poets

sought to outline theories and practices of correct reading and interpretation.[25] My work draws

attention to the ways that sound is another marker of a text's "fallen" materiality. Indeed audible

communication is an important sign of the fall in medieval thinking. Augustine's formulations

of prelapsarian interior communication repeatedly invoke metaphors related to vision while

postlapsarian language is often expressed in terms of sound. As Augustine neatly sums up in his

De Trinitate, "the word which sounds without is a sign of the word that shines within."[26] This

interplay between visual knowledge and audible knowledge is a way of expressing the problems

that time imposed upon language. With its associations of illumination, transparency, and

simultaneity along with it, I would suggest that vision is a useful way of framing the timeless

eternal nature of prelapsarian communication. The sound of spoken language, on the other hand

is fleeting, as one syllable replaces the next and so on, in succession. As Augustine writes, while

God's true voice spoke the "eternal word," the divine voice that allowed for human

comprehension "…was delivered and completed, beginning and end; the syllables sounded forth,

and passed away, the second after the first, the third after the second, and from there on, in order,

until the last came after the others, and silence after the last." [27] As Jaeger points out, this

---

[24] For a discussion of medieval hierarchies of sound in relation to spirit, see Burnett, "Perceiving Sound," 79-81.
[25] On the complexity of literacy in late-medieval England, see Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (New York, 1996).
[26] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews, trans. Stephen McKenna (Cambridge, 2002) 187.
[27] "…acta atque transacta est, coepta et finita. Sonuerunt syllabae atque transierunt, secunda post primam, tertia post secundam atque inde ex ordine, donec ultima post ceteras silentiumque post ultimam." Augustine, *Confessions*, v. 2, 220-22.

distribution of language over time splits a unified ideal of knowledge into discrete parts: syllables or letters. Some of meaning slips away; knowledge is dispersed or deferred through a process that Derrida might call "dissemination."[28]

The word "dissemination," conjures the image of scattered or wasted seed, either vegetal or animal, and reminds us that discursive treatments of language and understanding take place within a sexualized framework that posits knowledge or comprehension as reproduction. We use the term "conception," for example, to indicate "successful" understanding. This sexualized discursive framework is inherited from the classical and medieval models where the orator or author used words in order to enable understanding or mental conception. Rhetoric and poetic language could facilitate this process; one Middle English word for literary eloquence is "facound," from the Latin *fecundus* or "fertile." Yet rhetorical adornment could also overtake meaning and obscure communication, rendering poetry into sterile sounds. As we will see in *Piers Plowman*, reading or listening with too much attention to the noise of language, the ornate and pleasing sound of the words instead of their meaning, was akin to lechery or the enjoyment of sex for pleasure alone. Also like lechery, taking sensual pleasure in sounds without conception, in this case mental rather than physical, was "against nature." Thus, medieval authors often stressed the perversity of such earthly and embodied listeners and their proximity to sodomites and animals. As we will see, Langland's lady Meed and Chaucer's Wife of Bath are both examples of such perverse and bestial listeners.

Music, Noise, and Understanding

Medieval music offers useful ways of examining ideas about the sounded aspects of language. Medieval musicologists have drawn attention to the distinctions between "natural"

---

[28] Jaeger, *The Tempter's Voice*, 60.

music, governed by the rational principle of number, and "artificial" music or song, thought to be without any such governance.[29] In his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, for example, the early medieval philosopher Macrobius sets out the auditory cosmology that was to become an important mainstay of medieval music theory:

> From the very rotation of the spheres sound must come forth because air, when lashed, at the very instant of the blow sends forth from itself the force of the contact, as it is natural; thus a violent crashing of two bodies ends in a noise. But a sound produced by any lashing of air comes to the ears as something either sweet and melodious or dissonant and harsh. An agreeable concord results when the percussion is in keeping with certain numerical relations, but a grating discord results from a random blow, lacking proportionate intervals. Now it is well known that in the heavens nothing happens by chance or at random, and that all things above proceed in orderly fashion according to divine law. Therefore it is unquestionably right to assume that harmonious sounds come forth from the rotation of the heavenly spheres, for sound has to come from motion, and Reason, which is present in the divine, is responsible for sounds being melodious.[30]

Drawing on Aritstotelian notions of sound and hearing and on Platonic ideas of reason and cosmic order, Macrobius argues that divine reason is an ordering principle behind all music.[31] Significantly, this passage suggests that all sounds—whether musical or not—emerge from violent force or percussive contact, thus complicating scholarship that insists upon the violent associations of noise alone. What distinguishes sounds that are dissonant, harsh, or noisy, according to Macrobius, is their randomness, their pure physicality without the tempering influence of the rational mind.

Later vernacular poetry on music education expands upon this theme. A late thirteenth-century East Anglian poem known as the *Chorister's Lament* frets about the noise produced from a novice monk as he learns solmization, a method of musical articulation that uses the syllables

---

[29] Phillipp Jesserich, *Musica Naturalis: Speculative Music Theory and Poetics from Saint Augustine to the Late Middle Ages in France*, trans. Michael J. Curley and Steven Rendall (Baltimore, 2008). For more on "nonmusical" song in the Middle Ages, see Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Late Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 2006).

[30] Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York, 1952, rept. 1990) 185-86.

[31] Aristotle, *De Anima* 2.8 in *The Complete Works of Aristotle* v. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, 1984) 667-70; see also Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Peter Kalkavage (Newburyport, MA, 2001) section 36 D, 66.

do, re, mi, etc.[32] The monk's music-master chastises him, for example, for stumbling through his

notes "as [he] were lame" (18) and condemns the novice for sounding like a boiling kettle

because of his tendency to bite the notes "on-sonder" (21-23). These formulations of

disarticulated movement of body and mouth underscore a persistent preoccupation with mis-

articulated sound: a voice that is overly physical and embodied that prevents understanding or

mental conception.

Such accounts suggest that it was not simply harsh sounds that were thought to constitute

noise. Indeed, as Elizabeth Eva Leach has shown, it was the mental capacity of the songster and

listener that dictated what counted as music. Animals, women, children, and other "non-

rational" speakers and listeners might sing in ways that were beautiful, even dangerously spell-

binding. But such seductive sounds were not true music because they lacked reason and

appealed not to the intellects of their listeners, but to their bodies alone. Such "incorrect" singers

and listeners placed greater, or even exclusive emphasis on the somatic and affective aspects of

language rather than its rational semantic properties.

At times, however, medieval thinkers stressed that it was these affective, physical aspects

of music, and as we will see, of language, that were most useful in approaching divine

ineffability. Even as he privileges "inner" hearing, Augustine's commentary on the Psalms, for

example, praises the spiritual efficacy of the *jubilus*, a liturgical term referring to the lengthy

melisma—a single syllable stretched over numerous notes—sung to the *Alleluia*. The *jubilus*

---

[32] The poem appears in MS Arundel 292, an East Anglian miscellany that also includes the *Complaint Against Blacksmiths*, which bemoans the "devilish" noises of the craftsmen. For an edited version of *The Chorister's Lament* along with a translation and discussion of its contexts, see Francis Lee Utley, "The Chorister's Lament" *Speculum* 21 (April, 1946) 194-202.

transcends the rhythms of everyday language, which locate it in time: Augustine writes that it

surpasses "the boundaries of syllables" (*metas…syllabarum*).[33] Thus:

> One who jubilates [*iubilat*] does not speak words, but it is rather a sort of sound of joy
> without words; for the voice of the soul is poured out in joy [*diffusi laetitia*], showing as
> much as it is able the feeling without comprehending the sense. A man joying in his
> exultation, from certain unspeakable and incomprehensible words, bursts forth [*erumpit*]
> in a certain voice of exultation without words, so that it seems he does indeed rejoice
> with his own voice, but as if, because filled with too much joy, he cannot put into words
> what it is in which he delights.[34]

Recalling the exuberant Pentecostal tradition of speaking in tongues, Augustine's esteem for the

jubilus redeems nonsensical noise from its status as aural waste through the sensual joy of radical

disarticulation. It is the sound and feeling of the *jubilus*, not its meaning, that raises one to God.

Though Augustine refers explicitly to music here, his explanation of the *jubilus* begins to suggest

the potential musicality of language itself, when it is evacuated of meaning. The noise-making

affective potential of language becomes crucially important in the spirituality of later mystics

like Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe. It is integral, moreover, to the hermeneutic strategies

and authorial identities not only of these mystics, but also of authors like Langland and Chaucer.

Grammar, Noise, and *Vox*

Like music, language was thought to have both rational and affective aspects. Medieval

grammatical theories of *vox*, which I will explore at greater length in my chapter on Chaucer's

House of Fame, offer us a useful discursive site where conceptions of 'noise' in relation to

language begin to emerge. Drawing a distinction between sounds that were able to be written

and those that were not, the fourth century Roman grammarian Donatus first classified *vox* into

---

[33] Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos* in Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (Turnhout, 1956) v. 38, 254.
[34] Ibid., v. 39, 1394. Translation taken from Bruce Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford, 2001) 76.

the categories of *articulata* or "scriptable" and *confusa* or "unscriptable."[35] In the sixth century, the Byzantine grammarian, Priscian, suggested dividing sounds along the axes of signification and scriptability, thus expanding Donatus's two categories into four: *articulata*, *inarticulata*, *literata*, and *illiterata*. The *vox articulata* was the only form of *vox* able to be confined or "coupled" (*coartata*) with grammar and comprised an extension of human mental faculties.[36] In addition to the sounds of the *vox articulata*, Priscian asserted, we also encounter those like "the hissing and wails of men" (*sibili hominum et gemitus*) that cannot be written, but can nevertheless be understood. Other voices, like the "coax" of a frog and "cra" of a raven, can be written, but signify nothing. Sounds like rattling (*crepitus*) and roaring (*mugitus*) defy attempts to write or to understand.

Priscian's *vox articulata* was the monumental, structured voice of literature and history. Other forms were unstructured and, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas might say, "out of place."[37] Yet the rest of his taxonomy of sounds undermines itself with the very terms it invokes. If human cries and wails can be understood, for example, the *vox articulata* is *not* the only form of voice that conveys sense. By employing onomatopoetic noise words like *sibili* and *mugitus* to illustrate that certain sounds are not scriptable, Priscian nevertheless writes them down. Priscian's self-contradiction highlights the complex attitudes toward noise throughout the Middle Ages and invites us to explore the ambiguities surrounding medieval noise, as well as the ways that assertions about sound inadvertently contradict their own claims: in short, the shifting boundaries between language and noise.

---

[35] See Martin Irvine, "Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer's House of Fame" *Speculum* (Oct. 1985) 850-76 at 854.

[36] Priscian, *Institutiones Grammaticae,* Book I. in Heinrich Keil, ed. *Grammatici Latini ex Recensione Henrici Keilii* (Lipsiae, 1855-1870) 5.

[37] Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1991). For a definition of 'noise' based on Mary Douglas's influential anthropological account of 'dirt,' see Peter Baily, "Breaking the Sound Barrier: A Historian Listens to Noise." *Body and Society* (June, 1996) 50.

Indeed, medieval texts show an awareness of the ways that inarticulate sounds could covey meaning through the workings of affect and feeling. In his work *De signis* ("On signs"), the thirteenth-century Oxford philosopher and Franciscan friar Roger Bacon sought to account for the influence of the sensitive soul on the rational soul, and thus to find signifying value, however imperfect, in what Donatus might call the *vox confusa*, or Priscian the *vox inarticulata*. Bacon distinguished between "natural" signs, which constituted by essence, and signs that were constituted (*ordinata*) by a soul's intention. Among the latter category, Bacon reasoned that certain signs are constituted by the soul with reason and by choice of will. Examples of such signs, which are "at our pleasure" (*ad placitum*) and "for a purpose" (*ex proposito*), include languages and dialects as well as items set up on display for sale and more.[38] Other signs, according to Bacon were constituted by the soul, but without reason or choice of will. Such signs usually occurred "suddenly with no time lag" (*subito per privationem temporis sensibilis*), by "natural instinct" (*instinctu naturali*) and the "impulse of nature" (*impetus naturae*).[39] These included the sounds of animals (*voces brutorum*), as well as many of the utterances of humans, such as the groans and sighs of the sick (*gemitus infirmorum et suspira*) and exclamations of awe and pain; in other words, those signs that were stirred without the deliberation of the mind and arose from "the movement of the sensitive soul" (*ad motum animae sensitivae*).[40] Bacon's interest in the sensitive soul's "movement" anticipates his later insistence that such inarticulate utterances signify through emotion (*affectus*), and not ideas (*conceptus*).[41] When we are moved

---

[38] Roger Bacon, "An Unedited part of Roger Bacon's 'Opus Maius': 'De Signis,'" ed K. M. Fredbord, Lauge Nielsen and Jan Pinborg. *Traditio* 34 (1978) 75-136 at 83. I have consulted and at times borrowed from Roger Bacon, *On Signs,* trans. Thomas S. Maloney (Toronto, 2013).
[39] *Ibid.*
[40] *Ibid.* 84.
[41] *Ibid.*

to cry out in joy, pain, or wonder, the noises that we make create meaning not through intention, but through the feelings and affects behind them.

And just as the physical and affective aspects of music were both denounced and embraced, so were the somatic aspects of language. Despite the widespread preoccupation with moving past the embodied aspects of language to arrive at its rational essence, other medieval devotional practices placed an emphasis on the body over the mind, as a privileged site for understanding. Early monastic reading, for example, called for monks to read aloud in a low voice, either individually or as a group.[42] This practice enforced the attention necessary to incorporate sacred texts as monks strained to catch the mumbling that issued from the mouth of the reader. It was also a literal means of incorporation through textual 'eating' or *ruminatio*: the movement of sacred words about on the tongue was a way to savor them and was, like the eucharist, a means of absorbing moral and spiritual value more effectively into the mind and body.[43]

Vision and Hearing

Historical narratives pitting the "dark ages" against the "Enlightenment" have long placed vision as a marker for knowledge and understanding. Indeed, hearing vied with vision as an esteemed mode of perception in the Middle Ages. This approval was based in part on the biblical precedents of Pentecost, in which the apostles perceive God's voice authorizing them to preach his word by hearing a sudden disembodied sound (*factus est…sonus*), and in Paul's

---

[42] MED online, s.v. "walwen," (v.)

[43] Paul F. Gehl, "*Competens Silentium*: Varieties of Monastic Silence in the Medieval West," *Viator* 18 (1987) 125-60 at 141. For more on the monastic practice of meditation and the voiced and unvoiced reading practices that contributed to it, see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (New York, 1990). For further discussion of monastic mumbling, see Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon*, (Chicago, 1993), 51-65.

dictum in Romans 10:17 that "faith…cometh by hearing" (*fides ex auditu*). The Old French poem, *Pelérinage de la vie humaine*, translated into Middle English by John Lydgate in the early fifteenth century, places the ear at the pinnacle of all of the body's sensory "gates," asserting that it is the organ most adept at perceiving divine truth, and so makes up for the dangerous deficiencies of the other "wyttys."[44]

Yet medieval taxonomies of the senses nevertheless suggest the physical, even tactile materiality of sound, undermining the very hierarchies that they attempted to establish. The literature I will examine repeatedly frustrates the drive among the social, intellectual, and religious elite to codify the senses into categories of relative virtue by demonstrating what David Howes calls "intersensoriality"—a kind of synaesthetic cross-wiring in which it is impossible to isolate the perception of individual senses.[45] Indeed, as scholars in Sound Studies are quick to point out, more than any other sense, sound implicates other senses along with it. As a result, while hearing was a relatively privileged sense, it was often inextricably entwined with other senses. Medievalists have begun to explore such intersensoriality. Beth Williamson, for example, shows how shifts in register between vision and hearing—when music is experienced in a realm beyond the aural and when images are perceived in a realm beyond the visible— facilitate the use of "inner senses," including "the mind's ear."[46] Williamson ends with a call for more scholarship on the non-representational and the invisible. Through its emphasis on 'noise,' my dissertation begins to address sound and text that are aurally and visibly non-representational.

---

[44] Guillaume de Deguileville, *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, Englisht by John Lydgate, ed. F. J. Furnival (London, 1899). See ll. 5195-5339.
[45] David Howes, *Introduction*, in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford, 2005) 1-17 at 7.
[46] Beth Williamson, "Sensory Experience in Medieval Devotion: Sound and Vision, Invisibility and Silence" *Speculum* (January, 2013) 1-43.

Suggestive evidence highlights the promise of much more work exploring the synaesthetic interrelationship of the senses in medieval texts. In Chaucer's early dream vision *The House of Fame,* the Dreamer's eagle guide offers the metaphor of "lighted smoke" in explaining the physics of sound, thus subtly aligning hearing with vision. Correlating listening with taste and smell, religious authors write of the mellifluous or "honeyed" flavor of God's word. Finally, hearing was nearly inextricable from touch, the "basest" of all senses. Medieval authors repeatedly emphasize the physical, tactile effects, both violent and soft, that certain words or types of discourse had on the bodies of their auditors. The sound of language had the ability to strike a physical blow, as we hear with the Middle English word "clappe," meaning both a loud noise and a stroke of the arm or palm.[47] Other language was like a gentle caress. Touched by the sound of God's word, medieval mystics like Margery Kempe made spiritual use of the tactile effects of sound. The modern English word "blandishment" from the Latin verb "blandire," "to caress" or "coax" attests to the way touch remains implicated in the sound of certain kinds of language. Given the degree of intersensoriality inherent in medieval depictions of sound, it makes sense, I would argue, that noise becomes a metaphor to frame all of the sensory aspects of language as it is both spoken and perceived.

The complex interrelation and overlapping of the senses in medieval texts demands that we adopt a holistic intellectual approach, remaining sensible to the less explicit workings of the senses that lie latent in subordination to those on which medieval culture placed elevated value. In navigating these thorny critical divides, I have found the work of scholars like Veit Erlman to provide helpful models for approaching the topic of sound histories.[48] Erlmann provides a nuanced interrogation of the standard critical narrative that modernity saw the suppression of the

---

[47] MED, "clap" n.
[48] Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York, 2010).

body and emotion and cultivation of the mind as the basis of individual subjectivity. Inherent in critiques like Erlman's is not only an insistence on the continuity between the pre-modern and the modern, but also a refusal to see the mind and the body in diametric opposition and an emphasis on the non-hierarchical co-existence of sound along with other senses like vision. By complicating the narrative of a grand shift in sensory perception from the ear to the eye, we can begin to challenge the notion of linear historical progress that much recent scholarship in sound studies has inadvertently reinforced.

Noise and Modernity

Indeed, these ideas on medieval sound have important implications for how we view the Middle Ages in relation to modernity, especially in the emerging discipline of Sound Studies. Numerous important works in the field unthinkingly entwine histories of sound with narratives of "modernity."[49] In a particularly glaring example, one scholar surveys existing literature on histories of sound in the service of a "grand narrative for the ear," but omits the Middle Ages.[50] The author's short discussion of sound in the "non-literate world" stresses the importance of speech and listening as a means of transmitting information, quoting the seventeenth century scientist Helekiah Crooke: "The use of the Sense of Hearing according to Aristotle…is to acquire or get knowledge or wisdom."[51] By quoting an early modern scientist echoing a classical Greek philosopher, the author effectively bookends the Middle Ages. This is a conspicuous absence— one that inadvertently highlights a critical gap in sound studies and provides an example of a

---

[49] See, for example, Schaeffer's narrative of industrialization and noise pollution I quote above. See also Emily Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*, especially ch. 4 "Noise and Modern Culture: 1900-1933."
[50] Sophia Rosenfeld, "On Being Heard: A Case for Paying Attention to the Historical Ear" *American Historical Review* (April, 2011): 316-334 at 319-126.
[51] Rosenfeld, "On Being Heard," 320.

practice that is widely in place in the field: to begin narratives of the history of sound with Early

Modern Europe.[52]

Much of the scholarship concerned with sound and modernity is centered around the rise

of sound-related technologies (telephone, radio, and audio-recording, for example) that

flourished from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth.[53] Yet cultures have recorded

sounds since the beginning of language. As Derrida's famous critique of the supremacy of the

spoken word suggests, writing is a technology of sound recording. Even spoken language can

have a recording function. The classical rhetorical trope of *onomatopoeia*—in which the aural

texture of a word attempts to reproduce what that word represents—attests to this. Modern

English contains several noteworthy aurally imitative words, inherited from Greek and Latin.

"Susurrate," for example, from the Latin *susurrare*, reproduces the hissing sound of the

whispering it denotes while "ululate," from *ululare*, aurally conveys an inarticulate howl or wail.

The linguistic strategy of *onomatopoeia* is so embedded in English that even words that denote a

specific *visual* feature sometimes ascribe sound to that quality. The OED suggests that

contemporary uses of the word "bling" to denote ostentatious jewelry or conspicuous

---

[52] See especially edited volumes for example. Veit Erlman, ed. *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity* (Oxford, 2004) and Michael Bull and Les Black, eds. *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford, 2003). A noteworthy exception is Mark M. Smith, ed. *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens, GA, 2004), which includes an essay by Charles Burnett, entitled, "Perceiving Sound in the Middle Ages." Early modernists have indeed made important contributions to the field of sound studies, pioneering useful, "archaeological" methodologies and opening fruitful areas of inquiry. See especially Bruce Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (Chicago, 1999) and Penelope Gouk, *Music, Science, and Natural Magic in Seventeenth Century England* (New Haven, CT, 1999). See also Smith, "Listening to the Wild Blue Yonder" in Erlmann, ed. *Hearing Cultures*, 21-41 and Gouk, "Raising Spirits, Restoring Souls: Early Modern Medical Explanations for Music's Effects," in Erlmann, ed. *Hearing Cultures*. 87-105. The work of other early modernists, in my estimation, informs and is informed by sound studies, though their authors do not explicitly acknowledge it. See especially Carla Mazzio, *The Inarticulate Renaissance: Language Trouble in an Age of Eloquence* (Philadelphia, 2009). Mazzio's work on mumbling and other "failed" speech has been provocative to this project.
[53] See Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC, 2003). See also Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*.

consumption aurally represents the visual effect of light glittering off of precious stones or metals—a verbal representation of the sound of sparkling cartoon gems or coins.[54]

Despite the persistence of such echoic language, Modern English is onomatopoetically impoverished in comparison with Old and Middle English. In a culture with such an emphasis on oral literacy, it is no surprise that early English vocabulary registers a strong attunement to the sounds of everyday life. Indeed, early forms of English provide a wealth of aurally imitative words that are lost to us today. The Old English poem *Judith* recounts the noisy excesses of Holofernes's bellowing guffaws with the verb *hliehhan*, a word whose breathy, guttural bursts imitate the laughter it signifies.[55] The phrase "galder agalan," a common formula to denote the chanting of spells or incantations, captures the dangerously potent, though meaninglessly monotonous sound ("gagaga") of a charm.[56] Middle English too made use of numerous echoic words no longer in circulation today. The mid-fifteenth century Anglo-Latin Dictionary, *Promptorium parvulorum*, or "storehouse for children" suggests that the Middle English verb *bomben*—which denoted, alternately, the avian booming of a crane, the buzzing of bees, or the guzzling of a person drinking quickly—was equivalent to the Latin "bombizo," from the verb, *bombio*, "to buzz."[57] Increased trade with medieval Flanders saw the influence of Middle Dutch loan-words in addition to those that persisted from Franco-Latinate and Germanic languages. The percussive sounds of the verb *knakken* underscored the violence inherent in the argumentation or trickery it denoted.[58]

---

[54] "bling, n. and adj.". OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/257508?rskey=goRvtG&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed January 10, 2013).
[55] *Judith*, ed. Mark Griffith (Exeter, 1997) l. 23.
[56] See Dictionary of Old English, "galder." See also my discussion of the word in "*Soð* and Sense: Language Problems and Affective Solutions in Anglo-Saxon Treatments of the Guthlac Legend" *Viator* 44.3 (2013) 63-84 at 80.
[57] MED, "bomben"
[58] MED, "knakken" v.; also "knakkere" n. and "knakkinge" ger.

Beyond individual words, medieval authors were well aware that the process of recording sounds took place at the level of poetic and textual composition itself. With its root in oratory, the original function of rhetoric depended on language in its sounded form, suggesting that even written language was deeply imbued with sound.[59] Religious authorities demonstrate their awareness of this dynamic with their persistent anxieties about the sensual physicality of poetic language, its capacity to, in the memorable formulation of Augustine, "rattl[e] sonorous little gems" which distract the listener from the meaning of the words. As Chaucer stresses in the *House of Fame*, which includes important meta-poetic commentary on literary making, as we will see, spoken sounds echo forth unceasingly and monumental written narratives of both history and literature come together from the spoken discourses of gossip and tale-telling. Influenced by the sign theory of early theologians, which figured all of the sounded matter of language that surrounded an essential core of meaning as mere noise, medieval writing throughout Europe frets about the representative, signifying nature of language, its distance from the original and "pure" word of God. Yet, as I will show, medieval authors also revel in representationality, making use of the sonorous aspects of language along with and sometimes in place of its signifying capacity in order to further their own poetic projects. The existence of echoic language and aurally sensuous rhetorical texture complicates claims that sound recording began with the advent of certain modern technologies in a way that scholarship in sound studies has not yet acknowledged.

In close relation to the critical divide between the pre-modern and the modern—the "Dark Ages" and the "Enlightenment"—is a schism between the ear and the eye. Scholars in Sound Studies have made valiant attempts to correct the scholarly narrative that the transition

---

[59] For more on the link between rhetoric and orality see Walter Ong, "Oral Residue in Tudor Prose Style," *PMLA* 80 (June 1965) 146-148. Though Ong does not explicitly address sound here, the function of 'listening' underlies his discussion of orality in this and other works.

from the medieval to the modern corresponded with a shift in emphasis from the ear and the oral/aural tradition toward literacy and the eye.[60] Such work, as Jonathan Sterne has helpfully outlined, is often dependent on the dogmatic affirmation of sound as a more "authentic" and "natural" mode of perception than vision.[61] Sterne suggests that, in tandem with the Enlightenment, there was an "Ensoniment," a period when "[t]hrough techniques of listening, people harnessed, modified, and shaped their auditory perception in the service of rationality."[62] Yet by correlating reason and modernity, such approaches reinforce the duality between the modern and the pre-modern.

Similarly, much work on medieval vision and image perception has begun to correct the critical narrative of the Middle Ages as a pre-modern, pre-enlightened time by highlighting the importance of visual and imaginative perception in the Middle Ages.[63] Such work nevertheless conveys a hierarchical distinction between seeing and hearing, reinforcing the notion that vision is preeminently aligned with reason and the mind while hearing is more visceral and emotional. It seems that, in their efforts to complicate teleological notions of historical progress, medievalists have maintained the same framework used by many modernists, one that elevates vision as the sense most reflective of human reason.

---

[60] On this narrative, see the work of Walter J. Ong, in particular *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven, CT, 1967). For work in sound studies that challenges this narrative, see Sterne, *The Audible Past*, and Veit Erlman, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York, 2010).

[61] Sterne, *Audible Past*, 14-17.

[62] Sterne, *Audible Past*, 2.

[63] See, for example, Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1990). See also Alastair Minnis, "Affection and Imagination in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*," *Traditio* (1983) 323-366. For work on medieval vision that responds more explicitly to this tendency to understand vision as a mark of rationality associated with the emergence of modernity, see Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York, Palgrave, 2002). Though Biernoff's analysis responds to this scholarly paradigm, she is quick to point out that it presents "a highly equivocal picture;" it does not show any sudden 'dawning' of sight early or late (12). See also Dallas G. Denery II, *Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World: Optics, Theology, and Religious Life* (Cambridge, 2005). Denery's analysis focuses on the role of vision and perspective in medieval epistemologies, and how new forms of self-awareness led to new understandings of relation to self, others, and the world.

Chapter Outline

My dissertation is divided into six chapters grouped into three sections, which explore noise in relation to the ethics of interpretation, visionary perception, and vernacular authority. In chapters 1 and 2, I trace the deepening complication in Langland's view of noise as he undertakes his revisions from the B to the C versions of Piers Plowman. I engage first with Langland's earlier B text, especially the fable of the rat parliament and the songs of the street vendors in his raucous *Prologue*, and the following debate between the allegories of Meed (a personification of reward) and Conscience (chapter 1). For Langland, noise is wasted sound, bereft of sustained intention or efficacious outcome: a kind of lame and lazy misarticulation associated with effeminate superficiality and worldliness. These are the sounds of Langland's lollares. Thus, in a following interlude, I focus on an emergent debate among orthodox thinkers and the heretical views of John Wyclif and his followers, who were known as "lollards." The Wycliffite heresy insisted that biblical exegetes dismiss the surface sounds of language in favor of a universal underlying truth, or else run the risk of preaching empty noise. At the same time, Wycliffite emphasis on the "literal sense" of scripture, tied in the orthodox tradition to immature understanding, led orthodox thinkers to label Wycliffite teaching and exegesis as so much babble. I argue that this cultural attunement to the noise of language creates interpretative space for some of Langland's most striking additions in his final C-text revision of Piers Plowman (chapter 2), especially his contradictory characterization of lollares. Rather than pointedly referring to heretics, Langland's lollares signal a broader engagement with problems of reading and interpretation that were thick in the air of late-medieval England. Ultimately, they highlight Langland's embrace of textual noise as a medium of deferral, through which the project of interpretation is kept constantly in progress.

From my first section's focus on noise in relation to interpretive ethics, I turn next to sound and mystical perception in contemplative texts of the fourteenth century. I compare the effusive meditative strategies of affective mystics like Richard Rolle with those operating in the more tightly controlled apophatic tradition, namely the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, who explicitly corrects what he perceives to be the 'feminine' excesses of Rolle (chapter 3). As Rolle articulates his notion of canor or mystical song, I argue that noise is an important framing device for all of the affective, sensory aspects of language. Rolle represents *canor* in his own text through alliteration and other sound-play. While the *Cloud*-author rejects Rolle's affective devotional practices as excessively literal, he nevertheless employs similarly literary sound-play in the service of the paradoxical practice of eloquent silence, through which the *Cloud*-author aims to disable the intellect and ascend to a mode of mystical knowing beyond language.

Next I show how the shrieks and bellows of the fifteenth century East Anglian housewife Margery Kempe, who cites Rolle as an influence, engage with the same issues of ineffability seen in Rolle and the *Cloud*-author from a lay perspective (chapter 4). The biblical scene of Pentecost, which authorizes the twelve apostles to preach the word of God by speaking and understanding in tongues, provides context for many of the instances of miraculous *xenoglossia* through Kempe's *Book*. Grounding her evangelizing authority in this story of holy babble, Kempe forges her own vernacular style of eloquent inarticulacy, which she uses to convey her divinely authorized voice across linguistic, cultural, and temporal boundaries.

The work of Chaucer, who became the most authoritative vernacular poet of his period, is the focus of my final section, which explores the gendered associations of surface and excess that accompanied noise in relation to vernacular authority. Just as Margery Kempe plays up the

boisterous excesses of her voice in order to invent a new mode of 'feminine' authority, so too does Chaucer, aiming to find value in the surface noise of language for its own sake, and not simply its utility as a vehicle for thought. In his early dream vision, the *House of Fame*, Chaucer draws from early grammatical theories of the voice, ultimately marking his divergence from the written world of Latin literature and locating his own poetic authority in vernacular language's noisy sensorium of experience without stable or certain meaning (chapter 5).

Finally, I argue that, in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer underscores the value of noise through the figure of the Wife of Bath (chapter 6). As the Wife refuses to hear another "thrifty" tale with a proscribed moral message, opting instead to exercise her own "clink[ing]" vernacular voice, she calls attention to the imbalance of power between preacher and listener by foregrounding clerical desire for a direct communication of precise meaning, usually moral or scriptural. The tales assigned to the Wife manifest an increased insistence on unequal verbal exchange, ultimately demonstrating how the noisy and "feminine" superficiality of the Wife's voice can encourage semantic play, a performance of feminine submission that appears to leave masculine and Latinate authority intact, but which also grants the Wife—and Chaucer—tacit agency.

This project offers a different approach from scholarship that effectively reifies the normativity of the present, and modern, against the primitive pre-modern, a dynamic that medievalists have long noted and interrogated.[64] I excavate how unwanted sound was heard in the Middle Ages, drawing attention to the ways that power relationships shaped how, and to whom, people listened. In doing so, I highlight both divergences and continuities in culturally

---

[64] See, for example, John Dagenais and Margaret R. Greer "Decolonizing the Middle Ages: Introduction" *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (Fall, 2000) 431-448 and Carol Symes, "AHR Roundtable: When We Talk About Modernity" *American Historical Review* (June, 2011) 715-726. Both of these articles approach temporality and history from a postcolonial perspective.

and historically specific constructions of listening. As I will show, authors in late medieval

England were attuned to sounds that we often consider background humming or 'white noise,'

while they ignored—sometimes willfully—other sounds that would demand our attention today.

However, to claim that such different cultural practices were irrational, backward, or despotic in

contrast to the more "enlightened" sensory perception of the "modern" period notoriously

distracts from the perception of historical nuance or cultural particularity. It is a worldview that

justifies a lack of intellectual, and indeed ethical, inquiry and exploration.[65] It is, I will suggest, a

power play to label certain discourses as 'noise,' one that continues to be employed in political

discourse today. We would do well, I think, to adjust our attention and to listen more carefully to

what people, in the Middle Ages and today, are calling 'noise.'

---

[65] This viewpoint, as medievalists have noted, has been used to disturbing ends in American exceptionalism and the pursuit of empire. See, for example, Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, 2008) and Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago, 2007). See also Symes, "When We Talk About Modernity."

Chapter 1

Noise and Sound Ethics in the B text of *Piers Plowman*

Si linguis hominum loquar, et angelorum, caritatem autem non habeam, factus sum velut aes sonans, aut cymbalum tinniens.

-1 Corinthians 13:1, *Latin Vulgate*

If Y speke with tungis of men and of aungels, and Y haue not charite, Y am maad as bras sownyng or a cymbal tynkynge.

-*Wycliffite Bible*, c. 1384

To complement my epigraph, which shall come into focus presently, I begin with an episode from *Piers Plowman* that says something about reading and not about noise, as one might expect. The conclusion of the poem's first vision, a debate between the allegorical figures of Meed (a personification of money or reward) and Conscience (the medieval faculty of the mind or heart) contextualizes issues of voicing noise throughout all versions of *Piers Plowman*. Conscience describes the day that "resoun shal regne and rewmes gouerne," a time when Christendom shall be united and "Shal na more Mede be maistre, as she is nouthe/ Ac loue and lowenesse and lewte togederes,/ Þise shul be maistres on mode treuthe to saue."[1] He concludes with a proverbial sentiment from scripture: "*melius est bonum nomen quam diuicie multi*" (a good name is better than great riches).[2]   Meed waxes "wroth as þe wynd" (B 3.328), declaring that she does not know Latin, then turning to the bible in her own defense:

> 'I can no latyn,' quod she, 'clerkis wote þe sothe.
> 'Se what Salamon seith in Sapience bokes:
> "That hij þat ȝeueth ȝefts, þe victorie wynneth
> & moche worschip had þerwith," as holy writ telleth:

---

[1] William Langland, *Langland's Vision of Piers Plowman: Text B,* ed. W. W. Skeat (London, 1869, last reprinted, 1950) ll. 283, 288-90. All quotations from the B text are from this edition unless otherwise noted.
[2] *Ibid.* 46.

29

Honorem adquiret qui dat munera, etc.'
(B 3.329-32).

Meed's citation of *Proverbs* 22:9, "He who gives money will acquire honor," offers a classic

demonstration of how medieval theologians warned one should *not* read the bible. Meed takes

her biblical allusion out of context, neglecting the larger, more "true" meaning of the text.

Conscience calls this to her attention. Granting that "[her] Latyn be trewe" (B 3.333), he acidly

explains to Meed that she reads "lyk a lady" (B 3.334), who reads a lesson once, finds a

sentiment that "please[s] here herte" (B 3.335) and stops there. If Meed had merely turned the

page, Conscience continues, she would have found the conclusion of the proverb she has cited:

"*Animam autem aufert accipiencium, etc.*" Conscience argues that the full proverb, "He who

gives money will acquire honor, but he corrupts the soul of the receiver," condemns Meed.

This episode raises important questions about the ethics of reading, and of speaking about

what one reads. I propose that this description of Meed's "bad reading" and misunderstanding

sheds light on how Langland conceives of the deceptive, perverse, and 'noisy' vocalization of

Meed and other figures, throughout all versions of *Piers Plowman*. In this chapter I will focus on

the groundwork that Langland lays for this point of view in the B text. I will also gesture toward

the way he complicates a straightforward association between noise and deceptive immorality, a

concern that, as we will see in my third chapter, becomes much more pressing in his revisions to

the C-text.

Conscience, a manifestation of the medieval seat of thought and rational judgment,

declares that one day reason will govern a united Christendom and the concept of meed will be

moot. This automatically aligns meed with the superficial, physical world, in opposition to the

deeper more spiritual realm of conscience and Christian ethics. Meed's "bad" reading confirms

her association with self-interested and shallow desires over spiritual truth and the larger social

good.

Moreover, as Conscience's remark that Meed reads "like a lady" suggests, these

dynamics are gendered. Scholars have shown how medieval hermeneutic norms figured reading

as a quasi-erotic process of textual penetration enacted by an active and masculine clerical figure

as he cleared away a text's "feminine" material layers to reveal its essential "truth." Lay reading,

especially by women, was "against nature," a sodomitic process in which a woman or

"feminized" layman acted on a feminine text.[3] Throughout Will's first vision, Meed becomes a

figurehead for noisy and deceptive sins of the tongue that are uncoupled from reason. I show

how Meed's noise-making voice, characterized as perverse, excessive, and against the common

good, without "true" meaning at its core, is an outcome of her role as a bad reader, a laywoman

whose focus is on the superficial literal meaning of language without fully understanding deeper

meaning in context. In other words, Meed absorbs the sound of the words, but not their "true"

meaning. Without an internalized knowledge of the correct form of Christian morality or love,

Meed's voice is, as the Apostle Paul might say, "like sounding brass or tinkling cymbal."[4]

Through the speeches of the angel, lunatic, and goliard and the fable of the rat parliament,

the *Prologue* of Langland's B text first explores the line between meaningful communication and

noise in the public realm of good governance. These episodes show how, for Langland,

language is meaningful when it contains substance, a certain essence of intention or rational

---

[3] For the classic study of gendered reading and "sexual poetics" see Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, especially 18-25. See also Copeland, "Why Women Can't Read," esp. 254-60.

[4] Meed is thus akin to those itinerant preachers, insufficiently trained in Latin and in correct models of biblical interpretation, who proliferated in the wake of the Black Death, taking money indiscriminately without sufficient spiritual repayment. As we will see in chapter three, these religious performers and spiritual confidence men will come to be aligned with noise as well, as Langland develops the figure of the *lollare* in his C text. Indeed, in "Why Women Can't Read," Copeland shows how this implicit hermeneutic law, which aligned the reading practices of the laity, specifically women, with attention to the superficial, material qualities of a text in place of the more abstract "truth" at its core, would come to be influential in the formation of explicit laws outlining the conditions for prosecuting the Wycliffite or "lollard" heresy.

31

judgment that is made visible in actions that carry out that intended meaning. When language is unmoored from such intention, it becomes hollow, meaningless noise. This distinction between ethical and meaningful language and deceitful 'noise' extends into his first vision, where we again see a tension between the conceptual and the material aspects of language in the figure of Meed. Throughout the first vision, Meed is associated with excesses: pecuniary, sartorial, erotic, and semantic. As a figure who stands for the feelings and sensual pleasures of the body, it is fitting that Meed's speech is likewise excessive and idle noise, a riot of sounds that convey no pointed meaning. As Will the Dreamer moves into his second vision, Langland explores the tension between conceptual and physical aspects of language in relation to personal devotion and morality, shifting focus from a public ethics of good governance to the private realm of the individual soul. Through this shift, Langland clarifies a link between mental intention and the action that carries out that intention, drawing into focus the *Prologue's* emphasis on the need for action to render language meaningful.

Yet even as Langland explores an ideal of semantic and linguistic transparency, his style and form at various moments in his *Prologue* and early visions call into question the very possibility of that ideal, opening space for readers to embrace the noisy material of language, its physical experience in the body alongside its more pointed meaning. The aural mish-mash of the street vendors at the end of the *Prologue*, for example and the linguistic excesses and deficiencies Sloth, whose lame and lazy articulation betrays the lack of emotional investment in the Dreamer's confession and prayer, foregrounds the non-rational, corporeal nature of his somnolent state, which occasions the conditions for his own poetry. Thus, Will begins to grapple with the utility of the sounds and feelings offered by the alliterative texture of *Piers Plowman*, a concern that Langland will highlight further in his final C-text revisions.

The Voice of Good Governance

Langland's *Prologue* invokes sounds from the moment we learn that the Dreamer sets out on his quest, "wondres to here" (A, B, C *Prol*. 4) to the marketplace chants of the street vendors at the *Prologue's* end. I will have more to say about each of these moments in this chapter and the next. But first I want to focus on Langland's narration of commonwealth formation and his fable of the rat parliament in order to understand how Langland explores the line between meaningful and empty language in relation to good governance.

After an extended passage theorizing ecclesiological power through the estates satire of the fair field full of folk, Langland shifts to secular power, articulating a theory of kingship through his narration of commonwealth formation. The B text introduces a series of three quasi-allegorical figures offering voices of truth from outside the world of the court. Each of these voices stresses the need for spoken transparency in good governance, or more specifically, the need for a correspondence between word and deed and for a ruler to himself be ruled by the laws he creates. The first to speak is a "lunatik, a lene þing withalle" (B. *Prol*. 123), who offers a learned or "clergial" address to the king in the manner of a fool sage: "Crist kepe þee, sire Kyng, and þi kyngrych,/ And lene þee lede þi lond so leaute þee loue,/ And for þi riȝtful ruling be rewarded in heuene!" (B *Prol*. 125-27).[5] Offering a secular benediction that the king rule rightfully, the lunatic emphasizes "leaute," a word that implies both loyalty and fidelity, but also *legalitas* as an essential element of royal governance.[6] The lunatic highlights the limits of royal power by implying that a king is subject to the abstract concept of legality.

---

[5] For more on the lunatik as a "fool sage" see Andrew Galloway, *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman* v. 1 (Philadelphia, 2006). 122.
[6] *Ibid*., 123-25.

The next figure to speak offers an illustrious counterpart to the lowly lunatic. The angel reinforces the lunatic's assertion of the king's subjection to his own law and gestures toward the implications of this condition on the king's speech. Condescending to speak to the king and the commons by "lowing" himself, the angel offers an extended admonition in Latin:

> 'Sum Rex, sum Princeps'; neutrum fortasse deinceps!
> O qui iura regis Christi specialia regis
> Hoc quod agas melius—iustus es, esto pius!
> Nudum ius a te vestiri vult pietate.
> Qualia vis metere, talia grana sere:
> Si ius nudatur, nudo de iure metatur;
> Si seruiter pietas, de pietate metas
>   (B *Prol*. 132-38).

> You say 'I am King, I am Prince'; perhaps you will be neither, hereafter!/ O you who rule after the singular laws of Christ, Ruler/ In order to do that better—as you are just, be pitying!/ Naked law desires to be clothed by you with pity./ Sow the grain you wish to reap:/ If the law is nakedly administered, let there be a reaping, from the naked law. If pity is sown, may you reap according to pity.[7]

With this short lyric, the angel extends the lunatic's emphasis on *leaute* by stressing that the king is subject to whatever laws he creates in order to enforce the laws of Christ. The passage invokes the correspondence between word and deed that is necessary to kingship by stressing that the king must "clothe" the naked law with his actions. This detail evokes the necessity of transparent language as a cornerstone of good kingship.

The final figure to speak further reinforces an ideal of transparency. The goliard offers a shorter Latin admonishment to the king: "Dum 'rex' a 'regere' dicatur nomen habere,/ Nomen habet sine re nisi studet iura tenere" [While a 'ruler' (*rex*) is said to take his name from 'to rule' (*regere*), he has the name without the essential quality unless he strives to uphold the law]. Like the angel, the goliard stresses the need for the king's adherence to his own laws, lest he be king in name only (*nomen…sine re*). The goliard invokes the semiotics of Isidore of Seville, whose

---

[7] In preparing this translation I am guided by that of Galloway, *Penn Commentary*, 127. I thank Andrew Hicks for pointing out the need to revise Skeat's translation by rendering "metatur" in l. 137 as "reap" rather than "measure."

Etymologies stress that the Latin etymological basis for a word should define the qualities of that word, a way of reinforcing cosmological and social order through an ideal of transparent language.[8] By highlighting a linguistic genealogy through which nouns are born from related verbs, Isidore's semiotics conveys an ordered semantic world in which a subject's essence is conveyed through its actions. Meaningful language occurs when one's words are supported with consistent subsequent actions. A ruler's words are meaningless sounds if they are not supported by action.

Nonsense and the Belling of the Cat

The fable of the rat parliament that follows the intervention of the angel, the lunatic, and the goliard, extends the point of view that ethical, meaningful speech aligns intention with action and begins to distinguish such speech from noise. A host of rats and mice arrives at the court of the king to hold a parliament in order to discuss a cat who has been entering the rodent court whenever it pleases, seizing the rats at will, "ple[ing] wiþ hem perilously and poss[ing] hem aboute" (B *Prol*. 151). Coming together to decide on a course of action in response under the guidance of a "raton of renoun" who is "renable" or eloquently reasonable in speech (B *Prol*.158), the parliament decides to affix a bell onto the cat's collar so that all rats will be warned before it comes prowling around. Though there is consensus that this is a productive course of action, no rat will agree to attach the bell to the cat, for fear of its own life, and the plan is lost. Langland glosses this fable with the assertion that the rats have "leten hire labour lost and

---

[8] "Reges a regendo vocati. Sicut enim sacerdos a sacrificando, ita et rex a regendo. Non autem regit qui non corrigit." See *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum*, ed. W. A. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911) IX.iii.4. One begins to see how Isidore links networks of concepts through similar sounds, e.g. *reges/ regendo/ corrigit*.

35

al hire longe studie" (B *Prol*. 181). The fable thus dramatizes the warnings of the angel and the

goliard: words without ensuing action amount to nothing more than empty noise.

In presenting this warning, Langland adopts and expands upon concerns found in his

source materials for the fable. The fable appears in a sermon preached by Bishop Thomas

Brinton at a convocation for clerics assembled at the Good Parliament in May of 1376. Aiming

to redress the recent corruptions and extravagancies of the court, this parliament found a

formidable enemy in John of Gaunt, a son of King Edward III and the effective ruler of the time.

They elected Peter de la Mare, a knight from Herefordshire, as its speaker. The cat in this fable

has frequently been read as a stand-in for John of Gaunt, while the "raton of renoun" (B

Prol.158) represents de la Mare.[9] Brinton concludes his version of the fable with the assertion

"Hoc non fuisse in parliamento diffinitum, et per consequens inualidem erat et inane" (This [task

of belling the cat] was not accomplished in parliament, and therefore it was invalid and void).[10]

While the Good Parliament was ultimately successful in "belling the cat" (they imprisoned or

banished several courtiers who were thought to be the sources of corruption) Brinton's

cautionary use of the fable underscores the cultural and political preoccupation with "empty"

speech, disconnected from intention or action at the time Langland was writing *Piers Plowman*.

The fable of the belling of the cat is noteworthy in its obvious relevance to medieval uses

of noise.   It is tempting to assume that the story dramatizes the potential utility of noise when it

is used, for example, as an instrument for caution or warning. Yet Langland's account strikingly

omits any references to the noises of the bell. Indeed, the bell's function is repeatedly described

in terms of vision. The "renable" rat describes how he has "ysein" creatures with elaborately

crafted rings or "biȝes ful briȝte" (B Prol. 160-61) around their necks and how these collars

---

[9] Beginning with Bernard F. Huppé in "The Date of the B-Text of Piers Plowman" *Studies in Philology* 38 (1941) 34-44 at 35 (de la Mare) and 37 (Gaunt).
[10] See Galloway, *Penn Commentary* 139.

sometimes have a bell that announces its wearer's presence. The rat extends his initial emphasis

on clear visibility when he advocates forging "a belle of brasse or of briȝte syluer" (B *Prol*. 168)

for the capricious cat.   Here, the emphasis on clarity in the rat's account conveys the concept of

legibility through visual metaphors. Indeed, while the Middle English word "bright" most often

referred to visual stimuli, for example, vivid colors or luminous astronomical bodies like the sun,

moon, and stars, the word was also applied to the voice or to other sounds that gave signal or

were clearly comprehensible.[11] For example, the early fifteenth century alliterative poem, *The*

Parliament of the Three Ages, uses a reference quite similar, and possibly influenced by

Langland's usage here. Youth invokes the "belles so bright, blethly thay ringen," referring to the

bells that were often attached to the legs of falcons in medieval hunting practices.[12] Such bells

allowed falconers to hear their birds, even when they could not be seen, and so signaled where

the human hunters should go to attain their prey. The rat's insistence on the bright clarity of the

bell suggests that its loud sounds are not to be considered noise. In light of the failed

parliamentary agreement of the rats, this distinction highlights an implicit comparison between

the productive warning sounds of the bells, and the idle or 'noisy' speech of the rodent

parliament.

Indeed, in distinguishing the rats' nonsensical and empty promises from the bright clarity

of the bell, Langland may be influenced by an account of the story even earlier than that of

Brinton: a version of the fable from an early fourteenth-century Anglo-Norman collection by the

Franciscan monk, Nicholas Bozon. Bozon's account is almost entirely in Anglo-Norman except

at the very end, when he remarks on the victory of the nefarious cat, "Sire Badde," and on the

rats' failure, with a nonsensically sing-song proverb in Middle English: "Clym! Clam! Cat lep

---

[11] MED, "bright" adj.
[12] Warren Ginsburg, ed. *Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Thre Ages* (Kalamazoo, 1992) 214.

over dam!"[13] Bozon's switch to the more subordinate vernacular language along with his use of child-like nonsense words and sing-song rhythm here implies the perverse and ultimately chaotic and irrational nature of the rats' empty speech. It is this emphasis on the confounding irrationality of their idle talk, bereft of intention, the disjunction between their words and deeds, that may have resonated with Langland as he included the fable of the belling of the cat in *Piers Plowman*.

Sound-Play and Transparency

At the same time that the *Prologue* struggles to distinguish between ethically meaningful sounds and those that are idle and non-rational, at moments, its form and style call into question the very possibility that language can ever be a perfect, clear conduit of meaning or intention. I will explore this contradiction in greater depth at the end of this chapter, and even more so in the next. Here however, I want momentarily to return to the words of the lunatic, the angel, and the goliard, whose speech and poetic sound-play undermines the very possibility of true transparency even as it stresses such semantic clarity as an ideal of good governance. Crucially, it is the lunatic who is first to speak. In keeping with his character, the voice of the lunatic is unbound by reason, which is evident in his poetics. The lunatic vacillates between a smoothly metrical line with even alliteration ("Crist kepe þee, sire Kyng, and þi kyngrych") and a hyperalliterative line with alternating 'l' and 'þ' elements ("And lene þee lede þi lond so leaute þee loue.)" This fluctuation produces a frenetic vocalization that underscores the lunatic's lack of reason, calling into question the conceptual essence of his utterance.

---

[13] Nicholas Bozon, *Les contes moralisés de Nicole Bozon*, ed. L. T. Smith and P. Meyer (Paris, 1889) GrI 12. See also Galloway, *Penn Commentary*, 133.

The goliard's emphasis on the need for spoken transparency is also at odds with his

poetics, though this tension is expressed not through the irregularity of his verse, but instead

through its highly stylized poetic artifice. Written in leonine hexameter, which added internal

rhyme within each line to its metrical regularity, the goliard's speech exaggerates the materiality

of his language over its conceptual essence through its own poetic sound-patterning: "Dum 'rex'

a 'regere' dicatur nomen habere,/ Nomen habet sine re nisi studet iura tenere" (emphasis added

to highlight aural texture).[14]

As we have seen, the goliard's verse stems from a section of Isidore's *Etymologies*,

which outlines the mechanism of good governance as a process by which the identity or name of

a ruler, stems from his ruling actions. Yet in making this claim, Isidore makes reference to a

"proverb" (*proverbium*) from "among the ancients" (*apud veteres*): "Rex eris si recte facias: si

non facias non eris," a line of trochaic septinarius whose lilting sing-song exaggerates its aural

texture over its meaning. This tension between sound and sense stems from Isidore's probable

source for these lines, a section from Horace's *Epistolae*, which weighs the relative merits of

money and virtue. After considering the benefits of money, Horace introduces 'true' virtue by

invoking the schoolyard chanting of children: "At pueri ludentes: 'Rex eris,' aiunt, 'si recte

facies'" (And the boys playing [spoke]: 'You are king' they said, 'if you act rightly,').[15] He

concludes by asking rhetorically: is a Roscian privilege, which allowed men of a certain income

to sit in the best seats at the theater, better than a children's rhyme or "jingle" (*nenia*).[16]

It would seem that the ultimate provenance of this passage from such an incantatory

context was important for Langland. With these lines, Horace suggests that children at play have

---

[14] Again, I am grateful to Andrew Hicks for his invaluable help informing me on the scansion and meter of the Latin passages in this section.
[15] Horace *Epistolae*, Liber 1, ed. Roland Mayer (Cambridge, 1994) 56, ll. 59-60.
[16] *Ibid*., 57, l. 63.

access to moral truth, despite, or perhaps because of their lack of maturity or rational depth. He

further implies that this truth is best expressed with noisy incantation, the utterance of sounds

without complete understanding of their sense. Langland's goliard is a kind of child at play. The

sensuality of the language in this passage is in keeping with his reputation as a disruptive and

sinful minstrel, whom Langland calls a "gloton of wordes" (B *Prol*. 139), himself invoking the

word's etymology from *gula* or "glutton." The goliard is thus a figure of childlike pleasure over

reason, one who values the physical experience of language rather than its content.

The voice of the angel extends this impression that Langland valued the physical

experience of language on a par, or perhaps beyond, its semantic content. Like the goliard, the

angel speaks in rhyming and metrical verse that combines leonine hexameter and pentameter.

Remaining un-adapted to Langland's alliteration and meter the angel's Latin lyric is set apart

from the speech of the lunatic, suggesting a poetic authority of its own. Yet, like his goliardic

companion, the lilting nature of the angel's utterance stands in sharp contrast to the content of his

passage, which advocates the need for an authority marked by linguistic transparency. The

angel's language has a strikingly noisy and material quality as he plays with *polyptoton* (the use

of *regis* as both a verb and a noun) and internal rhyme (*Princeps*, *deinceps*; *melius*, *pius*, etc.).

Indeed the angel's middle line, central in both its situation and importance ("Nudum ius a te

vestiri vult pietate;" "The naked law must be clothed by you with pity") contains one of the

cleverest rhymes of all, rhyming "a te" with "pietate." Such poetics juxtaposes plain speech with

a highly wrought poetics that threatens to obscure the meaning of the text, overtaking the content

of the words with its sound.

Indeed, Langland curiously asserts that it is for the benefit of "lewed" men, who cannot

"iangle or iugge" (B *Prol*. 129-30). This formulation diverges from the other rhetorical pairing

"jangle and jape" which was often used to characterize the sounds of minstrels throughout *Piers Plowman*.[17] Scholars have debated whether this passage offers a more positive view of "jangling" through its association here with "judgment." A. V. C. Schmidt, for example, considers whether "jangling" in this case denotes argument, here presumably the just dispute of the parliamentary context, or whether it refers to a lack of understanding of the angel's words among the commons. I suggest that these dual formulations need not be mutually exclusive. By implying that the Angel's poetic speech is for the benefit of the unlearned, those who can neither engage in academic disputation nor understand Latin, this passage nevertheless suggests that those "lewed" men who listen can nevertheless access a form of meaning. The passage's play with poetic rhetoric falls short from its articulated ideal of communicative transparency. Yet it simultaneously offers a means of engaging with the text beyond its pointed meaning, a dynamic, as we will see in chapter three, that becomes increasingly important to Langland as he undertakes his final revisions to the poem.

Meed the Maid's Sterile Sounds

After questioning the very possibility of transparent language in the *Prologue,* the first vision reverts to promoting an ideal in which the conceptual essence of language is conveyed clearly and straightforwardly, unhindered by its material qualities. Tensions between these two aspects of language are foregrounded through the debate between Meed and Conscience. A marked contrast to Conscience's reasoned and rational debate, Meed's embodiment of all

---

[17] For an interpretation of "jangling" as "dispute, see A. V. C. Schmidt, ed. *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B Text* (London, 1978) Prol. 130-31n. For an interpretation of "jangling" as noise invoking a lack of understanding, see A. V. C Schmidt*, The Clerkly Maker: Langland's Poetic Art* (Cambridge, 1987). See also Linda J. Clifton, "Struggling with Will: Jangling, Sloth, and Thinking in *Piers Plowman* B" in *Such Werkis to Werche: Essays on Piers Plowman in Honor of David C. Fowler*, ed. Mícheál Vaughan (East Lansing, MI, 1993) 29-52 at 41.

manners of worldly excess—pecuniary, sartorial, erotic, and semantic—is in keeping with her

perverse and noisy sins of the tongue.

Meed's superficial and "effeminate" reading, which I used to begin this chapter,

contextualizes the countless ways she embodies worldly excess. Like Chaucer's Wife of Bath,

as we will see in my final chapter, Meed is swathed in layers of fine clothing and jewels. She is

promiscuous with her body and her speech. She takes pleasure in the sumptuous feelings of the

body rather than seeking a higher moral truth. All of these details are consistent with her focus

on the superficial surface level of language in her self-interested reading of the bible. They also

help to explain Langland's insistence on her sterile and uncommunicative voice. Meed insists on

a personal pleasure deemed to be perverse, unnatural, and sodomitic, rather than aiming for a

direct communication that facilitates understanding through mental conception.

An allegorical personification of 'reward,' the figure of Meed is not inherently sinister.

Rather, she is morally neutral, embodying negative connotations of monetary profit as well as

more positive associations with spiritual reward.[18] John Yunck has traced Meed's development

in the medieval tradition of venality satire. He locates Langland's treatment of Meed within the

changing economic traditions of late medieval England, which saw increased occurrences of for-

profit administration of the sacraments and other religious rites. Ultimately, he argues that

Meed's followers are guilty of the sin of simony.[19] It is no wonder, then, that Langland

emphasizes Meed's promiscuity of body and tongue, stressing her associations with sodomy, a

sin often conflated with simony that encompassed all kinds of non-procreative sexual acts for

---

[18] The prevailing view is that of Meed as a moral threat. Robertson and Huppé, for example, argue that she is descended from Antichrist and the Whore of Babylon. *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition* (New York, 1969) 50-51. Scholars like A.G. Mitchell, on the other hand, stress Meed's ambiguous morality, arguing that it is her indiscriminant generosity that is a force of corruption. Mitchell, "Lady Meed and the Art of *Piers Plowman*" (London, 1956).

[19] John A. Yunck. *The Lineage of Lady Meed: The Development of Mediaeval Venality Satire* (Notre Dame, IN, 1963).

personal pleasure in place of the communal benefit of biblically and socially mandated reproduction.[20] These associations with illicit economic and sexual exchange are transposed onto Meed's language and spoken intercourse in a way that reinforces her characterization as a for-profit reader and preacher of holy word, akin to another noise-making figure that will proliferate in the C text: the *lollare*.

Despite her inherent ambiguity, Langland's characterization of Meed defines her almost exclusively based on the negative associations of personal rather than communal profit. Will's first sight of Meed signals her wealth and excess. She is "wonderly yclothed," with a crown; each of her five fingers is "richeliche yrynged/ and thereon rede rubies and other riche stones." Langland's presentation of Meed's excess has been linked to Edward III's mistress, Alice Perrers, highlighting the economic stakes for the commons of such wasteful spending, and underscoring Meed's association with cupidity and the desires of the flesh.[21] The erotic undertones in Langland's assertion that Meed's finery "rauyssche[s]" (B II.17, C II.16) Will emphasizes Meed's active agency enacted on Will as a passive partner, beginning to suggest her associations with perverse and "unnatural" sexual and linguistic conduct.

Indeed, the *dramatis personae* surrounding the figure of Meed, in particular her family structure, call attention to her disruption of kynde or "natural" order in a way that undermines the efficacy of her speech. Though Langland places a broad spectrum of clerks and bureaucrats around Meed, he stresses that she is "most pryue" with the corrupt ones, especially "Simonye and Syuile" (II. 65-66). Indeed, her affiliation with these villains is increasingly close over the

---

[20] For more on the conflation of sodomy with non-sexual, monetary sins like simony and usury, see Eugene Vance, *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln, 1986) 230-55. See also Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago, 1997) 64.

[21] The first to connect Meed to Alice Perrers was Walter William Skeat in his early edition. See *The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts*. 2 vols. (London, 1886) 2:31. See also G. R. Owst in "The 'Angel' and the 'Golyardys' of Langland's Prologue, *MLR* 20 (1925) 27-79. For more recent treatments see Stephanie Trigg, "The Traffic in Medieval Women: Alice Perrers, Feminist Criticism, and *Piers Plowman*" *YLS* 12 (1998) 5-29.

course of Langland's revisions, as they go from witnesses to her wedding in A and B to kinsmen who conspire with Meed's father, Favel, or "Guile" to scheme a union between Meed and False in C, suggesting the increasing importance of kinship as a mark of moral value over the course of Langland's revisions. Indeed, in the B and C texts, Langland stresses Meed's moral family resemblance with the Latin proverb, "Qualis pater, talis filia. Bona arbor bonum fructum facit" ("Like father, like daughter. A good tree makes good fruit").

While my focus in this chapter is on how Langland grapples with noise in early versions of *Piers Plowman*, I want to note here how the C text revises this moment because it succinctly illustrates associations between noise and "unnatural" sterility of language that we see expressed in its nascent stages in the B text, and to a lesser extent in the A text, of the poem. In the C text, Langland modifies his placement of these Latin proverbs and adds an English gloss in a moment of calculatedly noisy poetics that sets up what will come to be a longstanding association between Meed's "unnatural" family ties and her sterile or uncommunicative noise-making.

Calling attention to the incest suggested by the allegorical overlap between Meed's father and her betrothed, the C text paints us a picture of Meed's "family tree," underscoring its gnarled misshapenness in contrast to the straight tree of the righteous:

> *Talis pater, talis filia.*
> For shal neuer a breere bere berye as a vine
> Ne on a croked kene thorn kynde fyge wexe
> *Bona arbor bonum fructum facit.*
> (C.II.27a-29a).

The straightforward paratactic syntax of the Latin reinforces the social and moral norm of upright family relations. In contrast, Meed's family tree is like a sharp and "croked" briar—one that can never bear fruit or grow "kynde" figs. "Kynde" is a tricky word in Middle English, particularly in *Piers Plowman*, where it denotes both God and Nature as well as other forces that

govern a moral life.[22] Here "kynde" is aligned with the "natural" fecundity of the straight or

upright life, in opposition to Meed's way of life, which is morally both crooked and unfruitful or

sterile. Though Theologie intervenes later in the passus, attempting to rehabilitate Meed by re-

asserting her legitimacy, this characterization implies that Meed's original and most pervasive

state is unnatural, or, in the words of countless medieval discourses denouncing sodomy,

"against kynde."

Further, the "unnatural" sterility of Meed's family structure is subtly aligned with a kind

of slippery vocalization. In his English gloss explaining the implications of her unnatural family

structure, Langland piles together alliterating words in the tongue and lip-twisting phrase "breere

bere berye," whose consonance and assonance adds to its stumbling poetics. The sound of the

words at this moment, the way they feel bumbling around the lips and teeth, begin to suggest the

ways that the body can impede clean articulation, a dynamic that will come to be important to

Langland's characterization of morally idle sounds.

Meed's sterile and "unnatural" kinship structures engender sounds that are consistent

with the idle and unproductive nature of her speech, especially when she is coupled with the

guileful allegory of Fauel's choice. Meed's father draws up a charter that promises Mede to

False, which the family's cronies, Simonye and Syuile, read aloud. The document comments

satirically on the corrupt distribution of meed by parodying the vast land holdings given to the

Black Prince, son of king Edward III, at his investiture in 1362.[23] In doing so, it reinforces

Meed's corrupt connections, stressing that all who desire to please Meed follow Falsness, Fauel,

and Lyare, and will earn meed. In the B text, whoever marries Meed, Favel offers:

---

[22] See Hugh White, *Nature and Salvation in 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge, 1988). For a discussion of the word,
unlinked to sodomy, in relation to Meed's family, see Teresa M. Tavormina, *Kindly Similitude: Marriage & Family
in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge, 1995) 10-11.
[23] See Skeat's edition, 2:34. See also, Tavormina, 21, Galloway, *Penn Commentary*, 259.

> To be princes in Pride, and pouerte to dispise,
> To bakbite and to bosten and bere fals witnesse,
> To scorne and to scolde and sclaundre to make,
> Vnbuxome and bolde to breke þe ten hestes.
>
> (B II. 80-83)

He also grants Meed's future husband, "þe erldom of Enuye and [Ire] togideres/ With þe

chastilet of cheste and chaterynge out of reson" (B II. 84-85).   These first lines underscore a

causal relationship between Meed's family wealth and idle noise-making or "chattering out of

reason"—one that Langland reinforces in his revisions of the C text as he changes the list of

moral deficiencies that will result from Meed's marriage to emphasize idle speech. While in the

B text, whomever marries Meed will spend fasting days frequenting taverns and wallowing "as

burgh swyn" (B. II. 98), in the C text, they will while away the time "With spiserye, speke

ydelnesse, in vayne speke and spene" (C. II. 101). In conjunction with the reference to the Black

Prince's investiture, Langland's stress on sins of the tongue in his account of Meed's marriage

charter, suggests that such speech is an unnatural and idle form of making noise, one that

benefits the individual instead of an exalted ideal of the commons.

These descriptions of Meed's family and marriage charter set up the political and social

stakes of her marriage: if she marries False, as her father desires, the union will engender a

cacophony of idle noise, a reflection of the moral and social discord that the couple would

promote in the world. Yet Theologie steps in to prevent this calamity, reasserting Meed's value,

and with it her legitimacy, by calling her a "muliere, a mayden of goode" (B II.132, See also A II

96 and C II.145). He repeatedly asserts that Meed has been unjustly pursuaded or "amaistried"

by the "murie" speech of her father and other duplicitous relatives (B II.148 and 154, also at A

II.112 and118 and C II.161 and 167). This intervention reminds us that Meed's allegorical value

can swing in either direction, toward selfish personal reward or toward the profit of the commons

reflected in the "communal wealth" of Parliamentary speech.[24] Yet despite Theologie's

objections, False and Fauel, Simonie and Syuyl continue to draw Meed to the court of

Westminster, along with a retinue of guileful followers. Langland gestures toward the "many

manner man" (B II.187) who comprise this group of followers with a telling *occultatio*: "Y haue

no tome to telle the tail þat hem folweþ" (B II.186, also at A II.147 and C II.196).[25] His

reference to the "tayl" of Meed's retinue is the first of a number of punning usages of the word

and other homophones, all of which reinforce his renunciation of a certain kind of sterile

storytelling. Here, the primary meaning of "tayl" refers to the line or queue formed by the train

of Meed's followers. Yet in conjunction with the verb "tellen" it is easy to hear the word as

'tale' or 'story.' Langland's repeated assertions of his desire to avoid wasting time reminds us of

the fraught position of storytelling for pleasure in Langland's intellectual and cultural milieu and

anticipates his preoccupation with justifying his own literary labor in the C text. Moreover, his

desire to avoid wasting time implicitly suggests that a restrained tongue is more socially

productive, an idea that is made explicit when an allegory of Sothnesse or 'Truth' enters the

narrative and "say[th] but lytel" (B II. 189, A II. 150, C II.200). Truth's taciturnity, in other

words, tells us that moral substance is best expressed with pointed pith.

Once they arrive at Westminster, the King teams up with Truth to prevent Meed's

marriage to False. After Meed undertakes a hasty confession, reminding us of her corrupt

associations when she offers to embellish the church of her confessor with glass windows and

paintings (B III.61-62, C III.65-66), Truth proposes his knight, Conscience, as a suitable mate to

replace False. But Conscience, sensible to Meed's entanglement with her more sinister kin,

---

[24] For more on the affective meanings of parliamentary speech and its associations with "communal wealth" in *Piers Plowman* and other contemporaneous accounts of Parliament, see Matthew Giancarlo, "Piers Plowman, Parliament, and the Public Voice," *YLS* 17 (2003) 136-74.

[25] In the C text, the line echoes an earlier assertion that he has "no tyme" to describe the richness of Meed's array (C. II. 15).

vehemently indicts Meed, loudly voicing his protest to her sinful tendencies. The resulting debate reinforces the episode's allusions to contemporaneous parliamentary clamor.[26] Its escalation of noisy complaint reminds us that parliamentary consensus was assessed based on the sheer volume of voices yelling in favor or against an opinion.[27] These topical resonances secure Meed's position as a bad reader and preacher.

As the debate unfolds, Conscience condemns Meed's insinuation with petty bureaucrats and high-ranking religious and secular officials alike. Meed responds in her own defense, telling Conscience that money is also put to positive social uses, even by Conscience himself. Indeed, she suggests, the principle of exchange is rooted in human social existence. She outlines the necessity of money in imperialist wars of conquest, referring first explicitly in the A and B texts, then more generally in C, to contemporaneous English conflict with France. Ultimately, Meed argues that money upholds social order as those in positions of power distribute meed "to mayntene hir lawes" (B III.216, A III. 203, C III.272).

At a key early moment of this debate, Conscience renounces Meed's moral corruption with another punning use of "tayle." Meed is, he asserts, "tikel of hire tail, [and] talewis of tonge" (B III.131, A III.120, C III.166). This formulation suggests Meed's promiscuity of speech, linking her to sins of the tongue like gossip and tale-telling. The link between excessive speech and promiscuity—particularly among women—was widely in play throughout the Middle Ages.[28] That Meed is "ticklish" in her "tail" and generous with her tongue offers another example of antifeminist conflations of verbal and sexual openness among women.

---

[26] For a discussion of this section in relation to parliamentary practices, see Giancarlo, *Parliament and Literature*, 190-99.

[27] For a discussion of this practice within Parliament, see Emily Steiner, "Commonality and Literary Form in the 1370s and 1380s," *New Medieval Literatures* 6 (2003) 199-222 at 202.

[28] See, for example, Mark Addison Amos, "The Gentrification of Eve: Sexuality, Speech, and Self-regulation in Noble Conduct Literature," in Susannah Mary Chewning, ed. *The Word Made Flesh: Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture* (Hampshire, 2005).

Further, Langland indulges in a threefold pun on the word "talewys," which adds more depth to the association. The word's primary meaning, "oriented toward tales," suggests Meed's proclivity for telling stories, presumably the kinds of false fables that her "fickle tongued" father might tell. Yet "talewys" also suggests "oriented toward tails" or "backsides," underscoring the perverse associations implied with Langland's assertion of Will's ravishment at the hands of Meed.[29] Recalling the biblical proscription against bestiality (Lev: 18), the word "peversion" is a misleading translation of the rare Hebrew word, *tebhel*, which means, more generally "mixing" or "confusion."[30] "Talewys" calls to mind the etymology of the word "perverse," from the Latin *perverso*, meaning "turned the wrong way" or "twisted," and highlights the theoretical overlap between sexual or moral "perversion" and double dealing. Suggestions of "ass backward" orientation were a common way of denoting natural or moral backwardness in Middle English, as in the *Book of Vices and Virtues*, a Middle English translation of the French treatise on morality, *Somme le Roi*, which suggests that those who are falsely humble solicit praise from others by "gon erseward, and maken hem so lowe, and seyn þat þei ben so wrecchede and so sinful…."[31] In this characterization, "erseward," literally, implies exaggerated and unnecessary lowliness for the sake of the personal gain or praise; figuratively, it suggests perverse moral dealings. Meed's speech is thus sterile and unnatural or "against kynde."

The suggestions of sterility that define Meed's "talewys" voice, link it to a violation of the secular piety of "common profit" in late fourteenth century England, an ideal of social order in which the labor of all professions and social estates comes together in a unified harmony of mutual benefit. Meed's orientation toward "tales" can also be read as a proclivity for "tailles," a

---

[29] For a discussion of this pun in *Piers Plowman*, see Andrew Galloway, "The Account Book and the Treasure: Gilbert Maghfeld's Textual Economy and the Poetics of Mercantile Accounting in Ricardian Literature" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 33 (2011) 65-124 at 82-3.
[30] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 54. Significantly, "tebhel" also meant "babble."
[31] *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. W. Nelson Francis (London, 1942) 57.

word denoting a medieval tax or tribute. A pun made all too frequently in *Piers Plowman*, the conflation of *tales* and *tailles* underscores the personal profit that, to Langland, inheres in certain modes of tale-telling—those that do not contribute to the common good. The suggestion that such speech is unnatural or perverse underscores its social sterility. Further, the threefold association among tales, tails, and tallies calls attention to the personal or individual profit of both tale-telling and sex for pleasure or individual profit.

Conscience highlights Meed's capacity as a speaker for her own pleasure and individual gain rather than the common good. In this light, his accusation that Meed is "frele of hire feiþ and fikel of hire speche" (B III.122, A III.111, C III.157) is significant. Meed's frailty of "faith" offers a counterpart to the lunatic's earlier emphasis on a king's need for "leuty." In contrast to a good king, who should have "leuty," and thus demonstrate his moral and spiritual substance, Meed's speech is "fikel" a word denoting deception and caprice and often associated with the feminine allegorical figures of Fortune and Fate.[32] Karma Lochrie reads Meed as a gossip, highlighting how medieval texts recognize the threat of gossip to "reduce the presumed moral and ethical dimensions of language to mere surface," creating disjunctions among intention, word, and action that exemplify the dangerous fluidity of language and pose one of its most serious threats in the Middle Ages.[33] The superficiality of noise, its diffuse dissemination of meaning, becomes a metaphor for this dynamic in figures of "effeminate" readers, like Meed.

Again, it is important to note how the major revision to passus III in the C text, the addition of Conscience's complex grammatical analogy, extends the associations Langland is making between noise and perverse sounds by reinforcing the link between Meed's unequal and individual profit and "unnatural" noise. In the C text, Conscience's ultimate response to Meed's

---

[32] MED, "fikel" adj.
[33] Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia, 1999) 65.

assertions of the social utility, or necessity of money is to outline the differences between *mede* and *mercede* or a just reward that is earned by hard work or virtue. This perplexing disambiguation aligns the noise of language that is unstructured by the divine or "natural" organizing principle of grammar with social and moral discord. Conscience describes meed and mercede as setting up "two manere relacions/ Rect and indirect, reninde bothe" (C III.333-4). "Relacion recte," Conscience claims, is a "record of treuthe" (C III.344). In Conscience's analogy, "treuthe" serves to indicate both loyalty and a kind of social and spiritual virtue based on verisimilitude. That is, "relacion recte" reflects a certain faithful personal relationship in which an exact, reciprocal exchange occurs between both parties, which Conscience claims is in line with natural virtue. Because of its apparent egalitarian exchange, "relacion recte" corresponds to the reciprocal exchange of *mercede*. Grammatically speaking, Conscience explains, this is akin to when adjective and substantive accord in gender (here called "kynde"), number, and case (III.336). By way of illustration for these metaphors, Conscience offers analogies that are both social, (a "leel laborer" and his "maister") and spiritual (the Lord and his believers), suggesting that the moral productivity of such reciprocal exchange, both economic and linguistic, through grammatically ordered language, is reflective of worldly and spiritual power relations.

By contrast, the uneven exchange of meed, is embodied in crooked or "unrecte" language, without grammatical agreement. Thus, Langland likens the individual profit of meed to unstructured, nonsensical language, without the ordering principles of grammar, which was thought, like musical harmony, to reflect the divine structuring of the universe.[34] Spoken

---

[34] For more on how this section reflects contemporaneous ideas about grammar and music reflected the ideal ordering of the cosmos, see Priscilla Martin, "*Piers Plowman*: Indirect Relations and the Record of Truth" in "'Such Werkis to Werche': Essays on *Piers Plowman* in Honor of David C. Fowler," ed. David C. Fowler and Miceál

language, in other words, has both substance (its meaning) and accident (its sound). Meaning

emerges only when a noun is aligned and in agreement with its predicate adjective. Without

such agreement, language is merely sound without substance: noise. In a telling further

illumination, Conscience tells us that such "unrecte" relation is like a son not accepting his

surname, because he is "[his father's] sone and his seruant, sewe for his ryhte" (C III.368). A

refusal to accept his father's name interrupts rights of inheritance and "kynde" social order. It is

no wonder, then, that Meed's sterile sounds are tied to her promiscuous sexuality and

illegitimacy. In Langland's ethical worldview, all such actions are violations of "natural" order,

which must be upheld in order to promote the formation of a just society.[35]

Intention and Lazy Articulation in the Confession of the Sins

The second vision begins to translate the social idleness that is a hallmark of Meed's

noise-making into the realm of the soul, underscoring the moral deficiencies that inform

Langland's notion of sterile sounds for individual rather than common profit. Passus V begins as

Will awakes from his vision of Meed at the King's court, feeling intellectually and spiritually

unsatisfied and sad that he has not "yseiȝen more" (B V.4). In response he picks up his rosary

and prays: "[I] sat softely adoun and seide my bileue;/ And so I bablede on my bedes, þei

brouȝte me aslepe" (B V.8). An onomatopoetic noise word marked by the repetition of

consonants that produces a monotonous droning effect, *bablen* suggests that Will's pronunciation

---

Vaughn (East Lansing, MI, Colleagues Press, 1993) 169-90 at 173-74. See also Paula T. Carlson, "Lady Meed and God's Meed: The Grammar of Piers Plowman B3 and C4" *Traditio* 4 (1991) 291-311 at 301-302.
[35] Despite its apparent conclusiveness, as Pricilla Martin remarks, Conscience's grammar metaphor "shines with a deceptive clarity" (178). She goes on to outline some of the ways that the poem contradicts itself on its own terms, refusing to uphold "right relations," including its basis in Latin rather than English grammar, and Langland's persistent tendencies to go against the grain of personification allegory by making abstract nouns (which were usually feminine) into masculine entities. These contradictions are consistent with what I will call Langland's poetics of lolling in chapter 3.

of prayer is inadequate. The passage invokes the practice of "monastic mumbling," a form of quiet, though not silent, reading common in monastic circles that was intended to reinforce attention to the content of the scriptural passages being read out loud to oneself.[36] Yet instead of reinforcing his attention to scriptural truth, the gentle hum of Will's babbled prayer causes him to fall asleep. This introduction to the second vision problematizes Will's mumbling as a kind of idle noise that lacks the investment of an active will or intention, a dynamic that informs Langland's subtle thematization of noise in his dramatization of the confession of the sins.

Will's second vision begins with the entrance of an authoritative allegory (in the A text Conscience and in B and C Reason) who preaches a fire and brimstone sermon, exhorting a wide array of "folk" to repent and abandon their sinful ways before they invoke the wrath of God. At the end of his sermon, an allegory of Repentance enters, undertaking to hear the confessions of the seven sins. Nearly every allegorical sin in the procession makes noise in association with transgressions of the tongue. In most cases, their noisy idle talk is produced, either in conjunction with or because of some deficiency or deformation of the body. Envy, for example, is so distended with wrath that he bites his lips in speaking (A V.66-70, B V.83-89). The idea that those with such noise-making voices were also physically malformed in some way is consistent with contemporaneous moral and theological preoccupations surrounding speech in the Middle Ages as well. Homiletic discourses on sins of the tongue, for example, stressed a metonymic association between the tongue and the body and suggested that words spoken were indivisible from the body, an extension of the physical. *The Book of Vices and Virtues* asserts that, in speech, "…þer may no þing come out of a vessel but suche as is þer-ynne."[37] It goes on to warn that one must carefully measure words, because "bi þe words mowe men knowe þe

---

[36] For further discussion of monastic mumbling, see Illich, *Vineyard of the Text*, 51-65.
[37] *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, 225.

wittes and þe folies of a man, as men knowen a swyn bi þe tongue, whether he is hole or mesel."[38] As an extension of the body, speech reflected one's interior moral state. Just as a diseased body reflected moral turpitude, foul words reflected an unclean spiritual state.[39]

This preoccupation with transparency, that the outside of the body, including one's speech, should match the inside, reflects larger theological anxieties about the representative nature of language, the distance between signifier and signified, the name of an object or idea, and the thing itself. In other words, the bodies and words of each of the sins are in alignment; their malformation reflects their lack of emotional and spiritual attention. Indeed, in more than one case, Langland suggests that the grotesque and excessive bodies of each of the sins begins to stand in the way of their correct articulation, thus obscuring the signifying relationship between the *verbum* and the *res*. Abuse of food and drink in conjunction with illicit or noisy speech are a common means of conveying this idea. Wrath's grimacing or "neuelynge" (B. V. 134) nose betrays his tendency toward immoderate consumption of food and wine, which in turn contributes to his "flux of a foul mouþ" (B. V. 177). Similarly, after "yglubb[ing] a gallon and a gille" (B. V. 340, similar to A. V. 190), Gluttony "blew his rounde ruwet at his ruggebones end,/ That all þat herde þat horn helde hir nose after…" (B. V. 344-45, similar to A. V. 192-93). These transgressions of the tongue amount quite literally to waste, the aural byproducts of immoderate consumption: a vomitous gag, a resounding fart. Such loud noises reinforce the preoccupation with language as an embodied and fallen medium of spiritual truth within Christian theology.[40]

---

[38] *Ibid.*, 282.

[39] On the link between the diseased body and the unclean soul in medieval thought, see Peter Lewis Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago, 2007) 27-8.

[40] For an extended treatment of the ways that medieval theologians reconciled the "fallen" and embodied nature of language with the biblical mandate to preach the word of God, see Marcia Colish, *The Mirror of Language* (Lincoln, NE, 1983).

Langland's description of Covetise in A, B, and C suggestively extends his position

regarding noise and truth by reinforcing the role of the body as an impediment to the articulation

of divine truth. Misshapen like his allegorical brethren, Covetise is "bitelbrowed and

baberlipped, wiþ two blered eiȝen,/ And as a leþeren purs lolled hise chekes (A. V. 109-110, B.

V. 188-89). Stemming from the French "babine," meaning "an animal's lip" or a "protruding

lip," *baberlipped*, meaning "thick-lipped," is related to the Middle English verb *blaberen*,

suggesting that Covetise's own words are mis-articulated.[41] Moreover, the suggestion that his

cheeks hang or "loll" from his face anticipates Langland's preoccupation with *lollares* as

outspoken beggars in passus IX of the C text. Though I will have much more to say on the

subject of *lollares* and lolling in chapter three, here it will suffice to say that the Middle English

verb *lollen* stems from the Middle Dutch word for "to mutter" as well as "to doze [and] sleep."[42]

The word's associations with spoken noise combine with the adjective "barberlipped" to suggest

a tendency toward noisy mis-articulation that is equated with sloth. Like his repeated

associations between food and language abuse, Langland's depiction of Covetise's oversized and

unwieldy lips and cheeks begins to suggest how the body could impede a more correct and

"pure" form of pronunciation, which corresponded more closely with spiritual truth.[43]

---

[41] MED. "babler-lipped," adj.

[42] MED, "lollen" v.

[43] Langland's suggestions of excessive and sinful inarticulacy here are helpfully juxtaposed with the contemporaneous alliterative poem *Cleanness*, which articulates the need for "clean" articulation in the service of spiritual truth. The very first lines of the poem make a distinction between "clean" speech and its opposite:

> Clannesse who-so kyndly cowþe comende,
> & rekken vp alle þe resounz þat ho by riȝt askeȝ,
> Fayre formeȝ myȝt he fynde in forþering his speche
> And in þe contrare kark & combrance huge.
> (1-4).

Whoever wishes to speak 'cleanness' should use "fayre formez" or eloquent rhetorical finesse. The poet's invocation of "þe contraré" here, is a bit unclear, meaning the opposite of either "fayre formez" or of "forþering" speech. This ambiguity is productive, however, in that it aligns the contrary of "fayre formez" (ugly or crude style) with the reverse of "forþering" speech (weighty or encumbered movement). The idea of such crude and heavy speech aligns movement with rhetoric in a way that suggests that the physical motions associated with "clean"

The suggestion of babbling or lolling inarticulacy as a reflection of the body's hindrance of "pure" vocalization is most fully realized in Langland's characterization of Sloth. More than any of the other sins, Langland associates Sloth with idle noise. His characterization begins to shed light on the moral and spiritual stakes of making such noise. Appearing grotesquely "byslabered with two slimed eiȝen" (B V.386, see also C VII.1), Sloth repeatedly exceeds boundaries of space and time, both in his appearance and in his speech. In keeping with his tardy nature, he appropriately brings up the rear of Langland's procession of deadly sins, In the C text, even spilling into the seventh passus rather than remaining contained with his allegorical brethren in passus VI. This emphasis on Sloth's lazy excesses links the overconsumption of Sloth's processional predecessor, Gluttony, with Sloth's own tendency toward hoarding, reminding us that the poem's logic of waste implicates both excess and lack.[44] Sloth begins his confession by making a series of loud noises: "He bigan *Benedicte* with a bolk, and his brest knokked,/ And raxed and rored, and rutte at þe laste" (B V.391-92). Sloth's subsequent belch, chest-thump, and roaring yawn as he initiates the confessional formula, call his actual penitence into question, reinforcing Langland's associations between noise and lack of intention or emotional-intellectual investment with words. Indeed, Sloth later confesses "That I tell wiþ my tongue is two myle fro myn herte" (B V.402). He goes on to describe how his days are spent telling "ydel tales" at alehouses and in Church. Sloth is ignorant of spiritually "productive" texts

speech (the movements of the eye in reading and of the tongue in pronunciation) are fluid in contrast to the stammering inarticulacy of sinful talk. See *Cleanness: An alliterative tripartite poem on the deluge, the destruction of Sodom, and the death of Belshazzar by the Poet of Pearl*, ed. Israel Gollancz (Cambridge, 1974). *Cleanness* is particularly relevant to my discussion here because of its concern with literal physical cleanliness and its influence from the pollution taboos of Leviticus. As A. C. Spearing has shown, Douglas's anthropological work in *Purity and Danger* is remarkably illuminating of the symbolic realm within which *Cleanness*, and other works by the *Pearl*-poet, operate. See A. C. Spearing, "'Purity' and Danger," *Essays in Criticism* (1980): 293-310. For a fuller analysis of the poem's treatment of 'clean' and 'filthy' speech, unlinked to Douglas, see Monica Brzezinski Potkay, "*Cleanness*'s Fecund and Barren Speech Acts" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 17 (1995): 99-109.

[44] For more on the juxtaposition between Gluttony and Sloth in the context of waste, see Eleanor Johnson, "The Poetics of Waste: Medieval English Ecocriticism," *PMLA* 127.3 (May, 2012) 460-76 at 468.

like saints' lives or sermons (B V.395), but instead focuses on stories like "rymes of Robyn hode and of Randolf erle of Chestre" (B V.396-97). When he asks Repentance for pardon, Sloth confesses "Sixty sythes Y, Sleuthe, haue foryeten hit sethe;/ In speche and in sparyng of speche yspilde many a tyme" (B V.435-36), stressing that his wasted speech has been manifested both through excess and lack, through speaking and thorough failing to speak.

In its assertions of Sloth's simultaneous excess and deficiency, Langland's characterization is consistent with medieval religious writings demonstrating the contribution of both laziness and busyness to the vice's characterization.[45] The excessive sleep and work avoidance through merrymaking associated with the vice of sloth in a lay context was complemented by a concerned desire among religious to eliminate the busy or restless thoughts that were enemies to contemplation. Indeed, the contradictory associations of both business and laziness that accompanied medieval conceptions of sloth extended into didactic writing on slothful or wasteful speech. In its discussions of "idle talk," the Middle English *Book of Vices and Virtues* is exemplary, showing a characteristic preoccupation with the ways that so-called "idle" words are actually frenetically active. The author characterizes idle talkers as overly busy rather than lazy, warning "þer beþ summe words so ydele and of nouȝt, and yit þes tongues beþ so fulle of hem þat þei spekeþ now of o þing, now of a-noþer."[46] The man or woman who gossips idly is not lazy or sluggish, but instead flits from topic to topic "and faren riȝt as the clappe of a water mylle, þat can not stynte."[47] Busily avoiding their own work, idle talkers are

---

[45] On the ambiguity and self-contradictory nature of sloth in the Middle Ages, see Sigfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1967). See also Clifton, "Struggling with Will," 38-39.

[46] *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, 55.

[47] *Ibid*. For another comparison of excessive speech to the noise of a mill see *The Book of Vices and Virtues,* 283.

both lazy and busy, active and passive, loud and, as the metaphor of the perpetually noisy mill

suggests, uncommunicative.

Showing a similar contradiction, in *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, "idle" language could

be both deficient and excessive. In the quotation above, the author equates words that are

"ydele" with those that are "of noght" and indeed, the gamut of definitions for "ydele" in the

Middle English Dictionary are suggestive of nothingness: "worthless," "empty," "lazy," etc.[48]

But with his "and yit" the author reverses all expectations around the concept of idle noise. Idle

words are not worthless. Men may call them "idle words" the author tells us, but this is

misleading "for þei beþ well dere and ful of harm and wel perilous…."[49] With the ambiguous

adjective "dere," the author implies not only that words can be severe or harsh, but also that they

can have worth or weight.[50] Such weight confers a physical effect upon the word. On the sin of

exaggeration, the author explains that embellished words are akin to "iapes and knakkes."[51]

Borrowed from Dutch, the Middle English echoic word "knak," is particularly suggestive

because of its dual signification as a "trick or stratagem" and a "blow."[52] The word reinforces the

status of extraneous or deceptive language as noise with a percussive physical effect. Indeed,

this physical effect is what leads the author to designate the term "idle" as misleading. Far from

being idle, he explains that exaggerated words "ben wel heuy and wel schrewede."[53]

Further, Sloth's confession that he has "spilled" speech by both speaking and failing to

speak suggests that he has sinned through mis-articulation. The most extensive discussion of

---

[48] MED, "idel" adj.

[49] *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, 55.

[50] See MED, "dere" adj. 1 and 2.

[51] *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, 56.

[52] See MED "knak(ke)" n.

[53] *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, 56.

wasted time and words in any version of *Piers Plowman* occurs in passus IX of the B text when

Wit characterizes 'Dobest' to Will in terms of silent, contemplative labor:

> He dooþ best þat wiþdraweþ hym by daye and by nyȝte
> To spille any speche or any space of tyme:
> *Qui offendit in vno in omnibus est reus.*
> [Tynynge] of tyme, truþe woot þe soþe,
> Is moost yhated vpon erþe of hem þat ben in heuene;
> And siþþe to spille speche þat [spire] is of grace
> And goddess gleman and a game of heuene.
> Wolde neyere þe feiþful fader [h]is fiþele were vntempred
> Ne his gleman a gedelyng, a goere to tauernes.
> <div align="center">(B. IX. 99-106).</div>

Langland defines spilled speech by instructing readers on how to avoid it, by withdrawing from

the world to concentrate on scholarly contemplation. This formulation suggests that the

contemplative quiet of spiritual contemplation is the best way to approach a moral life while the

noise of the world is morally idle or wasteful. While the question of what actually constitutes

"spilling speech" is elusive, the Latin quotation in Wit's speech, *Qui offendit in vno in omnibus*

est reus, offers a clue. As J. A. Burrow has shown, the same quotation appears in *Piers*

Plowman B XI.309 and in C XIII.122a to refer to skipping over words in legal charters.   Indeed,

the scribes of certain versions of the B text made emendations to suggest that the quotation

applied to such mis-articulation. While the original Latin quotation translates to "he who offends

in one [thing] is guilty in all," many versions of the B text replace "vno" with "verbo" to say

"He who offends in a word, is guilty in all things."[54] Here, as Burrow shows, Langland seems to

draw on homiletic depictions of the word-collecting demon, Tutivillus, a character frequently

cited in homilies and moral treatises alongside the sin of sloth and references to "idle" talk,

---

[54] J. A. Burrow "Wasting Time, Wasting Words in Piers Plowman B and C," Yearbook of Langland Studies 17 (2003) 191-202, 192.

particularly in church.[55] Though *exempla* on Tutivillus occur in two distinct types, the one

relevant to this particular instance in *Piers Plowman* concerns a holy man who encounters the

demon carrying a heavy bag of all the "faylynges, & of neglygences" in the words and syllables

of psalms and verses that are mumbled in church, intent to present each mis-articulation to God

on the sinner's day of reckoning.[56] The emendation suggests that, to these scribes, the "offense"

articulated in the quotation is a verbal one.[57] "Spilling" words then, is about deficient or lazy

articulation: sound that lacks the structure of syllabification.

Aural Experience and the Voice of the Poet

Sloth's confession that he has "spilled" speech by speaking and failing to speak suggests

that he misarticulates prayers and other religious language, a sinful defect that recalls Will's own

soporific mumbling at the beginning passus V. The Dreamer's association with Sloth thus calls

into question his intentional investment and problematizes the very language of the poem itself

by gesturing toward the way that physical experience of language, its sounds in the ear and

feeling as it moves through the lips, tongue, and teeth, has the capacity to overtake individual

intention to create new and more semantically diffuse meanings that obscure any stable notion of

moral or spiritual truth. We have seen this issue raised before. The final lines of the *Prologue*

call into question exactly how noise and semantic excess might fit into Langland's ideal of a

politically and morally just society and how Langland justifies his own noisy and embodied

verse in such a society.

---

[55] On the influence of Tutivillus in the Middle Ages, see Margaret Jennings, "Tutivillus: The Literary Career of the Recording Demon," *Studies in Philology* 74.5 (December, 1977): 1-95. See also Kathy Cawsey, "Tutivillus and the 'Kyrkchaterars': Strategies of Control in the Middle Ages" *Studies in Philology* 102.4 (Autumn, 2005): 434-51.

[56] Though the demon's collection of fragmented words appears throughout all versions of this type, this phrase is taken from the *Myroure of Our Ladye*, ed. J. H. Blunt (London, 1873), 54.

[57] For a discussion of these revisions, see Burrow "Wasting Time," 192.

Immediately after the cryptic "belling of the cat" episode, Langland momentarily raises the problem of literary interpretation and deflects it onto readers: "What þis metels bymeneþ, ye men þat ben merye,/ Deuyne ye, for Y ne dar, by dere God in heuene" (B. *Prol*. 209-210). Assuming that his listeners are laughing or "merye" at the content of the fable, Langland suggests that the story is a trifling amusement. Yet he asks auditors to take on the authority and agency of interpretation, as they "divine" the meaning of the story, and that of his dream as a whole. In doing so, Langland reminds us of the heuristic pressure that noise places on its auditors, highlighting the potential utility of "idle noise" like the fable of the rat parliament, which seems to exist solely for entertainment. This moment begins to suggest that, in its mysterious meaning and in the communal enjoyment it offers, the "noise" of idle talk can serve an important social function as "public poetry."

The *Prologue*'s last lines devolve into cacophony from the clamor of street songs sung by the urban tradesmen and professionals that populate the end of Will's dream:

> Baksteres and brewsteres, bochiers manye,
> Wollen webbesters and weueres of lynnen,
> Taillours and tynkers and tollers in markettes,
> Masons and mynours and many oþere craftes:
> Of alle lybbynge laborers lopen forþ somme—
> As dykeres and delueres þat doon hire dedis ille
> And dryueþ forth þe longe day wiþ *'Dieu vous saue, dame Emme!'*
> Cokes and here knaues cryden, 'Hote pies, hote!
> Good gees and grys! Go we dyne, go we!'
> Tauerners until hem tolden þe same:
> 'Whit wyn of Oseye and wyn of Gascoigne,
> Of the Ryn and of þe Rochel the roost to defie!'
> Al this Y seiȝ slepynge and seuene syþes more
> (B *Prol*. 219-31).

With the exception of a few place-names, the cries of the street vendors are almost exclusively monosyllabic. Their rhythm underscores the percussive poetic force of their language, which

threatens to overtake the meaning of their words, turning their voices into noise. It also underscores their use of song to mark and while away time or "drive forth the long day." Their singing to pass time contributes to their idleness, while the assertion that they "do their deeds ill" suggests that their songs cause poor craftsmanship, singing for pleasure. It would seem that the noisy hubbub of street songs is merely another form of idle noise in its resistance to communal and social harmonization and productivity. Yet Langland aligns his own voice with this impulse, manipulating the songs to fit his own meter, in some cases aligning them expertly to fill complete alliterative lines. This alignment figures Langland's own poetic voice as a noisy ruckus and calls attention to the way that his poetry marks and whiles away time, like the songs of the ditch-diggers. The passage revels in its own cryptic and idle noise-making, placing a value on the physical experience of poetic language, however "idle."

It is this very "problem" of the embodied nature of language that preoccupies Langland in some of his most significant revisions of the C text, especially those that center around his depiction of wandering *lollares* and lunatic *lollares* in passus IX, to which I will turn in my third chapter. But first it is important to examine some of the cultural and intellectual conditions that informed these revisions, namely the clamorous complaint about these very problems of language made by John Wyclif, the Oxford philosopher, theologian, and founder of the heterodox movement of religious reformers widely known as lollards.

Interlude

Wyclif, Lollardy, and the 'Noise' of Language

At roughly the same time Langland completed the B-text of *Piers Plowman*, or shortly

thereafter, the Oxford theologian John Wyclif put the finishing touches on his treatise on

scriptural interpretation, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* ('On the truth of holy scripture').[1] With

this work and many others, Wyclif became the figurehead for a movement of religious reformers

intent on ousting what they saw as the decadence and corruption of the Catholic Church, a

movement that came to be known as Lollardy.[2] Roughly a decade after Wyclif's publication of

De Veritate, Langland wrote his C-text revisions to *Piers Plowman*, where he added a number of

references to "lollares," "lolling" and a "lollarne lyfe." My next chapter will investigate these

additions to the C-text in greater detail, exploring in particular what *lollares* and *lolling* meant to

Langland. Here I am interested in the historical conditions, both intellectual and sensory, that

influenced Langland's interest in the term.

In this brief interlude, I sketch how John Wyclif's philosophical realism and universalism

led him to articulate a hermeneutic theory in *De Veritate* that dismisses sound, or "the voices of

words," among all other sensory perceptions of text as extraneous to the intention of its divine

author reflected in the "literal sense" of scripture. As Rita Copeland has shown, the literal sense

was an important aspect of elementary education and was seen a step toward philosophical

---

[1]Dated to circa 1377-78 Wyclif's *De veritate* is roughly contemporaneous with the 1377 B text of *Piers Plowman*, and predates C text revision of 1390 by about a decade. For the date of *De veritate*, see Ian Christopher Levy, *Introduction* in John Wyclif *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, trans. Levy (Kalamazoo, MI, 2001) 2. For a chronology of Langland's revisions to *Piers Plowman*, see William P. Marvin, "Chronological Outline of Historical Events and Texts in Britain 1050-1550" in David Wallace, ed. *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (New York, 1999) 867. For a discussion of Wycliffite interpretive practices in relation to Augustinian hermeneutics, see Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 10-11 and 23

[2] The first instance of the word "lollard" in reference to a Wycliffite, in this case those who favored the conclusions condemned at the Blackfriars Council, occurs in the *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, which records the suspension of one Henry Crumpe, a Cistercian friar, for disturbing the peace "quia vocavit haereticos Lollardos" (because he called the heretics Lollards). See the *Fasciculi Zizaniorum Magistri Johannes Wyclif Cum Tritico,* ed. Walter Waddington Shirley (London,1858) 311-12.

mastery through late antiquity and the Middle Ages. While this stage of knowledge was important to orthodox thinkers, it was seen as a mere phase along an extended path to philosophical and theological truth. The Wycliffite focus on the literal sense led opponents to accuse them of superficial and childish reading practices. These accusations proved a way of reasserting orthodox dominance in the face of the Wycliffite threat to clerical authority.[3] I share Copeland's interest in how these associations with childhood and immaturity affected the power dynamic between Wycliffites and their opponents, but I want to draw attention to another important facet of this interplay that she does not address: the cacophony of aural terms that resound from these debates about reading practices. The widespread tendency to dismiss the views of Wyclif and his followers in noisy terms, I argue, is an extension of their opponents's insistence on the irrational and immature nature of their reading practices and hermeneutic program. A childish and superficial reader who fails to glean the correct essence of a text will in turn make childish and inarticulate sounds that fail to convey important meaning.

Wyclif's followers, colloquially known as "lollards," in turn adopted this very strategy of accusing their opponents of "noisy" exposition of scripture. Rather than tying their opponents to elementary education practices, however, Wycliffite accusations of noisiness highlighted their disavowal of the embodied ways of reading presented and practiced by orthodox interpreters. Indeed, Wycliffite polemic against orthodox preaching pushed Wyclif's renunciation of embodied understanding to even further extremes as Lollard writers and thinkers strove to recalibrate lay attention to focus on spiritual essences rather than exterior worldly signs. I will argue in chapter two that this cultural attunement to the noise of language creates interpretative space for some of Langland's most striking revisions in his final C-text of *Piers Plowman*,

---

[3] Rita Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning* (Cambridge, 2001).

namely, the authorial apologia inserted in Passus V and the contradictory characterization of *lollares* in Passus IX, who both "sound forth mischief" and "prophecy for the people."

Wycliffites and the "Voices of Words"

Wyclif's views on sound and meaning were part of a general philosophical tendency toward realist universalism. Broadly speaking, Wyclif held that to know a thing was to know its being or universal essence, a direct reflection of God, rather than the singular sensible qualities through which it was perceptible to humankind. Wyclif acknowledged that comprehension of being was not formally separable from such sensible singulars, they are always known and apprehended together and are separable only in theory. Nevertheless, he reasoned that because of humankind's inordinate fondness for a being or object's concrete physical properties, the philosopher aiming to truly know it was apt to focus his attention more on those sensible singulars than on universal essence or *pura natura*. This was a dynamic he wished to correct, particularly in the context of scriptural hermeneutics.[4] Wyclif's realist universalism infused his ideas about reading and biblical interpretation. Grounded in platonism, which advanced gendered hierarchies between the 'masculine' soul or mind, an extension of God within man, and the fallen 'feminine' body and senses, Wyclif's views elevated scripture to the realm of pure idea rather than physical presence.[5] As J. I. Catto writes, "[in scripture] above all was the face of God turned upon man."[6]

Thus, Wyclif advanced the notion of scriptural and spiritual truth as an insensible, but nevertheless knowable interior core surrounded by incidental matter, which the practice of

---

[4] For a fuller summary of Wyclif's universalism in logical terms, see J. I. Catto, "Wyclif and Wycliffism at Oxford 1356-1430" in J. I. Catto and Ralph Evans, eds, *The History of the University of Oxford* v. II (Oxford, 1992). 175-261 at 190-91.

[5] *Ibid.*, 196-97.

[6] *Ibid*, 196.

exegesis should strive to eliminate at all costs. Wyclif's neoplatonism in *De Veritate* was

Augustinian in its emphasis on the representative nature of language, the distance of a sign or

word from its referent, the thing itself. Indeed, Wyclif's reverence for Augustine is writ large

over this work as Wyclif articulates his universalist hermeneutics. He uses Augustine's

commentary on the psalms, for example, to explain the proper way to explicate scripture: by

using its own language and logic without placing oneself at the same level as its author. Wyclif

writes "Look at this saint [Augustine]! He is such a humble logician, and still so subtle."[7] The

correct way to interpret scripture, according to Wyclif, was to accept it in its totality rather than

piecemeal, using its own logic to interpret the deeper and intended meaning of its figures. We

can only understand the New Testament's reference to Jesus as a lamb, for example, if we look

at the killing of the paschal lamb in the Old Testament, where we can begin to understand that

figuring Jesus as a lamb underscores his sacrifice for humankind.[8] Wyclif sought to eliminate all

human impositions on the transcendent and eternal truth of God: those accidental and material

facets of a text, including the sight of words on the page and the sound of the voice in oral

performance.

In his efforts to set forth a program for the correct extraction of spiritual truth through

scriptural interpretation, Wyclif stresses the role of sound in linguistic obfuscation, asserting that

"the voices of the words of scripture" (*voces…verborum scripture*) are like leaves which can

obstruct, confuse, or distract (*odumbrant…confundunt,…distrahunt*) from meaning or "fruit"

(*fructum*) and so they "must be cleared away, fashioned, or otherwise adapted" (*extirpanda,*

figuranda, vel aliter aptanda) by the exegete.[9] Wyclif's attribution of "voices" to words is

---

[7] Wyclif, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, 49.
[8] For this example, see *Ibid.*, 74-75.
[9] John Wyclif, *De Veritate Scripturae*, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg, 3 vols. Wyclif Society (London, 1905-07) v. 1, p. 21.

suggestive of their sounded aspects in performances, both silent (i.e. quiet reading) and out loud (sermons, group reading, etc).[10]

The sound of language was perilous specifically because it could lead to incorrect understanding. Wyclif reinforces the dangerous superficiality of attending to the sound of language rather than the meaning of the words. Such superficial listening rendered meaningful language into noise. Describing the need to uncover divine intention through the process of scriptural interpretation, Wyclif alludes to Corinthians 13:11, asserting that, in understanding sacred scripture we must turn away from "childish sense" (*sensum puerilum*) and take up the sense that God teaches (*quem deus docet, accipere*).[11] He then goes on to cite the "blessed Dionysius" who asserts in his treatise *On the Divine Names* that it is "unreasonable" and "foolish" (*irracionabile, stultum*) to pay attention to diction or "naked sounds" (*diccionibus, sonos nudos*) rather than the "virtue of intention," the "particular will" of God (*virtuti intentionibus, volencium proprium*).[12] By juxtaposing these two passages, Wyclif equates superficial attention to the sound of language with undeveloped or childlike understanding of scripture. The purpose of Wycliffite exegesis is therefore to clear away the occlusive sensory aspects of language, both aural and visual, to provide the raw truth of divine intent.

Noise and Lollardy

Wyclif's followers expanded his philosophies, taking Wyclif's suspicion of material and experiential forms of understanding to further extremes in their vernacular polemic.[13] While

---

[10] In this reading, I am guided by Ghosh's translation of the passage, which renders "*voces…verborum scripture*" as "the sounds of the words of scripture." See Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 24.
[11] *De Veritate Scripturae*, v. 1, 42.
[12] *Ibid.,* 42-43. Ghosh discusses this passage in relation to Wyclif's attitudes contextualizing his discussion with Wyclif's general theories of scriptural exegesis in *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 43.
[13] For a range of perspectives on the internal variations of Wycliffism and the relationship between Wyclif's thought and that of his followers, see Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard, eds. *Lollards and their*

examples of this are numerous, here I will focus on their invective against miracle playing. The

Tretise of Miracle Pleyinge is a particularly useful example of lollard extremism because it

explicitly transfers their disdain for the embodied performance of medieval drama to the practice

of preaching the word of God, highlighting the distracting 'noise' of such physical practices.

The author of this treatise declares that it is impossible for men to listen to the "voice of Crist"

and the "voice of the fleysh" all at once and that theater "makiþ to se veyne siȝtis of degyse, aray

of men and wymmen by yvil continaunse…."[14] The same author likens mystery plays to

lecherous love, as opposed to love of a spiritual nature. The lecher, he explains, desires "signes"

of true love, but not "dedis," of love. He continues, explaining that "So siþen þise myraclis

pleyinge be only syngnis, loue wiþoute dedis."[15] Finally, he reasons that the sexual acts of the

lecher are of the devil because, like those diabolic mystery plays, they are signs without deeds, a

hollow physical experience without the substance of sustained intention or efficacious outcome.

The author of this anti-theatrical polemic makes a connection between noise and idle

preaching without adequate interpretive gloss explicit. After likening mystery plays to lecherous

love (a sign rather than a deed) the author goes on to say that miracle playing is a kind of

"waytynge vanite[e]," an idle entertainment akin to the "shrew[ing]" of a priest at mass, who

"shrewyn hemsilf al day, as a iay þat al day crieþ 'Watte shrewe!' shrewynge hymself."[16] The

author's obsessive repetition of the verb *shreuen* combines with his bird analogy to suggest that

such preaching is nothing more than bestial noise. Stemming from the Old English word

[14] Clifford Davidson, ed. *A Tretise of Miracle Pleyinge* (Kalamazoo, 1993), 96.

[15] *Ibid.,*. 99.

[16] *Ibid.,* 100.

screawa, or shrewmouse, the noun *shreue*, from which *shreuen* derives, was used in Middle

English to denote a rogue, a devil, or in the usage that persisted most forcefully into the early

modern period and beyond, an overbearing woman.[17] The verb was most often associated with

dangerous and vain speech acts like cursing. Such "ydel" shrewing, an unwanted sound

associated with animals, which serves no productive purpose, suggests the same kinds of

violation of social order that we will come to associate with the noise of the *lollares*.

Just as they distrusted theater as a material 'sign' without substance, Wycliffites were

suspicious of certain kinds of fiction.[18] Their attitudes further underscore their anxieties about

representation, especially the occlusive potential of the sound of language, in a way that is

particularly resonant with Langland's preoccupation with idle speech. Fables are stories that

corrupt preachers tell for personal gain; they are empty of spiritual truth. Indeed, Wycliffite

writings speak of false preaching in some of the same terms Langland speaks of the idle noise of

minstrels and *lollares*. A Wycliffite sermon for the fifth Sunday after Easter disdains certain

religious men, describing the ways that they "disseyuon hemself in vanyte."[19] Not only do these

"veyn" clerics refrain from saying prayers and create their own rules, leaving those of God

behind, they also "prechon iapis to begge betture, to susteyne hem cloystres and howsus, and

oþre goodis þat þei coueyton."[20] The author's use of the word "iapis," which stems from *japer*,

an Old French verb meaning 'to howl,' taps into a range of significance from "a trick, deceit, or

---

[17] MED, s.v. 'shreue' (n.) and 'shreuen' (v.). Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* is perhaps the best-known example of the widespread purchase of this term.

[18] While for many years Wycliffite suspicion of fiction was a critical truism, this view has recently been complicated and nuanced by scholars exploring how Wycliffites used narrative to affect spiritual thinking and feeling and to model new modes of living. For more on these Wycliffite uses of narrative, see Elizabeth Schirmer, "William Thorpe's Narrative Theology," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* v. 31 (2009) 267-299. See also Fiona Somerset, *Feeling Like Saints: Lollard Writings After Wyclif* (Ithaca, 2014), especially ch. 4 "Lollard Tales" (137-165)

[19] Anne Hudson, ed. *English Wycliffite Sermons* v. I (Oxford, 1983) 590.

[20] *Ibid.*,. 591.

fraud" to "a frivolous passtime, amusement, or literary trifle" to "a remark not seriously intended, a joke, jest" to "something foolish, a senseless act, nonsense;" in other words, noise.[21]

While fables and false preaching amounted to mere nonsense sound covering over a spiritual void, some kinds of fiction, according to Wycliffites, were spiritually potent. Unlike fables, parables contained a kernel of religious or moral truth under the noisy guise of language. A Wycliffite sermon explicates a parable from the book of Matthew, "the kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field" (13:44), as a metaphor for scriptural interpretation. The "reume of heaven" is "Godus word" and the field, "þe feiþ of holy wryt." God's word is "hyd euerywhere in þis feeld."[22] Though some spiritual truths are openly expressed, many, as this metaphor suggests, are nestled secretly and mysteriously within the earthy *materia* of fiction, and so must be plucked out by a skilled interpreter. Recalling other Wycliffite metaphors for scriptural interpretation, especially Wyclif's analogy of the "voices of the words" of scripture as leaves that must be cleared away from the fruit of divine intention, the loamy dirt of the field in this sermon is akin to all of the physical, signifying aspects of language: the sight of words on the page and, in particular, their sound in the ear and mind.

Reading and Speaking Like a Child

As Rita Copeland has shown, reading and listening for the "literal sense" was a fundamental feature of elementary education throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages. While it was integral to learning, such superficial reading, was nevertheless merely a step toward the deeper and more mature knowledge of the philosopher. In his *Comentarii Somnium*

---

[21] MED, s.v. 'jape,' (n.), and 'japen' (v.)

[22] Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons* v. II, 167. For a discussion of Knighton's condemnation of lollard 'noise' in the context of the wails and bellows of the early fifteenth century mystic Margery Kempe, who was also branded a "lollare" see Cole, *Literature and Heresy,* 160-61.

Scipionis, a text that was foundational to the formation of hermeneutic theory in the Latin west, the Roman philosopher Macrobius distinguishes two purposes for "fables" (*fabulae*). Some "merely… gratify the ear" while others "draw the reader's attention to certain kinds of virtue."[23] A treatise on philosophy, he insists, will relegate the former (any sweet-sounding fiction) "to children's nursuries."[24] Those fables that appeal only to the senses rather than the mind are imperfect and childish in comparison to the spiritually edifying texts of philosophy.

Moreover, the literal sense is explicitly aligned with this childish physical enjoyment, which was located in the soft and feminine realm of the body rather than in the more secure masculine domain of the mind. The twelfth century theologian and poet, Alain de Lille describes the ideal "man," a word he uses to refer, not generally to 'humankind,' but quite literally to an ideal of masculine philosophical virtue, in his *Anticlaudianus*. This work, he explains in his prologue, is intended to inspire mature philosophers toward virtue. It is not for those puerile readers who, in reading, incorporate only the superficial material aspects of the text:

> Let those not dare to show disdain for this work who are still wailing [*vagientes*] in the cradles of the nurses and are being suckled at the breasts of the lower arts. Let those not try to detract from this work who are just giving promise of a service in the higher arts. Let not those who are beating the doors of heaven with their philosophic heads. For in this work the sweetness of the literal sense [*litteralis sensus suavitas*] will soothe childish hearing [*puerilum demulcebit auditum*], the moral instruction will inspire the mind on the road to perfection, the sharper subtlety of the allegory [*acutior alegoriae subilitas*] will whet the advanced intellect. Let those be denied access to this work who pursue only sense-images [*sensualitas insequentes imaginem*] and do not reach out for the truth that comes from reason, lest what is holy, being set before dogs to be soiled, lest the pearl, trampled under the feet of swine be lost, lest the esoteric be impaired if its grandeur is revealed to the unworthy.[25]

---

[23] Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York, 1952, rept, 1990) 84-85.

[24] *Ibid.,* 84.

[25] Alan of Lisle, *Anticlaudianus,* trans. J. J. Sheridan (Toronto, 1973) 40-1. For the Latin, see Alan of Lille, *Literary Works*, ed. and trans. Winthrop Wetherbee (Cambridge, MA, 2013) 222.

For Alain de Lille, the literal sense is for sensual enjoyment, its "sweetness" will soothe the hearing of children, who he also equates with the proverbial dogs and swine of Matthew 7:6.[26] Like beasts, such unreasoning readers are concerned only with "sense-images" and do not yearn for the higher truth that comes from the workings of the rational intellect. Further, and more significantly, such unreasoned reading is associated with noisy expression: the "wailing" of a child in its cradle. This link, I argue, is not coincidental. Such irrational noise is the logical outcome of what orthodox thinkers constructed as superficial reading practices. As we have seen in Langland's depiction of Meed, associations between bad reading and noisy expression occur throughout medieval theories of reading and are enthusiastically adopted by authors in England at the turn of the fifteenth century, just as the Wycliffite heresy was beginning to draw increased attention and conflict to debates around lay reading and interpretation.

Indeed, the theological and political polemics that remain from these debates are full of references to noisy expression and exposition of scripture. Copeland argues that opponents of Wyclif and his followers, inheriting the puerile associations of the literal sense, aligned the Wycliffite insistence on literal reading with elementary education, and thus characterized lollard strategies of reading as childish and undeveloped. I argue that the tendency in anti-Wycliffite writings to associate Wyclif and his followers with 'noise,' and in particular with undeveloped language, is an extension of their dismissal of superficial and "childish" reading practices. The very epithet "lollard," which, as we have seen stems from the Dutch word for "mumble" may be informed by this dismissal.

Broadly speaking, the orthodox tendency to position the interpretation and arguments of Wyclif and his followers as noise is consistent with the suggestion that they are undeveloped

---

[26] "Give not that which is holy to dogs; neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest perhaps they trample them under their feet, and turning upon you, they tear you."

readers. Like children, they prattle empty sounds without conveying a more pointed meaning.

While he admits that they are "eloquentes" (eloquent), the late fourteenth century chronicler and

Augustinian canon, Henry Knighton, also calls Wycliffites "over-cryers" or "super-cryers"

(*superclamantes*), emphasizing the penetrating and overweening volume of their voices.[27] He

stresses that, in their style of argument, they "do not influence with right reason" (*non poterant*

recta ratione), but speak "with a bawling and confused voice" (*cum voce clamosa et turbida*).[28]

Vernacular writing, too, makes use of the trope of Wycliffite noise. The early fifteenth

century lament, "Defend us all from lollardry" makes this association between lollard noise and

misinformed, childish reading more explicit, when it stresses that "Lollards" render the bible

"myswent" or twisted. In their misguided exegesis, they "iangle of Iob or Ieremye," and "bable

þe bible day and niȝt."[29] The verb *bablen* is particularly telling in this context, as it denoted both

the unformed speech of babies and the reading or recitation of the bible out loud. The

contemporaneous alliterative poem of the *Piers Plowman* tradition, *Mum and the Sothsegger*,

repeatedly uses the verb to refer to a form of immature and unlearned reading aloud. Outlining a

kind of soothsayer with striking similarities to Langland's *lollares*, the narrator describes one

"Saunder the serviselees," who "can not speke in termes ne in tyme nother,/ But bableth forth

bustusely as barn un-lerid."[30] Babbling is thus speech that does not yet fit the correct and

accepted parameters of philosophical discourse, either in specialized jargon ("termes") or in

---

[27] For more on Knighton's background and dates, see Martin, G. H.. "Knighton, Henry (*d. c.*1396)." G. H. Martin, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Online ed. Ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 15 Mar. 2013 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15747>.

[28] Henry Knighton, *Chronicon*, ed. J. R. Lumby (2 vols, RS 1889-95). v. 2, 187.

[29] See Rossell Hope Robbins, *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (New York, 1959), 152-57, l. 21, 22, 27.

[30] *Richard the Redeles and Mum and the Sothsegger*, ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo, MI, 2000) 84, ll. 44, 49-50. All subsequent citations of the poem will be parenthetical by line number in the text.

syllabification or pronunciation ("tyme") Such babbling is elementary, a mere step on a steep scale of knowledge acquisition.

What is striking about this particular poem, and about *Piers Plowman*, as I will argue in my next chapter, is the way that the *Mum*-author embraces childish mispronunciation and inarticulacy as an integral form of knowledge production. In trying to make sense of a troubling initial encounter with Mum, for example, the narrator turns to the literary authorities of "Sidrac and Salomonis," two authors known in the late Middle Ages for their compendious works containing important proverbs and truths.[31] Seeking knowledge in these works, the narrator, explains, he "bablid on thoo bokes that thoo barnes made" (308). The work of compilation exemplified in these authors, the collection of previous authorities with no discernable narrative or logic, is the work of children or "barnes." The narrator himself takes up this style by reciting their work out loud, a form of expression that he deems "babl[ing]."

Resounding Against the Faith

Anti-Wycliffite accusations of "lollard noise" could also highlights an orthodox preoccupation with eliminating social disorder through the authority of consensus. Mishtooni Bose has highlighted how Wyclif's opponents constructed their authority by creating interpretive communities organized around particular modes of reading. She has pointed out parenthetically that the verb *sonare* was often used in such contexts.[32] We can deepen and complicate this observation by highlighting how such uses of *sonare* are consistent with the general tendency to associate Wycliffite argumentation with noise, particularly when it regarded reading.

---

[31] For a description of these two authors, see *Ibid.*, 145 n. 304

[32] Mishtooni Bose, "The Opponents of John Wyclif" in *A Companion to John Wyclif, Late Medieval Theologian*, ed. Ian Christopher Levy (Leiden, 2006) 407-56 at 427.

This dynamic comes into focus in an incomplete account of Wyclif's earliest recorded debate, c. 1372-73, with the Carmelite John Kenningham.[33] Kenningham frames the stakes of incorrect scriptural interpretation in terms suggesting that interpretive authority is a matter of walking the line between deficient and excess exegesis, finding meaningful sound amidst noise. Articulating the finely calibrated discursive dance that is necessary to scriptural interpretation, Kenningham asserts, "we should not imitate the manner of speaking that Scripture uses, but expound the sense of Scripture by speaking accurately."[34] Kenningham's dismissal of "imitating" scripture is likely a critique of the Wycliffite practice of literal translation, a tendency to translate word for word rather than aiming to access scripture's transcendent truth by translating sense for sense. If scholars were to speak with the mode used in scripture, Kenningham continues, "we would not be teachers but reciters, and all interpretations beyond those adequate for preaching would be superfluous."[35] Interpretation thus runs a perilous line between empty ventriloquizing, like the rote recitation of early elementary education, and the extraneous glossing of sophists, who aimed to obscure rather than illuminate spiritual truth. As Bose points out of this passage, Kenningham is concerned to "police the boundaries of acceptable discourse."[36] I would add that to Kenningham, such discourse walks the line between deficient and excess commentary.

---

[33] Although this debate is included in Shirley's edition of the *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, attributed to Thomas Netter, Bose points out that the debate is not in fact in the *Fasciculi Zizaniorum* manuscript, but in Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 103. See Bose, 431. For the dating of this debate, see "Kenningham , John (*d.* 1399)," Anne Hudson in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eee ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, May 2008, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15830 (accessed May 16, 2014).

[34] "…non debemus imitari modum loquendi scripturarum, sed proprie loquendo Scripturarum sensum exponere." *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, ed. W. W. Shirley (Rolls Series 5, London, 1858) 27.

[35] "…non essemus doctors sed recitores, et superfluerent omnes glossae praeter illas quae sufficiunt ad praedicandum." *Fasciculi Zizaniorum,* 28.

[36] Bose, "Opponents," 433.

Further, Kenningham insists that Wyclif's pursuit of scriptural interpretation runs the risk of violating those strategies already agreed upon by the interpretive community of scholars and the Church. In making this claim, he repeatedly invokes the ways that Wyclif's positions "resound against the faith" (*sonant contra fidem*), highlighting the loud and ultimately meaningless quality of his discourse against the correct and meaningful voice of authority.[37] Outlining a discursive strategy for scriptural commentary, for example, Kenningham asserts that it is preferable to choose "a mode of speaking [that is] unrefined but nevertheless correct" (*rudi modo loquendi, sed tamen proprio*), than "subtly to announce those things that resound against the faith" (*subtiliter pronunciare quae contra fidem sonant*).[38] In this case, *sonare* is associated with "smooth" or occlusive rhetoric that deceptively distracts from its own hollow content, underscoring how Wyclif's opponents viewed his voice, and those of his followers, as overly academic and rhetorical, glossing over the meaningless vacuity of their words.

The formulation that Wyclif's ideas "resounded" against the faith would prove persistent. Yet at the same time that it dismissed the voices of the Wycliffites as irrational noise, the verb *sonare* could also betray an orthodox preoccupation with the growing power and influence of the Wycliffites. Writing in 1407, several decades after Kenningham's debate with Wyclif, Archbishop Thomas Arundel echoes Kenningham in his *Constitutions* against the Wycliffite heresy, condemning propositions that "resound against the catholic faith or good morals" (*in fide catolica seu bonis moribus adverse sonantes*).[39] Here, the verb *sonare* is an indicator of dissonance. It suggests a discourse that defies unified communal understanding enough to be dismissed as noise. At the same time, it gestures toward a force of agreement against this correct

---

[37] Bose's account of Kenningham's debate with Wyclif highlights several more of these instances. See "Opponents," 431-35.
[38] *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, 86.
[39] See Bose, "Opponents," 434.

mode of discourse that is loud enough to be dangerous and impossible to ignore. Such anxious dismissals of Wycliffite preaching and argumentation call attention to the extremism of their hermeneutic practice, a radical program that was deeply threatening to the clerical authorities in control of scriptural interpretation, and ultimately to the institutional Church as a whole.

This intellectual and sensory environment, which vigilantly strove to contain the interpretive potential of language in its spoken and in particular sounded aspects, informs Langland's rehabilitation of inarticulacy and poetics of lolling. As we will see, the 'noise' of language, its functioning at the level of sound and feeling rather than precise content, creates interpretative space for some of Langland's most striking revisions in the C text of *Piers Plowman*, namely, his greater emphasis on both *lollares* and lunatic *lollares* in passus 9 and the affinity of Will the Dreamer (and poet) with *lollares* in the authorial *apologia* inserted in Passus 5.

Chapter 2

Langland's Poetics of Lolling After Wyclif

…if I were to give you the very words of those who spoke to me you would scarcely understand them, although their language was English too, and at the time I could understand them at once."

-William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*

When the Host asks him to tell his tale, Chaucer's Parson renounces the idle stories or "fables" of his fellow pilgrims, asking why he should "sowen…draf" rather than "whete" with his tale.[1] Dismissing the alliterative poetics of the West Midlands, he declares that as a "Southren man" (42) from around London, he doesn't know how to tell a "rum, ram, ruf" story (43). In doing so, the Parson aligns the aural texture of poetic language with vegetal ruffage. He continues, ironically in rhyme, with the assertion that he judges "rym" to be "but litel bettre" (44). The Parson, in other words, does not want to tell a "virtuous mateere" (38) veiled with the noisy and expendable materiality of poetry, which threatens to overtake meaning with its sound. Such boisterous textuality is "by lettre"(43); it places too much value at the superficial literal level of the text without enough emphasis on buried meaning. Instead, as he justifies his own homiletic prose, the Parson stresses his aim for total transparency in conveying an essential moral truth or "sentence" (58).

Chaucer's Parson, then, would not approve of his fourteenth-century contemporary, the Pearl-poet's desire to convey "clean" speech with "faire formez," a style of tightly controlled

---

[1] Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987) X. 35-36. All further quotations of Chaucer will be cited in text by work and line number from this edition, unless otherwise noted. For uses of the Middle English word "fable" that refer explicitly to useless or idle stories, see MED, s.v. 'fable' (n.) def. 2 and 3.

poetics thought to befit the glory of God.[2] Still less would he support what I will call William

Langland's poetics of lolling, a mode of writing that foregrounds and complicates the process of

interpretation by manipulating language to stress its aural materiality on par with its more

pointed significance. In short, Langland invites readers and auditors to listen for sound,

unmoored from exact meaning. This lolling poetics, I will argue, highlights his stylistic and

literary radicalism.[3] There was, indeed, an element of transgression embodied in his stance that

the search for moral virtue and spiritual truth lay in the process of seeking and combing through

this literary "draf."

     In all versions of *Piers Plowman*, the poem's opening lines stress hearing before vision.

Will, the Dreamer, sets out on his spiritual quest in early summer, dressed in the rough woolen

garments of a hermit. Equipped in this way, he "[Goes] forth in the world wondres to here,/ And

s[ee] many selles and selkouthe thynges."[4] In a poem whose genre depends on its narrative of

vision, this emphasis on hearing is somewhat surprising. Reworking the dream vision *topos* of

birds lulling a dreamer to sleep, or, in the case of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, waking him

up, it figures Will's pilgrimage for moral and spiritual truth as a process of hearing what the

world has to tell him, alongside, even before, seeing its blessed marvels. More pointedly,

Langland's early emphasis on "wonder" highlights the importance of puzzlement, of curiosity

---

[2] *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, ed. Malcolm Andrew, Ronald Waldron, and Clifford Peterson (Berkeley, 1993) 104, l. 3.

[3] Scholars have debated the extent of Langland's orthodoxy and role as a "proto-Protestant" thinker aligned with the emergent heretical movement known as the Wycliffites or "lollards" (see also notes 5 and 7 that follow). It is generally accepted that, in the apt formulation of David Lawton, "Lollards had Langlandian sympathies" and not the other way around. See David Lawton, "Lollardy and the 'Piers Plowman' Tradition." *Modern Language Review* 76 (1981) 780-93.

[4] *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*, ed. by Derek Pearsall (Exeter, 2008). C. *Prol.*3-4. All further quotations from *Piers Plowman* in this chapter will be cited from this edition by line number in the text, unless otherwise noted. Whenever possible, I offer the corresponding passus and line(s) in the A and/or B texts in the same parenthetical format. For these citations I refer to *William Langland: Piers Plowman. A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C, and Z Versions*, ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt, *Vol. 1: Text* (London and New York: Longman, 1995); *Vol. 2: Introduction, Textual Notes, Commentary, Bibliography and Indexical Glossary* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008)

and, ultimately, of not knowing, underscoring a distinction between hearing what people have to say and hearing how they say it.

Indeed it is the experience of hearing and not comprehension, its end result—hearing how rather than hearing what—that is integral to Will's spiritual and moral hermeneutics throughout his quest for what constitutes a life of doing well. This hearing-how becomes increasingly important to Langland in some of his most significant final C-text revisions of the poem. Through an emphasis on their excessive and noisy voices, Langland's extended descriptions of the wandering minstrel-figures he calls *lollares* and lunatic *lollares* added to passus 9 of the C text draw attention to problems of listening, attention, and interpretation. Such tensions are also reflected in debates about scriptural hermeneutics centered in and around the Wycliffite heresy. Langland's authorial *apologia* added to passus 5, gestures toward the way that these problems helped to shape his poetic practice.

As we have seen, questions around noise are perceptible in the A and B versions of the poem, they coalesce in the C text through Langland's dramatic expansion of the *lollare* in passus 9, which occurs as the allegorical figure of Truth distinguishes the beggars who are worthy and unworthy of pardon. After a long description of unworthy beggars and their idle pastimes, Langland sums them up with two lines: "He that lolleth is lame or his leg oute of ioynte/ Or ymaymed in som membre, for to meschief hit souneth" (C.9.216-19). Langland's *lollares* have attracted scholarly attention largely for their suggestive dramatization of contemporary debates around poverty and mendicancy.[5] Scholars like Wendy Scase have argued that Langland's

---

[5] Wendy Scase. *Piers Plowman and the New Anticlericalism* (Cambridge, 1989) 125-37, 155. Anne Middleton. 'Acts of Vagrancy: The C Version "Autobiography" and the Statute of 1388', in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, ed. by Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia, 1997) 208–317 at 284-87. Derek Pearsall, "Langland and Lollardy: From B to C," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 17 (2003) 7-23 at 11-13 and all of '"Lunatyk Lollares" in *Piers Plowman*,' in *Religion in the Poetry and Drama of the Late Middle Ages in England: the J. A. W. Memorial Lectures, Perugia, 1988,* ed. by Piero Boitani and Ana Torti (Cambridge, 1990) 163-78. For a useful summary of critical and historical perspectives on lollardy and its relation to *Piers Plowman*, see Adams 98,

lollares have nothing to do with Wycliffites, and instead serve as a means of making distinctions between good and bad mendicancy as a form of labor, as the number of untrained friars begging for alms proliferated in the post-plague landscape of late medieval England. [6] Other scholars, most notably Andrew Cole, insist that Langland's *lollares* actually do refer to the Wycliffites. Cole argues that Langland "invents" the idea of the lollard as a social type, incorporating Wycliffite ideas on poverty and mendicancy as a coded means of critiquing orthodox practices (25-71).[7] My reading is similarly concerned with *lollares* and "lolling" as a construct or, as Raymond Williams might call it, a "structure of feeling"—a term that helps us to understand the apparently diffuse and subjective concepts of sensation and emotion as social and material categories that are open to historical analysis.[8] I want to highlight the physical, embodied, and *noisy* associations that accompany *lollares* as a means of demonstrating their influence on Langland's understanding of reading and interpretation.

I argue that *lollares* serve a crucial poetic function in the poem as a whole by embodying dual modes of dis-articulation in a way that calls attention to the physical experience of language. Just as their bodies are "oute of ioynte," their tongues resound with "mischief." In other words, rather than speaking articulately, they make noise, confirming the etymological origins of their name in the Middle Dutch word for "to mumble." The notion of "lolling" in *Piers Plowman* thus encompasses misarticulated movements of the tongue as well as lazy movements of the body. The noise of the *lollares* foregrounds problems of interpretation that undergird the entire narrative structure of the poem, as Will sets out on a journey in search of moral truth.

---

n. 55. See also the special issue of the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* v. 17 (2003) dedicated to "Langland and Lollardy."

[6] In addition to Scase, for more on both continuities and disjunctions in labor practices pre- and post-plague, see Anthony Musson, "New Labor Laws, New Remedies? Legal Reaction to the Black Death 'Crisis,'" in *Fourteenth Century England* v. 1, ed. Nigel Saul (Woodbridge, 2000) 73-88, esp. 76-77.

[7] Andrew Cole. *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge, 2008) 25-71.

[8] Raymond Williams. *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977) 128-35.

Indeed, Langland makes poetic and ethical use of the "radical" creative potential associated with Wycliffite noise in his authorial *apologia* added to passus 5.[9] Here Langland fully articulates the tension between different kinds of noise-making by responding to, and perhaps even critiquing a hermeneutic program associated with the Wycliffite heresy that figured language as a noisy and obfuscating force that veiled spiritual truth.

Viewed together, Langland's major additions to the C text articulate a poetics of lolling that embraces the noisy sounded aspects of language, what Katherine Zieman has called its "extragrammatical" facets, as an integral component in seeking religious truth.[10] As Zieman has argued, such extragrammatical aspects of language convey semantic excess that is not reducible to theological conceptualization, a dynamic that calls attention to the insufficiency of language in conveying divine truth. Yet rather than highlighting Langland's use of such language to express failure or lack, I propose that the poet revels in this excess as a means of producing a hermeneutic method that is always in progress, never complete; one in which seeking spiritual truth is an end in itself and noise is an integral medium of deferral. Through his extragrammatical sound-play, Langland's hermeneutic and literary style is radical, even if his religious doctrine does not approach the heterodoxy of the Wycliffites.

"Fisking" *Lollares* **and Lazy Sounds**

The pardon sent from Truth (A.8, B.7, C.9) marks the end of Will's second vision. Over the course of this vision he has explored upright governance of the individual soul by witnessing

---

[9] On this stylistic radicalism see Fiona Somerset, "Expanding." Somerset argues that vernacular Wycliffite texts convey academic Latin practices which allow scholars to entertain and argue for views that were fantastical and imaginative, yet theologically erroneous without ultimately upholding them. This is a sensibility that she notes but does not explicate at length in *Piers Plowman*.

[10] Katherine Zieman. *Singing the New Song: Literacy and Liturgy in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 2008) and Zieman, "The Perils of *Canor*: Mystical Authority, Alliteration, and Extragrammatical Meaning in Rolle, the Cloud Author, and Hilton' *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 22 (2008) 131-64.

the confession of the seven sins and encountering the beatific figure of Piers the Plowman.

Serving Truth, Piers seeks to manage the 'winners' and 'wasters' of society: those laborers who uphold social order by working diligently for the common good and those "faitours" who care only for their own individual welfare.   The passus just before Truth's pardon (A.7, B.6, C.8) closes with an apocalyptic segment that dramatizes the dire famine that will result from such widespread refusal to work. Truth enters the narrative to grant a pardon to those who, like Piers the Plowman, labor for the common good. The Dreamer recounts how Truth's pardon distinguishes those who are and those who are not worthy of charity based on their labor's degree of communal utility. Kings and knights who fight to defend Christendom will receive pardon and pass "ful lyhtly" (A.8.11, B.7.11, C.9.11) through purgatory. Bishops who behave "as they sholde" (B.7.13, C.9.13) will also receive pardon. Because merchants hold the Sabbath for the sake of their own business, the document instructs them to undertake works of charity for the poor and vulnerable (A.8.31-35, B.7.29-32, C.9.33-36). It is in this context that Langland adds extended passages on types of deserving and undeserving beggars.

The crux of what the Dreamer learns in this section is that false beggars, those whose duplicitous speech is not aligned with their will and is thus empty of sustained intention, deserve no charity. Those *lollares* who are unworthy are "beggars with bagges" (C.9.98), in other words, they take money and food in excess of what they need. *Lollares* and *lorels,* a word that is separate, but used interchangeably with *lollare* in numerous manuscripts, are unscrupulous beggars, undeserving of charity.[11] Lazy or "lolling" movement of the body is a mark of idleness and wasted labor. One who lives a "lollarne lyf" (C.9.140), we learn, lives "In idelnesse an in

---

[11] On the interchangability between "lollare" and "lorel" see Scase, "Anticlericalism," 155-60; Pearsall, "Langland," 12.

ese and by others trauayle" (C.9. 152), begging for alms. The Dreamer elaborates at length on

the idleness of such *lollares* and "lewede ermytes," asserting that he who lives as a *lollare*

> Loke[s] loughliche to lache men almesse,
> In hope to sitte at euen by the hote coles,
> Vnlouke his legges abroad or ligge at his ese,
> Reste hym and roste hym and his rug turne,
> Drink driue and depe and drawe hym thenne to bedde,
> And whenne hym liketh and luste, his leue is to ryse
> And when he is risen rometh out and right wel aspyeth
> Where he may rathest haue a repaest or a ronde of bacoun…
> (C.9.140-48).

The list of idle activity and crookedly acquired foodstuffs goes on. In this description, disjointed

or "lolling" movement underscores idleness. Such *lollares* "unlock" their legs to sprawl out by

the fireside, "resting and roasting" by the hot coals. Langland's use of the verb *unlouken* here is

suggestive, combining with his later assertion that the legs of the *lollares* are "out of joint" to

suggest a willful disarticulation of the body that reflects, even preconditions their mumbling

mischief. Arising when they please, the *lollares's* aimless movement continues as they "roam"

around the countryside and "fiscuth aboute" (C.9.153), looking for hospitality. The

purposelessness implied with the word *fisken* emphasizes their lack of progress and productivity.

Indeed the Middle English verb was associated with the idle wandering of the class of mendicant

preacher known as the *gyrovague*. The early fifteenth century friar Galfridus Anglicus, creator

of the first Anglo-Latin dictionary the *Promptorium Parvulorum*, glosses the phrase "Fiskin a-

bowte yn ydelness," with "Vagor, giro, girovago."[12] As Wendy Scase has shown, the figure of

the *lollare* in *Piers Plowman* owes a debt to the tradition of *gyrovague*: vagrant mendicants who

became known as false religious and apostates from monastic rule as they went from house to

house begging hospitality.[13] This tradition, as other scholars have highlighted, could apply more

---

[12] Galfriedus Anglicus. *Promptorium Parvulorum* (London, 1968) 162.
[13] Scase, *Anticlericalism*, 125-37.

or less readily to the various kinds of hermits and perhaps unofficial followers of the banned Spiritual Franciscans.[14]

Beyond simply aligning the *lollares* with idle movements, the passage offers us a taste of what might be called Langland's poetics of lolling. Langland's striking wordplay with verbs of concealing and revealing in this section destabilize singular or "true" meaning. Beginning his speech with the declaration that *lollares* "*Lo*ken *lo*ughliche to *la*che men *al*messe" (C.9.141, emphasis added), the passage repeats l-o-l-o sounds, enacting a "lolling" movement of the tongue and lips (perhaps not coincidentally), which is then extended and transmuted to the chiastic l-a-a-l sounds in *lache* and *almesse*. Further, and more pointedly, this play with language subverts singular meaning.[15] Though Langland uses *loken* to mean "look" or "appear," from the Old English *locian*, the word's homophone from Old Icelandic *loka* meant "to lock," even "to conceal," a significance that underscores the *lollares's* duplicitous nature.[16] Juxtaposed with the assertion several lines later that the *lollare* "Vnlouke[s] his legges" in repose by the fire, these lines create a nimbus of wordplay around the notion of concealing and revealing, closure and disclosure in which a singular, essential, and pure interpretation is undermined at every turn.

Continuing his play with these concepts, Langland uses *lacchen*, from the Old English *læccan,* "to seize or grasp" in the same line to denote the *lollares's* acts of unjustly taking alms.[17] Yet he also invokes the word's homophone, from the same Old English root, meaning "to latch, tie up, or secure," again reinforcing the *lollares's* secrecy and covert intentions.[18] In addition to these meanings, Langland may invoke another homophone, *lachen*, this one from the Old French

---

[14] Lawrence Clopper, *Songes of Rechelesnesse: Langland and the Franciscans* (Ann Arbor, 1997) 69-104; Cole, *Literature and Heresy,* 58-59.

[15] Langland's wordplay has been widely studied, often from a perspective that pits the "noise" of minstrels against Langland's more sophisticated poetics (Schmidt "Clerkly" and "Lele").

[16] MED "loken" v. 2 def 3, "loken," v. 1, def. 1, 2

[17] MED "lacchen" v. 1, def 2, 3. Def. 5b of the verb, "to dart out, shoot out (the tongue)," is also potentially at play in Langland's characterization of *lollares*.

[18] MED "lacchen," v. 2

verb *laschier*, "to relax" or "go limp" which meant in Middle English "to be lax or slothful," also clearly applicable to the *lollares*.[19] The actions and language of the *lollares* is covert and insidious. Yet they also have the capacity to unlock their bodies and their discourse in a way that counterbalances their associations with secrecy.

It is important to note that the wordplay of this passage is most apparent when the sound of the words is unhinged from their meaning. In other words, Langland is not punning strictly with these verbs by invoking multiple plausible meanings at the same time. The meaning of "loken" in line 140 is "appear," not "lock." His riotous invocations of homophones, however, serve as a way of tripping up readers, enforcing attention, and inviting rumination on meaning. While Langland's England was undergoing a shift toward a more documentary culture, oral performance was still a widespread means of experiencing literature, a dynamic that led to manifold forms of "aural" literacy.[20] Emily Steiner has highlighted the importance of the material culture of documents in the rise of late-medieval literature, acknowledging the role of aurally-inflected modes of rhetoric of performance within medieval materiality.[21] I want to shift the idea of the material more forcefully into the aural realm of language in its sounded rather than signifying capacity. It is this method of listening for sound, unmoored from more obvious or pointed meaning that offers us a taste of Langland's poetics of lolling, a mode of writing that calls attention to the act of interpretation by manipulating language to stress its aural materiality as much, if not more than its exact significance.

In this particular context, such lolling poetics underscore the duplicitous nature associated with the *lollares* and begin to suggest how their language can bewitch readers and auditors, distracting from content with the pleasure of sounds. As the poet's imaginative etymology in

---

[19] MED "lachen," v.
[20] Coleman, *Public Reading.*
[21] Emily Steiner, *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature* (New York, 2003).

passus 9 suggests, the *lollares*'s unproductive, non-linear, and disabled movement is mapped

onto their tongues, linking their idle movements with meaningless noise as they "sound forth

mischief." Again, the suggestion that *lollares* "fiscuth aboute" is illustrative. In addition to

denoting aimless movement, the verb *fisken*, along with its alternate form *fishen*, was also used

to describe a wagging tongue that flaps about, making disruptive and inarticulate sounds.[22] In

his *Regiment of Princes*, Thomas Hoccleve praises silence with the admonition "Silence of tonge

is wardeyn of good fame,/ And aftir repreef fisshith clap and fouleth./ The tonge of man al the

body deffoulith."[23] By equating *fisken* with the verb *clappen,* a noise word often applied to the

ringing of bells, for example, and which also invoked movements of expansion and contraction

as well as physical blows, Hoccleve suggests that such busy and noisy movement of the body

and tongue were deeply ingrained in notions of "foul" idle talk in Langland's intellectual

culture.[24]

Despite these associations with idle or aimless movement, the root of *fisken* in the Anglo-

Saxon and Norse verb for "to fish" suggests a simultaneous concern with the action's curious

and dangerous power: the ability to lure or draw others in with a certain skill or charm. Indeed,

figurative uses of the verb highlight this resonance. In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, for

example, the nefarious Diomede ponders to himself how he may most effectively employ his

skill or "sleght" to draw Criseyde's heart "into his net."[25] Ultimately, Chaucer informs us that

"to fisshen hire he leyde out hook and lyne" (5.777). The "fishing" of the *lollares* suggests the

---

[22] The MED gives two different entries for 'fishen' (v.) and 'fisken' (v.); each entry lists the other word as an alternate. The root of 'fishen' seems to be the Old English *fiscean* and the Old Norse *fiskja*, while the root of 'fisken is listed as Swedish *fjaska*. The Oxford English Dictionary entry for 'fish,' (v.) lists Old English (*fiscean*) and Old Norse (*fiskja*) and Swedish (*fiska*) in its etymology, suggesting that the two forms were related in Middle English.
[23] Thomas Hoccleve *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles R. Blyth (Kalamazoo, 1999). ll. 2441-43
[24] MED "clappen" v. def 1, 2; "clappe" n.
[25] *TC* in Benson, *Riverside,* 5.773-775. Subsequent in-text citation is from this edition.

dangerous force of their noisy idle talk—their capacity to influence or affect auditors with words so persuasive that they amount to a captivating, even musical drone.[26]

The crooked movements and duplicitous speech of the *lollares* are mutually reinforcing and point to their apparent moral deficiency. As influential work in anthropology has shown, holiness is symbolically reflected in physical completion. A whole or perfect body reflects a whole and holy soul.[27] Thus, much of Leviticus is preoccupied with the proscription of physical imperfection in holy spaces like the temple; priests must be perfect physical specimens, sacrificial animals must be unblemished, women must be ritually cleansed after childbirth, etc. Holiness is essentially order, encompassing the notions of rectitude and straight-dealing along with purity and wholeness or bodily integrity. The violation of any kind of order is "unclean" and taboo. Order is violated in *form* when a thing or creature confounds neat categorization into class or type (for example, a hybrid animal) or when its very class perplexes what is perceived as the order of nature (for example, creatures that creep or crawl on the ground). Order is violated in *behavior* through dissimulation, double-dealing, or more succinctly, "contradictions between what seems and what is."[28] The idle and non-linear movements of the *lollares* reinforce their crooked, duplicitous, and ultimately "unnatural" behaviors. They are linked to "fauel" or deceit. They carry bags for their alms in "a begyneld wyse" (C.9.154) and they craftily deploy their knowledge of different trades as a means to acquire bread or ale (C.9.155-56). As the Dreamer sums the *lollare*, "Goddes law hem dampneth" (C.9.158).

---

[26] In fact, the lines recall Langland's earlier characterization of minstrels as "Lucifer's hyne" (B Prol 39) in lilting and musical lines that, as Andy Galloway has suggested, evoke the tradition of Satan as bard (73-74). An Old English homily in the *Vercelli Book*, for example, narrates how the devil lures people away from the words of scripture with his musical voice and harp (*Vercelli*, 200). For more on this narrative in an Anglo-Saxon context see Christina M. Heckman, 58-59.

[27] Douglas, *Purity and Danger.*

[28] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 55.

Like Meed in the first vision of the poem, the beggars who are compared to *lollares* in this section are associated with unorthodox family forms in a way that reinforces their guileful transgressions. Following this vision's renunciation of the *lollares*, Piers the Plowman chimes in with his own assertions about the perverse violations of social and natural order he associated with beggars. Here, Langland explicitly links their social wastefulness to unconventional reproduction. Beggary causes men to "lyue in no loue, ne no lawe holden/Ne weddeth none wymmen that they with deleth;/ [and] Bringeth forth bastardus, beggares of kynde" (C.9.167-9). Those who perform illicit speech also form illicit kinship structures, creating perverse communities "of kynde" whose cohesion depends upon their unlawful dealings. Implicitly, this passage suggests, beggars are promiscuous, not holding to any "lawe" of love, for example. Explicitly, they do not marry or bear legitimate children, an extension of the kind of non-procreative sexuality associated with Meed's "talewys" speech (A.3.120, B.3.131, C.3.167).

The passage goes further to suggest that even when beggars do reproduce, "Or the bak or som bon they breke of here children/And goen and fayten with here fauntes for eueremore aftur" (C.9.170-1). Though it is applied to the more general category of the beggar rather than explicitly to *lollares*, this depiction of intentional child mutilation, which renders a previously able-bodied child "mysshape" (C.9.172) and unable to work, literalizes the implicit associations between idle speech and non-productivity asserted in Langland's emphasis on the *lollares's* aimless movement. Though they have created a community "of kind" the perverse *unkyndeness* of beggars is threefold: it is un-familial, unnatural, and ungenerous. Their idle actions and speech are a violation of laws of *kynde*, which privilege the needs of the many over individual benefit.

Despite the depth of the *lollares's* associations with duplicity, it is significant that Truth, who never actually speaks, is the ultimate source of the ideas conveyed with such lolling

89

language. Truth's silence is juxtaposed with Langland's "noise," his manipulation of poetic

language to stress sound over meaning, which likewise communicates extra-semantically. This

juxtaposition between a veritable embodiment of singular meaning and language that is aurally

ambiguous asks us to question Truth's apparent singularity and understand the noise of language

as complementary, and not extraneous to truth. Indeed, as we have seen in the debates around

Wycliffism or "lollardy," the intellectual and sensory environment around Langland in the period

between the B and C texts of *Piers Plowman* was steeped in discussion about the relation

between the sound or sensation of language and the truth it was thought to carry. Such

questioning became crucial to Langland's justification of his own written and sounded work.

'Pleying, as hit were' with *Lunatyk Lollares*

The debates about the noisy materiality of language that were centered within and around

"lollard" culture in the late fourteenth century demonstrate that Langland was operating within a

literate environment that was concerned with physical sounded qualities of language in relation

to literary and scriptural hermeneutics. Despite his widespread dismissal of the noise of *lollares*

and other wandering minstrels, Langland recuperates the embodied, sounded aspects of language

through his characterization of "lunatyk lollares," a second brand of beggar that has the same

tendency toward mis-articulated movement and speech as Langland's more detested *lollares*. As

Truth offers pardon to those who 'dowel' in *passus* IX, he takes care to distinguish between

"beggares with bagges" (C.9.98) and a more positive kind of mendicant:

> Ac yut art her othere beggares, in hele as hit semeth,
> Ac hem wanteth wyt, men and women bothe,
> The which aren lunatyk lollares and lepares aboute
> And madden as the mone sit, more other lasse.
> Careth they for no colde ne counteth of non hete
> And aren meuynge aftur the mone; moneyeles they walke

> With a good will, witteles, mony wyde contreyes,
> Riht as Peter dede and Paul, saue that they preche nat
> Ne none muracles maken—ac many tymes hem happeth
> To profecye of the peple, pleyinge as hit were.
>   (C.9.105-14).

These "lunatyk lollares" correspond with Langland's more negative bag-carrying *lollares* in almost every way. In keeping with the original sense of 'lunatics,' they "move after the moon," in an apparently aimless fashion.   They "leap about," expending energy in uncontrolled movement, in aimless idleness, or as we will see in productive play. The main difference between *lollares* and lunatic *lollares* lies in their apparent variation of intellect. While the *lollare* passes his days with guile, cozening his audience for the benefit of money, food, and drink, the lunatic *lollares*, as Langland reiterates twice, are "witless," wandering the countryside according to the changing phases of the moon. The aimlessness of the lunatic *lollares*, unlike that of their more sinister counterparts, is aligned with the authority of divine order and intent as they "profecye of the peple" (C.9.114), embodying the apostolic life of Christ's "priue disciples" (C.9.119).

Langland's designation of *lollares* as "lepares" is particularly suggestive, both of their authority and of their inarticulacy. In addition to suggesting their frenetic movement, the word *lepare* also gestures toward their role as babbling mediators of divine truth. Tempered with question marks, the Middle English Dictionary proposes that the word denotes a "messenger," suggesting that the lunatic *lollare* conveys truth between God and man.[29] Significantly, the word homophonically invokes the rare Middle English verb *leperen*, which denotes babbling, usually of secrets.[30] Moreover, like the verb "lollen" *leperen* is said to stem from another noise word in Middle Dutch, "leppen," which meant "to speak with thick lips; to stammer," reinforcing the link

---

[29] MED "lepere" n.
[30] MED "leperen" v.

between stumbling or stunted movements of the mouth and noise-making that is embedded in the *lollares's* very name.[31] *Leperen* and *lollen* thus resonate (quite literally) with the many words that arose in Middle English to convey morally vacuous speech, especially prayer that lacked proper attention or interior investment. Words like *mumelen*, *blabberen*, *bumblen* were consistently onomatopoetic. Noteworthy for their repetition of consonants, such words, as Zieman has suggested, present the lips and tongue as "bodily impediment[s] to pure vocality."[32] Langland's invocation of "lolling" and "lipping" curiously associate the authority of the lunatic *lollares* with embodied language and duplicity.

Indeed, as foolish madmen, the lunatic *lollares* have a complex relationship to the presentation of truth, which continues to open up important questions around the issue of reading and interpretation in *Piers Plowman*. It is tempting to assume that their divorce from the rational faculties suggests that, unlike other *lollares*, who deceive hard-working people for the sake of their own personal profit, lunatic *lollares* are guileless truth-talkers, speaking for the common good. As we might expect with such prophets, the lunatic *lollares* are "merye-mouthed men" (C.9.126). The characterization of their voices as "merye" raises questions about the form or rhetoric of their speech. The primary sense of "merye" is "merry" from the Old English *myrige*.[33] Yet it also homophonically evokes "mere," from the Latin *merus*, or "unmixed," which with reference to the voice could mean "pure" and "clear" suggesting an articulacy befitting a soothsayer.[34] The lunatic *lollares* thus juxtapose "pure" and truthful speech with that which is emphatically embodied, in much the same way that Langland juxtaposes Truth's silence with his own poetic noise. The *lunatyk lollares* thus embody a paradox: as "Godes boys"

---

[31] MED, "leppen" v.
[32] Zieman, *Singing*, 75-76.
[33] MED, "mirie" adj.
[34] MED, "mere" adj. 2

(C.9.127) and "Goddes mynstrales" (C.9.136) they speak the "clean" truth. Yet, such truth is conveyed not in spite of the body, but because of it.

To characterize their mouths and their voices as "merye" underscores a paradox: how can noisy speech also be straightforward, "clean," and thus fitting for the conveyance of divine truth? As we have seen, the mumbling of the lunatic *lollares* calls attention to the embodied nature of human language, its difference from the eternal and transcendent truth of God's word, thus highlighting the distance between signifier and signified, *verbum* and *res*.[35] Langland invites this reading by suggesting that, in "prophesy[ing] of the people," the lunatic *lollares* are "pleyinge, as hit were" (C.9.113-14). Adding to the uncertainty implied with the verb *pleyen* (are the lunatic *lollares* to be taken seriously, or are they merely playing) Langland's hedging rhetoric at this moment reinforces the uncertainty of language in representing reality.

I propose that, for Langland, "truth" paradoxically lies in play, and in the process of interpretation it produces. Unlike the Wycliffites, or those opponents who satirized their academic rhetoric as noise, Langland accepted and played with the noisy excesses of language as a necessary and productive impediment to spiritual truth. Langland's poetics of lolling facilitates wandering—of mind, of body, and ultimately of voice—as an essential component to a spiritually productive life. Such 'lolling' faith makes room for uncertainty, failure, and doubt within his spiritual epistemology. Indeed, the infamous ending of this scene in the A and B texts, in which Langland reverses the virtuous characterization of Piers the Plowman he conveyed at the beginning of the passus, reinforces a search for spiritual understanding that is always in progress. After Truth outlines the contents of the pardon at length, a priest arrives and offers to "construe ech clause and kenne it…on Englissh" (B.7.106, C.9.281) for Piers. Amounting to

---

[35] For more on how medieval thinkers grappled with this issue, see Vance, *Mervelous Signals,* 34-50.

"two lynes … and noȝt a lettre more" (B.7.109, C.9.284), the pardon reads, simply "Et qui bona egerunt ibunt in vita eternam;/ Qui vero mala, in ignem eternam" (Those who do well will go to eternal life; those who do evil will go to the eternal fire [of hell] B.7.111-12, C.9.286-87). The priest glosses this equally simply by stressing that those who 'do well' go to heaven while the devil takes those who 'do evil.' In response, Piers tears the pardon in half "for pure tene" (A.8.101, B.7.115), vowing to undo his characteristic virtue with the oath "'I shal cessen of my sowyng,'…'and swynke noȝt so harde" (A. 104, B.7. 118). By tearing up Truth's pardon, Piers unseats his previously stable spiritual epistemology with the anger and frustration of doubt, in turn throwing the Dreamer into a state of uncertainty that requires him to continue further on his journey for moral and spiritual truth. The tearing of the pardon scene in A and B thus anticipates Langland's paradoxical characterization of *lollares* in the C text where the presence of doubt and ambiguity, the doubling of semantic meaning and the uncertainty it conveys, becomes amplified in the imprecise embodied knowledge produced in the noise of language.

Seeking Treasure in a Field

Lollares and 'lolling' are thus sites of contention around the material nature of language as an impediment to interpretation. These contradictions raise questions about the role of language, both rough and poetic, in representing a transcendent moral. We are left to wonder, for example, how Langland reconciles his distrust of language with his sprawling and digressive narrative and with the aural excess of his alliterative poetry. Again, I propose that the figure of the *lollare* helps us to address some of these questions. After all, Langland invites us to apply the mis-articulation of his *lollares* to his own poetics as his dreamer-avatar Will enters the poem's second vision at the beginning of *passus* 5 "yclothed as a lollare" (C.5.3). Indeed, the C

text incorporates an extended *curriculum vitae* of the poet's life and an apology for his poetry that underscores his play with the materially and aurally excessive rhetorical practices that were under such scrutiny in his age.

Will's status as a *lollare* is vexed. By all appearances, he is an unproductive shirker of work, like the idle *lollares* of passus 9. Encountering the allegories of Reason and Conscience, Will is bombarded with questions about his vocation. Reason, a personification of that mental faculty so often thought to be missing from wrong reading and inarticulate speech, demands justification for Will's work:

> 'Then hastow londes to lyue by,' quod Resoun, 'or linage ryche
> That fynde the thy fode? For an ydel man thow semest,
> A spendour that spene mot or a spille tyme,
> Or beggest thy bylyue aboute at men hacches
> Or faytest vppon Frydayes or feste-dayes in churches,
> The which is a lollarne lyf, that lytel is preysed…'
> (C.5.26-31).

The familiar discourse of idleness and time-wasting that is a feature of the "lollarne lyf" reminds us of the troubled status of poetry within the social and spiritual economies of the poem. Through his characterization of *lollares*, Langland grapples with his own place and the place of his poetry within the moral economy of his literary and intellectual milieu. Ultimately, Langland asserts that, like the mumbling of the lunatic *lollares*, which, while un-reasoned, nevertheless speaks prophetic political truth, his poetry is socially and spiritually productive noise.

In response to Reason's interrogation, Will recounts his education in holy writ as a boy, his entry into clerical orders, and his clerical labor in reading, singing, and prayer. Like the *lunatyk lollares*, who, as we have seen, are different from those "beggares with bagges" (C.9.98) that Truth denounces, Will's vocation earns him only enough food to live on, as he roams the countryside "Without bagge or botel but my wombe one" (C.5 52). He lives "by the lawe of

Leuyticy" (C.5.55) which ordained that clerks like him, who are equipped with "kynde

understondynge" are exempt from common toil. The lines that follow align with the genre of

"popular prophesy," a lament over the social mobility and violations of "natural" social order

that were common to England in the decades immediately following the outbreak of plague in

the mid-fourteenth century: the sons of bondsmen have been made bishops (C.5.70), for

example, and cobblers and their sons have bribed their way to the status of knights (C.5.72). This

digression affirms Langland's religious orthodoxy, offering Reason a concrete example of the

poet's intention to produce "public poetry," inflected with social commentary.[36] "…[R]ebuke

me ryht nauhte, Reason" (C.5.82), Will pleads, for "Preyeres of a parfit man and penaunce

discrete/ Is the lauest labour that oure lord pleseth" (C.5. 84-85).

Yet Conscience, listening in, objects that Will does not live according to his own

prescription for the "parfit" moral life. Will concedes, acknowledging his misspent time. He

concludes with a poignant petition for grace:

> Ac yut Y hope, as he that ofte hath ychaffared
> And ay loste and loste and at the laste hym happed
> A bouht such a bargain he was the bet euere
> And sette al his los at a leed at the laste ende,
> Suche a wynnyng hym warth thorw wyrdes of grace:
> *Simile est regnum celorum thesauro abscondito in agro.*
> *Mulier que invenit dragmam*
> So hope Y to haue of hym that is almighty
> A gobet of his grace and bigynne a tyme
> That alle tymes of my tyme to profit shal turne"
> (C.5.94-101).

With these lines, Langland suggests that his quest for spiritual truth is an end in itself. He quotes

the biblical verse from Matthew that we recall from the Wycliffite sermon: "the kingdom of

---

[36] My use of the phrase "public poetry" is indebted to Anne Middleton's important article, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II" *Speculum* (January, 1978) 94-114. Middleton argues that in contrast to "complaint poetry," public poetry is expressed with something like a "common voice," from "the vantage point of a universal scheme of ideal order" (95).

heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field." While I do not claim that Langland read or heard that particular sermon, which explained the parable in terms of scriptural interpretation, an exegesis of exegesis, I do suggest that Langland may have had the same ideas about language in mind in quoting this verse. Instead of excoriating or attempting to eliminate the noisy obscuring force of language, like the Wycliffites, Langland embraces it as an essential aspect of the "parfit" life and search for spiritual truth. Combing through such language, searching for meaning within a system in which its location is never secure or clear, is an answer to the problem that has occasioned Will's journey and the composition of the poem itself: what does it mean to do well?

The second scriptural quotation in this passage, which reads "The woman who found a silver coin," an allusion to a parable contained in chapter fifteen of the gospel of Luke, is similarly concerned with seeking as a hermeneutic tool. This chapter, which contains the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son, recounted by Christ in response to accusations that he has received sinners and eaten with them at his table, is primarily concerned with repentance. Though superficially each parable within it recounts a joyful reunion (the end point of particular quests for a lost sheep, a lost coin, or a lost son) what is implicit in each is that error, the process of wandering away from an endpoint accepted as orthodox, is a necessary function of belief. Langland's poetics of lolling, then, has a moral and spiritual force. It revels in the aural excesses of language as a medium for the deferral of spiritual truth. Yet at the same time, this noisy poetics stresses that such truth, always inaccessible, always inexpressible, resides in the search.

Sound and the *Cor[e]* of Patience

The riddles of Patience at the Banquet of Conscience reinforce the importance of
rumination on sounded semantic excess as a means of approaching a moral life of Dowel.
Langland's revisions of Patience's riddles in the C text translate the graphic and visual modality
of the academic Oxford culture of riddling into a more aurally inclined mode centered on the
interpretation of noise.[37] This shift offers greater interpretive access to lay readers and listeners,
bringing it in line with contemporary radical principles of religious literacy and access to
spiritual truth. At the same time, Patience's riddles flout Wycliffite ideals by resisting solution
or singular interpretation, falling in line with the noisy hermeneutics resulting from Langland's
poetics of lolling.

In the B text, passus 14 finds the allegorical figure of Patience counseling Haukyn the
minstrel-waferer on the virtues of poverty. As a character embodying the kind of courtly
noisemaking-for-profit that Langland so detests, Haukyn is appropriately equipped with a cloak
stained with sin. As a result of his encounter with Patience, Haukyn ultimately confesses his
sins, having learned the orthodox line of thinking that patient long-suffering poverty inhibits
moral transgression. If the poor man is patient and resists sins like wrath, pride, and
covetousness, Patience reasons, he is showing superiority to the rich, who are governed by such
vices. Poor men without patience, who succumb to wrath, Patience suggests, will speak out in
unsanctioned ways, grumbling and chattering, and they will be will be the worse off for it:

> If Wraþe wrastel with þe poor, he hath þe worse ende,
> For if þei boþe pleyne, þe poore is but feble,
> And if he chide or chatre, hym cheueþ þe worse
> <div align="center">(B.14.225-26).</div>

---

[37] On the visual orientation of Langland's riddles in the B text, see Curtis Gruenler, 'How to Speak Like a Fool:
Riddle Contests and the Banquet of Conscience in *Piers Plowman*,' *Speculum* 85, (July, 2010) 592-630 at 618.

Patience contrasts such wrathful grumbling with the spare and "true" speech engendered by patient poverty. Such poverty, Patience suggests, is a "welle of wisdome" that engenders "fewe wordes" (B.14.307). Because a rich man will not listen to a poor man, the latter should "tempreþ þe tongue to truþeward and no tresore coueiteth" (B.14. 309). Here Patience implicitly denounces Haukyn's profession, advocating rhetorically spare speech as the most "truthful." Such straightforward rhetoric as an aspect of "truþe," one would think, is consistent with the poem's repeated emphases on order, both rhetorical and otherwise. Through Patience's reasoning, Langland again offers us the same dichotomy of noise that he has already put forth in his portrayal of *lollares*: some noise is excessive, filthy, and against the common good while other noise is beneficent and "clean." Yet the verb *tempren* complicates this portrait, as we consider its sense not merely of softening or controlling, but also of mixing or dilution: a state of confusion or disorder. Indeed, the suggestion that the poor man "temper" his tongue "to truþeward" implies an act of twisting or turning it in another direction, suggesting that "truthful" speech is actually crooked or oblique in some way.

Patience's sermon on patient poverty to Haukyn is consistent with his prior advice to Will during the feast of Conscience episode, in *passus* 13 of the B text, which is revised in *passus* 15 of the C text. Indeed, revisions of this episode in the C text extend Patience's advocacy for oblique speech even further through the use of riddles and sound. Sitting down to a feast with Reason, Conscience, and Clergy, Will and Patience are set together "at a syde-table" (B.13.36, C.15.41), a vantage point from which they can observe the gluttonous excesses of the Doctor of Divinity. Will is outraged that such a figure, who should be in possession of spiritual truth, has no "campacience" (C.15.87), no willingness to endure hunger, nor compassion for the poverty of those like Will around him. His mouth, which should be filled with the words of scripture, is

99

instead stuffed with "disches and dobelares, with alle the deyntes aftur!" (C.15.90). When Will

resolves, like the poor man who succumbs to his wrath in the B version, to "iangle to this iurdan

with his iuste wombe," (B.13.84, C.15.91) Patience counsels him to "Lat be" (C.15.93) and the

feast turns more broadly to the moral-philosophical question of what constitutes a life of

"dowel." In the B text, Patience offers a series of enigmatic remarks, drawing from the academic

tradition of riddling.[38] He concludes with the lines:

> Kynde loue coueiteþ noȝt no catel but speche.
> Wiþ half a laumpe lyne in Latyne, *Ex vi transicionis*,
> I bere þerinne aboute fast ybounde Dowel,
> In a signe of þe Saterday þat sette first þe kalender,
> And al þe witte of þe Wodnesday of þe nexte wike after;
> The myddel of þe moone is þe myght of boþe.
> And herwith am I welcome þer I haue it wiþ me.
>   (B.13.151-57).

Much ink has been spilled by contemporary critics in deciphering these puzzles, without much

security in providing an answer.[39] I am less concerned with offering a solution to Patience's

riddling utterances than I am with noting their obtuseness and resistance to solution by all except

perhaps the educated clerical elite from whence the medieval culture of riddling sprang. To the

uninitiated, in the Middle Ages and today, such enigmatic utterances look a lot like noise; they

are a series of words forming a string of nonsense.   Indeed, the academic culture of riddling

depended on such resistance to solution in order to create an aura of mystery and power that

reinforces the mastery of the riddler over his audience.[40] Langland draws attention to this power

imbalance with the remarks of Clergie to Conscience, another noteworthy peddler of riddles.

---

[38] For the influence of riddles on this section, see Andrew Galloway, 'The Rhetoric of Riddling in Late-Medieval England: The "Oxford" Riddles, the *Secretum philosophorum*, and the Riddles in *Piers Plowman*,' *Speculum* 70, (1995) 68-105 at 86-92.

[39] In addition to the articles by Galloway and Gruenler, see the earlier work of Edward C. Schweitzer, '"Half a Laumpe Lyne in Latyn" and Patience's Riddle in *Piers Plowman*,' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (July, 1974) 313-327.

[40] Galloway, "Rhetoric of Riddling," 84.

Clergie announces his distaste: "'What!...are ye coueitous nouþe/ After yeresȝeues or ȝiftes, or yernen to rede redels?" (B.13.184-85). This response, as Galloway suggests, figures the practice of riddling as a performance for profit, akin to the services of minstrels like Haukyn, and other itinerants. As such, riddling is another example of the disreputable noise-making for profit in *Piers Plowman*, aligning such enigmatic riddlers with *lollares*.

Yet the C text offers an alternative and more accessible form of riddling that, like the speech of Langland's *lunatyk lollares*, begins to rehabilitate semantic excess as an effective means of facilitating the search for truth. In the C-text version of the banquet, Langland omits Clergie's withering lines to Conscience and tempers Patience's enigmatic explication of Dowel, transforming the six riddling lines above into a single enigma. When Will asks his opinion on what constitutes a life of Dowel, Patience offers the cryptic screed:

> *Patientes vincunt, &c.*
> For, by hym that me made, might neuere pouerte,
> Meseyse ne mischief ne man with his tongue
> Tene the eny tyme and thou take pacience
> And bere hit in thy bosom aboute wher thou wendest
> In the corner of a cart-whel with a crow croune.
> > (C.15.156b-61).

Like his counsel to Haukyn in the B text, Patience advises Will not to let the "mischief" of any man's tongue cause him to lose his patience, whether such bad behavior is in speech or, as Will had threatened earlier in his response to the gluttonous doctor, in overeating. Instead, Patience says, a life of Dowel requires a man to remain quiet, bearing patience "[i]n the corner of a cart-whel with a crow croune." Using the rules of riddling outlined in the academic treatise *Secretum philosophorum*, Galloway proposes a solution to this enigmatic line: *cor*, or "heart."[41]

---

[41] *Ibid.*, 93-4.

What is striking about these lines is how they simultaneously extend and flout Patience's command to be quiet and spare with language. They offer a cryptic phrase that appears to be lacking sufficient information or significance. Yet at the same time, the riddle lengthens its one-word solution into a full alliterative line. Far from straightforward "truth-talking," these lines convey their answer in a metaphorical, oblique, or "bent" way, one that requires a certain kind of thinking (and patience) to interpret. Yet, as Galloway points out, the meaning of this riddle as it appears in *Piers Plowman* is embedded in the sound of the lines, which repeatedly stress the c-o-r sounds of its solution, in various formations: "*cor*ner of a cart-whel with a *cro*w croune." That Langland offers an answer to his riddle through the sound of his poetry suggests his desire to make knowledge available through unorthodox means in his C-text revisions. In this case, hearing the language, provides a second layer of significance at the level of sound, one that overtakes the apparent nonsensicality of the phrase in its entirety.

Though this one word solution seems at first to offer a singular answer, a contradiction of Langland's noisy hermeneutics, the *sound* of the word would tell us otherwise. Galloway suggests that solution to the riddle is the Latin *cor*, a word that, in addition to denoting the heart, referred to the mind and to the faculty seated somewhere between the heart and the mind: judgment. Yet in Langland's trilingual intellectual milieu, *cor* also would have denoted the French word for 'heart,' and would have led to the homophonic English word, "core," the center or pith of something, returning us again, perhaps to the Latin *corpus*, or "body." Thus one word provides an ever-expanding set of associations, which together draw near to a singular "truth," but never quite attain it. The transposition of letters in this line, first the right and straightforward way (the "c-o-r" of "*cor*ner") then crookledly (the "c-r-o" of "*cro*w") is not only a means of repeating the sound of the answer in an ever more oblique way, but also reflects Langland's

celebration of the noisy excesses and ambiguities of language itself. Patience's lesson, then, lies not only in the riddle's one-word solution. It also resides in the means of reading and interpretation that Langland invites us to enact through the riddle.

"Gradd[ing] aftur Grace"

In this light, the noisy excesses of Langland's own work, those confounding aspects of the poem that resist singular interpretation and double back on previously established pieties, begin to take on a weight and import of their own, despite contemporaneous dismissals, like that of Chaucer's Parson, of the noisy alliterative style. Thus, the poem ends not with the sixth vision narrating Christ's rhetorical triumph against the devils (B.18, C.20). Christ's efforts to bring about the harrowing of hell by beguiling the beguilers underscores Langland's poetics of lolling by rendering double talk and linguistic ambiguity into the very material of salvation, and so would seem like a fitting place to end the poem. Instead, the concluding vision reinforces the doubt that emerges from semantic excess through the drama of the apocalyptic final scene, the eighth vision (B.20, C.22), in which Antichrist and his henchman, *Penetrans Domus*, lay siege to the Barn of Unity. At the close of the poem, after the fall of Unity, Conscience vows to take up the life of a pilgrim. The poem closes with Conscience moving and being moved, audibly; wandering and crying out as he "gradde[s] aftur Grace" (B.20.387, C.22.387), a figure he has almost touched, who has already slipped away—just out of reach.

Langland was deeply preoccupied with interrogating what constituted "productive" spiritual work, particularly among those clerics who found pleasure in their labor, instead of aiming for a straightforwardly utilitarian exchange of ideas. In a landscape where the physical experience of language was under attack as idle and useless, Langland finds a moral and ethical

103

utility for it, forging literary forms to move and affect his listeners toward somatic and affective modes of spiritual knowledge. Yet Langland was not the first to undertake such an endeavor. Several decades before he wrote *Piers Plowman*, the hermit and mystic Richard Rolle was also experimenting with the spiritual utility of such idle aural delight.

Chapter 3

Affect and Sound-Play in Rolle's *Incendium Amoris* and *The Cloud of Unknowing*

"For the rest, with little or no sharpness of faculty or any trace of the wisdom of the serpent, nor yet quite a dove, he possessed that kind and degree of intelligence going along with the unconventional rectitude of a sound human creature, one to whom not yet had been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge. He was illiterate; he could not read, but he could sing, and like the illiterate nightingale, was sometimes the composer of his own song."

-Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*

In the final chapter of his Latin treatise, the *Incendium Amoris*, the early fourteenth century hermit Richard Rolle recalls that once, at an early stage of his religious fervor, he used to model himself on the nightingale:

> In principio enim conuersionis mee, et propositi singularis, cogitaui me uelle assimilari auicule, que pre amore languet amati sui, sed languendo eciam letatur adueniente sibi quod amat et letando canit, canendo eciam languet, sed in dulcedine et ardore. Fertitur enim philomena tota nocte cantui et melo indulgere, ut ei placeat, cui copulatur. Quanto magis cum suauitate maxima canerem Christo meo Ihesu, qui est sponsus anime mee per totam uitam presentem…[1]

> In the beginning of my conversion, and of my singular resolution, I used to think I wished to imitate the little bird, which languishes because of love for its lover, but in languishing, rejoices for the one coming to him, who he loves, and in rejoicing sings; and in singing, languishes, but in sweetness and warmth. It is said that the nightingale will sing all night and indulge in melody so that she might please her partner. How much more should I sing, with greatest sweetness, to my Jesus Christ, my soul's spouse, through the whole of this present life…

With characteristic love-language that places himself in the role of Christ's spouse, Rolle stresses the physical and emotional nature of his inclination toward God.[2] This yearning, which is accompanied by the sensations of heat and sweetness, is ultimately best expressed with a song like that of the nightingale. Rolle's desire to sing like a bird, I propose, is not coincidental. As

---

[1] Richard Rolle, *The Incendium Amoris of Richard Rolle of Hampole* ed. Margaret Deansley (New York, 1915) 277.
[2] Sarah McNamer has explored the marital dynamic between the mystic and Christ in terms of affective "scripts" in medieval English and Italian literature. See Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia, 2010).

Elizabeth Eva Leach has shown, medieval thinkers believed that birdsong lay distinctly outside the domain of music, which was governed by the rational principles of number.[3] Thus, although birdsong was song, it was also a kind of noise—an amalgam of sounds and physical experience without an essence of reason. Sarah Kay, moreover, has outlined a "nightingale's way" in the Occitan lyric tradition—one that places greater value on "recreation" rather than exact repetition of prior sources, and that is defined by "assimilation, affect, and song."[4] While I do not claim that Occitan lyric directly influenced Rolle, I do suggest that the nightingale's broader associations with emotionally and physically affective song may have informed his desire to model himself on the bird. Rolle's embrace of the nightingale's song here marks the culmination of his sustained emphasis on affect over intellect in approaching God. I will argue that in Rolle's articulation of divine song or *canor*, noise becomes an important way of framing the non-rational, affective aspects of his devotional practice.

Writing in the mid-fourteenth century, several decades before the efflorescence of mystical prose by writers like Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Walter Hilton, and the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, Rolle is generally read as a foundational figure for late-medieval affective piety. Rolle's corpus of mystical work emphasizes three sensations—heat, sweetness, and song (*calor, dulcor, canor*) as integral paths to divine understanding. Scholars have tended to treat these three sensations as separate feelings, often aiming to uncover a hierarchy among them and usually concluding that Rolle's choice to end with *canor* suggests that it reigns supreme in his affective epistemology. Nicholas Watson's foundational study *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* is exemplary in this regard. Watson's chapter on Rolle's *Incendium* meticulously traces Rolle's discussions of each feeling, noting that while

---

[3] Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 2007).
[4] Sarah Kay, *Parrots and Nightingales: Troubadour Quotation and the Development of European Poetry* (Philadelphia, 2013) 91-105; quotations at 11 and 13.

calor seems to be his focus in the beginning, *canor* has come to be the touchstone sensation of mystical experience.[5] His book goes on to align each sensation with a different phase in Rolle's development of authority, each underscored by a progression of Rolle's texts.[6] But I would argue that it is not so easy, or necessary to separate these sensations. Wolfgang Riehle's recent suggestion that we understand Rolle's contemplative practice as a kind of "auditive vision" begins to complicate the scholarly tendency to treat each sensation separately.[7] Yet the phrase nevertheless only evokes two senses and seems to yoke hearing to vision as the most privileged category of mystical perception. As scholarship in sound studies has taught us, sound has the ability to implicate other senses—in particular feeling—along with it.[8] Sound metaphors like *canor* and also, as we will see, *clamor*, thus lend themselves to describing the all-encompassing effects of devotional experience.

Katherine Zieman has explored Rolle's emphasis on semantic excess, in her words, the "extragrammatical" aspects of language, in Rolle's affective approach to contemplation.[9] She argues that Rolle names this excess *canor* and represents it through alliteration. I would add that, in addition to alliteration, Rolle employs other sound-play to represent such semantic excess and extragrammatical meaning. Moreover, his repeated references to *canor* in terms of noise, in particular *tinnitum* and *clamor*, underscore his emphasis on the aspects of divinity that lie beyond comprehension through the rational intellect. Indeed, noise becomes an important framing

---

[5] Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge, 1991). See, in particular, his discussion on pp. 120-121.

[6] Watson's section discussing the contemplative life, uses each sensation, in succession, to title a separate chapter, each on a specific text by Rolle, e.g. "*Fervor: Incendium Amoris*," "*Dulcor: Super Psalmum Vicesimum, Super Canticum Canticorum, Contra Amatores Mundi*," and "*Canor: Melos Amoris*"

[7] With respect to the *Incendium Amoris*, Riehle argues that "the single aspects of the 'total mystical experience' [i.e. *calor, dulcor, canor*] cannot be made absolute, nor can they be isolated" (95). See Riehle, *The Secret Within: Hermits, Recluses, and Spiritual Outsiders in Medieval England* trans. Charity Scott-Stokes (Ithaca, 2014) 91-97.

[8] See for example, Steven Connor. "The Modern Auditory I" in Roy Porter, ed. *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London, 1997) 203-23.

[9] Katherine Zieman. "The Perils of *Canor*: Mystical Authority, Alliteration, and Extragrammatical Meaning in Rolle, the Cloud Author, and Hilton' *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 22 (2008) 131-64.

device for the affective, immanent, and literal aspects of mystical experience, a variation on the ineffability *topos* so common to mystical writing. To Rolle, and other mystics, as we will see, divine grandeur is so radically other that it can only be perceived as noise. Thus, just as it is perceived affectively through the body and not the intellect, it also resists expression in structured language governed by reason. Rolle articulates this process as an echoic feedback loop: the mystic, emptied of intellect, absorbs divine *canor* as incomprehensible noise and then reverberates it back, again in the form of noise or, to use Rolle's term, *clamor*. Thus, Rolle takes care to stress that his mystical perception of *canor* emerges from within him; his perception is not part of the "effeminate" sensory pleasures of the world around him. Yet, ultimately his insistence on the noisy aspects of mystical song—the *clamor* of *canor*—he acknowledges not just the inevitability but also the utility of the body and its sensory experience in accessing God, ensuring his role as an innovator of later English affective devotion.

Rolle's sound-play was influential in how later mystical writers, in particular the author of the treatise on contemplation known as the *Cloud of Unknowing*, addressed the issue of physical sensation in knowing God. The *Cloud*-author, who is also thought to have translated into Middle English some of the work of the sixth-century Syrian monk known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, is generally accepted as a proponent of apophatic or negative theology, which held that to express God in human language was to impose limitations on the divine.[10] Instead, apophatic theology sought to express divine knowledge through negation. Those who sought to know God should be, in the words of Pseudo-Dionysius himself, "like sculptors who set out to carve a statue."[11] While Middle English authors of negative theology, including the *Cloud*-author, frequently denounce the "boisterous" and effeminate sensory

[10] On the *Cloud*-author's relation to Pseudo-Dionysian negative theology, see, Cheryl Taylor, "The *Cloud*-author's remaking of the Pseudo-Dionysius's Negative Theology" *Medium Ævum* 75.2 (2006) 202-218.
[11] Pseudo–Dionysius, *Pseudo Dionysius: The Complete Works* trans. C. Luibheid (New York, 1987) 138.

excesses of affective mysticism, the work of Pseudo-Dionysius was frequently cited during medieval scholastic debates about whether theology was primarily comprehensible through the rational workings of the mind (*intellectus*), or whether it was a function of the loving powers of the individual will (*affectus*).[12]

Alastair Minnis has traced the intellectual genealogy of the *Cloud*-author to the strand of pseudo-dionysian scholasticism that stresses *affectus* over *intellectus*.[13] Thus the *Cloud*-author's denunciation of Rolle's emphasis on affect and sensation would seem to be at odds with the affective genealogy of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. This contradiction invites further reflection and investigation. To be sure, the rhetorical sound-play and literary features that the *Cloud*-author employs reflect his learnedness and reinforce his authority to offer instruction on contemplation. But I want to press this issue further by asking whether there might be further reasons that the *Cloud*-author, who renounces the affective work of Rolle, might nonetheless employ aural strategies that draw near to Rolle's own. I suggest that the *Cloud*-author's use of alliteration and other rhetorical sound-play serves a double and paradoxical purpose. On the one hand, it highlights the "gross" carnality and literal-mindedness of those contemplatives, like Rolle, who the *Cloud*-author believed to be over-invested in the sensations of the body. At the same time, I argue that the *Cloud*-author's extragrammatical sound-play participates in an overall impulse toward what scholars have called the "eloquent silence" of the apophatic tradition, an attempt to disable the intellect by pushing textuality beyond its limits.[14] Such a practice resembles the textual "excess" that Zieman attributes to extragrammatical literacy. Yet cataphatic writers like

---

[12] For a discussion of the gendered contrast and tension between the sensory control among the apophatic mystics and the more "effeminate" sensual excesses of affective mysticism see Sarah Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe" in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. David Aers (Sussex, 1986) 34-57 at 38-39.

[13] Alastair Minnis, "Affection and Imagination in the *Cloud of Unknowing* and Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*" *Traditio* 39 (1983) 323-366. For more on the affective pseudo-dionysian tradition see Boyd Taylor Coolman "The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition" *Modern Theology* (2008) 615-632.

[14] Variations of the phrase "eloquent silence" appear in Taylor's article, "The *Cloud*-author's Remaking"

the *Cloud*-author use this strategy, along with more straightforward modes of communication, in order to approach the paradoxical yoking of *affectus* and *intellectus* that is necessary for mystical union.

Sensation and the Realm of the Real

Rolle begins the *Incendium* by describing his first mystical experience of heat, which he calls *calor* or the "fire of love." He insists upon its authenticity as a true feeling:

> Admirabar magis quam enuncio quando siquidem sentui cor meum primitus incalescere, et uere non imaginarie, quasi sensibile igne estuare. Eram equidem attonitus quemadmodum eruperat ardor in animo, et de insolito solacio propter inexperienciam huius abundancie: sepius pectus meum si forte esset fervor ex aliqua exterior causa palpitaui. Cumque cognouissem quod ex interior solumodo efferbuisset, et non esset a carne illud incendium amoris, et concupiscencia, in qua continui, quod donum esset Conditoris, letabundus liquefactus sum in affectum amplioris dileccionis, et precipue propter influenciam delectationis suauissime et suauitatis interne que cum ipso caumate spirituali mentem meam medullitus irroravit.[15]

> I wondered more than I can say when I first felt my heart begin to warm; and it was true, not imaginary, as if it burned with perceptible flame. I was astonished at the way this ardor erupted in my soul, and at the unaccustomed solace, on account of whose abundance I was inexperienced. Frequently I probed my heart in case by chance the heat might be from any exterior cause. And when I had come to realize that that fire of love effervesced from my interior alone, and that it was not from flesh or concupiscence, in this I maintained that it was a gift from God. Overjoyed, I melted into the passion of greater pleasure, and especially because of the influence of this most sweet delight and this internal sweetness, which irrigated my mind with this spiritual heat from the marrow.

Rolle's *calor* is not metaphorical but an actual; he goes on to call it an "elemental" (*elementaris*) physical feeling.[16] The literal sensuality of Rolle's formulation of *calor* asks us to consider the ways that the sensations of the body undergird the authenticity of his mystical experience. The realm of reality or spiritual truth is thus framed not in terms of the intellect, but in terms of actual physical experience.

---

[15] Rolle, ed. Deansley, 145.
[16] "inflamat animam meam ac si ignis ibi arderet." *Ibid.*

At the same time, the feelings Rolle outlines over the course of the *Incendium* do not come from outward stimuli, hence Rolle's initial worry that the heat he feels might be *conconcupiscensia*. Instead they are *medullitus*, stemming from his inner marrow or essence—an outpouring of the longing he feels for God. Rolle's mystical feelings are emphatically interior rather than exterior. *Calor, dulcor, and canor* are thus perceived by the interior rather than exterior skin, tongue, and ears. At a later point in his text, after he has introduced *canor*, Rolle will go on to explain that the mystic "praises God in jubilation (*jubilus*), but in silence. Not for the ears of man, but in the face of God and his ineffable sweetness does he pour forth odes, that is, praise."[17] Here Rolle characterizes *canor* with the liturgical term *jubilus*, referring to the lengthy melismatic singing of the alleluia, which stretched the last syllable over several notes. Yet he qualifies that this elaborate ornamental sound is silent. This emphasis on the physical, though nevertheless interior nature of spiritual truth distinguishes *calor*, *dulcor*, and *canor* from the more base sensory experience of worldly pleasure.

Rolle's insistence on the interior quality of his feelings signals the orthodoxy and relative conservatism of his writings. Indeed, the *Incendium* upholds the traditionally gendered distinctions between inner and outer experience so often found in medieval religious writing. Rolle wishes to dedicate himself to the life of a hermit so that he can devote all his time to a contemplation that is mercifully removed from "effeminate" sins of the world. Outlining the perfect lover of God, Rolle renounces the effeminacy of beauty and luxury: "…no young man among the blandishments and sweet words of beautiful women and an outpouring of delicacies can be holy, unless it is by the inestimable magnitude of God's grace.[18] It is "like a man"

---

[17] "Laudat Deum in iubilo, sed in silencio; non ad aures hominum sed in conspectu Dei et ineffabili suauitate odas emittit, id est laudes." *Ibid.*, 238.

[18] "…non potest iuuenis inter blandicias et dulcia uerba pulchrarum mulierum et affluancias delicarum sanctus fieri, nisi ex inestimabili magnitudine gracie Dei…" *Ibid.*, 166.

(*viriliter*) Rolle asserts, to rise above the "allurements" (*alliciencia*) and the "weaknesses of the flesh" (*carni mollia*) to an exalted state of contemplation, which can only be done through the grace and the love of Christ.[19] After outlining the perils of the world and of the flesh, Rolle warns would-be mystics not to touch these "slippery things" *(lubrice)* and to discipline hands, tongue, and appetite.[20]

Rolle's distinction between "real" inner and false outer perception is important to our understanding of how he uses the idea of noise to frame all of the external and literal aspects of *canor*. Like many other religious figures of his day, Rolle describes all of the worldly concerns that beset the mystic in terms of noise. Indeed, Rolle values the contemplative life precisely because it sets the mystic apart from the "noise" of the world. In contrast to the solitary man, Rolle asserts, the man who lives in the midst of "tumult" (*tumultus*) is distracted, and can rarely meditate or pray.[21] The Carmelite friar Richard Misyn's 1453 translation of Rolle's *Incendium* tellingly translates *tumultum* with "clatteryng."[22] Quoting from the biblical *Psalms*, Rolle goes on to assert that the hermit should go about "with a voice of exaltation and praise, the sound of one feasting."[23] But he quickly clarifies that this exalting voice should be without "strepitum et cantem corporalem" or, as Misyn translates, "noys and bodily song."[24]

In addition to framing the unwanted distraction of the world, the idea of noise also gets used to signal the literal and physical aspects of contemplative mystical experience. A brief examination of a passage from Misyn's translation of Rolle's *Incendium* helpfully highlights this dynamic. Shortly after he explains that the hermit's jubilation is without "noys," Misyn's

---

[19] *Ibid.*.

[20] *Ibid.*, 167.

[21] *Ibid.*, 181. Walter Hilton, who would aim explicitly to correct Rolle's religious program in his *Scale of Perfection*, similarly speaks of his desire to "hide" himself in the wounds of Christ, away from the "dronynge of þe world."

[22] Richard Misyn, trans. *The Fire of Love and the Mending of Life or the Rule of Living,* ed. Ralph Harvey (London, 1896). p. 30.

[23] "in voce exaltacionis & confessionis, sonus epulantis." See Psalm, 41: 5.

[24] Rolle, ed. Deansley, 181. Misyn, ed. Harvey, 30.

translation continues, asserting that the joyous hermit will be assumed into "þe swete sownd & heavenly noys" ("canorum iubilium et sonum celicum") through his contemplation.[25] Why should Rolle's early translator take such care to argue that the joyous hermit eschews the physical "noys" of the world, and then suggest that "noys" is what he will experience in heaven? I suggest that the associations between noise and worldly experience lead Misyn to stress the physical, sensual aspects of *canor*, by framing them in terms of noise. Misyn's phrase "heavenly noys," then, is not a simple or straightforward translation of Rolle, who uses the more general expression "heavenly sound" (*sonum celicum*). Instead, Misyn is picking up on a more systemic tendency in the *Incendium* to refer to *canor* as "noise" in order to stress its literal physicality.

Intaking *Tinnitum*

Rolle recalls his first experience of *canor*, which occurs when he is sitting in a chapel, "repeating" (*decantare*) psalms as best he c[an] (*prout potui*). Suddenly he hears a sound like "the jangling of psalmody" (*quasi tinnitum psalencium*).[26] Thus, Rolle initially perceives *canor* as noise; something radically different from anything he has heard before.[27] While he eventually uses *canor* to name the otherworldly music that elevates his contemplation, he initially uses the word *tinnitum*. In classical poetic and post-Augustinian prose, *tinnitum* has a sense of annoyance, as in the modern condition of tinnitus: a ringing in the ears.[28] More pointedly, and certainly more relevantly to Rolle, the word's variant *tinniens* appears in the Latin Vulgate verse from First Corinthians 13:1: "Si linguis hominum loquar, et angelorum, caritatem autem non

---

[25] Misyn, ed. Harvey, 30, translating Rolle, ed. Deansley, 182.
[26] Rolle, ed. Deansley, 189.
[27] Misyn again uses "noys" to translate Rolle's "tinnitum." See Misyn, ed. Harvey, 36.
[28] "tinnitus" in Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds. *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1969). According to the editors, the word also was also used to connote incomprehensible foreign language, as when Tacitus refers to the "tinnitus Gallionis" (the "jangling of the Gauls"). See Tacitus, *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, ed. Alfred Gudman (Boston, 1898) 24 section 26

habeam, factus sum velut aes sonans, aut cymbalum tinniens" (If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have charity, I have become like sounding brass or clanging cymbal). Rolle's choice to frame his initial experience of *canor* in terms of noise reinforces the inscrutability of the otherworldly sounds he perceives. It is, I argue, a variation on the ineffability *topos* so common to mystical writing.

As he describes his first experience of *canor*, Rolle underscores its incomprehensible "jangling" quality by highlighting his emphatically embodied state of being upon its perception, a state that is signaled with noisy vocalization. He describes repeating (*decantare*), we might even say "rattling off," psalms to himself. The devotional practice of repeating psalms or prayers was widespread in Rolle's time and it often involved inarticulate sub-vocalization or mumbling to oneself.[29] The inarticulate, mindless quality to Rolle's religious performance is evident in the word *decantare*, which denoted monotonous repetition, often with associations of triteness or absurdity.[30] These associations with meaninglessness inform other uses of *decantare* to denote the vocalization of charms and hence, enchantment. Rolle's first experience of heavenly music, first perceived as noise (*tinnitum*) emerges from Rolle's vocalization of noise: sounds without rational faculties behind them. This account highlights *canor's* associations with overwhelmingly embodied experience. It is a means of communication that is primarily affective rather than intellective.

Rolle extends the affective over the intellective nature of his experience of *canor* stressing its musical qualities and by framing this musicality to be in opposition to his thoughts or intellectual faculties. The initial "jangling" or "ringing" of *canor* turns into a choir or

---

[29] For more on monastic mumbling see Gehl, "*Competens Silentium*" and Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 51-65.
[30] Lewis and Short, "decantare" (v.).

"concord of song" (*concentum canorum*) and "a most delectable heavenly harmony"

(*delectabilissimam armoniam celicus*).[31] As he listens to this heavenly melody, Rolle recounts:

> Nam cogitatio mea continuo in carmen canorum commutabatur, et quasi odas habui meditando, et eciam oracionibus ipsis et psalmodia eundum sonum edidi. Deinceps usque ad canendum que prius dixeram, pre affluencia suauitatis interne prorupi, occulte, quiddem, quia tantummodo coram Conditore meo.[32]

> [My thinking continuously converted into the celestial chorus, and it was as if I reasoned by meditating on odes, and I emitted that same sound with these very prayers and with psalms. The effect was that I began to sing what previously I had spoken; I burst open with an outpouring of sweetness internally, secretly, in the face of my creator alone.]

In this passage, Rolle repeats that his thinking turns into celestial song, here signaled, as Zieman would have it, by the alliterative phrase "carmen canorum commutabatur." In other words, his contemplation transforms from an intellective activity where he thinks about the linguistic and semantic meaning of the prayers and psalms that he utters, into an affective experience where he attends to the feelings of their performance and utterance.

Moreover, these feelings, the affective aspects of his meditation, are represented first as noise (*tinnitus*) and then as music (*canor, carmen*, *odas*, etc.). It is perhaps counterintuitive that Rolle would conflate noise and music in his description of *canor*, when the two would seem to be opposing modes of expression. While noise is generally regarded as unpleasant and signals the disorder and the distraction of the world, music represents an aurally pleasing organized progression of sounds. Yet scholars in medieval musicology have demonstrated that medieval thinkers distinguished between two kinds of music. "Natural music," was a structured progression of sounds thought to contain the rational essence of number that reflected divine concord and order. Song was "artificial" music without number, sounds that employed affect

---

[31] Rolle, ed. Deansley, 189.
[32] *Ibid.*, 189-90.

over intellect.[33] Elizabeth Eva Leach explores medieval conceptions of birdsong as a primary

purveyor of this latter kind of musical sound. In doing so, she touches on the ways that medieval

thinking about birdsong overlaps with thought about the noises of other animals, implicitly

highlighting the ways that medieval song became a kind of noise because of its affective and

bestially embodied associations.[34] Rolle's invocations of *canor* as noise highlight this overlap

between noise and song, inviting a more explicit exploration of the two. I argue that both noise

and song invite perception at the level of affect over intellect as they emphasize physical

experience over the communication of exact meaning.

Rolle's choice of musical terms imply that, to him, *canor* is closer to lay musical and

poetic forms rather than the institutional music and literature of the liturgy. According to Rolle,

heavenly *canor* is fundamentally incompatible with earthly music. He explains that he has come

to avoid the ecclesiastical singers (*cantantes in ecclesiis*) or the organ-players (*ludentes in*

organis) of the Church because they distract from his experience of *canor* by "produc[ing] an

impediment to the sweetness of the sound and compel[ling] these splendid songs to cease."[35]

Ultimately, he asserts, the mystic will know he has attained holiness, the highest state of

contemplation, "if he cannot bear to sustain the clamor of psalmody unless his own inner song is

attuned to his thoughts."[36] As Zieman has pointed out, Rolle's focus is on *canor* rather than

musica, suggesting that his interest lies less in the abstract structures of the music of the spheres

outlined in learned academic circles than it does in a lay form that he viewed as more affective

than intellective. In other words, she writes, "the essence of *canor* is made available to the

---

[33] For more on the ways that music was seen to reflect cosmological order, see Leach, *Sung Birds*. See also Jeserich, *Musica Naturalis*.

[34] See Leach's discussion of birdsong in relation to the barking of hunting dogs in *Sung Birds*, 175-237.

[35] "Impedimentum enim exhibebant sonoris amenitate et preclara carmina deficere cogebant." Rolle, ed. Deansley, 239.

[36] "…si non valeat sustinere clamorem psallencium nisi canor eius interior ad cogitatum redigatur." *Ibid.*, 238.

auditor because of, rather than in spite of the constraints of time, voice, and language."[37] The lay

forms that interest Rolle, I would add, place a premium on sound over the direct communication

of meaning. Thus, language becomes a conduit for somatic rather than semantic communication.

Rolle's use of *oda* as an alternate word for *canor* is exemplary in this regard. Deriving from the

ancient Greek *word for* "song," *oda* was often used to refer to pagan poetry and developed into

the modern English "ode," a lyric poem, often intended to be sung. In its original Greek form

oda was cognate with another word referring explicitly to the human voice.[38] Rolle's use of

"odas" as an alternate expression for heavenly *canor* insists upon its affective and lay

associations.

Expression in Echo

Just as the mystic perceives and processes *canor* through the body and not the mind, in

Rolle's formulation, he can only express it through the corporeality of sound unstructured by

thought or language. Indeed, many of Rolle's invocations of heavenly music and "jubilant song"

emphasize the mystic's emphatically physical rather than mental experience by characterizing

his own expression of *canor* in terms of echo and reverberation. Rolle stresses the rarity of the

exalted state wherein the mystic attains *canor*, explaining,

> Raro nimirum inuenimus aloquem sanctum uel eciam perfectum in hac uita tanto amore
> raptum ut in contemplacionem usque ad canoris iubilum eleuaretur, ita scilicet ut in se
> susciperet sonum celicus infusum, et laudes Deo quasi cum melodia resonaret, dulces
> faciens modulos, et pneumata multa laudando supernaliter componens, atque ut in
> semetipso ueraciter sentiret ipsum ardorem dileccionis Dei.[39]

---

[37] Zieman, "Perils," 144.

[38] "ode, n.". OED Online. September 2012. Oxford University Press.
http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/130418?rskey=UUMUU1&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed October 20,
2012). The word's association with imperfect or worldly language is emphasized as we consider its relation to the
Greek word for "to call or name," and further with the Sanskrit root *vad-*, "to speak." A variant of the same Sanskrit
base *vad-* with long vowel, *vāda-, meaning* "to call," informs later words for dangerous human speech acts, such as
the Old Church Slavonic *vaditi,* "to calumniate," *and the* Old High German *firwāzan*, *firwāzen,* "to damn or deny."

[39] Rolle, ed. Deansley, 151.

Rarely indeed have we found a man who is so holy or even perfect in this life, and with so great a love that he is seized in contemplation, elevated toward the joy of *canor*, with the result that, of course, he, heavenly, would sustain the sound infused in himself, and echo back the praises of God as if with a melody, making sweet music, and from above composing many airy songs by praising, [or] with the result that he would feel truly, in his very being, that same ardor of love for God.

In this characterization, *canor* enters the body of a mystic who is completely evacuated of agency, as the verb *rapere*, and the passive sentence construction emphasize. The substantive nominative *celicus* ("he, heavenly,") implies that it is this self-evacuation that enables the mystic to attain the holiness of the *canor* that has pervaded him. That the mystic will come to echo (*resonare*) the song back emphasizes the absence of his individual mind and instead, the full participation of his body.

Indeed, the embodied and affective quality of the mystic's reverberation of *canor* pushes it into the realm of noise. In another description of this echoic feedback loop between the mystic and angelic choir, Rolle stresses the imperfect nature of the mystic's expression, hampered as it is by the physical body:

Est enim angelica suauitas quam in animam accipit et eadem oda, etsi non eisdem uerbis laudes Deo resonabitur. Qualis angelorum, talis est iscius concentus, etsi non tantus nec tam perspicuus, propter carnem corruptibilem que adhuc aggrauat amantem…[40]

It is indeed, angelic sweetness and this same ode that [the mystic] accepts into his soul, although his praise for God will not be echoed with these same words. Just as the singing of angels, so is his, though it is not so great or so clear on account of the corruptible flesh that oppresses the lover.

While the song of the angels conveys the mysteries of heaven with perfect and pointed transparency (*perspicuus*), the mystic's own reverberation is corrupt because it is echoed through his own flesh. The body impedes the transparency of the mystic's echo of divine song. When *canor* springs to his lips, Rolle explains, "he will become more slow of the tongue because the

---

[40] *Ibid.*, 237.

abundance of his inner joy and the singular nature of his song impose delay, so that what

previously occupied him not more than an hour, he will now hardly be able to implement in half

a day."[41] This elongation contributes to the faltering quality of the mystic's voice, what Rolle

later calls his "stuttering" (*balbuciens*), which can only articulate the ineffability of *canor* with a

noisy language that emphasizes the movements of the body and inhibits correct articulation,

extending sounds beyond the boundaries of syllables.[42]

Reclaiming *Clamor*

Ultimately Rolle names the inarticulately voiced longing of the mystic, his very echoes

and reverberations of *canor*, with the word *clamor*. Describing the condition of true jubilant

song, Rolle explains:

> …totus in amore Christi liquescit, et omnia interior eius ad Deum clamant. Clamor iste
> amor est canorus, quia magnam uocem eleuat usque ad aures Dei: est et desiderium boni,
> affeccioque uirtutis. Clamor eius extra mundum est, quia mens eius nihil preter Christum
> concupiscit. Ignitus est eius interior homo igne amoris ut sit cor eius lucens et urens et
> nihil exterius agat, quod non possit ad bonum interpretari.[43]

> …all of him dissolves in the love of Christ and all things inside him clamor towards God.
> This clamor is the love of *canor*, because it elevates his great voice up to the ears of God:
> it is both the desire for good and affection for virtue. His *clamor* is otherworldly because
> his mind desires nothing but Christ. His interior is ignited with the fire of love so that his
> heart is shining and burning and nothing external spurs him that cannot be interpreted to
> the good.

The result of Rolle's echoic feedback loop, the mystic's dissolution into divine *canor*, is an

intense burning: a "fire of love" that can only expresses itself in *clamor*. In short, Rolle tells us,

"clamor iste amor est canoris" ("this clamor is the love of the song"). A variation of this phrase

---

[41] "…fie[t] impedicioris lingue. Quoniam pre habundancia interni gaudii et sonoritate singulari pneumatizando
moram faciens, quod prius ipsum non nisi per unius hore spacium occupabat: iam sepe per dimidiam diem uix
implebit." *Ibid.*, 237.
[42] *Ibid.*, 268.
[43] *Ibid.*, 238.

appears when, at the end of an extended attempt to explain the nature of mystical *canor*, Rolle concludes that he cannot express the nature of this divine song, except to say that "clamor iste canor est" (this clamor is song)."[44] Enhanced through consonance, assonance, and internal rhyme, the tongue-tying quality of these moments (*clamor iste amor est canoris* and *clamor iste canor est*) momentarily perform and represent the ineffability of the divine song. Like the alliteration that Rolle uses elsewhere in the *Incendium*, which, as we will see, he develops into a stylistic principle in the *Melos Amoris*, the literary quality of these phrases work to represent the semantic excess of *canor*. Their internal rhyme and sound-play tease the tongue, teeth, and lips to become impediments to pronunciation, highlighting the ineffability of divine *canor* and enacting its resulting inarticulacy.

Sound and Vernacular Theology

Rolle's emphasis on the affective over rational experience of sound, which manifests itself in his preference for song over music and in his emphasis on the noisy physical qualities of *canor*, is one aspect of his emphasis on lay agency in personal devotion. That is, although Rolle writes in Latin he is still a purveyor of what scholars have called "vernacular theology": the manifold forms of textual interaction that developed among the laity throughout the Middle Ages, but especially flourished in England at the turn of the fourteenth century.[45] Such modes of

---

[44] *Ibid.*, 243.

[45] For an influential essay on vernacular theology, see Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409" *Speculum* 70.4 (October, 1995) 822-864. Much of Watson's subsequent work also engages with the term. Bernard McGinn has also been influential in developing the term, especially in the context of mysticism. See, for example, "Introduction: Meister Eckhart and the Beguines in the Context of Vernacular Theology" in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite de Porete,* ed. Bernard McGinn (New York, 1994) 1-14. For an overview of "vernacular theology" in medieval studies, see Vincent Gillespie, "Vernacular Theology" in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English,* ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford, 2007) 401-20. In its emphasis on lay devotional practices, the study of vernacular theology often overlaps with inquiry into affective piety. Though scholarship on these issues in England has centered on Middle English

lay reading often located spiritual understanding in the gestures, movements, sights, and sounds of the body. Because of their association with the laity, those who were not a part of the educated, all-male clerical elite, vernacular texts and the affective devotional practices that often accompanied them were gendered as "feminine" in the official ecclesiastical culture of medieval England.[46] The dynamic engagement with the body and the senses common to these practices underscored their associations with effeminacy, especially as they were adopted most enthusiastically among laywomen and female contemplatives.

Rolle's relationship with the official culture of the Church and the active life of evangelizing it advocated was a complex one. An Oxford-trained scholar, Rolle left the university at age nineteen after a religious conversion. Rather notoriously, he departed the city and retreated into the countryside wearing a hermit's habit that he had fashioned for himself out of his sister's dresses, a sartorial detail that has been seen as an example of Rolle's tendency to perform femininity in the context of his religious devotion.[47] It is undeniable that Rolle's work was influential in the proliferation of late medieval devotional texts that advocated embodied devotional practices, as well as those that, in Sarah McNamer's term, "scripted" identification with female figures. Yet I think that Rolle's relationship to women and to gendered devotional

---

literature, some forays have been made into exploring the idea in earlier Anglo-Saxon literature. See for example, Scott DiGregorio, "Affective Spirituality: Theory and Practice in Bede and Alfred the Great" *Essays in Medieval Studies* 22 (2005) 129-39; Allen Frantzen, "Spirituality and Devotion in the Anglo-Saxon Penitentials" *Essays in Medieval Studies* 22 (2005) 117-128; Adin Esther Lears, "Soð and Sense: Language Problems and Affective Solutions in Anglo-Saxon Treatments of the Guthlac Legend" *Viator* 44.3 (Autumn, 2013) 63-84.

[46] On the gendering of the idea of the vernacular, see Rita Copeland, "Why Women Can't Read." On the gendering of affective devotional practices the classic study is Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987). See also McGinn, "Meister Eckhart" and Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism."

[47] "Rolle, Richard (1305x10–1349)," Jonathan Hughes in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eee ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, May 2008, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/24024 (accessed February 26, 2014). See McNamer, *Affective Meditation,* 119-20. Though she cautions against making too much of this episode, McNamer, uses it to begin her chapter on how Rolle popularized "feeling like a woman" in personal devotion, noting that it is suggesting of Rolle's willingness to "engage in feminine self-fashioning." Riehle also reads this episode as evidence of Rolle's particularly "theatrical" mysticism (72), and leans a bit too heavily on Rolle as an effeminate figure with "rather feminine sensitivity" (97).

practices needs further refinement. Indeed, the *Incendium*, a work from early in his life as a

hermit, highlights Rolle's persistent attempts to reinforce his own authority, in part by

denouncing the effeminacy of an active life in the world.

The contemplative life, especially that of a hermit like Rolle, was under no small scrutiny

in medieval England. Ralph Hanna has highlighted how medieval authors on monasticism

including Benedict, author of the Benedictine Rule, denounced hermits for their imperfect

adherence to monastic rule. According to their detractors, because hermits lived outside social

and monastic order, by necessity they failed to adhere to the monastic precept of obedience.

Instead, they obeyed only their own will or desire, a regulating principle of female recluses.[48]

The widespread suspicion regarding lack of eremitic rules led the Church to apply to hermits the

same regulation they applied to female religious. Thus, the strict discipline and obedience of the

Benedictine rule came to be seen as a "masculine" way of life, while the eremitic regulating

principle of will alone was regarded as "feminine."[49] Indeed, several decades after Rolle died,

Walter Hilton, who is notable in part for his explicit critiques of Rolle's affective approach to

contemplation, viewed the contemplative life as a life of idleness: the domain of nuns and other

female religious in contrast to the priest's calling toward active preaching and evangelism.[50]

Hanna examines these proscriptions against hermits in the context of illuminating

Langland's authorial *apologia* in *Piers Plowman*. In doing so, he suggests that Richard Rolle

provides a mid-century precursor to Will's eremitical way of life.[51] I would extend Hanna's

suggestion by proposing that this widespread conviction that hermits followed their will alone

---

[48] Ralph Hanna, "Will's Work" in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship* ed. Steven Justice and Katherine Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia, 1997) 23-66 at 26-27.
[49] *Ibid.,*30.
[50] Catto, "1349-1412: Culture and History" in Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism* (New York, 2011) 113-131 at 121-22.
[51] Hanna "Will's Work" 46. Hanna also proposes that Margery Kempe's authorial persona offers a later parallel—a suggestion that my next chapter supports and expands upon.

explains why Rolle is so intent on stressing the purity of his desires and that *canor* comes from

his inner will toward God rather than from outside stimuli of the world. While he would go on to

author vernacular texts aimed at pastoral care for women, Rolle's Latin texts like the *Incendium*,

as Zieman reminds us, were far more concerned with self-inspection and self-justification than

his later English texts.[52] Like Hilton, Rolle fixates on these cultural perceptions of the

effeminacy of the contemplative life, ultimately attempting to evade them by stressing that the

active life was a hotbed of sin and temptation from women and that the contemplative life of the

hermit constituted a merciful retreat from their company.

Rolle's insistence on the effeminate dangers of the active life come to him unexpectedly

from the very women he wishes to avoid. In one of Rolle's most sustained accounts of the moral

instruction of laywomen, he recalls what he sees as the rightful rebukes of three different

women, each of whom have taken him to task for improper attention to worldly things. The first

woman rebukes Rolle because he inspected her too closely [*nimis inspexi*], which Rolle attributes

to his being desirous [*cupiens*] to denounce her "foolish" (*insaniam*) garments.[53] The second

woman reproaches him because he "spoke of her huge breasts as if [he] delighted in them."[54] In

both of these examples, Rolle chastises a woman for her sins, first her immodest dress and then

her voluptuous body. Yet he implies that his overzealous impulse toward correction veered

dangerously into the realm of taking pleasure in the sin he corrected. In his rather cryptic third

example, Rolle explains that a woman instructed him "Pipe down, brother!" [*Quiesce frater*]

when he "threatened [her] as if [he] rudely wished to touch her, or did touch her."[55] The verb

quiescere, which encompassed not just calm, but also silence, again calls attention to the ways

---

[52] Zieman, "Perils of Canor," 135.
[53] Rolle, ed. Deansley, 178.
[54] "…de mammis eius grossis loquebar quasi me delectarent." *Ibid.*, 178.
[55] "…minabar quasi rude eam tangere uellem, uel tetigi." *Ibid.*, 178.

that the dialectic relationship between noise and silence corresponded to that between earthly and

spiritual behavior. Further, as Rolle recalls this woman's rebuke, he includes a telling

interjection: "it was as if she had said, 'it doesn't go with your office of hermit to fool around

with women.'"[56] Here, Rolle unexpectedly frames the role of the active male cleric, correcting

the sins of his female parishioners, as an indiscreet, even effeminate act, one that may even

culminate with an improper sexual encounter ("or *did* touch her"). In other words, he turns

contemporaneous associations of the effeminacy of the contemplative life on their heads, by

arguing that the *vita contemplativa* is actually an opportunity to eliminate women, and all the

sins and worldly attention that they represent, from one's thoughts.

Rolle's final recollection in this chapter reinforces this point. He concludes by recalling a

fourth woman—one who "despise[ed]" [*contempnendo*] him rather than rebuking him by saying,

"You have nothing except a beautiful face and beautiful words: you have no actions (literally,

"work").[57] This comment would seem to raise the very issues for which men of the

contemplative life were sometimes scorned, i.e., for abandoning their pastoral duty in order to

luxuriate in the glorification of God. Again, in the face of this coded accusation of effeminacy,

Rolle concludes that he is better off without the company of immoderate women: "I think it

better," he says, "to abstain from their particularity (or peculiarity) than to fall into their hands,

which do not know how to have measure either in love or contempt.[58]

Yet Rolle cannot help but make use of the effeminate associations of his own vocation in

order to distinguish his spiritual work from other more intellectual approaches. And indeed, if,

as Hanna suggests, the hermit's habit was seen as an outward sign of intention, we might view

---

[56] "…quasi dixisset, 'Non pertinent ad statum tuum, scilicet hermeticum ludere cum mulieribus." *Ibid.*, 178-79.
[57] "Nihil habes nisi pulchrum uisum et pulchrum uerbum: opus nullum habes." *Ibid.*, 179.
[58] "Et ideo melius estimo earum specialitate carere quam in earum manus incidere; que modum nesciunt tenere siue in amore siue in contemptu." *Ibid.*, 179.

124

the patchwork quality of Rolle's habit, made from his sister's dresses, to reflect his more ambivalent or hybrid approach.[59] Though he does not identify with women or their devotional practices, Rolle recognizes the subordinate nature of his vernacular theology and codes this subordination as effeminate. It is in Rolle's insistence on the non-institutional nature of *canor*, the supremacy of the private and interior experience of the mystic, that Rolle's work constitutes vernacular theology, albeit written in Latin. Indeed, in the *Incendium*, Rolle consistently renounces the sinful hubris of intellectual pursuit. Framing the correct pursuit of God in terms of a contest between *affectus* and *intellectus*, Rolle asserts that "it is when we brood over immoderate inquiry that we indeed do not feel the eternal sweetness of [heavenly] delight."[60] Intellect distracts from a more 'pure' physical and affective perception of divinity.

Indeed, to Rolle, this affective perception is a form of vernacular theology, extending beyond the *doctores* of Oxford and Cambridge to a wider lay audience. Rolle explains:

> [V]etula plus expertitur de Dei amore and minus de mundi voluptate quam theologus, cuius stadium uanum est, quia pro uanitate studet ut sciatur et gloriosus appareat, ut redditus et dignitates adquirat qui stultus non doctus meretur reputari.[61]

> [An old woman can be more expert in the love of God, and less with the pleasures of the world, than a theologian, whose studying is useless because he does it for vanity—so that he might be known and appear glorious, so that he might acquire monetary return and rank; he who does so deserves to be thought a fool, not a doctor.]

In keeping with his moral education from the three women who corrected him, here Rolle represents vernacular theology with the cultural figure of the *vetula* or "little old woman." Like Chaucer's Wife of Bath or *La Vieille*, from the *Roman de la Rose*, this character type was associated with excess physicality and with gossip, games of love, and other "women's secrets,"

---

[59] Hanna, "Will's Work," 34.

[60] "Dum, enim inuestigacioni immoderate incubimus, dulcorem profecto eterne suauitatis non sentimus." Rolle, ed. Deansley, 160.

[61] *Ibid.*, 160.

what Karma Lochrie has called "covert operations."[62] In framing vernacular theology in such terms, Rolle links it to more affective forms of knowledge that are grounded in the body and the senses. This association is heightened as we recall Rolle's previous assertions that intellectual pursuits distract from a more fundamental and sense-based spiritual perception.

Sound-play and the *Melos Amoris*

While it is beyond the purview of this chapter to fully explore how Rolle's affective innovations in the *Incendium* extend into his later work, here I will offer a brief taste of *canor* in Rolle's later work. Nicholas Watson argues that ultimately, the *Incendium* demonstrates that "*experientia* can become the basis for *auctoritas* …above all because of [Rolle's] ability to recreate [the experience of *canor*] verbally.[63] He goes on to argue that Rolle's rhetorical finesse, in particular his use of alliteration, becomes a stylistic principle in his later work, the *Melos Amoris*. Watson writes that the *Melos Amoris*, seems like a "kaleidoscope," in which Rolle's style is "part…of a luminous shifting pattern whose strange beauty holds ear and eye even while the mind slides off into confusion." A passage of *the Melos Amoris* is exemplary of its rich aural texture that joyfully overtakes its meaning:

> frustra fundatur falsi fideles quia funditus finietur fiducia fenerantis, et fumo inferni ficti ferientur et omnes utique umbra honoris operti ut appareant in aulis avaris. Fervebunt fetentes formidine futura; formosus et fortis in feno falluntur et ideo imbuti impio instinctu fervore felici nunquam fruentur quia federati fuerunt in factis falsorum ut fixi in fervore finiendi favoris feruntur cum furibus in facibus frementes: horum fornax fetidus fauces iam fringet, nam fugiunt fidem famamque fugant; sic filii feroces firmantur fortiter ut fundum furencium penetrent post pauca et penas percipiant perpetuo perdurantes.[64]

---

[62] Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*. For more on the idea of the *vetula* in relation to the authority of the Wife of Bath and her French counterparts, including La Vielle from the *Roman de la Rose*, see Alastair Minnis, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and the Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia, 2008) 294-312.

[63] Watson, *Invention*, 140.

[64] Richard Rolle, *The Melos Amoris of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, ed. E. J. F. Arnould (Oxford, 1957) 52-53.

Without discounting the rhetorical skill of this ornate alliterative style, I want to highlight its noisiness and the way that its emphasis on sound-play overwhelms the meaning or content of the words. This, I would argue, is not simply Rolle's enactment of divine *canor* on the page. Nor is it his way of calling attention to the inadequacy of his own voice in relation to heavenly melody, as Andrew Albin has suggested.[65] Instead, it is Rolle's jubilant *clamor*, which values expression that is ecstatic and embodied rather than rational. Indeed, Rolle's exuberant babbling voice in the *Melos Amoris*, may go further to explain his self-identification as youthful (*iuvenculus*) in the *Melos*, despite the rather late composition of the text.[66] Rather than taking this as evidence that Rolle composed the *Melos* at different times, as Wolfgang Riehle has suggested, I would argue that Rolle is cultivating a non-rational, even childish authorial persona in the manner of Langland's *lunatyk lollares*.[67] Rolle's clamorous invocation of *canor* is imperfect because it is filtered and echoed through his own flesh. But that very flesh is what makes it possible for him to approach God.

Eloquent Silence in the *Cloud of Unknowing*

The writings of Richard Rolle were early examples among the efflorescence of mystical writings in the second half of the fourteenth century. Several decades after Rolle died in 1349, another author, for whom we have no name, wrote a treatise on mystical contemplation now known as *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Alastair Minnis has shown how the *Cloud*-author was influenced by work of Thomas Gallus, a thirteenth century abbot and Canon Regular of the Congregation of St. Victor, who wrote a number of interpretive glosses on the works of the

---

[65] Andrew Albin, "Auralities: Sound Cultures and the Experience of Hearing in Late Medieval England." PhD diss, Brandeis University, 2011. Ann Arbor: *ProQuest*
[66] Rolle, *Melos Amoris*, ed. Arnould 9.34.
[67] Riehle, *Secret Within*, 121.

Syrian monk known as Pseudo-Dionysius. Gallus's interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius's

negative theology popularized a strand of thought that stressed the primacy of the affective

faculties over the intellective faculties in knowing God. It was this strand of apophatic, yet still

affective mysticism that influenced the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.[68] Minnis argues that

the *Cloud*-author's great literary accomplishment is his employment of the very discursive

methods that he professes to distrust as a way of enacting the *via negativa's* paradoxical

approach to contemplation. In particular, Minnis asserts, the *Cloud*-author is fond of using

highly metaphorical and imagistic prose that stimulates the imaginative faculties, even as he

denigrates the imagination as an amateur and overly worldly means of approaching the divine. I

would add that the *Cloud*-author also uses sounds to contribute to this paradoxical approach. In

keeping with his "imaginative denigration of the imagination," the *Cloud*-author noisily

denounces the "noisiness" of earthly entertainment. Like Rolle, the *Cloud*-author stresses sound

patterning through alliteration and ornate, rhetorical repetition as a way of drawing attention to

the issue of divine ineffability. Yet in contrast to Rolle, the *Cloud*-author assimilates his appeal

to affect into a contemplative program that is negative or apophatic. This apophaticism is, in a

word, paradoxical, making use of sound for two apparently contradictory purposes. First, his

sound-play calls attention to the literal, non-spiritual nature of the worldly actions he describes.

At the same time, such sound-play also pushes language past its limits so that it begins to

resemble the "eloquent silence" favored by Dionysius.

Devotional writing influenced by apophatic theology was gaining increased traction over

the second half of the fourteenth century, in large part as a backlash or correction to the

---

[68] See Minnis, "Affection and Imagination," 324-350.

proliferation of effusively affective devotional practices among the laity, especially women.[69]

The *Cloud*-author was most likely writing for academically trained religious men, and so is somewhat removed from this affective lay religious culture, even as, I would argue, he feels its influence. It is from this distance that he critiques Rolle's affective devotional program.

The *Cloud of Unknowing* is preoccupied with denouncing excesses of both intellect and the body. The author explicitly opposes those "ypocrites" or "heretykes" who are immoderately contemplative, pursuing God with undisciplined resort to the intellect. Likewise, he condemns his more orthodox contemporaries for the excesses of their affect and imagination.[70] He frames these excesses in terms of their naïve or amateurish focus on the literal and bodily in place of the spiritual:

> A ȝong man or a womman, newe set to þe scole of deuocion, hereþ þis sorrow & þis desire be red and spokyn, how þat a man schal lift up his herte vnto God, & vnseeingly desire for to fele þe loue of here God. & as fast in a curiosite of witte þei conceyue þees words not goostly, as þei ben ment, bot fleschly & bodily, & trauaylen þeire fleschly hertes outrageously in þeire brestes.[71]

The *Cloud*-author goes on to explain that these "outrageous" feelings of the body come to be mistaken for "þe fiir of loue," a phrase thought to find its source in Rolle's *Indendium Amoris*.[72] Thus the *Cloud*-author critiques the affective and sense-based devotional practices proliferating in the wake of Rolle, by stressing their misguided literalism. Such novice mystics perform by-the-letter interpretations of the biblical injunction to "lift up one's heart to God" by agitating their feelings so much that they perceive a literal burning in their hearts.

---

[69] For more on affective devotion as an especially feminine pursuit, see Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast;* Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late-Medieval Writings* (London, 1993); McNamer, *Affective Meditation.*

[70] For the Cloud-author's denunciation of excess thought, see *The Cloud of Unknowing,* ed. Phyllis Hodgson (London, 1944) 49.

[71] *Cloud*, ed. Hodgson, 85.

[72] See, for example, Roger Ellis and Samuel Fanous, "1349-1412: Texts" in Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism* (Cambridge, 2011), 151.

These literal, physical feelings are ultimately tied to the "false" realm of the body rather than the "true" domain of the spirit. This falsity is often denounced through reference to the visual faculty of the imagination. The *Cloud*-author asserts that his work is "fer fro any fantasie, or any fals ymaginacion, or queynte opinion; þe whiche ben brouȝt in, not by soche a deuoute & a meek blynde stering of loue, bot by a proude coryous & an ymaginatiif witte."[73] "By stressing the false artifice of certain "queynt" and "coryous" approaches to God, the *Cloud*-author disavows intellectual pursuit. Vision, moreover, is the product of the intellect, and the intellect, the author asserts, must be overcome to achieve union with God. Knowledge of the divine can only be found in the darkness of the "cloud of unknowing."

The *Cloud*-author's distrust of sensory perception extends to the aural realm as he repeatedly points to the ways that the language necessary for contemplation becomes noise. The mystic's very thoughts can "jangle," disrupting contemplation.[74] The *Cloud*-author stresses that it is necessary to escape the noise of language in order to approach the divine, specifying that "Fleschly ianglers, glosers & blamers, roukers & rouners, & alle maner of pynchers" are not the intended audience of his text.[75] Such spoken language is of the body—"fleshly"—and is therefore incompatible with true union with God.

Noise as Eloquent Silence

Even as he denounces the worldliness of the senses, the *Cloud*-author engages the visual and aural capacities of his audience through the representational excesses of literary language, including metaphor, alliteration, and rhetorical redundancy. In the case the *Cloud*, the ultimate goal of contemplation is to disable the intellect and, in doing so, ascend to God. By eliciting

---

[73] *Cloud,* ed. Hodgson, 22.
[74] *Ibid.,* 27
[75] *Ibid.,*130.

such a strong affective and sensual response even as he denounces this response, the *Cloud* engages a paradoxical rhetorical strategy that confounds the intellect, rendering language itself into a noisy sounded husk, thus reinforcing their audience's sensory investment, including their *aural* engagement, with the text. Far from what Minnis calls a "condescen[sion] to human infirmity" this emphasis on the senses, both vision *and* sound, is not a concession at all, but a deliberate rhetorical decision to assimilate the body into the negative theological practice of paradox.[76]

Scholarship on both the *Cloud* and the same author's translation of the *Mystical Theology*, the Middle English *Deonise Hid Diuinite*, has stressed the author's tendency to enact or facilitate the failure of intellect that he advocates through what Cheryl Taylor calls "an exaggerated textuality that stretches language beyond its limits."[77] One strategy of this over-wrought materiality is the use of paradox as a means to confound and disable the intellect. Despite its vocal distrust of the perception of the senses within its spiritual epistemology, the *Cloud* repeatedly facilitates an affective sensory response in its readers. As Minnis writes, the *Cloud of Unkowing* engages with "imaginative denigration of imagination" and "symbolic rejection of symbolism."[78] With the central structuring image of the text, the "cloud of unknowing," the author has provided us with a strikingly visual representation of an essence that he insists lies beyond representation.[79] Yet after introducing this cloud, he immediately negates the worldly grounding of this visual affirmation:

---

[76] Minnis, "Imagination and Affection," 365.
[77] Taylor, "The Cloud-Author's Remaking," 205. See also Taylor's reading of the *Cloud*, in "Paradox Upon Paradox: Using and Abusing Language in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Related Texts" *Parergon* (2005) 31-51. Here she underscores the ways that the *Cloud* author warns readers of the deceptive carnal nature of language as it applies to spiritual instruction and accordingly engages in rhetorical strategies that simultaneously constrict and expand language.
[78] Minnis, "Imagination and Affection," 346.
[79] J. A. Burrow, "Fantasy and Language in the *Cloud of Unknowing*" *Essays in Criticism* (1977) 283-98.

& wene not, for I clepe it a derknes or a cloude, þat it be any cloude congelid of þe humours þat fleen in þe ayre, ne ȝit any derknes soche as is in þin house on niȝtes, when þi candel is oute. For soche a derknes & soche a cloud maist þou ymagin wiþ coriousite of witte, for to bere before þin iȝen in þe liȝtest day of somer; & also aȝenswarde in þe darkest niȝt of winter þou mayst ymagin a clere schinyng liȝt.[80]

As the author warns us against imagining an image taken from the physical world, we cannot but imagine it. It is through this paradox that the *Cloud*-author uses language to call attention to its own inadequacy.

Immediately after his critique of what he takes to be the Rollean literalism of certain mystics, the *Cloud*-author offers his own prescription for the correct approach to contemplation. Contemplatives should not "streyne" their hearts "ouer-rudely, ne oute of mesure."[81] Instead, he recommends that they should work more with a "list," a desire or willed intention: "For euer þe more listly, þe more meekly & goostly;" he explains, "& euer the more rudely, þe more bodily & beestly."[82] Without "list," a mystic's approach to God is overly physical, even bestial, without the tempering influence of the will. The *Cloud*-author goes on to describe an elaborate metaphorical scenario in which a "beastly heart," anthropomorphized to move of its own accord, is beaten away from reading his work with stones:

> For sekirly what beestly herte þat presumiþ for to touche þe hiȝe mounte of þis werke, it schal be betyn away wiþ stones. Stones ben harde & drie in her kynde, & þei hurte ful sore where þei hit. & sekirly soche rude streynynges ben ful harde fastnid in fleschlines of bodily felyng, & ful drie fro any wetynge of grace; & þei hurt ful sore in the sely soule, & make it feestre in fantasie feinid of feendes.[83]

This passage offers a rich example of the paradoxical rhetorical strategy that the *Cloud*-author employs so well. As Minnis would remind us, its vivid use of metaphor engages with the visual

---

[80] *Cloud*, ed. Hodgson, 23.
[81] *Ibid.*, 87.
[82] *Ibid.*, 87.
[83] *Ibid.*, 87.

faculty of the imagination. Yet beyond the visual imagination, the passage makes evocative use

of other fantastic sensory faculties. Touch, conveyed through repeated references to the texture

and feeling of the stones as they pelt against the body, is important. Even more so, I would

argue, is sound. The fantastical faculties denounced by the Cloud-author are simultaneously

engaged in readers through a style marked by lilting parataxis and the marked alliteration in

phrases like "sekirly soche rude streynynges," "fastnid in fleschlines of bodily felyng," "sore in

the sely soule," and finally "feestre in fantasie feinid of feendes."   His extended emphasis on

rhythmic alliterative prose comes at the very point where he condemns a physical and embodied

approach to the knowledge of God. This noisy denunciation of noise bears some resemblance to

the *Cloud*-author's "imaginative denigration of imagination."

The *Cloud*-author's contradictory renunciation and embrace of language and the body is a

pervasive rhetorical strategy throughout the text, a paradoxical move to confound the intellect in

the way of the *via negativa*. At those very moments when the author rejects the physical world,

he clearly takes pleasure in language, employing rhetorical excess and lilting alliteration to

emphasize the physicality that he rejects. This paradoxical assimilation becomes a textual

strategy in its own right, acting to disable the workings of the intellect by rendering meaningful

language into noise. In one of his most memorable and theatrical passages, the *Cloud*-author

vividly describes those who are deceived by false contemplation practices as grotesque fools:

> Some men aren so kumbred in nice corious contenaunces in bodily beryng, þat whan þei
> schal ouȝt here, þei wriþen here hedes onside queyntely, & up wiþ þe chin; þei gape wiþ
> þeire mouþes as þei schulen speke, poynten wiþ here fyngres, or on þeire fyngres, or on
> þeire owne bresetes, or on þeires þat they speke to. Som kan nouþer sit stille, stonde
> stille, ne ligge stille, bot ȝif þei be ouþer waggyng wiþ þeire fete, or ells sumwhat doing
> wiþ þeire hands. Som rowyn wiþ þeire armes in tyme of here spekyng, as hem nedid for
> to swymme ouer a grete water. Som ben euermore smyling & leiȝing at iche oþer worde

þat þei speke, as þei weren gigelotes & nice japing jogelers lackyng kontenaunce.
Semeli cher were wiþ sobre & demure beryng of body and mirþe in maner.[84]

Again, the author's description of such fools as "corious" stresses their emphasis on the false or artificial realm, in this case of the body rather than the intellect. The passage suggests that false contemplatives are ruled by their bodies rather than their minds, a supremacy stressed in extended descriptions of their constant and disjointed movement as well as their noisy "spekyng" and "leiȝing." This perpetual movement of body and voice suggests a lack of quietude that underscores their noisy physicality. The end of this passage affirms that correct contemplative behavior is restrained and quiet.

At the same time, the baroque excesses of the author's description suggest his pleasure in the physical experience of language. The passage is strikingly imagistic, so much so that in one manuscript of the *Cloud*, a medieval reader has added an elaborately doubled face to the rubric chapter heading. The profile of a glowering man is in the foreground with the silhouette of a horned animal visible behind him, as if to depict the "corious countenances" described in the passage.[85]

In addition to its visually evocative nature, the Cloud-author employs strategic syntactical repetition that lends a rhythmic and musical quality to his prose, suggesting an embrace of sound over meaning and therefore enacting noise as a form of eloquent silence. Beginning each sentence that describes a certain type of false contemplative with the word "some," the Cloud-author further incorporates smaller scale anaphora, usually in the tricolon sanctioned by classical rhetoric, within each subsequent description. He enumerates the places on the body to which these jokers point by repeating the phrase "or on (their own fingers, their own breasts, those of

---

[84] *Ibid.*, 99.
[85] British Library MS Royal 17 C xxvi, 64f.

others)." He lists the ways that they cannot be still (sitting, standing, lying). Finally, he catalogs

the manners in which they move "with their (feet, hands, arms)." This rhythmic repetitive

syntax is accompanied by deliciously alliterative phrases like "kumbered in nice corious

contenances" which parallels "gigelotes & nice japing jogelers" at the end of the passage.

Similarly, the alliterative phrase "bodily beryng" in the first sentence is chiastically rewritten as

"beryng of body" at the end, which in turn parallels the alternate final alliteration, "mirþe in

maner." As the striking sounds of such language denature its own signifying capacity,

meaningful words are translated into the eloquent silence favored by pseudo-dionysius. Yet such

silence is, nevertheless, voiced, in the mind of the reader if not through the body. The silently

sounded nature of the text renders it into the very noise that the *Cloud of Unknowing* condemns,

enacting a paradoxical linguistic strategy that disables the intellect.

The *Cloud*-author's emphasis on the aural texture of language in the service of the

paradoxical eloquent silence of the pseudo-dionysian tradition is one manifestation of Rolle's

influence on the religious culture of late-medieval England. Yet as an educated, and most likely

male author writing for an audience of the same, the *Cloud*-author was only one such example.

Several decades after the *Cloud*-author wrote the *Cloud of Unknowing*, shortly after the turn of

the fifteenth century, Rolle's contemplative and textual notion of *canor* was still influencing

innovations in religious devotion and expression. This time, it was in the boisterous life and text

of an East Anglian laywoman and housewife from Bishop's Lynn: Margery Kempe.

Chapter 4

Lay Authority and Margery Kempe's Mystical Bellows

> Stephen jerked his thumb towards the window, saying:
> —That is God.
>   Hooray! Ay! Whrrwhee!
> —What? Mr. Deasy asked.
> —A shout in the street, Stephen answered, shrugging his shoulders.
>   -James Joyce, *Ulysses*

At a moment in her early fifteenth century autobiographical account when Margery

Kempe is at her loudest, rolling, wresting, and shrieking as she approaches Calvary on

pilgrimage, a fifteenth century annotator recently identified as Kempe's scribe Salthows, has

added "nota de clamor[e]" in the margin [Fig 1].[1] The scribe's use of the Latinate word 'clamor'

to describe Kempe's outcry, particularly when the English word is not a feature of Kempe's text,

recalls Richard Rolle's invocations of the term in his *Incendium Amoris*, a text that Kempe

mentions explicitly as an influence. Indeed, Hope Emily Allen, an early editor of Kempe's *Book*,

suggests that this annotator is recalling Rolle's formulation that he cannot express the nature of

this divine song except to say that "clamor iste canor est."[2] Allen interprets the annotation in

Kempe's *Book* as a "misunderstanding" of Rolle, a literalization of the same kind that the *Cloud*-

author warns against when he denounces those zealots who feel a burning and straining in their

core when they are told to "lift up their hearts" to the Lord.[3] Yet, as I have demonstrated, Rolle

used the idea of noise—and the word clamor—to emphasize the literal and corporeal facets of

his mystical experience. Here I will show how Kempe's clamor and Rolle's *canor* operated

---

[1] See British Library MS Additional 61823 folio 33v. Joel Fredell has undertaken the most recent and thorough analysis of the annotators of the manuscript, and is the first to suggest that the scribe of this and other marginalia, who he calls "Little Brown," might be Salthows himself. See Freddel, "Design and Authorship in the *Book of Margery Kempe*" *Journal of the Early Book Society* (2009) 1-28.

[2] Rolle, *Incendium Amoris*, ed. Deansly, 243. For Allen's observation, see Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Meech and Hope Emily Allen (London, 1940) 323, note to p. 154 at p. 323. All quotations from the *Book of Margery Kempe* will be cited parenthetically in-text from this edition.

[3] *Cloud*, ed. Hodgeson, 85.

within overlapping spiritual economies and aural "structures of feeling." Just as Rolle's had

before her, Kempe's outbursts served to organize communities both around and against her.[4]

Inscrutable sounds pervade Kempe's narrative, from the "swet and delectable" (11)

melody she hears that reminds her of paradise, to the roaring thunder and wind that convey

God's will, and the garbled sounds of Latin and other languages unknown to her.[5] Indeed, I

argue that the noises that effervesce in Kempe's account are particular to her brand of vernacular

mysticism in a way that has not yet been emphasized. Feminist exploration of the role of the

body, and especially its feelings and performances, has been a fertile area for scholarship on the

intersection of religiosity and affect in the Middle Ages and Margery Kempe has long been an

object of such inquiry.[6] Such studies have largely focused on the compassion of medieval

religious women (and the men who admired them), a desire to 'suffer with' (*co + passio*) through

identification with the humanity of holy figures and through embodied performances of their

lives. The foundational work of Clarissa Atkinson, for example, explored these issues in relation

to Kempe's tears, an aspect of her character and performance and that has been the focus of

---

[4] In using the phrase "structures of feeling," which I borrow from Raymond Williams *Marxism and Literature*, I aim to explore broadly how lived sensory experience influenced mystical understanding.

[5] Throughout her *Book*, the suggestion that God communicates through the weather is repeated often as Kempe fears the Lord's wrathful storms while she is at sea or prays for God to send a "fayr snowe" (163) to quench a fire in her parish church. Once, in the midst of an experience of violent tears during a church sermon, God describes to her the weather tokens (thunder, lighting, and wind) through which he communicates his divine will (182). On the connection between sound and spirit, and sound and weather, Burnett, "Perceiving Sound." Jeffrey Jerome Cohen also discusses God's communication through weather in Kempe's *Book*. See Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis, 2003) 179-85.

[6] Lynne Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, PA, 1994); Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylavnia Press, 1991); Gail McMurray Gibson, *Theater of Devotion* (Chicago, 1989). See also Beckwith, *Christ's Body*. For feminist treatments of the intersection of the body and religiosity that are not explicitly focused on Margery Kempe, see Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* (Berkeley, CA, 1982) and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. See also McNamer, *Affective Meditation*.

much work on her affective piety.[7] I am also interested in these religious displays, but I would like to shift focus more to their emphatic aurality.

Broadly speaking, sound has been integrated into scholarly explorations of medieval affect as scholars consider how music has been a medium for compassion and feeling.[8] I will expand on such work by highlighting the importance of the physical experience of language, in particular its sound, as an important realm of understanding, both religious and secular. Scholars have considered how the musicality of language has offered readers and auditors a chance to formulate alternate epistemologies that are not tied to the meaning of the words.[9] Yet too often they focus on how these vernacular epistemologies are framed by medieval thinkers as expressive of lack, a concession to the frailty of the human body. I wonder why we must consistently frame this emphasis on the body and its physical experience solely in terms of human failure and frailty. I want to ask what it would mean if we viewed Margery Kempe's noise, both within the narrative of her text and in the messy and discordant style of her prose, as a kind of calculated artistry, one that assures her singularity and spiritual authority.

Indeed, Kempe's nearest contemporary and one-time mentor, Julian of Norwich, offers a useful foil to her account, highlighting the uniqueness of Kempe's boisterous religiosity. In tandem with writers like Walter Hilton and the *Cloud*-author, Julian's book of "shewings" stress the silence and quietude that are necessary contemplation and religious vision. As in Rolle's work, however, "vision" proves an inadequate category to describe Kempe's mystical experience, which encompasses a variety of sensation and feeling. This is, I would suggest, in part tied to the fact that Kempe's account is far more concerned with the *vita activa* than that of

---

[7] Clarissa Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca, 1983). See also Dhira B. Mahoney, "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power over Language" in Sandra J. McEntire, ed. *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays* (New York, 1992) and Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 154-87.
[8] Bruce Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford, 2001).
[9] Zieman, *Singing the New Song* and "Perils of Canor."

Julian.   Indeed, I argue that Kempe translates the biblical scene of Pentecost, which authorizes the apostles to preach the gospels and to communicate through noise, into her own vernacular idiom, thus securing her own legitimacy as a *mediatrix* of God's word and facilitating the many instances of miraculous *xenoglossia* throughout her narrative. Influenced by the effusive affective mysticism of Richard Rolle, among other mystics, Margery Kempe's noisy roaring and wailing offer a lay variation of Rolle's *canor* and the "eloquent silence" of apophatic mystics like the *Cloud*-author, one that attracted negative attention as idle noise from clerical authorities because of its semantic excess and resistance to a singularly articulated understanding of scripture. Grounding her evangelizing authority in the Pentecostal story of holy babble, Kempe forges her own eloquently inarticulate vernacular voice, reflected in the fragmented and disjointed, but nevertheless musical style of her *Book*. With this vernacular *canor*, she conveys her divinely authorized voice across linguistic, cultural, and temporal boundaries.

Bird Voice and Bellows in Kempe's Translation of Pentecost

The scene of fundamental importance to Kempe's mystical reception, and ultimately to her expression of divine truth, occurs nestled next to Kempe's account of a mystical episode in which Christ tells her he wishes to "be homly" with her and lie in her bed as her "weddyd husbond" (90). After recounting this vision, Kempe shifts inexplicably to a discussion of the "diuerse tokenys in hir bodily heryng" that she perceives throughout her mystical episodes (90), and then to a particular instance in which "a maner of sownde as it had ben a peyr of belwys [was] blowing in hir ere" (90). Though at first Kempe fears this noise, God informs her that it is the sound of the Holy Ghost. After this, the sound changes into "þe voys of a dowe," and then,

139

"into þe voys of a lityl bryd which is callyd a reedbrest þat song ful merily oftyn-tymes in hir ryght ere" (91).

This account of Kempe's interior drama echoes the biblical ur text of divine inspiration, the scene of Pentecost in *Acts* 2:1-4, which authorizes the twelve apostles to preach the word of God:

> And when the days of the Pentecost were accomplished, they [the apostles] were all together in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a mighty wind coming, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them parted tongues as it were of fire, and it sat upon every one of them: And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they began to speak with divers tongues, according as the Holy Ghost gave them to speak.

The apostles' first perception of the divine presence is aural, as signaled through the verbal phrase "there came…a sound" (*factus est…sonus*). Signs of the holy spirit quickly turn to vision and to touch as God's voice becomes "a mighty wind" and conveys heat through tongues of fire.[10] By invoking an English songbird and a common household instrument used to kindle fire, Kempe's account above serves as a "domestication" of the divine, a translation of the Pentecost scene into the vernacular English idiom of a housewife from Bishop's Lynn.[11] The "mighty wind" becomes the soft breath of a bellows which stirs in Kempe a fiery love for God that resembles the biblical "tongues of flame;" the dove that commonly represents the Holy Spirit in pictorial accounts of the scene of Pentecost becomes a native English bird. Beyond simply

---

[10] The biblical scene of Pentecost was widely influential in late medieval England, in religious and secular contexts alike. Chaucer, for example, is said to parody this story in *The Summoner's Tale*, and the scene was depicted widely in psalters and other religious texts. For more background on the Pentecost in Chaucer, see Alan Levitan, "The Parody of the Pentecost in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*" *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 11. 3 (Spring, 1971) 236-46. For more on Pentecost and late medieval lay piety, see Clifford Davidson, *Festivals and Plays in Late Medieval England* (Burlington, VT, 2007) 107-38.

[11] Representations of Pentecost in medieval art show the apostles seated together with tongues of flame emanating from the mouth of a bird (presumably the dove that often represents the Holy Spirit in medieval iconography) onto their foreheads. See, for example, the twelfth-century English Psalter illumination [Figure 3a] and the thirteenth-century Latin Psalter illumination [Figure 3b] in Levitan, "Parody of the Pentecost." For a brief discussion of this passage from Margery's *Book* as a "domestication" of the scene of Pentecost Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 161.

illustrating Kempe's demonstrative intimacy and familiarity with God, the intersensoriality of her divine encounter suggests that mystical "vision" is an inadequate category to describe her spiritual experience, raising critical questions about the role of sound in her spiritual understanding and expression. Her translation of the scene of Pentecost, I argue, provides context for the holy noises that Kempe perceives and emits throughout her narrative.

Seeing God's Voice in Julian's *Shewings*

Kempe's account embraces sound and aural mystical experience far more than those of other medieval religious women. Writing by female mystics often betrays distrust for aural encounters with God. The German mystic and composer Hildegard of Bingen, to name a continental example, repeatedly uses visual metaphors to convey her aural experience, stressing their perception not with her body, but with her soul. The sound of God's voice is light and Hildegard asserts that she experiences it not aurally, but visually: "I see [God's voice] only in my spirit, with my eyes wide open, and thus I never suffer the defect of ecstasy in these visions.... Thus the things I write are those that I see and hear in my vision, with no words of my own added…. Moreover, the words I see and hear in the vision are not like the words of human speech, but are like a blazing flame and a cloud that moves through clear air" Hildegard stresses her visual experience of the divine voice to reinforce the authority of her own words, suggesting that in her case seeing, not hearing, was believing. [12]

Margery Kempe's contemporary mystic, Julian of Norwich takes pains to highlight the interiority of her perception by stressing that God's voice speaks to her in silence. Indeed, it is

---

[12] Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen,* trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman (New York, 1998) vol. 2, letter 103r, 23. For more on the role of sound to German female mystics including Hildegard and others, see Raymond Powell and Geri Henderson, "The Power of Words: Speech, Sound, Song, Silence, and Audition in the Writings of Five Medieval Women," *Mystics Quarterly* 35.1-2 (March/June, 2009).

helpful to examine Julian's views toward the senses as a point of contrast to Kempe's use of noise to draw attention to problems of ineffability and forge her own vernacular authority. To Julian, the "sensualite" of the body is abased in relation to its "substance," a term that evokes learned philosophical terminology that juxtaposed "substance" or essence with "accident" or physical characteristics. Thus Julian's substance is a kind of essence or soul in opposition to the sensual materiality of the flesh. Julian stresses that as we approach divine union and understanding, "In our substance we aren full; in our sensualite we faylen."[13] In keeping with this view, Julian advances an understanding of the senses, in particular vision, that stresses a mystical progression toward God. Julian refers to her revelations from the Lord as a "techyng…as it were the beginning of an ABC" (108).[14] By invoking elementary education, Julian stresses that her visionary physical experiences of God are an introduction—as Walter Hilton might have it, a step on a "scale of perfection" toward more perfect contemplation.

Julian also evokes the language of enigma and obscurity common in the *Cloud of Unknowing* and tradition of the *via negativa*. Recounting a vision of the death of Christ in minute detail, she nevertheless stresses that she sees this scene "swemely and derkeley" (50). Julian's half-dark means of perception is a mode of anagogic or "doubled" sight through which the vision of the body imperfectly mirrors the more pure vision of the soul. After narrating her account of a moment of spiritual doubt and frustration at her incomplete ability to understand her "shewings," Julian recounts a vision, which she describes as "the answere to the doute afor" (101). In this vision, God shows Julian "full mystily" (101) a lord and his servant, each of which, as she explains "was shewid double in the lord and…in the servant" (101). The sight of the two figures in "bodily likeness" leads to her "gostly understondyng" (102) or spiritual sight.

---

[13] *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton (Kalamazoo, MI, 1994) 118. All subsequent quotations from Julian will be cited by page number in-text.
[14] Another reference to Julian's teaching as an ABC occurs on 149.

Julian expresses her understanding in terms of vision over all other senses. She conveys this experience to her readers through prose that produces striking images: the entire cosmos as a hazelnut, for example, or the suffering Christ turning blue as lead. Her mystical experiences, she hastens to tell us, are silent. Revealing that the devil's temptations are overcome through the passion of Christ, God appears to Julian and "er [he] shewid ony words" asks her to behold him with naked intellect, "as the simplicite of the soule migte take it" (56). Only then does he form words "without voice and opening of lippis" in Julian's soul (56). Similarly, Julian later describes a "restful shewing" (134) in which the Lord appears to her and "shewid…full mekely, withouten voice and withouten opening of lipps" that her earlier vision "was no raving that [Julian] saw" (135). By insisting that her vision was "restful" and that her perception of God's mystical voice is not "raving," Julian takes pains to underscore authenticity of her visions by emphasizing their beatific quietude and stillness. The knowledge that emerges from spiritual union with Christ, as Julian makes clear at several points, is interior and quiet. Reflecting on the meaning of a vision of Christ's passion, Julian comes to realize that "the more we besyn us to knowen [God's] privities in this or any other thing, the ferther shal we be from the knowing thereof" (79). To Julian, "business" of the body is a distraction from knowing God's mysteries.

Indeed, in contrast to vision, for Julian, aural experience is repeatedly aligned with a noisy lack of quietude associated with the devil. In one vision of the crucifixion, Julian sees a host of devils and explains that, though she is "seker and save" when she views the cross, "beside the Crosse was no sekernes for uggyng of fends" (63). Julian's portrait of the scene places the teeming mass of fiends in contrast to the serene singularity of the cross. Moreover Julian gestures toward their noisy disruption with the word "uggyng," which conveyed not only

143

fear or dread, but also the quivering movements (and, onomatopoetically, the grunting sounds) associated with it.[15]

The suggestion of noise in association with devils that is implicit in this scene is made more explicit in a later vision in which the devil attempts to lure Julian to despair. She recounts:

> After this the fend came agen with his hete and with his stinke and made me full besy. The stinke was so vile and so peynful and also dredful and travelous. Also I heard a body jangeling as it had be of two bodies, and both, to my thynkyng, jangyled at one time as if they had holden a parliament with a gret busyness. And al was soft muttering, as I understowde nowte what they seid. And al this was to stirre me to dispeir, as methowte, semand to me as thei scornyd bidding of beds, which arn seid boistrosly with mouth, failing devowte entending and wise diligens the which we owen to God in our prayors (135-36).

Invoking a wide array of "busy" and unwanted sensory experiences, Julian asserts that the devil's noisy "jangeling" is suggestive of a doubled body in chaotic disorder and disagreement, like the raucous clamor of an un-unified parliament. This parliamentary metaphor implicitly disavows public life and reinforces Julian's own attachment to a secluded life of contemplation.[16] Moreover, it ties such public life to noise; the devil's discordant and excessive body gives rise to his inscrutable muttering, which frustrates attempts at comprehension.

The lesson Julian takes from this vision stresses her suspicion of sensory perception and embodied language and understanding. To the mystic, the noise and discord the devil sows in this vision is a strategy to affect her doubt and ultimately despair as she vacillates from one thought to the next without a "seker" interpretation. Julian's perception of the embodied nature of the devil's jangling and muttering seems to call into question the very nature of language,

---

[15] Though a gerund form of the verb *uggen* could refer generally to "fear," the verb could also refer to quaking or trembling. See MED "uggen" v. and "ugging[e]" ger.

[16] Despite her mandate for stillness and quiet in contemplation, Julian's book resists such quietude in its script for its own reception. As Julian insists at the beginning of her final chapter, "This book is begunne be Gods gift and His grace, but it is not yet performid, as to my syte" (154). This lack of closure ensures countless more iterations of the text as it is performed and perceived in the service of spiritual knowledge. Julian's acknowledgement of her book's busy future suggests that, despite being out of place in the *vita contemplativa*, there was a role for noise in the active life of the mystic who sought to spread the word of God. While active evangelizing was not at the forefront of her spiritual agenda during her own life, she nevertheless imagined an afterlife of being heard.

causing her to reflect on her own voiced prayer.   She condemns prayer, which is "seid bostrosly with mouth." As the word "boistros[e]," meaning "crude or noisy," (from the Old French *boisteous* or "limping") implies, such prayer is excessively embodied and lacks a straight path from interior investment to action or the "devowte entendyng and wise diligens" that is owed to God.[17] This dis-alignment of "entending" and speech enables the body, with its busy motions and sounds, to overtake the yearning of the individual will in its straight path toward Christ. Thus, for Julian, all busy and unwanted movements of the mind and body in prayer and contemplative practice are understood in terms of noise, a sensation that is felt with the entire body, not simply with the ears. Such noise is counter-productive to efforts at mystical union. Instead, spiritual knowledge emerges in quietude of mind and body, which must be cultivated by the mystic in her contemplative practice.

Canor and Kempe's Wallowing Rumination

Margery Kempe's account of mystical divine union diverges from Julian's in its embrace of aural and other sensory experience, falling closely in line with Richard Rolle's adoption of heat, sweetness, and song or *canor*. Indeed, the *Book of Margery Kempe* explicitly cites Rolle's *Incendium Amoris* as an influence on her mode of mystical reception (39). Rolle's effect on Kempe is the most clear in the *Book*'s invocations of sound and smell, and through its language of heat, flame and fire. Kempe describes her mystical marriage to the Godhead and the various non-verbal signs or "tokens" she receives through this spiritual conversation. In a moment particularly resonant with Rolle, God gives her a "flawme of fyer wondir hoot and delectabyl & ryth comfortably, nowt wasting but evyr incresyng…" (88). This flame directly recalls Rolle's pleasurable "fire of love," underscoring Rolle's influence on Kempe's perception and

---

[17] MED, "boistous" (adj.) def. 1

understanding of mystical contemplation. The *Book* evokes Rolle's sensorium more subtly

through its emphasis on smell and sweetness. Directly after God marries Kempe in the company

of a host of angles and saints, the *Book* describes her experience of multi-sensory contemplation.

She "felt swet smellys wyth hir nose," which "[a]re swettyr, hir thowt, than evyr was ony swet

thing that sche smellyd beforn, ne sche myth nevyr tellyn how swet it wern, for hir thowt sche

myth a leved therby yyf they wolde a lestyd." (87). For Kempe, the smell of the Holy Spirit has

a taste: a sweet one that she reckons could provide enough sustenance for her to live on if it

would only remain present with her. This olfactory-gustatory perception of the Godhead

transforms into an aural experience when "Sumtyme sche herd wyth hir bodily erys sweche

sowndys and melodijs þat sche myth not wel heryn what a man seyd to hir in þat tyme les he

spoke þe lowder" (87-88). Akin to Rolle, with his synaesthetic notion of *canor*, Kempe conflates

smell, taste, and hearing to underscore the sweetly mellifluous taste and delectable sound of

God's voice.

Indeed, the tasty quality of God's voice, and Kempe's noisy imitation of it proves to be

an integral aspect of her aural experience and understanding of the godhead. Kempe's tendency

in her affective devotional practices to understand through performative imitation of both Christ

and the Virgin Mary has been well documented.[18] Adding to such accounts, I argue that

Kempe's noisy vocalizations contribute to her mimetic spiritual understanding by incorporating

the experience of Christ, absorbing it into her body through her own lay version of monastic

ruminatio. Her bellows begin, the *Book* recounts, when she is on pilgrimage to the holy land.

By tracing the steps of Christ at Calvary, Kempe maps out his path "in þe cite of hir sowle" and

experiences the crucifixion as if she were present to view it herself, "cry[ing] wyth a lowed voys

---

[18] See for example, Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, 47-65 and Beckwith, *Christ's Body,* 76-79.

as þow hir hert xulde a brostyn a-sundyr" (68). Kempe's cries persist through the narrative whenever she sees a crucifix, a male child, a beaten animal, or is otherwise reminded of Christ's suffering and death.

Such boisterous noise-making is an affective display that accompanies Kempe's *imitatio Christi*, a process that expresses her longing desire for God. Further, her dramatic vocalizations at the scene of Christ's passion are a means of understanding Christ's experience through reliving his physical pain. As she approaches the site of Christ's crucifixion, the *Book* reports that Kempe "fel down þat sche mygth not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd & wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys a-brode" (68). Kempe mimes the gestures both of Christ dying on the cross, arms outspread, and of his mother Mary, writhing in empathetic agony on the ground. Her physical contortions emphasize her vocal inarticulacy.

Yet this inarticulacy is crucial to Kempe's spiritual understanding. Though its primary meaning refers to movements of a body turning to and fro, "walwen" could also refer to "rolling one's food or utterance around in the mouth," a phrase that resonates with early monastic reading practices in which monks read aloud in a low voice, either individually or as a group.[19] Such murmured reading was a way to enforce the attentiveness necessary to understand and learn the sacred texts they read: the reader's ears would strain to catch the soft noises that issued from the reader's mouth and process them into a narrative or moral lesson that made sense. It was also a means of incorporation through textual 'eating' or *rumination*; the movement of sacred words about on the tongue was a way to savor them, absorb them more effectively into the mind, and assimilate their moral value into the body.[20] This practice was so widespread that monasteries

---

[19] MED, "walwen," (v.)
[20] Gehl, "*Competens Silentium*," 141. For further discussion of monastic mumbling, see Illich, *Vineyard*, 51-65.

were often called the dwelling places of "mumblers and munchers."[21] The practice of monastic

mumbling provides a helpful template through which to understand the passionate and noisy

devotional displays of a largely illiterate woman like Margery Kempe. Her own roaring and

wallowing is a lay version of monastic mumbling, dramatically magnified. Instead of reading

about Christ's life, she incorporates his experience by occupying the same physical space and

imitating the same physical movements.

The intense disjointed movement and speech that we see in Kempe's *Book* has an

illustrative analogue and counterpoint in the mysticism of the thirteenth century Italian mystic,

Angela of Foligno. Throughout her mystical narrative, God advises Foligno to "escape from…

words" in a manner consistent with affective mysticism, and to understand through feelings.[22]

Like Kempe, inarticulate noise is important to Angela's spirituality and she is known for

dramatic wailing and "screech[ing]" (*strixerat, stridere*) which frequently embarrasses those

around her, including her confessor and scribe. Angela's vocalized wails, expressed at her loss of

rapture, underscore the way that her divine experience resists human language. [23] Though they

are expressive, her inarticulate utterances do not seem calculated to communicate. Instead they

are affective indications of her experience; a vocalized means of receiving God, which extends

from her mouth through the rest of her body as well. At various points in her *Memorial*, Angela

describes the spontaneous dislocation of all of her joints in moments of ecstasy, an event that is

accompanied by "the greatest delight" and a loud noise.[24] Like Margery Kempe does with her

noisy "wallowing," Angela receives and understands God through painful disarticulation of body

---

[21] Illich, *Vinyard*, 54.
[22] Angela of Foligno, *Angela of Foligno's 'Memorial': Translated from the Latin with Introduction, Notes, and Interpretive Essay*, trans. John Cirignano, introduction by Cristina Mazzoni (Cambridge, 1999) 41. For the Latin text, see Angela da Foligno, *Memoriale*, ed. Enrico Menestò (Firenze, 2013).
[23] *Angela of Foligno's 'Memorial,'* 43.
[24] *Ibid.* 51.

and of voice. At these moments of rapture, Angela takes pleasure in the abjection of pain and

noise, which bring her closer to God. This abasement informs her entire religious program, the

most extreme example of which arguably occurs when she drinks the puss-filled water she has

used to bathe lepers, and declares that it tastes like communion.[25]

This mode of understanding beyond language, through the body is important to Margery

Kempe's mystical "wallowing" as well. The Middle English verb "walwen" used to convey

Kempe's debilitated physical posture and motion stems from the Old English *wealwian*, meaning

both "to fade or wither" and "to wallow, roll" in a vigorous fashion, often stimulated by the

passions.[26] Much like Richard Rolle's lovesick *languor amoris*, Kempe's "wallowing" conveys

a simultaneous weakness and passionate vitality, underscoring the paradoxical way that she gains

strength and authority through her imitation of holy abjection.

Kempe's Noisy Evangelism

Unlike Angela's screeching and dis-articulation, however, Kempe's noise-making is not

simply a byproduct of her devotion that helps her to incorporate the experience of Christ into her

mystical understanding. It is also a means of evangelizing. As the biblical account of Pentecost

suggests, the "mighty wind" that infuses the bodies of twelve apostles with the sound of God's

voice passes through them in the form of miraculous glossolalia, rendering their preaching voices

into ebullient sounds comprehensible across all languages. This biblical precedent raises

questions about Kempe's noise and the evangelizing voice at both thematic and stylistic levels. I

argue that, just as her forebear Rolle does with his *canor*, Kempe translates the affective aural

---

[25]*Ibid.,* 53.

[26] See Bosworth, Joseph. "An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online." Wealwian. March 21, 2010. Accessed December 18, 2014. http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/034820. See also Bosworth, Joseph. "An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online." Wealwian. March 21, 2010. Accessed December 18, 2014. http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/034821.

experience that facilitates her mystical epistemology into her own boisterous language which is audible in both the content and style of her *Book*. In doing so, she effectively forges a vernacular authority that enables her to communicate across semantic, cultural, and temporal boundaries.

The orthodoxy of lay preaching was a hotly contested issue at the turn of the fifteenth century. In the wake of the plague, badly-trained mendicant preachers proliferated, explicitly commodifying religious offices by offering their services for a profit, a dynamic that preoccupied Langland, as we have seen. Likewise, the Wycliffite or "lollard" heresy promoted the radical possibility of individualized spiritual understanding without the need for clerical mediators and advocated the right of laypeople, including women, to preach the word of God. As Wycliffism gained followers, it also drew the ire of religious elites, who undertook systematic and sometimes violent efforts to suppress it.[27] Tracing the suppression of Kempe's noise-making (which includes several accusations of lollardy) underscores the transgressive nature of her voice and begins to flesh-out her self-appointed status as a lay preacher.[28] Andrew Cole argues that Kempe cultivates lollardy as an affective form, assuming the role of the "shameful, crying 'lollard'" to fulfill her desire to be shamed for Christ.[29] I would add that, like Langland's "lunatyk lollares," and as we will see, the Wife of Bath, Kempe's associations with "lollardy" underscore her engagement with the physical properties of language as a means of accessing and understanding spiritual truth.

Many people throughout Kempe's narrative, particularly men in positions of religious power, vocally denounce her authority to preach and so betray a fixation on the disturbingly public nature of Kempe's voice. On a visit to Canterbury, she is "gretly despised and reprevyd"

---

[27] For a general account of the opposition to Wycliffism, see Bose, "Opponents of John Wyclif." Cole's account of the Blackfriar's counsel, at which religious leaders officially condemned a number of conclusions set out in Wyclif's works, is also helpful. See Cole, *Literature and Heresy,* 3-22.
[28] Kempe is accused of being a lollard at 28-29, 111
[29] For more on Margery Kempe and lollardy see Cole, *Literature and Heresy* 155-82; quote at 156.

(27) for her tears by monks and secular men. Even her husband walks away from her "as he had

not a knowyn hir" (27). When she repeats a scriptural passage to a wealthy old monk, he replies

"I wold þow wer closyd in an hows of ston þat þer schuld no man speke wyth þe" (27).

Similarly, when she tells a younger monk that he should support her as a servant of God, he tells

her, "Eyther þow hast the Holy Gost or ellys þow hast a devil within þe, for þat þu spekest her to

us is Holy Wrytte and þat hast þu not of þiself" (28). Other religious authorities question the

source and orthodoxy of Kempe's voice as she travels on pilgrimage both at home and abroad.

When an English priest, whom she considers "hir enmye" (84) for not approving of her choice to

reclaim her virginity by wearing white clothing, sees her in black and remarks that he is glad of

it. In response, Kempe talks back, stressing God's official sanction of her former clothing. The

priest tells her, "Now wote I wel þat þu hast a devil wythinne þe, for I her hym spekyn to me"

(85). Like the young monk who questions her quotation of scripture above, this English priest

locates Kempe's devilry specifically in her voice, which continues to speak from a position of

authority.

Just as these clerics work to silence Kempe by maligning her words, her fellow pilgrims,

also irritated by her noisy disruption, suppress her voice through similar efforts. The fellowship

repeatedly seeks to silence her as they tire of her refusal to eat meat and her constant roaring and

wailing. When they are unsuccessful, they isolate her by refusing to listen. As her company

encounters an English friar in the German town of Constance, her fellow pilgrims request that

the friar refuse to offer Kempe companionship and food unless she agrees to eat meat and "levyn

hir wepyng…and …not speke so mech of holynes" (63-64). Her company repeatedly leaves

Kempe behind, telling her they "wold not suffren hir as hir husband dede" (61) and that they

"woldyn no mor medyl wyth hir (64). When they have no choice but to travel with her, her

company resorts to humiliation. Journeying around Constance, her fellow pilgrims cut her gown short and make her wear a woman's sackcloth garment, "for sche xuld ben holdyn a fool & þe pepyl xuld not makyn of hir ne han hir in reputacyon" (62). By rendering her body legible only as that of a "fool" (a buffoon or sinner) Kempe's companions attempt to silence her by damaging her reputation, ensuring that, though she may speak, no one will listen. These episodes illustrate the political stakes of her choice to speak, cry, and wail. Kempe's bellows violate public space in a way deemed to be unsuitable for the laity, especially lay women. The emphatically public nature of her voice underscores her investment in the evangelizing *vita activa*.

Kempe makes even more explicit attempts to embody clerical authority by appropriating liturgical discourse and language. As a crowning visual sign of God's contact at the end of one of her more elaborate mystical experiences, she sees "many white thyngys flying al a-bowte hir on euery syde as thykke in a maner as motys in the sunne; it weryn ryth sotyl and comfortabyl, & þe brygtare þat the sunne schyned, þe better sche myth se hem" (88). Though at first Kempe is afraid of these strange dust motes, God explains to her that they are a "tokyn" that "God is in þe & þu art in hym" (88) and that they are actually angels protecting her visions from the meddling of the devil. Upon learning this, the *Book* tells us, Kempe begins to welcome these figures with the Latin phrase used by priests to welcome the divine element into the host: "Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini" ("Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," 88). Kempe's priestly utterance here serves to underscore the sacramental nature of her visions.[30] Yet it also points to her assumption of authority, her theatrical embodiment of the role of priest, as a justification for her place to speak and preach.

---

[30] Lynn Staley makes this point in her Norton Critical Edition of Margery's *Book*. See *The Book of Margery Kempe: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. and trans. Lynn Staley (New York, 2001) 93, n. 2058-9.

This episode also highlights the complicated nature of Kempe's literacy as a woman who is familiar with the sounds of Latin, but not their meaning. The *Book* claims that she does not speak Latin; her occasional Latin outbursts are presented as miraculous manifestations of divine grace. Yet at this moment, the *Book* makes no comment on the wondrous quality of Kempe's Latin utterance, suggesting not that the words themselves are meaningless, but that they have no specific meaning to her; they are simply sounds that she recognizes from the liturgical performances that she has witnessed. The meaning of these words lies not at the linguistic level, but at the level of sound and circumstance.

Kempe's use of Latin sounds in this passage demonstrates how she utilizes a kind of paralinguistic noise through the use of both Latin and vernacular English in its somatic rather than semantic capacity. This dynamic informs repeated instances of *xenoglossia* throughout Kempe's narrative, stressing her miraculous ability to communicate across language barriers.[31] Indeed, as often as her own countrymen abandon and alienate her on account of her crying and roaring, Kempe's cries repeatedly garner her credulous followers among those who do not speak her language. She takes care to assert that she was loved and embraced by the inhabitants of foreign lands. Describing her experience in Jerusalem, for example, Kempe explains how "Also þe Saraȝines mad mych of hir & conueyd hir & leddyn hir abowtyn in þe cuntre wher sche wold gon. & sche fond alle pepyl good on-to hir & gentyl saf hir owyn cuntremen" (75). When she acquires a German priest and confessor as an ally against her hostile company, they are hindered by a language barrier. Yet it is clear that Kempe's bellowing makes an impression on the priest:

---

[31] For more on Margery's Pentecostal *xenoglossia*, see Christine Cooper-Rompato, *The Gift of Tongues: Women's Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages* (University Park, PA, 2010) 103-42 and Jonathan Hsy, "Overseas Travel and Language Contact in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *The Sea and Englishness in the Middle Ages: Maritime Narratives, Identity, and Culture*, ed. Sebastian Sobecki (Cambridge, 2011) 159-78 at 164.

> & sithyn sche schewyd hym þe secret thyngys of reuelacyonys & of hey contemplacyons, & hoe sche had swech mend in hys Passyon & so gret compassion whan God wolde ȝeve it þat sche fel down þerwyth & myth not beryn it. Þan sche wept bittyrly, sche sobbyd boistowsly & cryed full lowed & horybly þat þe pepil was oftyn-tymes aferd & gretly astoyned,…not leuyng it was þe werk of God but raþar sum euyl spirit, er a sodeyn sekenes, er ellys symulacyon & ypocrisy falsely feyned of hir own self. The prest had gret trost þat it was the werk of God… (83).

Simply put, Kempe's aural impression on this priest incites his faith. Beyond the content of her words, the full sensory range of her performance of piety moves the priest to trust that God stirs her and speaks through her.

Yet the faith of this priest is put to the test. Beginning to be persuaded by the disbelief of his countrymen and concerned that Kempe's tears in church are simply a confidence game to garner the support of the audience, he sets out to prove to himself that her tears are a gift from God. As he brings her into an empty church, Kempe roars so loudly that the priest is "astoyned him-self, for it semyd to hys heryng þat sche cryed neuyr so lowde be-for þat tyme. & than he beleuyd fully þat it was þe werkyng of þe Holy Gost, and neitþyr feynyng ne ypocrise of hir owyn self" (84). Again, it is the sense of astonishment and wonder created by Kempe's aural impression, and not the communication of a pointed spiritual message, that incites faith in the priest.

It is through these instances of *xenoglossia* that Kempe begins to forge her own noisy vernacular authority. She describes how an English priest is intent on testing the validity of her confession with the German priest, an objection based on the notion that Kempe's confession would be invalid if her confessor were not to understand her. Deciding to try the extent of the latter's comprehension, the English priest invites both Kempe and her confessor to a meal. The English priest is able to communicate with the German priest in Latin and with Margery in English, though while he does so the German priest sits sulkily "in a maner of heuyness for

cawse he vndirstod not what þei seyden in Englysch" (97). Yet when Kempe herself speaks to

her German confessor, telling him "in hyr owyn langage in Englysch a story of Holy Writte

whech sche had lernyd of clerkys whil sche wa at hom in Inglond" (97) he can understand her.

While the passage emphasizes Kempe's orthodoxy by stressing that she has learned her scripture

from clerics, it reinforces the transgressive authority of her voice by claiming ownership over

"hyr owyn langage." The redundancy of this assertion, that Kempe speaks "in hyr owyn langage

in Englysch," suggests that she speaks simultaneously in English and in her own language

parallel to English, an adjacent argot that out-vernaculars the vernacular in the logic of spiritual

competition characteristic of Kempe's narrative.[32]

But what does Kempe's "owyn langage" sound like? The conclusion of this episode links

this singular idiom to noise. The episode ends with Kempe's commentary:

> …so blyssed mote God ben þat mad an alyon to vndirstondyn hir whan hir owyn cuntre-
> men had forsakyn hir & wolde not heryn hir confessyon les þan sche wolde a left hir
> wepyng & spekyng of holyness. & ȝet sche myth not wepyn but what God ȝaf it hyr. &
> oftyn-tymes he gaf it so plentyuowsly that sche cowed not wythstonde it. But the mor
> þat sche wolde a wythstonde it er put it a-wey, þe mor strongly it wrowt in hir sowle
> wyth so holy thowtys that sche schuld not sesyn. Sche xulde sobbyn & cryen ful lowde
> al a-geyn hir wyl that many man & woman also wondyrd on hir þerfore" (98).

The passage transitions oddly between the wonder of Kempe's *xenoglossia*, which allows "an

alyon to understonden hir" and her God-given gift of noise and tears, each a problem centered

around the issue of legibility. The transition suggests a conflation between these two types of

noise; first the sound of a language foreign to her auditors and second her cries and wailing. It

renders each eloquent in its own way.

---

[32] On this logic of spiritual competition, see Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, 50.

Kempe's Chattering Text

Just as Kempe's narrative thematizes her chattering evangelism, noise pervades the *Book's* narrative voice at the level of the style and form. This becomes clear from the opening pages of the text as Kempe describes how the text came into being, curiously framing the ineffability of her experience in terms of illegibility. Kempe's account underscores the role of both God's voice and her own as unintelligible noise and emphasizes the necessity of her own intervention to make that noise legible. The *Book's* proem begins by telling readers how, despite encouragement from certain credulous clerks, Kempe does not write down her "felyngys" of God until twenty years or more from their beginning (3). It goes on to describe the series of amanuenses whom she employs to write her story when she finally decides to undertake this process.

Her first scribe is an Englishman from Germany, a good friend to Kempe. Having "good knowlach of þis creatur & of hir desyr," this man moves himself and his family to England and writes on Kempe's behalf "tyl he had wretyn as mech as sche wold tellyn hym for þe tym þat þei were togydder" (4). When her first scribe dies, Kempe takes what he has written to a second scribe, another familiar priest, who agrees to work with her. But, "Þe booke was so euel wretyn þat he cowd lytyl skyll þeron, for it was neiþyr good Englysch ne Dewch, ne þe lettyr was not schapyn ne formyd as oþer letters ben" (4). To emphasize the extent of the manuscript's complete illegibility, the *Book* describes how Kempe's priest, the second scribe, abandons the task of transcription both in frustration and influenced by the "euel spekyng" (4) of the public about her. The priest tells her to take her unreadable manuscript to a third man, whom he claims has worked with her first scribe and knows his writing. But, the third man, who should be familiar with the first scribe's handwriting "cowd not wel fare þerwyth, þe boke was so euel sett

& so vnreasonably wretyn" (4). The illegibility of Kempe's first manuscript suggests that it is a kind of written noise, a set of strange and incomprehensible symbols aligned with her clamorous voice. This formulation begins to suggest Kempe's articulation of her own language, one that is virtually unrecognizable and distinct from the language of written authority.

In its role as written noise, Kempe's unintelligible first manuscript highlights how she herself is in control of her own legibility. Not recognizing the strange symbols of the first scribe, the second scribe asserts that "þer schuld neuyr man redyn it, but it wer special grace" (4). When, the priest returns to his promised task of transcription, he asks her to pray for him. Kempe, for her part, tells the priest that "sche schuld prey to God for hym and purchasyn hym grace to redden it and wrytyn it also" (5) and when she does so, it seems to the priest that "it was mych mor esy…þan it was beforntym" (5). Kempe's use of the verb "purchasen" to describe the spiritual economy of prayer implies a direct and equal trade between Margery and the Godhead, wherein Margery offers prayers in exchange for divine grace. The transactional nature of this formulation points to her immense power as a *mediatrix* between God and man and to her ultimate control over the legibility of her own text.

Kempe's insistence on the ineffability and illegibility of her experience translates into her own singularly boisterous textual style, an inscrutable mode of writing that ensures her own control over the text. As Cohen writes, the *Book* "resists harmonization into linear chronology."[33] Yet Kempe's *Book* also attains a level of rhetorical sophistication that paradoxically contributes to its noisiness. Such strategic poetic language allows the aural texture of language to overtake pointed meaning, rendering its own musicality into noise and highlighting the *Book*'s status as a lay variation of *canor*. The *Book*'s concluding prayer is

---

[33] Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 167, emphasis added.

exemplary of the rhetorical capacity of Kempe's voice. In its final chapter, Kempe invokes the

Pentecostal prayer, *Veni creator spiritus* ("Come creator spirit") to begin her own concluding

orison:

> Whan sche had sayd "*Veni creator spiritus*" wyth þe versys, sche seyd on þis maner,
> "The Holy Gost I take to witnesse, owr Lady, Seynt Mary, þe modir of God, al holy
> cowrte of hevyn, and all my gostly faderys her in erth…(248).

At this moment, the *Book* switches from the third person into the first person, suggesting a direct

quotation of Kempe's voice. Yet its invocation of the Pentecostal hymn reminds us that God

speaks through her.

The prayer that follows is sophisticated, demonstrating a grasp of Latinate rhetoric that

would have been associated with the learned male clerical culture from which Kempe was

pointedly excluded.[34] In a sentence of almost Ciceronian proportion, she prays:

> As for my crying, my sobbyng, and my wepyng, Lord God al-mythy, as wistly as þu
> knowist what scornys, what schamys, what despitys, & what reprevys I have had, þerfor,
> &, as wistly as it is not in my power to wepyn neyþr lowde ne stille for no deuocyon ne
> for no swetnes, but only for þe ȝyft of the Holy Gost, so wistly, Lord, excuse me a-geyn
> al þis world to knowyn & to trowyn þat it is þi werke & þis ȝyfte for magnifying of þi
> name & for encresyng of oþer mennys lof to þe, Jhesu (249).

The tripartite structure of the sentence set up with the phrases "as wistly," "as wistly," and "so

wistly" makes use of tricolon with *variatio*. It also sets up Kempe's smaller-scale anaphora and

parallel structure in the phrases "what scornys, what schamys, what despitys, and what

reprevys…" and "for magnifying of thi name and for encresyng of other mennys lof to the."

This emphasis on repeated phrasing and parallel structure is extended into the following section

of the prayer as Kempe names the individuals and groups for whom she prays with the phrase "I

cry the mercy." This phrase appears no fewer than ten times in succession, creating rhythmic

---

[34] For more on how Margery's rhetoric in her final prayer appropriates patriarchal language see Mahoney, "Margery
Kempe's Tears," 47-9.

undulation of text that contrasts with the much shorter vernacular speech patterns of the rest of the book. Kempe's Latinate prayer in English mirrors Rolle's alliterative Latin *canor* as well as the eloquent silence of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. It is significant that both of the passages I point to above invoke Kempe's voice, the first in content as it addresses her heaven-sent roaring, and the second through her meta-articulation of her own shout, "I cry," "I cry." The rhetorical sophistication in these moments calls attention to the distance between Kempe's eloquent prayer and her apparently inarticulate cries. Yet the also serve to minimize that distance. Here, Kempe's shout is also her song: *clamor iste canor est*.

Manuscript Echoes

Understanding how Kempe's noise-making informs the style of her prose sheds light on the early manuscript and print history of her narrative. Given her complicated literacy and her need for an amanuensis to transcribe her work, scholars have debated over the extent of Kempe's agency in creating her own text as well as the degree to which we can identify the "authentic" worldview of a medieval woman in her voice.[35] I take for granted the composite nature of the *Book's* authorial voice and acknowledge the impossibility of accessing Margery Kempe's unmediated thoughts and feelings through the layers of textual mediation we are left with. Like many scholars, I am interested in the ways that Kempe's male scribe and readers attempted to wrangle her voice to fit their own agendas and desires. But I am also interested in what these manipulations say about how these men experienced Kempe's text, which I think can begin to

---

[35] Meech and Allen's EETS edition of Kempe's *Book* introduced this issue. See Meech's Introduction, vii-ix and Allen's notes to the Preface, 257-58. Scholars such as Staley and Lochrie have since taken up the issue in their book-length studies of Kempe. Nicholas Watson and Felicity Reddy have debated the issue in an exchange in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (South Bend, IN, 2005). See Watson, "The Making of the *Book of Margery Kempe*," 395-434 and Reddy, "Text and Self in the Book of Margery Kempe," 335-53. Joel Fredell's article on the marginal annotator's of Kempe's *Book* also addresses the subject from the perspective of manuscript history.

outline how the structures of feeling I have sketched with the content of Kempe's *Book* reverberated through its reception in the decades after her death.

The afterlife of the *Book of Margery Kempe* highlights Kempe's singularly inscrutable style as its male scribes, readers, and editors attempt to tame and contain her narrative.[36] Joel Fredell has distinguished six separate annotators of the *Book*, including the "Little Brown" annotator, with whom I began this chapter, as well as three separate hands writing in red ink, all of whom have previously been lumped together under the moniker of the "Red-Ink Annotator." Despite their differing inks and handwriting, Fredell identifies similar objectives among each scribe to reshape Kempe's narrative into a recognizable hagiographic form. Little Brown, or as Fredell argues, the *Book's* original scribe Salthows, for example, adds notes next to episodes that begin to shape the text into the *vita* structure of contemporary hagiography. Similarly, the Big Red N Annotator highlights episodes that could come together to form a *passio* narrative of Kempe's "martyrdom" at the hands (or mouths) of her detractors. Two other scribes working with red ink, the Ruby Paraph Annotator and the Red-Ink Annotator focus on episodes that illustrate Kempe's striking approach to contemplation. These varying impulses to organize Kempe's text testify to its very messiness and noise and to the ways that we can still sense a very "real" aspect of her voice despite the muffling effect of its various mediating influences.

While it is not devoid of punctuation, the manuscript of Kempe's *Book* very rarely offers any *puncti versi* to indicate a definitive stop or pause. Brackets and other punctuation are

---

[36] George R. Keiser, "The Mystics and the Early English Printers: The Economics of Devotionalism" in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Dartington Hall July 1987*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge, 1987): 9-26 at 9. On early printing as efforts to "silence" Margery, see A. E. Goodman, "The Piety of John Burnham's Daughter of Lynn," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker and Rosalind M. T. Hill (Oxford, 1978) 347-58 at 357-58. Lynn Staley shows how the notorious "red ink annotator" (which Fredell later emends to multiple annotators, all writing in red ink) attempts to impose order on Kempe's "flood of language" by organizing it into generic categories. Similarly, Wynkyn de Worde's early edition heavily excerpted the original manuscript, organizing Kempe's chaotic narrative into quartos. See Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, 98. For a full description and account of the marginalia in Kempe's *Book*, see Fredell, "Design and Authorship."

frequently added in red ink in an attempt to tame the *Book*'s flood of language. At moments where the manuscript doubles back in time, the Red-Ink Annotator attempts to wrangle the text into better narrative sense. Just before a chapter that begins "On a day long before this time" he directs us to another, more concurrent chapter with the words, "It begins thus 'in the time' the vi lefe efter" [Fig. 2].[37] He often adds a red 'C' in the margin to indicate that he thinks there should be a chapter break when these large temporal gaps occur within individual chapters, for example, when Kempe transitions into a different memory with the phrase "On a tyme beforne" [Fig. 3].[38]

Likewise, the same annotator frequently adds or changes language, transmuting Kempe's emphasis on physical experience into a more spiritual realm. In one of the *Book's* most sensually effusive chapters, in which Kempe experiences *languor amoris*, exchanges vows of marriage with God, and welcomes otherworldly dust motes with a sacramental Latin benediction, the scribe adds "gostle" next to the word "hand" in a passage describing how "the Fader tok hir be the hand in hir soule…."[39] The word "gostle" appears even more explicitly calculated to minimize the sinful physicality of Kempe's accounts when it appears again in red next to a section where Jesus appears to her, thanking her for harboring him and his "blessyd modir" in her bed [Fig. 4].[40] At times, this corrective impulse seems to silence Kempe's voice quite literally, as when the red ink annotator writes "sylence" just above a passage in which Kempe describes how she "wept wonder sore" at a vision [Fig. 5].[41] This addition seems consistent with the scribe's frequent hastening to specify that her mystical perception takes place in her soul rather than with the base exterior senses of her body.

---

[37] British Library MS Additional 61823, 19f.
[38] *Ibid.*, 22v. See also 42v at another moment of parataxis ("And another…")
[39] *Ibid.*, 43r.
[40] *Ibid.*, 103v.
[41] *Ibid.*, 42v.

Yet this same Red-Ink Annotator has included a number of notes to indicate their attunement to Kempe's emphasis on aurality. Securing the direct link between the voice of God and Kempe's own through her text, at the chapter rubric that immediately follows the crucial Pentecostal scene, he has drawn three delicate lines between the monogram of Jesus Christ that fills its initial letter and the chapter heading [Fig. 6]. As the first and only time such lines are drawn in the *Book,* these marks are worth noting, a means of visually reinforcing the networks of ventriloquism that Kempe has outlined for us.[42] At the moment when Kempe explains that her second scribe has been afflicted by a disease of the eye, which made reading the work of a former scribe difficult, the Red-Ink Annotator has added the word "hale" at the margin. While this is likely a gloss commenting on Kempe's healing powers with a word meaning "health" or "wholeness," it is tempting to read in the word a secondary resonance as a visual transcription of an aural note of attention, as if to underscore the limits of vision [Fig. 7].[43] Finally, the scribe's attention to listening comes at a moment when Kempe's mystical experiences are in peril. She asks God to take away her visions because she finds them hard to bear, but she is lost without them. When God restores them to her, she vows always to listen to him. At this moment, the scribe offers a biblical gloss from Samuel 3:10 in response to Kempe's resolution to listen: "Loquere, Domine, quia audit seruus tuus. Audiam quid loquatur in me, Dominus Deus" ("Speak, Lord, for your servant listens. Let me hear what you speak in me, God") [Fig. 8].[44]

The Red-Ink Annotator's simultaneous efforts to acknowledge and contain Kempe's aurality signal his self-situation within a historical moment when reading practices were shifting from the oral performance of manuscripts to the silent reading of the printed page. An early edition of the *Book*, printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501, further highlights this shift. This

---

[42] *Ibid.*, 44v
[43] *Ibid.*, 3r.
[44] *Ibid.*, 71f.

edition heavily excerpts Kempe's original manuscript, organizing Kempe's chaotic narrative into quartos. It excises Kempe's voice almost entirely from the narrative and downplays her demonstrative physical displays of piety to focus instead on the direct speech of the Godhead.[45] The title page of de Worde's edition, for example, declares the book to be "a shorte treasyse of contemplacyon by oure lorde Jhesu cryste/ or taken out of the boke of Margerie Kempe of lyn." In keeping with this declaration that the book's author is Christ himself, the first page alone reads as a compiled series of first person snippets of direct discourse from Jesus to Kempe, which appear without any clear narrative order, for example, "Daughter, thou mayst no better please God than to thynke contynually in his love" and "…haue mynde of thy wyckedness and thynke on my goodnes."[46] This formatting suggests that de Worde remediated Kempe's curiously hybrid narrative of spiritual autobiography into a more recognizable generic form of compiled exemplary maxims, demonstrating the insufficiency of accommodating Kempe's voice in printed form.

The afterlife of the *Book of Margery Kempe* demonstrates that Kempe's noise echoes through this shift in reading technologies, reinforcing the singularity of her own textual style. These efforts by later readers and printers to contain her authorial voice are a testament to its persevering strangeness and inscrutability. While her boisterous expression reinforced Kempe's role as an outlier in the landscape of late-medieval mysticism, it also secured her own power and ownership over the divine message she hoped to convey. It is this paradoxical power dynamic that I will now turn to in the lay context of Chaucer's poetry.

---

[45] Rebecca Schoff Erwin, "Early Editing of Margery Kempe in Manuscript and Print" *Journal of the Early Book Society for the Study of Manuscripts and Printing History* 9 (2006) 75-94.
[46] Kempe, Margery, "Here begynneth a shorte treatyse of contemplacyon taught by our lorde Jhesu cryste, or taken out of the boke of Margerie kempe of lyn[n]" ed. Wynken de Worde (1501). Accessed August 4, 2014 through Early English Books Online.

Figures

1.
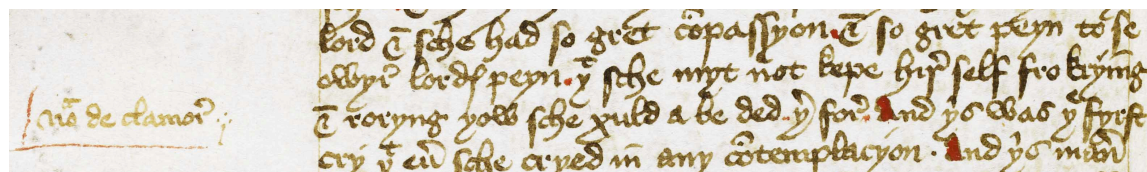
[Fig. 1] Little Brown, or Salthows adds "nota de clamore" next to a section describing one of Kempe's loudest fits of weeping.

2.
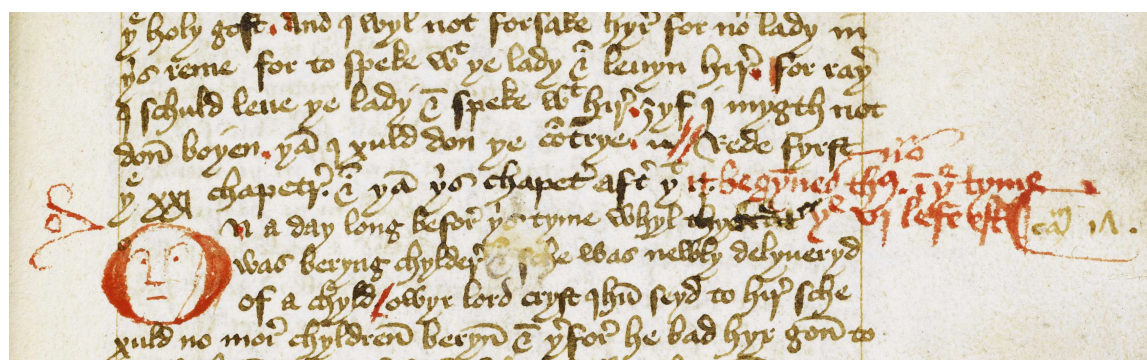
[Fig. 2] The Red-Ink Annotator attempts to order Kempe's narrative by directing readers to read in a more chronological order.

3.
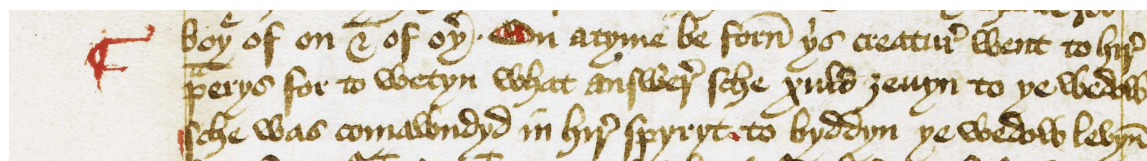
[Fig. 3] The Red-Ink Annotator adds a red 'C' to indicate the beginning of a new chapter at a moment of non-sequitur in Kempe's narrative.

4.
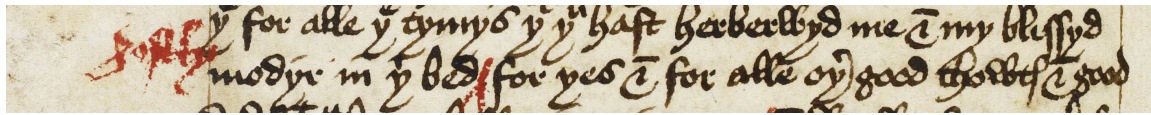
[Fig. 4] The Red-Ink Annotator adds "gostly" at a moment when Jesus thanks Kempe for harboring him and his mother in her bed.

5.
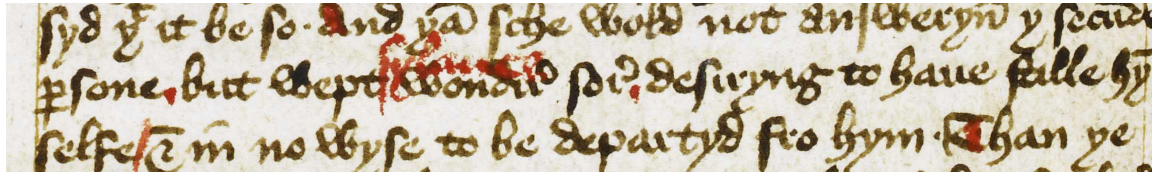
[Fig. 5] The red ink annotator adds "sylance" above a passage describing how Kempe "wept wonder sore."

6.

[Fig. 6] In the chapter heading immediately following Kempe's "domestication" of the biblical scene of Pentecost, the Red-Ink Annotator adds lines connecting a monogram of Jesus Christ in the rubricated first letter to the chapter heading.

7.
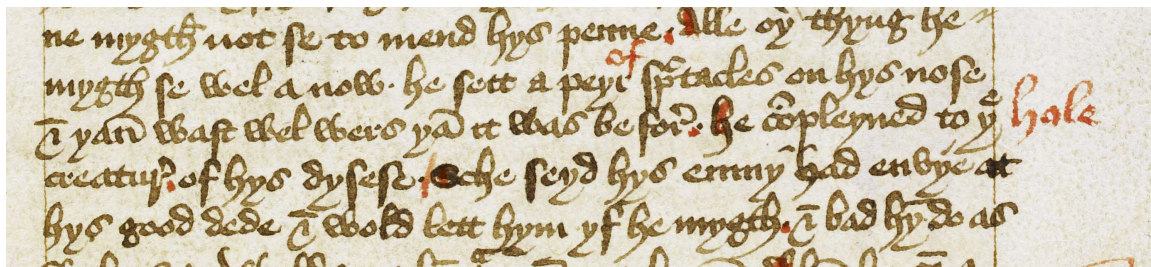
[Fig. 7] The red ink annotator adds "hale" next to a section describing how one of Kempe's amanuenses had trouble with his eyesight and could not read the manuscript of her *Book*.

8.
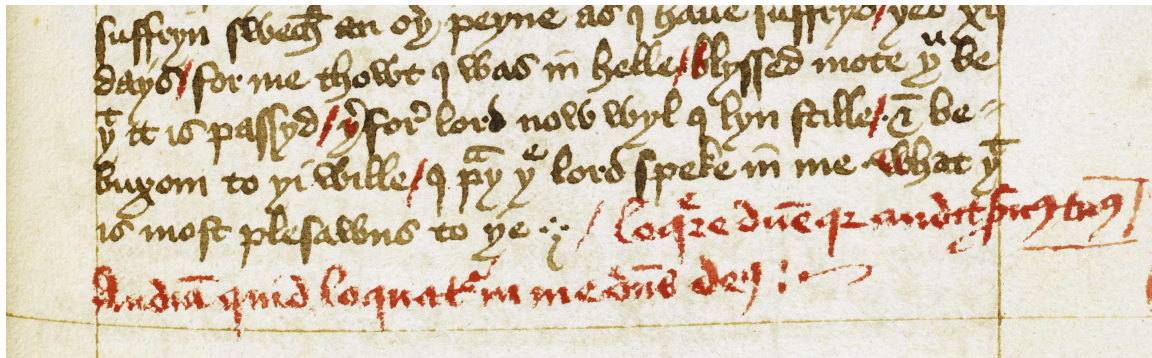
[Fig. 8] At a moment when Kempe's faith is in doubt, the red ink annotator adds a gloss from Samuel 3:10; *Loquere, Domine, quia audit seruus tuus. Audiam quid loquatur in me, Dominus Deus* (Speak, Lord, for your servant listens. Let me hear what you speak in me, God.

Chapter 5

Experience and Unknowing in Chaucer's *House of Fame*

> "A good deal of noise, a very great deal of noise, noise, continued noise, more noise,
> always some noise, always a good deal of noise, noise is what some one is hearing."
>
> -Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*

At the end of the second book of Chaucer's early dream vision, the *House of Fame*, the

Dreamer's eagle guide describes the curious metamorphosis of voices that takes place at Fame's

house:

> Whan any speche y-comen is
> Up to the paleys, anonright
> It wexeth lyk the same wight,
> Which that the word in erthe spake,
> Be it clothed in red or blake;
> And hath so verray his lyknesse
> That spake the word that thou wilt gesse
> That it the same body be,
> Man or woman, he or she…
>
> (1074-1082)

As voices leave their speakers' mouths, they drift ephemerally up to the house of Fame where

they rematerialize as the very bodies to which they were initially tied. This description imagines

some eternal quality essential to the voice that is covered or "clothed" with the material of *textus*,

here the black script and rubrication of a manuscript.

This passage speaks to a deep preoccupation throughout the poem with the interplay

between the essential substance or meaning of language and all of its accidental material

qualities. This is a problem that Chaucer repeatedly suggests is foregrounded and problematized

through the interrelated processes of speaking, writing, and creating text. The *House of Fame*

highlights how the voice is a purveyor of both rational properties (meaning and information) and

physical experience (pitch, timber, resonance; in a word: sound). Such creation is a project of

translation or remediation, one that transfers meaning from the spoken to the written word and renders visible and legible the invisible materiality of what is heard. Centered within a poem that explores orality and destabilizes structures of written authority and settled epistemologies through its emphasis on gossip, fame, and "tydynges," this passage invites us to examine the ways that Chaucer locates the authority of his own literary voice in relation to the acoustic and the vernacular rather than the visible, legible and Latinate.

Since Sheila Delaney's influential study of the poem, scholars generally agree that the *House of Fame* seeks to both engage and at least partially dismantle the authoritative, written, and usually Latinate tradition and to locate authority in newer, more vernacular forms.[1] Delaney argues that Chaucer, caught between the authority of literary sources and the world of his own experiences, must navigate toward truth according to a principle of what she calls "skeptical fideism," which he draws from late-medieval philosophy. Delaney argues that the house of Rumor represents a world of experience that influences Chaucer as he forges his own poetic identity. Ultimately, she concludes that the poem embraces the "pluralism" of experience over any articulation of singular truth.[2]

I want to expand on Delaney's work by exploring how the sounds of language itself are a prime purveyor of that experience. I argue that it ultimately in the noise of language, its sensorium of experience without a stable or certain meaning, that Chaucer begins to locate his own poetic authority. Though the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer's first poem in English, experiments with orality, in particular the discourses of confession and gossip, the *House of*

---

[1] Sheila Delaney, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Chicago, 1972). These vernacular forms range from the silenced voices of women and animals to the interplay of orality and literacy. For a reading that underscores Chaucer's interest in the voices of women and birds, see Lesley Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities: Chaucer's Talking Birds* (New York, 2011) ch. 1, pp. 25-51. For Chaucer's emphasis on orality in the poem, see Leslie Arnovick, "'In Forme of Speche' is Anxiety: Orality in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *Oral Tradition* 11 (1996) 320-345. See also Ebbe Klitgård, "Chaucer's Narrative Voice in the *House of Fame*" *Chaucer Review* 32 (1998) 260-266.
[2] Delaney, *House of Fame,* 112.

Fame secures the influence of speaking and listening to Chaucer's vernacular project.[3] Indeed, the poem comments on his shift from Latin to vernacular poetics and about the radical uncertainty that is necessary in order to forge new ways of knowing.

In showing how Chaucer grounds his authority in the aural experience of language, I will expand upon the scholarship linking Chaucer's *House of Fame* to medieval grammatical theory. Martin Irvine, for example, has outlined the influence of early grammatical theories of voice and voicing in the poem, particularly from authors like Donatus, Priscian, and Isidore of Seville.[4] He argues that Chaucer incorporates medieval grammatical theory throughout the *House of Fame* as a means of exploring the nature of truth and literary authority. The end of the poem, he suggests, anticipates poststructuralist literary theory by calling attention to the discursive and textual nature of history and authority. In doing so, it looks forward to Chaucer's later works, which offer an "escape hatch" from the imprisoning effects of language by turning to "silence in the apprehension of realities not subject to human discourse."[5]

Similarly, Katherine Zieman draws attention to the way that Chaucer aligns his poetic voice with the *vox confusa*, the unstructured and noisy counterpoint that medieval grammarians articulated for the literary *vox articulata*.[6] Zieman argues that this alignment with the *vox cofusa* is a way that Chaucer forges his place within the "rude" and non-rational vernacular tradition in opposition to the classical Latin tradition. She suggests that Chaucer corrects or responds to this self-positioning in Fragment I of *The Canterbury Tales* through the booming voice of the Miller, who becomes an agent of vernacularization, opening space for reason or *ratio* within vernacular

---

[3] For more on the influence of oral modes in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* see Adin Esther Lears, "Something From Nothing: Melancholy, Gossip, and Chaucer's Poetics of Idling in the *Book of the Duchess*" *Chaucer Review* 48.2 (October, 2013) 205-21.
[4] Martin Irvine, "Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer's House of Fame" *Speculum* (Oct. 1985) 850-76.
[5] Irvine, "Grammatical Theory," 876.
[6] Katherine Zieman, "Chaucer's Voys" *Representations* (Autumn, 1997) 70-91.

composition by making use of a discourse of harmonics that is merely nascent in the *House of Fame*.

I argue that medieval grammatical texts position the physical experience of language—in particular its sound—as separate and accidental from a more essential core of truth or meaning. At the same time, such early grammatical readings are self-undermining in their onomatopoetic use of sound to extend and underscore meaning. These grammatical texts thus call attention to the ways that the noise of language, its sound rather than a fixed 'truth' at its core, could carry extra-grammatical significance that was diffuse and dangerously open-ended to the clerical authorities who controlled systems of reading and interpretation. Chaucer recognized and played with such 'noise,' in the *House of Fame* and beyond. The work of both Irvine and Zieman is valuable in highlighting Chaucer's interest in textual instability and openness in the *House of Fame*. Yet ultimately, both of their readings wish to correct or normalize that instability in Chaucer's later works. Rather than pointing to the way that Chaucer corrects his alignment with the *vox confusa* I want to highlight the *House of Fame's* continuity with later works, on the subject of linguistic noise and meaning. As the following chapter on the Wife of Bath will show, the *House of Fame's* emphasis on surface level sounds over rational substance or meaning proves influential to Chaucer as he forges his persona as a vernacular author in the *Canterbury Tales*.

In its attention to the ways that the 'noisy' somatic aspects of language carried significance, my reading thus extends the role of sound and noise within Chaucer's poetic corpus beyond its place as a signal of the changing political climate in the wake of the Peasant's Revolt of 1381.[7] Noise does signal change for Chaucer. But this change goes far beyond such overt

---

[7] See Peter Travis, "Thirteen Ways of Listening to a Fart: Noise in Chaucer's Summoner's Tale," *Exemplaria* 16.2 (Fall, 2004) 323- 348 at 325. See also Travis's book-length study on the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, *Disseminal Chaucer:*

governmental, economic, and social shifts to the subtle realm of linguistic sounds and surfaces.

Chaucer embraces the physical and embodied aspects of language, all of which comprise its

'noisiness,' as a foundation to his own literary program. If this approach was not a grand

political gesture in the same way as parliamentary clamor or other "noise of the people,"

Chaucer's noisy literary voice was still transgressive in its revaluation of a category of speech

generally aligned with waste, excess, and feminine speakers. In making this claim, I question

scholars who see the Dreamer of Chaucer's early visionary literature as a figure who seeks to

reinforce his own masculinity, either by correcting his effeminacy or through, in Karma

Lochrie's terms a "mobiliz[ation]" of his own ignorance of feminine gossip in the service of

poetic creation.[8] In my reading, Chaucer's project is not about feigning ignorance of women's

secrets or positioning his own voice in opposition to them. Nor is it entirely about embracing the

effeminate position of "passive reception," a strand of "queer poetics" that Susan Schibanoff has

argued runs through Chaucer's dream trio.[9] Instead, I will argue that Chaucer embraces the

effeminate associations of the language's sounds and feelings and the indirect ways of knowing

---

Rereading the Nun's Priest's Tale (Notre Dame, IN, 2010). In both of these discussions of noise in Chaucer, Travis
argues that there are four main percussive explosions of "historical/ political" noise throughout the poet's corpus:
the violent emanation of sound from the brass trumpet of Sklaundre in the *House of Fame*, the "noyse" of political
debate in the *Parliament of Fowls*, the fart divided 13 ways in the *Summoner's Tale*, and the hubbub of "Jakke
Straw and his meynee" in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. I do not want to take issue with Travis's overall argument that
these are moments when Chaucer chooses to highlight the "noise of history" and a "politics of noisy resistance"
(325) Instead, I argue that noise is far more ubiquitous and foundational to Chaucer's literary production than Travis
proposes.
[8] See Lochrie, *Covert Operations,* 56-92. Lochrie's examination of the *House of Fame* is part of a larger point that
Chaucer's representations of women's gossip take place within an epistemological regime of ignorance and
knowledge; more specifically within the domain of masculine knowledge of women's "secrets" and a repudiation of
that knowledge. For the argument that Chaucer seeks somatic correction of his effeminate melancholia in his earlier
dream vision, the *Book of the Duchess,* see Steven Kruger, "Medical and Moral Authority in the Late Medieval
Dream" in *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams From Chaucer to Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford,
1999) 55-83.
[9] Susan Schibanoff, *Chaucer's Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio* (Toronto, 2006).

associated with them as a crucial aspect of his own poetic making. He thus highlights the utility

and active force of what was widely deemed passive and effeminate matter.[10]

Seeing Sound in the Temple of Glass

As several scholars, including Irvine and Zieman, have suggested, the Dreamer's journey

over the course of the *House of Fame* reflects a general movement from vision toward sound

and, in parallel with this transition, from written Latinate authority toward a more vernacular oral

poetics.[11] The poem stresses vision from its opening lines, which detail the various kinds of

"avisioun[s]," "drem[s]," and "revelacioun[s]" outlined in medieval dream theory.[12] In

accordance with its categorization as a dream vision, the Dreamer falls asleep and enters a

strange and otherworldly place, in this case "a temple y-mad of glas" (120). Chaucer's initial

emphasis on vision is reflected in this physical space with its clear and gleamingly reflective

surfaces and its proliferation of "images" (121) and "portrytures" (131). The Dreamer's

description of the temple suggests not only its luminosity, but also its stillness and

monumentality as he names the heavy and durable materials used for its construction and its

objects: the gold of the statues, "stondinge in sondry stages" (122) and, the "table of bras" (142),

on which the Dreamer finds written much of Virgil's *Aeneid*.   These features stress both the

visuality of the Latinate tradition of Virgil and Ovid from which Chaucer draws his

characterization of *fama*. Indeed, much of Book I is preoccupied with recounting the story of the

Aeneid in Chaucer's own words, as the Dreamer ostensibly reads either words or images

---

[10] This position is informed by my argument on Chaucer's prior poem, the *Book of the Duchess*. In "Something from Nothing" I argue that Chaucer highlights the utility of idleness and thus to activate a position long held as "passive" and "effeminate."

[11] See also Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*.

[12] *HF*, *Riverside*, ed. Benson. 1-65. All further quotations from the *House of Fame* will be cited parenthetically by line number in-text.

inscribed on the brass table. As he reads, the Dreamer punctuates his story with variations on the expression "I saw," which occurs no fewer than seventeen times over the course of his journey through the glass temple.

Yet even in Book I, vision and written authority are in tension with hearing and the oral and aural tradition, as Chaucer reminds us when he opens his account of the *Aeneid* with a translation of Virgil's own words, "Arma virumque cano" ("I sing of arms and a man"), in Chaucer's own voice: I wol now say, if that I kan,/ The armes and also the man" (143-144). As Martin Irvine has shown, these lines demonstrate Chaucer's engagement with exegetical grammar through a calculated reference to Priscian, who uses them to discuss the authoritative voice of the Latin literary tradition: the *vox articulata*.[13] Yet coupled with the table of brass, an image taken from Ovid's description of the clangorous hall of Fame in his *Metamorphoses*, they also remind us of the orality of the classical poetic tradition, and of the overlap between the role of epic poet and the maker of musical sounds.[14] This overlap is especially evident in the homophonic invocation of Virgil's *cano* ("I sing") in Chaucer's line-ending "kan" ("I am able," "I know"), which links singing with knowing through affective impression and sound-play. Here Chaucer gestures toward what will become an all-consuming emphasis not simply on orality and the vernacular but also on the crucial poetic importance of the sensory husk or skin of language.

In keeping with this interest in sounds, Chaucer injects moments into Book I when inarticulate and non-literary 'noise' is in tension with written authority. Though the Dreamer recounts each vignette from the *Aeneid* as something he has seen "graven" on the table of brass, his accounts repeatedly emphasize his heard perception of the voices of both Virgil and the characters he creates. After recounting the destruction of Troy and Venus's responses to save

---

[13] See Irvine, "Grammatical Theory," 859.
[14] See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 12.46; Irvine, "Grammatical Theory," 859.

her son Aeneas, the Dreamer alights on Creusa, Aeneas's wife. As she flees from Troy with their children, Creusa leaves "with drery chere,/ That it was pity for to here" (179-180). This phrase is echoed as Creusa's ghost haunts Aeneas "That it was pitee for to here,/ Whan hir spirit gan appere" (189-190). As when the Dreamer ventriloquizes Virgil's opening lines, his repeated references to *hearing* the story of the *Aeneid* highlight its origins within an oral tradition. Moreover, the assertion "that it was pitee for to here" to draw attention to the pathos of the scene, gesturing toward the wailing and inarticulate voice of Creusa herself. In this suggestion, it anticipates the rage of Juno, who "Renne[s] and crye[s] as [she] were wood" (202) and the lament of Venus, "Wepynge with ful woful chere" (214) as she asks Jupiter to take pity on her son.

These accounts set the stage for the most important Virgilian story in all of Book I, which centers on Dido, her downfall at the hands of the fickle Aeneas, and the role of *fama* in assuring this disaster. As in his previous narrations from the *Aeneid*, the Dreamer frames his story around a woman, Dido, in place of the hero Aeneas. Though Virgil's Dido is largely defined by her emotions and her noise-making—her most frequent epithets in the *Aeneid* are *misserrime* (most pitiable) and *furens* (raving, raging)—Chaucer includes no particular lines to emphasize these qualities. Yet as he recounts Dido's story he conspicuously abandons his oft-repeated formulation "I saw," suggesting a shift in modes of attention away from vision. Indeed, he conveys a particular interest in Dido's voice, emphasizing her point of view by ventriloquizing her "plein[t]" (311) at great length (315-363) as she laments her lost love and reputation. The finale of this speech reasserts the cooperation of the oral and written traditions, as Dido reflects on the goddess Fame:

> O welawey that I was born!
> For thrugh yow is my name lorn

174

And alle myn actes red and songe
Over al this lond, on every tongue.
O wikke Fame, for ther nis
Nothing so swift, lo, as she is!
…
Eek, though I mighte duren ever,
That I have doon, rekever I never
That I ne shal be seyd allas,
Y-shamed be thurgh Eneas…
                    (345-50; 353-56,).

Dido's speech highlights the power of the spoken word in relation to the written, stressing how individual stories make up larger traditions, both written and oral or "red and songe." At the same time, as the Dreamer concludes his voicing of Dido, Chaucer undermines the power of the oral/aural mode, by adding the Dreamer's gloss, "But al hir compleynte ne al hir mone,/ Certeyn availeth hir nat a stre" (362-363). He concludes the story of Dido by claiming his own inadequacy as a cipher for Dido's voice and bidding readers to return to the Epistle of Ovid to read "What that she wroot er that she dyde" (380). With this gesture, Chaucer appears to have returned, at least momentarily, to elevating the authority of the visual and Latinate over the spoken vernacular word.

As Book I ends, the Dreamer has stumbled out of the temple of glass and into field of sand, a vast Libyan desert that appears sterile, uncultivated and unnatural. Casting his eyes to the heavens, the Dreamer tells us

Thoo was I war, lo, at the laste,
That faste be the sonne, as hye
As kenne mighte I with myn yë,
Methoughte I sawgh an egle sore,
But that hit semed moche more
Then I had any egle seyn
                    (496-501).

175

As the first book comes to a close, Chaucer signals the limits of vision, a faculty that, while prized, can lead easily to deception. With these lines the Dreamer leaves the static and monumental world of the *vox articulata*, grounded in the written Latinate tradition and takes his first steps into the bizarre and thrumming world of sound.

Accidents and Essences of *Vox*

Book two includes some of the poem's lengthiest and most virtuosic treatments of sound as the Dreamer's eagle guide lectures him on the acoustical physics with lessons influenced by the Aristotelian principles of the early grammarians. To better contextualize these resonances, here I want to introduce some of Chaucer's source materials, which begin to divide the voice (*vox*) into two separate factions: meaning or substance and physical experience or accident.

The principal concern in the discipline of grammar was *vox*, the signifying vocal utterance through which sound conveyed meaning to varying degrees. Subscribing to the common dictum that that all *vox* was *sonus* but not all *sonus* was *vox*, grammarians struggled to delineate boundaries between sound that was meaningful and that which was not.[15] The fourth century Roman grammarian Donatus first classified sound into the categories of *articulata* and *confusa*, explaining that articulate sound can be understood in letters, while confused sound cannot be written.[16] In the sixth century, the Byzantine grammarian Priscian expanded upon the work of Donatus, dividing sounds along the axes of signification and scriptability: *articulata*, *inarticulata*, *literata*, and *illiterata*.

---

[15] The thirteenth-century Franciscan Bartholomaeus Anglicus, for example, catalogues the "accidents" of the senses in the nineteenth chapter of his *De Proprietatibus Rerum*. In discussing music and song in *De Musica sive Modulatione Cantus* he writes "omnis enim vox est sonus sed non econverso" See Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De rerum Proprietatibus* (Frankfurt, 1964) 1252-1253.

[16] See Irvine, "Grammatical Theory," 854.

An extension of human mental faculties, the *vox articulata* was the only form of *vox* able to be structured (*coartata*) with grammar and comprised.[17] Priscian also attempted to account for those sounds like like "the hissing and wails of men" (*sibili hominum et gemitus*) which he judged could carry meaning, though they could not be written down. Conversely, animal sounds like the "coax" of a frog and "cra" of a raven, could be written, but signified nothing. Still other sounds, like rattling (*crepitus*) and roaring (*mugitus*) were able neither to be written nor to be understood. Priscian's *vox articulata* was the structured voice of literature and history. The forms of *vox* aside from Priscian's *vox articulata* were formless and, as I suggested in the *Introduction*, a kind of "sound out of place" in contrast to the meaningful communication governed by grammar.[18] Unstructured by reason, Priscian's definitions of the *vox inarticulata* was purely embodied and experiential with no spiritual essence of truth.

Yet even meaningful language had physical components that were separate and incidental to meaning. *Vox* had two distinct aspects corresponding to the theological terms of *substance* or essence and *accident* or matter. Martin Irvine has dismissed the importance of these sensory associations, suggesting "The subsemantic or merely physical attributes of speech sounds were

---

[17] Priscian, *Institutiones Grammaticae,* Book I. in Heinrich Keil, ed. *Grammatici Latini ex Recensione Henrici Keilii* (Lipsiae, 1855-1870) 5. Translations of Priscian are mine, though I am guided by those of Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter in *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory AD 300-1475* (Oxford, 2009) 172-89.

[18] In making this distinction, I am guided by the anthropologist Mary Douglas's formulation of 'dirt' as "matter out of place." See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 162. Like dirt, 'noise' is sound that is out of place or that resists neat ordering and categorization. Further, as Douglas reminds us, disorder is an impetus to creativity: "Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment" (Douglas, 2). She goes on to describe the ways that religions sacralise the unclean objects and practices they normally disavow. In dirt, she suggests, is a lack of form or structure. "Formlessness," she asserts, "is therefore an apt symbol of beginning and of growth as it is of decay." This emphasis on the creative potential of 'dirt' or waste has been influential to my thinking on Chaucer's use of noise. Historians of sound and music have suggested that we might view "noise" as "sound out of place," making this very connection between noise and Douglas's conception of disorder. See for example Peter Baily, "Breaking the Sound Barrier: A Historian Listens to Noise." *Body and Society* (June, 1996) 49-66 at 50; Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, 1985) 3.

not a concern for grammarians."[19] It is true that grammarians persistently dismiss linguistic

accident, in particular sound, in their writing. Yet contrary to Irvine, I would suggest that these

dismissals highlight the philosophical importance of the sounded somatic aspects of language to

grammarians.

Indeed, the discipline of grammar aimed to enable the interpreter to expunge the

accidental sensory aspects of language for the sake of penetrating to a text's essential substance.

In attempting to delineate the correct process of interpretation, grammarians spent ample time

discussing the physical properties of *vox*, which they framed as its "accident." Priscian begins

his *Institutiones grammaticae* by defining *vox*:

> Philosophi definiunt, vocem esse aerem tenuissimum ictum vel suum sensibile aurium, id
> est quod proprie auribus accidit. Et est prior definitio a substantia sumpta, altera vero a
> notione, quam Graeci *ennoian* dicunt, hoc est ab accidentibus. Accidit enim voci auditus,
> quantum in ipsa est.[20]

> Philosophers define *vox* as 'very thin struck air' or 'its property perceptible to hearing,'
> that is, what properly strikes the ears. And the first part of the definition is taken from the
> substance; the second part from the concept, which the Greeks call *ennoia*, that is, from
> the accidents. The hearing of *vox* is an accident inasmuch as it depends on the sound
> itself.

In order for conception or human understanding to take place, sensory perception, in this case

hearing, must occur. Priscian is essentially discussing the signifying role of the sound of

language as a sign or note of memory, an aural counterpoint to the sight of a word written on the

page.[21] This accident is taken from the air, to which *vox* gives form and matter:

> Nam si aer corpus est, et vox, quae est aer icto constat, corpus est ostenditur, quippe cum
> et tangit aurem et tripertito dividitur, quod est suum corporis, hoc est in altitudinem,
> latitudinem, longitudinem, unde ex omni quoque parte potest audiri. Praeterea tamen

---

[19] Irvine, "Grammatical Theory," 856.
[20] Priscian, *Institutiones grammaticae*, p. 5.
[21] For a fuller analysis of medieval theories of cognition and the role of sensory perception in relation to them, see
Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*.

singulae syllibae altitudinem quidem habent in tenore, crassitudinem vero vel latitudinem in spiritu, longitudinem in tempore.[22]

For if air is a body, it is shown that *vox*, which consists of struck air, is a body, since it touches the ear and is divided into three parts which pertain to its body, that is height, breadth, and length, whence it is able to be heard from every direction. Moreover, single syllables have height in their tone, thickness or breadth in breathing, and length in their measure.

This process of "strik[ing]" (*accidit*) the ears is aligned with accident (*accidentibus*) in its association with matter and sensation. Priscian's doubling of words with the root *cedere* ("to fall") reminds us that, to medieval theologians and grammarians alike, the need for physical perception of language as a prerequisite to cognition was a result of human transgression in Eden.[23]

Priscian's logic of the production and cognition of speech was also a logic of devolution, placing mental experience (*affectus mentis*) as a point of origin, followed by articulate spoken utterance (*articulata vox coartata*), struck air (*aer ictus*), struck air's perceptible property (*sensibile aurium*), conception (*ennoia*), and finally, mental meaning (*sensus mentis*).[24] Irvine shows how commentaries on Priscian from the twelfth century onward link this logic to a similar Boethian formulation, which placed things (*res*) as a point of origin, followed by concepts (*intellectus*), spoken utterance (*vox*), and then letters (*littera*).[25] These articulations of human understanding highlight how medieval thinkers perceived the physical experience of voice to be logically secondary to mental experience. Human language was a fallen medium, one that by its very nature must transfer substance or essential meaning through layers of sound and other physical accidents incidental to that meaning.

---

[22] Priscian, *Institutiones Grammaticae,* book I, 6.
[23] For more on language and the fall in the Middle Ages see Jaeger, *The Tempter's Voice.*
[24] Irvine discusses this logic in the context of highlighting the relationship between signifier and signified as a central concern in medieval grammar in "Grammatical Theory," 856.
[25] *Ibid.,* 856.

Many early grammarians, including Priscian, aimed to control the fallen nature of language through careful and ordered articulation. Focusing on rules of pronunciation and meter, the grammatical doctrine of *lectio* elucidated the practice of oral interpretive reading. Letters and syllables broke up sounds and enabled them to be written down on the page. But they also provided a map to enable readers to re-constitute sounds when reading aloud. In Isidore of Seville's influential formulation, which Priscian cites, letters (*littera*) take their name because they provide a route or path (*iter*) for the one reading.[26] Enumerating faults that must be avoided in oratory, Isidore stresses that the "pure and chaste" speech of an orator must have clear articulation. The conjunction between words must be "apt and proper," so that the final vowel sound of a word must not be the same as the first vowel sound of the following word, as in "*feminae Aegyptiae*." Isidore says that the phrase would be much improved with the incorporation of a consonant between adjoining vowels. Likewise, one should avoid the conjoining of three consonants, in particular *r, s,* and *x*, which "seem to clash and brawl" (*stridere et quasi rixare videntur*) when coming together, for example, in the phrases "ars studiorum," "rex Xerxes," or "error Romuli."[27] Isidore's notion of correct articulation marked time evenly and fluidly, promoting a lilting alternation between vowel and consonant sounds. In accordance with its etymology, which referred to the correct alignment of pieces or joints, articulation was a way of choreographing the body, containing it so that the embodied aspects of language would not overtake or stray away from meaning.

Yet language has a way of spilling out of any of these neat boundaries. Much grammatical exposition begins to undermine itself with the very terms it invokes. Priscian's taxonomy of sounds, for example, does not entirely hold. If human cries and wails can be

---

[26] Priscian, *Institutiones Grammaticae* book I, 6.
[27] Isidore, *Etymologies* II. xix, 75.

understood, the *vox articulata* is *not* the only form of voice that conveys sense. By employing onomatopoetic noise words like *sibili* and *mugitus* to illustrate that certain sounds are not scriptable, Priscian nevertheless writes them down. Similarly, Isidore's attempts to enable his readers to clear away the physical sounded qualities of language to arrive at 'true' meaning, Isidore plays with those very accidents. His influential etymology of *littera* from *iter* or 'path,' for example, typifies one of his most common philological strategies: the discovery of a word's origin based on another word or phrase with similar sounds. This approach is evident throughout the *Etymologies*. At the very beginning of Book I of *De grammatica*, Isidore explains that *scire* ('to know') is named from *discere* ('to learn'). Likewise, in the last entry of the untitled book XX, which details provisions and instruments of living, *cauterium*, a kind of iron for branding, takes its name because it is a warning (*cautio*) to thieves it might burn (*urere*). This strategy unexpectedly privileges the superficial sounded aspects of language alongside, even in place of meaning.

The meanings of Isidore's etymological root words have a kind of logic in relation to the words he is defining; a *cauterium* does indeed require *cautio*. But his choices are also ideologically inflected; they invent affinities based on sound in order to make a separate point: in the case of *littera*, his point is to reinforce that letters, along with the sounds they convey, are notes of memory that serve to guide readers back to an earlier, and thus more 'authentic' form. As we will see, Chaucer recognized the powerful protean nature of linguistic accident—its refusal to be constrained to one meaning—and used it to forge his own vernacular voice.

The Essence of Accident in the Eagle's Lesson

In keeping with its general trajectory away from vision and toward sound, from its

invocation, Book II affirms the role of listening and vernacularity in Chaucer's own poetic

project. Chaucer bids "every maner man/ That Englissh understonde can" (510-511) to listen. In

recounting his dream, the Dreamer increasingly stresses the simultaneity of hearing and seeing in

his dream vision, making explicit what was merely implicit in his previous emphasis on the

"sounds" of the inscription on the table of brass. The Dreamer's vision broadens as the eagle that

he encounters at the close of Book I lifts him into the air. So too does his hearing:

> The egle, of which I have yow tolde,
> That shoon with fethres as of golde,
> Which that so high gan to sore,
> I gan beholde more and more
> To see the beautee and the wonder;
> But never was ther dint of thonder,
> Ne that thing that men calle foudre,
> That smoot somtyme a tour to poudre…
> (529-536).

By invoking both "thonder" and "foudre" the Dreamer casts his acquisition of knowledge in

terms of both seeing and hearing. Both words in Middle English could refer to lightning and to

thunder, suggesting that the Dreamer's enlightenment is also an 'ensoniment'—it is predicated

not just on vision, but also on sound.[28] Moreover, the doubling of vernacular terms at this

moment as Chaucer employs first English (*thonder*) then French (*foudre*) to denote the same idea

begins to secure the primary place of vernacularity in his intellectual and poetic project.

The eagle's justification for spiriting away the Dreamer draws this emphasis on the

vernacular more firmly into the oral and aural mode. As the Dreamer ponders whether his work

as a love poet will lead him to be turned into a constellation or "stellified," the eagle explains

---

[28] Here I am indebted to Jonathan Stern's formulation of an 'Ensoniment,' a movement somewhat like the
Enlightenment, when scholars employed the faculty of hearing in the service of scientific advancement and rational
thought. See Sterne, *The Audible Past,* 2. I use the term to denote a more general knowing by listening.

that he has been sent by Jupiter to offer the Dreamer a reward for his service to Venus and work as poet of love. Yet beyond such "disport and game" (664), the journey has a practical purpose as well. The eagle stresses the Dreamer's limitations as a poet. His knowledge of love is too provincial, stemming from the "tydings" of his "verray neighebores/ That dwellen almost at [his] dores" (649-650). Ultimately, the eagle frames this in terms of a kind of deafness, chiding, "Thou herest neither that ne this" (651). This deafness, in turn, leads to poetic muteness, as Chaucer returns home "And also dombe as any stoon,/ Thou sittest at another booke/ Til fully daswed is thy look…" (656-658). The Dreamer's poetic output, according to the eagle, suffers from the circumscribed nature of his listening. Composing poetry from such a limited set of sources metaphorically renders the Dreamer as voiceless as a written text, preserved in stone. This moment resonates with the beginning of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, in which the Dreamer suffers from an idle melancholia that renders him unable to compose poetry. As in the *Book of the Duchess*, this melancholic idleness will transmute and amplify into another, more social and aural form of idleness: gossip.[29]

A key component to this amplification, as the eagle explains, is the confounding wonder of a new world. The eagle tells the Dreamer that he will hear more "wonder thynges" (674) than he can imagine, an amalgam of "sothes… and lesynges" (676) that will radically destabilize his epistemology, thrusting him into a world of unknowing that is characterized by noise. The house of Fame promises

> More discords, moo jelousies,
> Mo murmures and moo novelries,
> And moo dissymulacions,
> And feyned reparacions,
> And moo berdys in two houres
> Without rasour or sisoures

---

[29] For more on the utility of idleness, including melancholy and gossip, in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess,* see Lears, "Something From Nothing."

Ymad then greynes be of sondes
(685-91).

The noise of Fame's house reverberates not only in its inarticulate murmurs and susurrations, but also in its confounding wordplay and tricks with language. Such verbal trickery is perhaps best reflected in the bizarre reference to the house's production of "beards…without razor or scissors." The Middle English phrase "maken berd" could mean literally "to dress a beard" or it could mean more figuratively "to outwit" or "delude."[30] This phrase lent itself to punningly duplicitous language. For example, Chaucer's Wife of Bath—another noisy trickster, as we will see—makes use of it as she describes hoodwinking her jealous husband. Though her husband vigilantly watches the Wife of Bath's interactions with other men, she takes care to convey her adept deception by exclaiming, "Yet koude I make his berd, so moot I thee!" (*CT*, III. 361). In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer's invocation razor and scissors alongside the phrase at first invites a literal interpretation—until we realize that Fame's house makes beards *without* razor or scissors. Thus, the figurative meaning of the phrase as a trick or deception is confirmed. By tricking readers on the meaning of a phrase implying trickery, Chaucer's play with language calls attention to the way that linguistic sounds can be deceiving. This unknowing, a destabilization of secure knowledge and communication, is ultimately what proves valuable to the Dreamer's own poetic making.

The eagle extends his advocacy for this paradoxical value in unknowing through his physics lesson on sound, in which the accidents of language begin to take on their own substance. Based on Aristotelian theories of sound, the eagle's lecture resorts to layer upon layer of metaphor to explain the intricate and abstract natural workings of sound. He begins by invoking the same theories of sense perception and cognition we have seen in early grammatical

---

[30] See MED "berd" (n. 1), def. 4a. See also OED "beard" (n.) def 1e.

184

texts, asserting, "Thou wost wel this, that speche is soun,/ Or ells no man might hyt here; Now

herke what I wol the lere" (762-64). Reminding readers of the grammatical commonplace that

all *vox* is *sonus* ("speche is soun," 762), the eagle stresses that hearing is a prerequisite to

"ler[ning]" and obtaining knowledge. His rhyme on *here*/*lere* recalls the resonance he cultivates

between Virgil's *cano* and his own "kan." Both instances of wordplay reinforce the mutual

dependence of hearing and knowing.

This poetic use of sound alongside meaning brings the issue of linguistic accident to the

fore. Recalling the grammatical notions that *vox* takes its accident from the air, the eagle explains

> Soun ys nought but eyr ybroken;
> And every speche that ys spoken,
> Lowd of pryvee, foul or fair,
> In his substaunce ys but air;
> For as flaumbe ys but lighted smoke,
> Ryght soo soun ys air ybroke
> (765-70).

The eagle's lesson calls attention to poetic language as a particularly embodied and fallen

medium that is increasingly further removed from the meaning at its core. Yet the eagle

simultaneously suggests that these mediating layers of linguistic accident are the very material of

truth. Substance is nothing but the accident of air. In making this formulation, Chaucer seems to

play with the paradoxical ambiguity of the word 'substaunce,' which in Middle English could

mean something that is tactile and physical or it could refer to a more spiritual essence.[31] The

eagle's interjection, "loo, thys is my sentence" (776) amidst a particularly visceral metaphor of

sound as "twisted" air calls attention to the juxtaposition between linguistic accident and

substance, reinforcing the idea that substance or *sentence* resides in the accidents of language.

As they approach the house of Fame toward the end of Book II, the eagle concludes his

speech and prepares to let the Dreamer go, explaining how the Dreamer should make use of his

---

[31] MED, "substaunce" n.

exposition of sound. He insists on the straightforward nature of his speech in terms that

simultaneously deny and reinforce rhetorical accident, addressing the Dreamer

> Telle me this now feythfully,
> Have y not preved thus simply,
> Withoute any subtitle
> Of speche, or gret prolixite
> Of termes of philosophie,
> Of figures of poetrie,
> Or colours of rethorike?
> Pardee, hit oughte the to lyke,
> For hard langage and hard matere
> Ys encombrous for to here…
>   (853-61).

Congratulating himself on explaining the abstract workings of fame to the Dreamer in

straightforward language, the eagle renounces linguistic accident asserting that rhetorical

ornamentation is a means of hiding meaning, rendering language "hard" or intractable and

ultimately impenetrable to understanding.

At the same time, he invokes the language of the physical and the experiential to

emphasize the accessible nature of his own speech, thus reinforcing the paradox of unknowing

that characterizes his lesson. The eagle has spoken, he claims, "Lewedly to a lewed man" (866),

and in doing so has shown the Dreamer such "skiles" (867) or workings of reason "That he may

shake them by the biles,/So palpable they shulden be" (868-69). The eagle's lesson is doubly

palpable. It is both graspable to human understanding and communicative, and thus soft or

sympathetic, in contrast to the impenetrable "hard mater" of other orators.[32]

In explaining his accessibility, however, both here and throughout his lesson the eagle

has made creative use of rhetorical tropes. In this case he employs allegory, as he advances the

image of an embodied and anthropomorphic "skile" with a "bile" or beak that the Dreamer can

grab hold of and shake around. The image undermines the eagle's crowing claims to

---

[32] See MED, s.v. "palpable" and MED, s.v. "hard"

straightforward persuasion without any obscuring "colours of rethorike." Again, it would seem

that the eagle's substance resides in the accidental excesses of his voice, a paradoxical condition

that casts the Dreamer into a mental framework of unknowing that necessitates further

exploration.

This destabilization is the eagle's point. The next mode of exploration, he soon explains,

is experience. The Dreamer will test out all that the eagle has explained to him by moving

through the world of fame:

> Thou shalt have yet, or hit be eve,
> Of every word of thys sentence
> A preve by experience,
> And with thyn eres heren wel
> Top and tayl and everydel…
> (876-880).

Anchoring the realm of experience firmly in the faculty of hearing, the eagle's formulation again

imagines the noise of language that echoes from Fame's house as synecdoche for an entire

spectrum of sensory experience.

Before approaching this experience and in order to amplify knowledge, the eagle insists

on a radical embrace of unknowing. As they approach their destination, the eagle tenderly asks

the Dreamer "How farest thou?" (887), to which the Dreamer answers, simply, "Wel" (888). In

response, the eagle commands the Dreamer to look down at the uncanny landscape they fly over.

"And when thou has of ought knowing," he continues, "Looke that thou warne me,/ And Y

anoon shal telle the/ How fer that thou art now therfro (892-95). It is no wonder, then, that in

response to the eagle's confounding lesson, the Dreamer begins to "wexen in a were" (980),

unsure of whether he is being taken up in body or spirit.   This moment of ontological and

epistemological doubt recalls a scene in *Piers Plowman*, when Piers the Plowman angrily tears

the pardon sent from Truth "for pure tene" (A.8.101, B.7.115) and vows to abandon his hard-

working life of do-wel. Like Langland, Chaucer's invocation of the Dreamer's doubt conveys

the state of confusion incited by his dream, an unknowing that will ultimately be spiritually and

creatively productive.

The Dreamer's response to this bewilderment is to turn again to what he already knows:

the authority of the Latin tradition. His mind alights on the author "Marcian" (985), identified as

Martianus Capella, a late antique author on the liberal arts. I will discuss Capella further in the

following chapter, but here it will suffice to say that by personifying rhetoric as a beautiful

woman outfitted in sumptuous clothing and gems, Capella's work highlights the very interplay

between linguistic substance and surface or accident that has been a concern throughout the

House of Fame. Likewise, the Dreamer thinks of the "Anteclaudian" (986), a work by the

French theologian and Latin poet Alan of Lisle, which also highlights the seven liberal arts. The

Dreamer's turn toward epistemological stability in the realm of Latin poetry indicates that he has

not fully absorbed the details of the eagle's lesson. This necessitates that he continue his trip,

attending to his own experience, in the world of Fame and Rumor.

Noise and Unknowing in the Houses of Fame and Rumor

Chaucer's invocation to Book III signals the growing importance of the non-literary

voice—the *vox confusa*—to his rising poetic consciousness. Resorting to a well-worn humility

topos, Chaucer comments on the "lewed[ness]" of his verse:

> O god of science and of light,
> Apollo, thurgh thy grete might
> This litel laste book thou gye!
> Nat that I wilne, for maistrye,
> Here art poetical be shewed,
> But, for the rym is light and lewed,
> Yet make it somewhat agreeable
> Though som vers faile in a sillable…

(1092-1097).

It is tempting to read this passage as a commentary on the folksiness of Chaucer's own iambic tetrameter in contrast to the pentameter, verse that does not "faile in a sillable," that Chaucer will develop in his next major poem, the *Parliament of Fowls*.

Indeed, scholars have tended to point to the *Parliament of Fowls* as the first of Chaucer's more perfectly crafted works, a departure that marks a maturation from his early efforts in the *Book of the Duchess* and the *House of Fame*. Katherine Lynch, for example, points to the more "demanding" rhyme royal stanzas in the Parliament as evidence that it is "Chaucer's most polished dream vision."[33] Similarly, Larry D. Benson notes that Chaucer has attained an "easy confidence of style notably lacking in [his] earlier work."[34] He attributes this confidence in part to his use of a new meter unlike the four-beat couplet he used in the *House of Fame*, which "seems more suited to parodying rather than reproducing the classics."[35] I am interested in the way that both of these scholars view the iambic tetrameter of Chaucer's early dream visions as a rougher and less sophisticated form than his later pentameter. I suggest that this point of view stems from an uncritical acceptance of the supremacy of pentameter as a more "natural" meter that adheres to spoken language. Thus, pentameter is a form that privileges the meaning of its words while tetrameter stresses their poetic sound patterning. It is a mistake to read Chaucer's early use of this more sing-song tetrameter as evidence of a linear process of maturation or the simple perfection of his craft. Instead I argue that Chaucer's *House of Fame* comments on his use of such a noisy meter, embracing its tendency to stress sound patterning over semantic sense. While he will go on to combine an emphasis on meaning and poetic sounds in his later work,

---

[33] Katherine Lynch, *Introduction to the Parliament of Fowls* in *A Norton Critical Edition: Geoffrey Chaucer Dream Visions and Other Poems* (New York, 2007) 93.
[34] Larry D. Benson, "The Parliament of Fowls" in *Riverside*, 383-84 at 383.
[35] *Ibid.*

here he is stressing the sound of language as a crucial aspect of his own poetic craft, a feature that distinguishes him from other more learned authors.

As he journeys through the house of Fame, the Dreamer cannot yet completely abandon the authority of prior poets, nor the primacy of visual perception. The phrase "I saw" appears frequently throughout his account, as it did in his narrative of the temple of glass in Book I. This time, however, the phrase "herd I" is interspersed (1201, 1243, 1245, 1313, etc.), signaling the beginning of his move toward aurality. Indeed through a complex scheme of echo and amplification, facilitated by its architecture, Fame's house renders literature into noise; the poetic *vox articulata* becomes a *vox confusa*.[36] The voices of classical poets like Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and Lucan resound through the hallways of Fame's house. Yet as the Dreamer tells us in a phrase echoing Priscian's notion of the *vox confusa*, they are perceptible only as a "ful confus matere" (1517). It seems that what the Dreamer hears are not the ordered grammatical voices of *literatura*, but instead a confusion of the *vox articulata*, broken into fragments and defined in terms of their accident rather than their substance. Like "substaunce," "matere" conveyed both physical, accidental matter and a more essential subject, character, or state. Thus "confus matere" conveys the noisy confusion of both sound and meaning emanating from Fame's house.[37] Here Chaucer is again stressing the substance in linguistic accident and the meaning in somatic as well as semantic aspects of language: what we might call the fact of the matter.

Indeed, noise serves to define the physical experience or accident of language as the Dreamer likens the fragmented sounds of literary voices in the halls of the structure to a "noise.../that ferde as been doon in an hyve" (1521-22). Yet it is merely a part that represents a larger whole; synecdoche for an entire sensorium of experience for which language is a prime

---

[36] See Irvine, "Grammatical Theory," 868.
[37] See MED, s.v. "mater(e" (n.) definitions 1, 5, and 7.

purveyor. In keeping with the eagle's metaphor of sound's dazzling visibility as "lighted smoke"

Fame's trumpet, "Sklaundre " emits smoke in a rainbow of colors: "Blak, bloo, grenyssh,

swartish red" (1647). It embraces the very "colours of rethorike" that the eagle strives to avoid.

Likewise, the trumpet "Clere Laude," its counterpart, "…smelde/As men a pot of bawme helde/

Among a basket ful of roses" (1685-87), while "Sklaundre" emits a foul odor "Out of his foule

trumpes ende" (1646). Scholars have taken this emphasis on Slander's foul odor as a crude joke,

an explicit rendering of the implicit flatulence pun in the notion of voice as "broken air."[38] If the

sound of Slander amounts to the foul-smelling byproducts of digestion, I would add, the sounds

it emits are also a form of waste: the somatic aspects of language that exist in excess of its

semantic meaning.

Another mode of sensation, the feeling of motion, is implicit in the Dreamer's experience

of fame's noise. By breaking down authoritative literary voices into fragmented parts, Chaucer

gestures toward a process of composition based on the recycling of former sources that was

commonplace throughout the Middle Ages.[39]   This process relied on piecing together fragments

of written authorities that were often taken out of context and manipulated to fit the Chaucerian

speaker to which they are attributed with added commentary and gloss. Chaucer describes his

means of composing the *Legend of Good Women* in a way that highlights the dynamism of the

process. Lamenting the inadequacy of the English language to adequately describe the daisy he

has spotted in his dream, Chaucer appeals to French vernacular poets for help:

> For wel I wot that ye han her-biforn
> Of making ropen, and lad awey the corn,
> And I come after, glenyng here and there,
> And am ful glad yf I may fynde an ere

---

[38] See for example, Zieman, "Voys," 84.

[39] For more on this mode of textual production and its prevalence throughout the Middle Ages, see A. J. Minnis. *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, Second ed. (Philadelphia, 1984, 1988).

Of any goodly word that ye han left.[40]

By "gleaning" the "corn" that other authors leave behind, Chaucer creates his own poetry out of other poets' leavings. According to this description, Chaucer wanders between and collects fragments, relying on his own creative ability to fill in the gaps in a creative mode. Poetic composition becomes both an intellectual and a physical labor—one that both relies on and produces a wondrous spectrum of sensory experience through the accidents of language.

Though the Dreamer's journey to the house of Fame begins to acquaint him with the world of sense and experience conveyed through language, it is still limited. After encountering eight diverse "company[ies]" seeking fame, the Dreamer meets another individual fame-seeker, who addresses him with a friendly greeting and asks if he too has come for fame. The Dreamer replies emphatically in the negative. Upon his death, he claims, it would suffice "That no wight have my name in honde" (1877). Instead, the Dreamer insists on a self-contained control over his own name, claiming "I wot myself best how I stonde" (1878). Asserting "For what I drye, or what I thinke,/ I wil myselven al hyt drynk" (1879-80) the Dreamer demonstrates that he has learned to frame and pursue knowledge in terms of affective and sensory experience. The verb *drien*, meaning 'to perform or do,' but also both 'to suffer' and 'to enjoy,' embraces a broad array of emotional and physical experience and underscores the Dreamer's emphasis is on "drinking" in the world.[41] Yet in conjunction with this formulation, *drien* puns on its homonym, meaning 'to dry off' or 'to wither,' frustrating the Dreamer's claims to "drink" and suggesting that his education is not yet complete. What the Dreamer still lacks, I argue, is a value for the sociable nature of experience. His world is still the hermetically sealed one of the scholar. Aware that he is still searching for the right "tydynges" the Dreamer must enter, with the help of

---

[40] LGW, *Riverside*, ll. 68-77
[41] See MED s.v. *drien* v. 2.

192

the nameless friend encountered at fame's House, a world of deeper experience and even more noise, the "lewed" and vernacular realm of Rumor.

Even more than the house of Fame, the house of Rumor gyrates and resounds with noise, which serves as a hallmark of experience. The porous wicker structure moves "That never mo hyt stille stente" (1926) and in turn this whirling movement causes "so gret a noyse" (1927) that it might be heard from Rome to the banks of the river Oise at the mouth of the Seine. Observing that this movement is "ever mo, as swift as thought" (1924), the Dreamer calls attention to the physicality of his intellectual labor, suggesting that he has begun to understand that crafting poetry is an effort of sculpting the raw material of linguistic accident.

It is in fact through the physical act of movement through gaps in the wicker, like Chaucer's process of wandering through fields of grain, that the house of Rumor produces meaningful noise. Made of twigs, the structure is full of "entrees" (1945) and "hools" (1949), which "leten wel the soun out goo" (1950). The Dreamer explains

> [It was] for the swough and for the twygges,
> This hous was also ful of gygges,
> And also ful eke of chirkynges,
> And of many other werkynges;
>   (1941-44).

The rhyme placed on "chirkynges," a word that invoked a broad variety of noises from twittering birds, grinding teeth, and even the music of the spheres, and "werkynges," a capacious term for reproductive and intellectual creations, reinforces that it is movement through and experience of the noisy accidents of language that produce poetry.[42]

As in the house of Fame, it is a *vox confusa* that makes up the noise of Rumor's house. Yet instead of fragments of written *literatura*, it disseminates fractured narratives of news and gossip. In describing the contents of this speech, Chaucer's shift toward short syntactical units in

---

[42] MED "werkyng" ger. 1 and "cherken" v.

list form underscores the fragmented nature of the voices resounding through the house of

Rumor:

> And over alle the houses angles
> Is ful of rouninges and of jangles
> Of werres, of pees, of mariages,
> Of reste, of labour, of viages,
> Of abode, of deeth, of lyfe,
> Of love of hate, acorde, of stryfe…
>   (1959-64).

Such monumental topics are the raw material of authoritative written histories and literature, yet in the house of Rumor, they are not yet woven together into narrative.   Instead, they appear as component parts, akin to other more trivial pieces of news that pervade Rumor's house. The list goes on for another dozen lines, ending with the items "Of fyr and of diverse accident"(1975). This emphasis on accident is, of course, not accidental. Referring not only to the kinds of disaster that could contribute to oral report, the line also recalls Chaucer's numerous invocations of sound, the accident of *vox*, as "lighted smoke." It thus highlights the halting aural texture of the list that precedes it, reinforcing the utility of language as a pan-sensory mode of experience.

This emphasis on language as experience that incites poetic creation extends what the Dreamer has already demonstrated he understands as he leaves the house of Fame. The house of Rumor, however, begins to teach him about the social nature of this experience. Overhearing a dishy conversation between two men that imitates the clipped syntactic structure above, gossip emerges as an experiential mode of discourse that stresses the sociability, and with it the "lewedness" and vernacularity of Chaucer's poetic project.   When one man confesses that he has not heard the latest news, the other

> …tolde him this and that,
> And swore therto that hit was soth—
> "Thus hath he sayd," and "Thus he doth,"
> "Thus shal hit be," "Thus herde y seye,"

"That shal be founde," "That dar I leye"…
(2050-54).

Zieman reads these fragments as a signal of the way Chaucer's voice has devolved into the *vox confusa*. I want to suggest that such fragmentary sounds without complete or direct communication are integral to the process of Chaucer's poetic creation. The Dreamer observes this exchange extend into another, and then another in a long line of telephone, ultimately producing "a lesyng and a sad soth" (2089), both of which grapple to enter a window of Rumor's house all at once, "Til ech of hem gan crien lowde,/ 'Lat me go first!' 'Nay, but let me!...'" (2097). The latter—whether it is the 'lesyng'or the 'soth' it is not clear—promises that if it is allowed to go first, it will stay with the other forever as "[its] owne sworen brother" (2101). Thus the Dreamer observes "fals and soth compouned" together into "oo tydynge" (2108-9). The shift from Latin to vernacular making that Chaucer has outlined moves the Dreamer from the hermetically sealed, learned and Latinate world of the scholar toward a realm that is "lewed" in its sociable existence in the world.

Moreover, this process is also "lewed" in its resistance to secure knowledge. The Dreamer's personification of "truth" and "lies" recalls the eagle's anthropomorphic "skile[s]" with "bile[s]" in its very oddness and inscrutability. It would seem that the Dreamer, yet again, must embrace unknowing, again, not in the sense of willful ignorance, but instead as a means of accepting limitations in one's own knowledge for the sake of seeking more. In light of this emphasis, the Dreamer's frequent invocations of his wondrous dream's inexpressibility take on a new force. They are a means of opening spaces in order to learn more. And indeed, through the trope of *occultatio*, they are productive of poetry. We see this dynamic, for example, when the Dreamer tells us in Book I that he "kan not" (248) of love and so will not speak at length on the love of Dido and Aeneas, which incites a love story of several hundred lines. We see it too,

195

when the Dreamer begins to describe the house of Fame, then holds back, claiming "Ne kan I not

to yow devyse;/ My wit ne may me not suffise" (1179-80), then continues with his account of the

structure and its inhabitants, again, for several hundred more lines.

In its famously 'unfinished' nature, the narrative structure of the *House of Fame* enacts

the very process of creative unknowing that it describes. The poem ends with yet another

invocation of the narrator's lack of wit, this time, without continuation. He sees a man "Which

that y [nevene] nat ne kan;/ But he semed for to be/ A man of gret auctorite…." (2156-58). The

poem trails off. The ending of Chaucer's poem demonstrates how Chaucer's authority,

personified into a human figure at the very moment when the text breaks off, lies quite literally

in a gap in knowing. Though initially scholars viewed this the end of the poem as incomplete, a

disjuncture that Chaucer always intended to fill, recent scholarship has embraced the poem's

imperfect lack of closure, pointing to other instances of Chaucer's "open endings" as evidence

for his embrace of unknowing.[43] Such openness leaves room for creation beyond the boundaries

of the text itself, a reaction to which the poem's long afterlife attests. In his 1483 edition of the

poem, the publisher William Caxton, for example, added a few last lines in which the Dreamer is

awakened by the noises of the house of Rumor and concludes that the dream was telling him to

"studye and rede alway." Caxton added his own name in the margin next to these lines, along

with a note that Chaucer had left the poem unfinished. Yet William Thynne's 1532 edition of

Chaucer's works, adopted Caxton's ending, but omitted his signature and note, a change that

would prove long-lived, extending through later editions into the nineteenth century.[44]

---

[43] Penelope Reed Doob, "The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages" (Ithaca, 1990) 307-39 and Rosemarie P. McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville, 1998) 61-78.
[44] See *Riverside* textual notes, 1142.

Highlighting Chaucer's creative unknowing, the poem's final description of Rumor's house anticipates Chaucer's longest and most complex work, the *Canterbury Tales*.[45] As he describes the teeming mass of humanity that fills the house of Rumor, the Dreamer points explicitly to "shipmen and pilgrims" (2122) who carry with them "scrippes bret-ful of lesinges/ Entremedled with tydynges" (2123) and to well as to the "pardoners,/ Currours, and eke messagers" (2127-28) who likewise tote along "boystes crammes ful of lyes/ As ever vessel was with lyes" (2129-30). By pointing to some of the characters (shipmen, pardoners, and pilgrims) who will make up the *Canterbury Tales,* the poem calls attention to Chaucer's authorial self-conception and his awareness of the trajectory of his own works. Further, these characters all carry a myriad of stories ("lesinges," "tydynges," "lyes") with them in various containers, a hubbub that contributes to the noisy spoken fragments resounding through the houses of Fame and Rumor. Finally, the Dreamer is fully attuned to this noise:

> And…I alther-fastest wente
> About, and dide myn entente
> Me for to pleyen and for to lere,
> And eke a tydynge for to here…
> (2131-34).

Here the process of textual production through wandering and gathering that Chaucer describes in his prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* seems to be the same, only perhaps sped up, as Chaucer's persona, the Dreamer whirls about playing, hearing, and learning from other pilgrims, as he will do through various personae in the *Canterbury Tales*. Tellingly, at this moment he holds back, informing readers, that these stories "shal not *now* be told for me—" (2136, emphasis added), emphasizing the gap in knowing from which the *Canterbury Tales* will emerge.

---

[45] The Majority of the *Canterbury Tales* were written after the *House of Fame*. For a proposed chronology, see Benson, "The Canon and Chronology of Chaucer's Works" his *Introduction* to *Riverside*, xxiii.

Chapter 6

Noise, Vernacular Authority, and Chaucer's 'Jolly Bodies' in the *Canterbury Tales*

> Gatsby turned to me rigidly:
>> "I can't say anything in his house, old sport."
>> "She's got an indiscreet voice," I remarked. "It's full of—"
> I hesitated.
>> "Her voice is full of money," he said suddenly.
> That was it. I'd never understood it before. It was full of money—that was the
> inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle in it, the cymbals' song of it…

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Chaucer's early dream vision the *House of Fame* advocates the accident or noise of language as a realm of experience through which Chaucer begins to shape his literary authority as a vernacular poet. His next major project, the *Canterbury Tales* adopts and expands upon this this dynamic, solidifying the value of noise in the figure of the Wife of Bath. The exchange among the Parson, the Host, and the usurping Wife in the epilogue to the Man of Law's Tale raises questions around medieval distinctions between linguistic substance and accident and questions the utility of orthodox clerical models of preaching as a means of conveying knowledge.[1]

The Wife, who is famed for her garrulous carnality and fun, is one of Chaucer's most controversial figures and, I will argue, one of his noisiest. Scholarly debates surrounding the

---

[1] The *Riverside Chaucer* credits the Shipman with the lines that usurp the Parson's place. For a reading that places the Wife of Bath in the role of the Parson's usurper, see R. A. Pratt, "The Development of the Wife of Bath," *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Kroll Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia, 1961), 45-79. For a summary of the scholarship on the order of the *Canterbury Tales*, including the possible placement of the *Shipman's Tale* with the Wife of Bath, see Larry D. Benson, "The Order of the Canterbury Tales" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* (1981) 77-120. Skeat's reading places the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* immediately after the *Man of Law's Epilogue*. This position initiates Fragment III and the "Marriage Group," a set of tales concerned with the place of marriage within society. As the *Riverside* editors point out, the *Man of Law's Tale* presents an ideal of patient and long-suffering womanhood that "must have set Alison's teeth on edge" (10) and would have been sufficient impetus for her to mouth off on her own marriage in a long sermon that presents her own much more complex vision of womanhood and female authority. In another ordering of the *Canterbury Tales*, scholars have placed the *Shipman's Tale*, as one might expect, immediately following the interruption in the *Man of Law's Epilogue*, which they attribute to the Shipman.

Wife have largely been centered on the extent of her authority. D. W. Robertson's *Preface to Chaucer* responded to the New Critics preoccupation with literary form to the exclusion of historical context by aiming to locate the Wife within larger medieval (and specifically Augustinian) ideas about reading and interpretation. Ultimately, he argued that the Wife embodies "rampant 'femininity' *or* carnality."[2] Robertson's telling 'or' here, highlights how he unquestioningly accepts misogynist medieval ideas associating femininity with the frailties of the flesh. The Wife is thus, in Robertson's view, a figured to be mocked and ultimately rejected as misguided and immoral. In the wake of Robertson's important though deeply flawed study, critics adopted his condemnatory stance toward the Wife and extended it to argue for her perversity, criminality, and even sociopathy.[3]

Responding to such Robertsonian criticism, feminist scholars like Carolyn Dinshaw have highlighted the ways that the Wife's speech calls attention to her misogynist environment and her own imprisonment in patriarchal culture and language.[4] In a wide-ranging recent study, Alastair Minnis locates the Wife of Bath's voice within medieval debates about women preaching, highlighting how associations between women and material embodiment informed the notion that women could not adequately convey the *res*, or sacred essence of scripture.[5] Minnis's work asks how and to what extent the Wife succeeds in conveying a moral message, despite the impediments of her body and her gender. His conclusion is ambivalent: the Wife tells a story wherein true "gentilesse" seems to triumph over the feigned trappings of nobility, yet

---

[2] Robertson, *Preface,* 321 (emphasis added).
[3] Several studies argued for the Wife's criminality, by suggesting that she murdered her husbands. See, for example, Beryl Rowland, "On the timely Death of the Wife's Fourth Husband" *Archiv fur das Studium der Neuern Sprachen* (1973) 273-82. See also Dolores Palomo, "The Fate of the Wife of Bath's 'Bad Husbands'" *The Chaucer Review* (1975) 303-19. Similarly, Donald B. Sands argues for the Wife's sociopathy, going so far as to compare her to Charles Manson. See Sands, "The Non-Comic, Non-Tragic Wife: Chaucer's Dame Alys as Sociopath" *The Chaucer Review* (1978) 171-82.
[4] Dinshaw *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. See also Barrie Ruth Strauss, "The Subversive Discourse of the Wife of Bath: Phallocentric Discourse and the Imprisonment of Criticism," *ELH* (1988) 527-554.
[5] Alastair Minnis, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and the Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia, 2008).

the Wife also undermines this reading in subtle ways, reinforcing her status as a product of misogynist discourse.

In many ways, Minnis' reading is characteristic of much anti-Robertsonian scholarship on the Wife of Bath, which acknowledges some power on her part, but ultimately dismisses that power as an effect of her embodiment of misogynist tropes. I do not wish to discount the Wife's deeply rooted social performance of femininity; indeed, I will show how the semantic excess and noisiness associated with her voice is an extension of those antifeminist ideas about language and knowledge. But I will also argue that it is time to shift the terms of the debate around the Wife's moral authority. If we de-emphasized looking for precise meaning in the Wife's speech and instead embraced it as noise, as the text invites us to do, how would it change our understanding of the Wife and of Chaucer's work in the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole?

This chapter offers some responses to this set of questions. I propose that we stop aiming to locate the Wife's authority in how successfully she conveys a specific message in her *Tale*. Instead, I argue that the text is asking us to view her voice as noisy physical experience. The Wife calls attention to the imbalance of power between preacher and listener by foregrounding the power dynamic inherent in the communication of precise meaning, usually moral or scriptural. In the Wife's social and spiritual economy, preaching requires an equal exchange wherein the preacher speaks meaningfully and the listener understands his 'message,' a dynamic that is also engaged in reading, an extension of the experience of listening. This model of equal exchange between speaker and listener paradoxically reinforces the power of one party over the other. An authority or *auctor* conveys meaning from a position of masculine and usually clerical power, which the lay, and in the Wife's case female listener or reader must come to understand. Resisting this model entirely, the Wife insists upon a noisy, embodied, and "effeminate" mode of

communication that does not rely on conveying a precise meaning or moral lesson. This method is 'vernacular' in its full etymological sense as a 'language of slaves' or even 'language of *little* slaves,' trifling and subordinate, a method of speaking in which the sounded and felt "husk" of language becomes meaningful on its own terms, for the pleasure it offers, and not for the pointed message it conveys.[6]

Indeed, the Wife's *Tale*, suggests how this physical experience is paradoxically where she draws her authority. The noise of her voice becomes a mask, a subtle assertion of her own agency and authority even as she appears to embody abased stereotypes. The Wife's *Tale* shows how the economies of social and spoken exchange between the knight and the loathly lady insist upon mystery and misunderstanding, highlighting how the noisy superficiality of the Wife's voice can encourage a play of meaning, a performance of feminine submission that appears to leave masculine authority intact, but which also gives the old woman and the Wife their own tacit agency. Thus, in its lack of equal and unequivocal spoken exchange, the Wife's noisemaking is a critique of the model of clerical authority promised by pilgrims like the Parson, which focuses on the conveyance of a singular unambiguous message. The Wife's model for social exchange allows for a subtle vernacular authority in its embrace of misunderstanding, misdirection, and *un*knowing and shows how this subordination can hold a kind of tacit power.

---

[6] In the way that she privileges surfaces, whether visual (as in her appearance and clothing) or aural (her noisy sounds), over depths, the Wife offers a kind of "camp" performance akin to what scholars like Esther Newton and Judith Butler have discussed in terms of drag as gender parody. Ultimately, I argue that this performance is not for the purpose of ridiculing women and qualities associated with femininity, as D. W. Robertson might have it. Instead, it critiques the very notion of gender as an essential category to begin with. The classic articulation of camp aesthetics, which stresses this focus on surface over depth, is Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," reprinted in Fabio Cleto, ed. *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject, A Reader* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999) 53-65. While Sontag insists that camp is a modern sensibility, Thomas King has shown how camp aesthetics pervade the world of the early modern "fribble," a collector of knick-knacks and trifles. See King, "Performing Akimbo: Queer Pride and Epistemological Prejudice" in Moe Meyer, ed. *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London, 1994) 23-50. For Butler's discussion of drag as gender parody, see *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 186-90. Here Butler is influenced by the earlier anthropological work of Esther Newton in *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago, 1972). In assessing the relative "feminism" of camp performance, I am guided by the work of Pamela Robertson in her book *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham, 1996).

In order to discuss her in greater detail, however, I turn once again to *lollares* and their social meaning for Chaucer and his contemporaries.

Chaucer's "Lollard Jokes"

The epilogue to Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, which is generally thought to precede the Wife's *Prologue* in one prominent strand of editorial presentation, both introduces the Wife's noisiness and sets up its purpose and stakes.[7] Harry Baily, the host of the Canterbury pilgrims and the one who is orchestrating their tale-telling, invites the Parson to tell the tale that will follow the Man of Law's tale (1165-66). In response, the Wife of Bath interrupts in protest. Renouncing the Parson's authority in no uncertain terms, she exclaims "'Nay, by my fader soule that schal he nat [speak]!'"(1178). She continues vehemently, "'Heer schal he nat preche/ He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche" (1179-80). Rather than listening to the interpretations of an orthodox authority, intent on conveying a rigid moral message through his interpretation of the gospel, the Wife steps in to assert the legitimacy of her own voice, which is resoundingly embodied and vernacular, in contrast to learned men like the Parson:

> My joly body schal a tale telle,
> And I schal clynken you so mery a belle
> That I schal waken al this compaignie.
> But it schal not ben of philosophie,
> Ne phislyas, ne termes queinte of lawe.
> Ther is but litel Latyn in my mawe!"
> (1185-90).

---

[7] The *Riverside* follows the ordering of fragments offered by the *Tales's* first modern editor, Thomas Tyrwhitt, who based his editorial decisions on the order of the tales in the Ellesmere manuscript. In the nineteenth century, several decades after Tyrwhitt's eighteenth century edition, Henry Bradshaw drew upon his work to posit a slight variation in the order of *Tales*: the Shipman's *Prologue* and *Tale* were placed after the *Man of Law's Tale*, while the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* followed the *Pardoner's Tale* later in the narrative. While Tyrwhitt's fragments are the basis of the *Riverside*, what is now known as the "Bradshaw shift" was embraced by the Chaucer Society and by editors like Skeat. See Benson, *Riverside*, 5. While it is not my intention to argue definitively for an ordering of the *Canterbury Tales*, I would argue that the usurping speaker's interest in noise, and in using it to undermining clerical authority adds further evidence that the lines were assigned to the Wife of Bath at some point.

These lines extend the Wife's disdain for learned authority, and all the jargon that accompanies it.

It is possible to read the nonce word "phislyas," a garbled form of "physic" (the discipline of medicine), as mocking evidence of the speaker's limited education.[8] But I suggest that we can read the joke extending in the other direction. In the context of this section's virulent rejection of clerical and Latinate authority, *phislyas* reads like a word invented to poke fun of the highfalutin and impenetrable terminology of the educated classes. It is a word whose crowding of the consonants *s-l-y* in the middle cause it to slide around in the mouth. In this way, the word emphatically rejects those rules of pronunciation advocated by Latin grammarians and rhetoricians like Isidore of Seville, who cautions against the "clash[ing]" sounds of too many conjoining consonants.[9] In other words, as she rejects the Parson, the Wife invents a word that requires an emphatically carnal pronunciation. She goes on to insist on her own mode of lustily embodied performance and understanding.

Declaring that she has no Latin in her "mawe," the Wife invokes not simply a ravenous mouth or throat, but also the *stomach*. In the most direct sense of these lines, the Wife is asserting that she does not speak Latin. But she is also framing the process of understanding as a kind of digestion or physical incorporation. Moreover, this passage lends itself to a pronunciation through which the lines draw attention to their own poetic qualities. In the first line of this passage in particular, "my j*o*ly b*o*dy sh*a*ll *a* t*a*le t*elle*" (emphasis added to highlight aural texture), we can hear and feel how the assonance of the vowels combine with the meter to involve the entire body as they are pronounced. In both form and content, then, the Wife is

---

[8] This viewpoint was first described by R. C. Goffin in "Notes on Chaucer" *Modern Language Review* (1923) 335-37. It has since been adopted widely among Chaucer's editors. See *Riverside,* n. to line 1189 at 863.
[9] Isidore, *Etymologies* II. xix, 75.

asserting the unbridled sensuality of her voice, and underscoring the role of the body in understanding.

The exchange between the Host and the Parson that precedes the Wife's interruption is important in understanding her emphasis on the body in this section, offering one of the poet's few overt references to lollards. After praising the Man of Law for his "thrifty" story, the Host invites the Parson to tell the next tale (1165-66), emphasizing that learned men such as the Parson "Can moche good, by Godes dignitee! (1169). The Host's use of *thrifty*, meaning "worthy, " sets up the process of storytelling as a system of exchange in which the author's worth or value is based on his ability to communicate a "good" moral or message. In the Man of Law's case, this is the story of Constance, the ideal woman, who is so obedient or "constant" to authority that she endures being set adrift in a rudderless boat.

When the Parson objects to Harry Baily's mild oath, however, the Host undertakes an about-face in his attitudes toward this conventional mode of clerical authority that insists upon the conveyance of a singular moral message. With characteristic menace, he sneers "O Jankin, be ye there?/ I smelle a Lollere in the wynd" (1172-73). Scholars have suggested that the host is calling the Parson a Wycliffite in this passage, perhaps in reference to Wycliffite proscriptions against swearing.[10] But I read this passage as more broadly opposed to the sanctimonious piety of a learned and Latinate religious authority. The Host employs the scornful nickname "Jankyn," a diminutive of "Sir John" which was used widely as a derisive name for a priest during the period.[11] More pointedly, he embraces the Parson's preachiness, ironically:

---

[10] Despite pointing out that objections to swearing were widespread, even among orthodox clergy, the editors of the *Riverside* nevertheless frame this section in terms of the host's "assum[ption] that the Parson's objection to swearing indicates he is a Lollard." See *Riverside* n. to line 1171 at 863. On "lollards" and swearing see Henry G. Russell, "Lollard Opposition to Oaths by Creatures" *American Historical Review* 51 (1946) 668-84.

[11] See MED s.v. "Jon." In the Nun's Priest's Prologue, the host addresses him derisively as "Sir John" (VII.2810). Though it lies beyond the confines of this chapter, it is interesting to note that the NPT has one of the most noteworthy eruptions of noise in Chaucer's entire milieu—one that ties it to the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. Perhaps

> 'Now! Goode men,' quod oure Hoste, 'herkneth me;
> Abydeth, for Goddes digne passioun,
> For we schal han a predicacioun;
> This Lollere heer wil prechen us somewhat.'
> <div align="right">(1174-77).</div>

Andrew Cole reads this invitation as a "conscientious if not over performed attempt to show that he stands corrected for his sinful swearing."[12] I agree on the theatrical nature of his response but I read the passage as ironically mocking the Parson's authority. After all, the Host persists in calling the Parson "lollere," a term of derision. Further, the host's addition of the tern "predicacioun," from the Latin *praedicare*, instead of relying solely on the vernacular *prechen* suggests his alignment of clerical authority with Latinate learning and highfalutin terminology. We are reminded that, to Harry Baily's ears later in the pilgrimage, the Monk's self-righteous tale will "clappeth lowde," sounding worse than the "the clynkyng of [the] belles" on his bridle.[13] The Host invokes noise, then, as a way of dismissing the self-righteous morality of a clerical speaker. In other words, he counter-intuitively seeks to undermine the Parson's clerical authority by calling him a name associated with radical thinkers, the lollards, who interrogated religious authority.

As I do in *Piers Plowman* and in Margery Kempe's narrative, I am reading the word *lollere* not always as a word to denote a particular member of a heretical group, but as a term that can also signal a broader engagement with problems of interpretation and authority that were "in the wind" in the 1390's. As we have seen, during Chaucer's time, the Wycliffite heresy was emerging from the exclusively male academic setting of Oxford. Wycliffites were vehemently in favor of writing in the vernacular and strongly against what they saw as the sensual excesses of

---

this resonance is not coincidental. For further discussion of this exchange in terms of conflict between *latinitas* and vernacularity, see Derreck Pitard, "Sowing Difficulty: The Parson's Tale, Vernacular Commentary, and the Nature of Christian Dissent" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004) 299-330 at 300-305.
[12] Cole, *Literature and Heresy,* 77.
[13] *NPP*, *Riverside*, VII. 3971, 2794.

the Church, which included paintings and luxury objects as well as drama, music, and other kinds of spectacle and performance. In the view of the Wycliffites, these excesses had the dangerous potential to distract from a more true and pure attention to God. Indeed, as Cole points out in connection with this passage, the noisy sounds of pilgrimage were part and parcel of the material signs of devotion that Wycliffites sought to eliminate. [14] In a testimony from 1407, the Lollard preacher William Thorpe complains about those busy men and women who "gon hidir and þidir on pilgrymage," asserting that such endeavors are "more for the helþ of her bodies þan for þe helþe of her soulis."[15] He goes on to condemn a host of noises associated with the display of devotion enacted in pilgrimage processions, including "rowtinge songis," "baggepipis," the "noyse of syngyng," the "soun of…piping," the "gingelynge of…Cantirbirie bellis," and the "berkynge of the dogges aftir hem."[16] As I have explored in earlier chapters on *Piers Plowman*, their views on reading extended this dynamic as they argued that the task of the interpreter was to look and listen past the surface sounds of language to uncover its inner meaning.

To be clear, this rigid way of reading for a precise moral message was also an ideal of orthodox readers and clerics. But the official Church made room for sensual experience and embodied devotional practices, largely as a way of ensuring dependence on the ultimate authority of priests. Ultimately, I will argue that the Wife turns this orthodox acceptance of bodily understanding on its head and employs it in the service of assuring her own agency. I argue that the Wife's insistence on her own noise-making capacity is emphatically anti-lollard: a way of asserting not only the pleasure she and others take in the aural texture of her own voice,

---

[14] See Cole, *Literature and Heresy,* 78.
[15] *Two Wycliffite Texts*, ed. Anne Hudson (Oxford, 1993) 63.
[16] *Ibid.* 64.

but also an avowal of her own capacity as an author, albeit one who is "fallible" and impeded by her own body and gender. On the one hand, the Wife wants to speak and compose in the vernacular, like the Wycliffites. At the same time, she rejects an impulse to eliminate sensual excesses by communicating a precise scriptural or moral message, an impulse that was not just Wycliffite, but that was more broadly associated with male clerical authority.

The word "lollere" sets up these larger questions of interpretation. While the Parson may or may not be a Wycliffite, he does represent a kind of rigid moral authority associated with an educated male class of clerics, intent on elevating precise meaning over physical experience. After all, the Parson will later reveal himself to be against the "rum ram ruf" texture of language when he finally does take his turn to speak. Here, he objects to an oath, which was a kind of language that by its very nature stressed the physicality of words. It was widely believed, for example, that speaking oaths against Christ was a means of beating and crucifying him anew. The Parson reminds us of this conception of oaths when he says in his later sermon, "For Christ's sake, ne swereth nat so sinfully in dismembryng of Christ by soule, herte, bones, and body."[17] The Host's irony in inviting the Parson to speak underscores his emphatic rejection of the Parson's rigid moral authority, whether orthodox or heretical. In other words, the Host reckons that the Parson, with his strict clerical training and religious vocation, could contribute a tale that would fit in well coming at the heels of the Man of Law's "thrifty" and virtuous story. But when the Parson objects to Harry Baily's momentarily colorful oath, it is the last straw for the Host. Harry's tone sours and his invitation to speak turns acerbically ironic, calling further attention to the Parson's rigid moralism.

---

[17] *PT*, *Riverside*, X. 590.

As Cole has suggested, the passage concluding the Man of Law's Epilogue amounts to a veritable "lollard joke."[18] By invoking this phrase Cole is of course making reference to a moment of Wycliffite ridicule in the *Pardoner's Tale*, which Paul Strohm has argued links the Pardoner's digression on greed with contemporaneous lollard debates about the eucharist.[19] After opening his tale with an unruly tavern scene, the Pardoner embarks on a long digression on gluttony, the apex of which invokes theological debates regarding the nature of transubstantiation:

> O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod,
> Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!
> At either ende of thee foul is the soun.
> How greet labour and cost is thee to fynde!
> Thise cookes, how they stampe and streyne, and grynde,
> And turnen substaunce into accident
> To fulfille al thy likerous talent![20]

Wycliffite or "lollard" attitudes toward the eucharist were tightly bound together with their views on language: both were unified by an overarching preoccupation with "signs" and their relationship to holy "truths." It is no wonder, then, that this passage invokes the "foul…soun(s)" of the body along with digestion, a well-established metaphor for the reading of sacred scripture, in conjunction with his play on lollard anxieties about the embodied and "accidental" nature of the eucharist.

Both "lollard jokes" highlight similar preoccupations with language and its interpretation. As a mode of discourse that often relies on punning and wordplay, stressing sounds alongside and sometimes over meaning, such 'jokes' are an effective way to raise questions around the interplay of linguistic substance and accident. They emphasize signifier and destabilize signified. Chaucer's 'lollard jokes,' both in the *Man of Law's Epilogue* and the *Pardoner's Tale*,

---

[18] Cole, *Literature and Heresy*, 78.

[19] Paul Strohm, "Chaucer's Lollard Joke," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* (1995) 23-42.

[20] *PaT*, Riverside, VI. 534-40.

raise the twinned issues of authority and interpretation. Who has the authority to clear away the

noise of language to render plain the meaning of a text, and how should that meaning best be

expounded?   Chaucer's answer, as the Wife's response above suggests and as the following

sections will show, is rousingly vernacular. It embraces the language that was aligned not only

with the laity, but also with the corporeal, the subordinate, and the 'feminine.'

Clothing the Naked Text

This exchange among the Host, the Parson, and the Wife introduces the Wife's noisy

corporeality and situates it within the social and gender politics of Chaucer's time. The Wife's

Prologue extends these issues by insisting on the Wife's concern with surface, including the

sounds of language, over substance. As we have seen, medieval mores around reading figured

textual interpretation as a practice of clearing away the embodied and aural and sensory aspects

of a text in order to encounter a "naked" truth that lay hidden at its center. This custom was so

entrenched it became, as Rita Copeland has shown, a kind of implicit hermeneutic law.[21] In one

of the most widely cited examples of this association, the fifth century platonist Macrobius

justifies reading fables on the grounds that Philosophy, which he allegorizes as a woman, must

be veiled modestly from the lewd gaze with the garment of fiction or allegory.[22] Rhetoric was

likewise allegorized as a woman and often described with an emphasis on her ravishingly and

deceptively ornate dress. In his late antique work on the seven liberal arts, Martianus Capella,

whom Chaucer mentions by name in the *House of Fame* (985), emphasizes Lady Rhetoric's

dazzling surface array with a series of puns on sartorial and written ornamentation. Her robe

---

[21] Copeland, "Why Women Can't Read." Copeland outlines how the implicit laws of medieval hermeneutics, which figured women as bad readers, contributed to explicit legal definitions for what was prosecutable as "lollard" heresy.
[22] Macrobius, *Comentarii in Somnium Scipionis,* ed. J. Willis (Stutgard, 1994) 7-8. For a discussion of this formulation and its influence through the Middle Ages, see Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics,* 20-23.

"was adorned with the light of all kinds of devices and showed the figures of them all, while she had a belt under her breast adorned with the rarest colors of jewels."[23] This description of her clothing calls attention to the ways that metaphors of sartorial adornment also functioned to describe rhetorical adornment, highlighting its associations with surface and excess.

With her emphasis on physical experience and sensuality, the Wife of Bath is a veritable embodiment of Dame Rhetoric.[24] As Carolyn Dinshaw and other scholars have shown, her preoccupation with cloth and clothing draws attention to her role as a text to be uncovered and read by her husbands.[25] Adept at sartorial self-presentation, her shoes are "ful moyste and newe" (*GP*, 457) and her hose "gaye scarlet gytes" (559). John Alford has usefully suggested that Chaucer's emphasis on the bright color of her clothing ("Her hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed," *GP*, 456) and its excess ("Hir coverchiefs…weyeden ten pound," *GP*, 453-54) recall the empty splendor of Martianus Capellanus' Rhetoric and embodies two critiques of rhetoric common through the Middle Ages.[26]

The Wife is not simply a clotheshorse, however. Her very livelihood is as a dealer in material: in physical and rhetorical *textus*.   Chaucer's description in the *General Prologue*, informs us that "Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt,/ She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt" (*GP*, 447-48). This description calls attention to the performative aspect of the emerging middle class.[27] The Wife's professional identity is comprised of repeated, habitual returns or

---

[23] *Martianus Caplla and the Seven Liberal Arts* v. II, ed. William Harris Stahl and Richard Johnson with E. L. Burge (New York, 1977) 156.

[24] John A. Alford, for example, usefully contrasts the Wife's embodiment of rhetoric with the Clerk's incarnation of the opposing philosophical discourse of dialectic. See Alford, "The Wife of Bath versus the Clerk of Oxford: What Their Rivalry Means" *The Chaucer Review* (Fall, 1986) 108-32.

[25] On the Wife of Bath's embodiment of this trope, see Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics.* See also Heather Hill-Vasquez, "Chaucer's Wife of Bath, Hoccleve's Arguing Women, and Lydgate's Hertford Wives: Lay Interpretation and the Figure of the Spinning Woman in Late Medieval England" *Florilegium* (2006) 169-95 at 171-77.

[26] See Alford, "Rivalry," 121.

[27] Many medieval moralists, including Chaucer's Parson, denounced the ways that clothing could lead to great upward mobility and ambiguous social status. In keeping with his distaste for "rum, ram, ruf" language, the Parson

"haunts" to her craft. She has no artistic essence; or rather, her essence *is* her artifice. She is, it would seem, pure form or matter rather than spiritual essence.   Indeed, the Wife's attention her body and material experience is part and parcel of her embodiment of misogynist stereotypes, a characterization that I argue dictates the noisy corporeality of her voice. As she performs antifeminist tropes, the Wife becomes a booming echo chamber: an amplifying conduit for all of the excessive sensual qualities of rhetoric that cover or disguise meaning.

The corporality of the Wife's voice is written on her body in her "gat-tothed" grin (*GP*, 468), which signals her irreverent and luxurious nature, according to medieval physiognomy.[28] More pointedly, the gap in her teeth points to the Wife's particular bodily and vocal openness— her incontinence of sexuality and words. Sermons against sins of the tongue frequently advanced the idea that the tongue was "naturally" guarded by the double walls of the teeth and the lips.[29] The Manciple uses this homiletic commonplace in his exemplum against gossip, for example, as he moralizes at the end: "My sone, God of his endelees goodnesse/ Walled a tongue with teeth and lippes eke,/ For man sholde hym avyse what he speeke" (ll. 322-4). Though some manuscripts read "gap-tothed," suggesting a lack of complete integrity and closure, the more commonly accepted "gat-tothed" is particularly compelling in combination with the homiletic metaphor of the walled tongue. In this formulation, "gat" comes from the Old English *gæt* or

---

engages in a prolonged screed against pride in which he scorns the ways that the excessive sleeves of the rich "trai[l] in the dong and in the mire" (*PT*, X. 418), and derides the ways that men of the court wear clothes so short and tight that "the buttock of hem faren as it were the hyndre part of a she-ape in the fulle of the moone" (*PT*, X. 423). Such descriptions highlight the Parson's concern about clothing's potential to transgress the boundaries of social status and gender. On the role of clothing as a performative indicator of social status, see Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia, 2002).

[28] See Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (New York, 1960), 109.

[29] For a discussion of the metaphor of the tongue "walled" by teeth and lips in relation to homiletic literature and the *Manciple's Tale*, see Edwin Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker* (Cambridge, 1997) 202-203.

'gate,' pointing to an opening or breach in the implied portcullis of the teeth and underscoring the Wife's promiscuity of the mouth.[30]

The Wife's oral openness is intimately linked to her "excessive" sexuality and physicality, an association that was rooted in medieval medical theory. Recalling the homiletic commonplace that the teeth were a "gate" to guard the tongue, female genitalia were often characterized in terms of "openings" or "doorways" in medieval medical literature. Vernacular English translations of the twelfth century compendium of women's medicine by Trotula, for example, use the term "weket."[31] This language of opening and access more firmly delineates the boundaries between inside and outside the body, reminding medieval readers that women's bodies had the potential to be more porous and open and that their physical integrity was harder to maintain.

Underscoring this boundary between inside and outside, medical literature frequently referred to women's sexual and reproductive functions as "secrets," an association illustrated most notably in the proliferation of "secrets" literature on medieval gynecology, such as Albertus Magnus's *De secreta mulierum* ('On the secrets of women'). Albertus' treatise was hugely influential in the Middle Ages and spawned a variety of texts stressing the 'secrecy' of women's physical functions, some to a ridiculous degree, for example, *De secreta secretorum mulierum* ('On the secrets of secret women').[32] This so-called 'secrets'-literature counter-intuitively stressed the dangerous, excessive, and uncontrolled bodily openness of women in contrast to the self-contained physical and rhetorical control of men. The Wife frequently asserts that she, like

---

[30] See explanatory note in *Riverside*, 818, n. 468.

[31] Monica Green, "From 'Diseases of Women' to 'Secrets of Women': The Transformation of Gynecological Literature in the Early Middle Ages *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (Winter, 2000) 5-39 at 11 and 31 n. 23; Gail Kern Paster has also helpfully outlined how the idea of women as "leaky vessels" carried into early modern drama. See Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1993).

[32] Monica Green has detailed the increasing influence of the idea of secrecy or privacy over gynecological literature in the later Middle Ages. See "Transformation."

all women, is a gossip, and unable to keep secrets. Indeed, her account of Midas's wife in her

Tale changes the "whisper" (*inmurmurat*) of Ovid's servant's "tiny voice" (*voce…parva*) to the

booming voice of a "bitore" that "bombleth in the myre" (972).[33] A crane colloquially known as

the "mire drum" for its deep and resounding mating call, the sound's contextual rootedness in

avian mating practices reinforces the link between women's speech and their sexuality.[34]

Combined with her associations with appetite and uninhibited sexuality, these assertions position

the flow of language and knowledge as another 'secretion' that mars the integrity of her and all

women's bodies.[35]

Showing Skin/ Caterwauling

As the metaphor of the bittern suggests, animal noise becomes a synecdoche for all of the

uninhibited and carnal qualities of the Wife's voice. The Wife again participates in misogynist

conceptions of women's voices by highlighting her focus on sensual surface rather than

substance, with respect to her voice as well as her body. She recalls one husband's tendency to

compare her with a cat while condemning her love of ostentatious fine attire:

> Thou seydest this, that I was lyk a cat:
> For whoso wolde senge a cattes skin,
> Thanne wolde the cate wel dwellen in his in;
> And if the cattes skin be slyk and gay,
> She wol not dwelle in house half a day,

---

[33] See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* v. 2, ed. T. E. Page (Cambridge, MA, 1916, rept. 1964) 132 (XI. l.187).

[34] See note to l. 972, *Riverside*, 873.

[35] Manuscript annotations of Walter Map's *Disuassio Valerii ad Rufinum*, an anti-feminist text that was influential in the composition of the Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, points to a preoccupation among male clerics that the uncontrolled flux from women's mouths could affect men like a poison or a contagion. In the *Disuassio,* Map discusses the "honeyed poison" administered to Rufinus by the "ministers of Bable" (the women who seduce him). The Oxford Franciscan John Ridewall added an annotation next to this section, which links it to a story on King Zedekiah told by the twelfth-century French theological writer, Peter Comestor. Comestor narrates how Zedekiah was taken prisoner by the King of Babylon and one day was brought in front of the Babylonian court and given "a delicious laxative drink" which caused him to evacuate his bowels shamefully in front of the whole court. By Comestor's account, Zedekiah died of shame a few days later. For more on this story and other annotations of Map's *Dissuasio*, see Traugot Lawler, "Medieval Annotation: The Example of the Commentaries on Walter Map's 'Dissuasio Valerii,' in *Annotation and its Texts*, ed. Stephen A. Barney (New York, 1991).

> But forth she wole, er any day be dawed,
> To shewe her skin and goon a-caterwawed.
>   (ll. 349-54).

The likeness of the Wife to a cat on the prowl links her sexuality to her voice as it suggests that she "shows her skin" and "goes caterwauling." Like the "gaye scarlet gytes," (559) which she revels in showing, the Wife's loud voice is a kind of ostentatious display. Her self-description shows the extent to which she embodies this misogynist point of view as she compares her own marital complaints to the noise of a neighing horse ("For as an hors I coude byte and whyne," 386). Recalling her husband's comparison between the Wife and a cat in heat, the Wife's own self-comparison to a punchy horse, correlates the wildness of her sexuality with the wildness of her speech, emphasizing the irrepressibly corporeal nature of her voice, its conception as pure accident with no substance. As the dual metaphor of "showing skin" and "caterwauling" suggests, the Wife's clothing and voice are *both* a kind of ostentatious display, emphasizing surface over substance.

The Wife's noisy and libidinous voice is consistent with her self-interested style of citation. Her knowledge of learned texts from patristic, anti-feminist, and misogamist traditions is widely acknowledged.[36] It is the Wife's tendency toward what H. Marshall Leicester calls "voicing," "citation," and "miming" that secures her role as a "noble prechour" (165), in the words of the Pardoner, Chaucer's other questionable evangelist.[37] The list of authors that the Wife integrates, caricatures, or ventriloquizes throughout her prologue is long and includes St. Paul, St. Jerome, and Walter Map among others. Despite her wide-ranging knowledge of learned

---

[36] In addition to Leicester (below) see, for example, Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* and Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, 1991), 280-321 and Andrew Galloway, "Marriage Sermons, Polemical Sermons, and the Wife of Bath's Prologue" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* (1992) 3-30.

[37] H. Marshall Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, 1990) 91, 99, 114, 404. For the Wife's role as a preacher, Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*; Galloway, "Marriage Sermons;" and Minnis, *Fallible Authors*.

sources, her interpretations are nearly always out of context and self-interested. She embraces

Paul's grudging advocacy of marriage with the wry observation "Bet is to be wedded than to

brynne" (51). She acknowledges the moral supremacy of virginity, but insists that, while Paul

may advise women to be virgins, "He put it in oure owne juggement" (68). Sensibly, she

defends this stance with the rhetorical question "And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe,/

Virginity than wherof sholde it growe?" (70-1).

In discussing the Wife of Bath's authority, Minnis points out that her intellectual training

stems almost entirely from *listening* to her husband Jankyn, a clerk trained at Oxford. She is

thus, in his terminology, an "*auditrix*" of philosophy far beyond what was deemed appropriate

for the laity. I want to add to this observation by highlighting how Chaucer's characterization of

the Wife's voice participates in misogynist medieval conceptions of women's access to

intellectual authority. If the Wife has listened to more theological and moral argumentation than

most of her lay peers, she has been incapable of absorbing the essence of those arguments. Her

attendance to sounds rather than ideas is consistent with her role as a "fallible author," impeded

by her body from correct understanding. As with Langland's Meed, the Wife's noise-making is

an extension of her role as a "bad" reader. Unable to absorb the correct essence of a text, her

speaking is likewise empty: the noisy clacking of tongue against teeth.

The Wife calls attention to this interplay between 'bad' reading and noisy voicing as she

narrates how a blow from her fifth husband Jankyn rendered her deaf, then quickly and

inexplicably transitions to her own innate 'jangling':

> By God he smoot me ones on the lyst,
> For that I rente out of his book a leef,
> That of the strook myn ere wax al deef.
> Stibourn I was as is a leonesse,
> And of my tongue a verray jangleresse…
>   (634-38).

215

The Wife's quick transition correlates her deafness with a mind that is "stubborn" and intractable, like a wild animal. Her 'jangling' preaching voice emerges directly from her practices as a bad reader, "deaf" to spiritual sense.

The idea that the Wife is deaf to the spiritual content of what she hears is, of course, consistent with Robertson's controversial reading of the Wife. Yet even though I acknowledge and extend the utility of Robertson's literal viewpoint, my argument is somewhat different in spirit. Rather than condemning the Wife, or holding her up to ridicule as a moral failure (and confirming Chaucer's own conservatism in the process) I want to suggest a way we can view the Wife's deafness and noise-making as a potential exercise of power or agency. Ultimately, I argue, the Wife's play with language and performance is an exercise in the absurd. Stemming from a Latin phrase for "from deafness" or "muteness" (*ab* + *surdus*), the idea of the absurd offers a way of reading a measure of agency over her own voice in the Wife's deafness and non-communicative or "mute" noise.

Another of the Wife's self-comparisons to animals begins to suggest this form of agency. Here, however, the animal is a magpie, which adds a layer of contradiction to her self-characterization as a noise-maker. In a passage where Wife reinforces the dominion of her body over her mind, she recalls that in her youth, she was "ful of ragerye,/ Stiborn and strong and joly as a pye" (455-56) Magpies developed a reputation as chatterers and are referenced as such through much medieval literature.[38] In the *Parliament of Fowles* the 'pye' appears with the epithet "jangling" (*PF*, 344). And in a passage resonant with the Wife's self-characterization in her *Prologue*, Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* pokes fun at the amorous verbosity of its aged protagonist, January: "He was al coltish, ful of ragerye,/ and full of jargon as a flekked pye"

---

[38] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghoff (Cambridge, 2006) 267.

(IV.1847-48). Moreover, the chattering of the magpie was said to be imitative rather than productive of meaningful human sound. To Isidore of Seville, magpies "pronounce words with a distinct articulation, like a human." They "sound out in unmannerly garrulity, and although they are unable to unfold their tongues in meaningful speech, still they imitate the sound of the human voice."[39] Though their sounds recreate those of human language, the noise of magpies is ultimately but a pale imitation of human speech.

Significantly, however, Isidore claims that the Latin for magpie (*pica*) stems from the word for poet (*poetica*) based on its similar, though syncopated, sounds. As I have argued in the previous chapter, this common etymological strategy, which found the origin of a word in another word or phrase with similar sounds, was influential to Chaucer's conception of language as an experiential realm in the *House of Fame*. Taking place in a section where she sings the praises of wine, asserting its influence over her various physical desires, her itch for merriment and sexual license, the Wife's self-comparison to a magpie underscores her embodiment of rhetorical accident over substance. Yet I would suggest that it is precisely in the superficial skin of language where the Wife locates poetic authority, as she hints with her conclusion "a likerous mouth must han a likerous tayl" (466). Conflating gustatory and sexual appetites, the line underscores the libidinous nature of what comes out of her mouth, along with what goes into it. Yet it also punningly suggests that in order to have a good story or "tale" one must give in to the pleasures of the mouth and body, to the sound of language, and to its taste and feel on the tongue.

It is these very accidental aspects of language that the Wife sees as the essence of her voice. Figuring her aging body as a thrumming textual instrument, she laments:

> But age, allas! That al wol envenyme,
> Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith
> Lat go, farewell! The devel go therwith!

[39] *Ibid.,* 267.

The flour is goon, ther is namore to telle:
The bren, as I best can now moste I selle…

(474-78).

The Wife emphasizes her loss of essential vital spirit or "pith" and gestures toward the way that

this lack of essence translates to her speech. Just as her body has lost the desirable bloom of

youth, so her voice is now devoid of meaning: "there is no more to tell."[40] Instead, the Wife

must "selle" the "bran" of her voice. In Middle English, the distinction between "flour" and

"bran" is essentially the difference between "wheat" and "chaff": the bran is the "chaff" or

"husk." As with Langland's Meed, who is "talewis of tonge" the Wife's economic formulation

reminds us of the increased suspicion of for-profit preachers and performers during Chaucer's

time. Such practices were aligned with both sexuality and, I would add, textuality for pleasure.

They were viewed as both socially and spiritually unproductive. It is worth noting that, while the

Wife talks at length about sex, she never mentions having children. Her non-reproductive

sexuality is in line with her tendency to speak for her own pleasure with a noisy voice that

frustrates mental conception.

Noise and Mercantile Poetics in the *Wife of Bath's Shipman's Tale*

It is precisely this emphasis on speech within economies of individual versus common

profit, what I will call a "poetics of mercantile accounting" following Andrew Galloway, that

links the *Shipman's Tale* to the Wife of Bath.[41] Joseph A Dane has helpfully outlined the logical

and aesthetic assumptions behind early nineteenth century editorial arguments that the *Shipman's*

---

[40] See MED "flour" n. 2 for the desirable essence of a grain. See MED "flour" n. 2, def. 2d for the word's
associations with virginity.
[41] See Andrew Galloway's examination of the account book of a fourteenth century merchant who served Chaucer
and others in his literary milieu. Using the *Shipman's Tale*, among other works, Galloway shows how the
accounting method of double entry bookkeeping reflects certain contemporaneous ideas about literary creation. See
Galloway, "The Account Book and the Treasure," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 33.1 (2011) 65-124.

Tale was originally intended for the Wife of Bath.[42] I do not aim to make a definitive argument about the order of the *Canterbury Tales*, or about Chaucer's intention in assigning different tales to different pilgrims. My aim is simply to offer further evidence for the relation of the *Shipman's Tale* to the Wife of Bath, and for the possibility that the *Shipman's Tale* was given to the Wife at some point. While I will ultimately show how the Wife's *Tale* extends her use of the noise of language as a kind of masquerade, here I want to highlight how the *Wife of Bath's Shipman's Tale* is in fact suited to the voice of the Wife because of its emphasis on commodified speech, as an extension of for-profit sexuality and trade.

Scholars have highlighted the ways that the economic and social exchanges of the *Shipman's Tale* reflect a cultural ambivalence toward merchants in Chaucer's age, in particular their troubled place working for both common and individual profit; they have also underscored how the *Tale* highlights the problems of integrating the emergent mercantile middle class into local government.[43] I would add that spoken exchange is an important economy in the *Wife of Bath's Shipman's Tale*. Through its depiction of comically over-determined social and economic exchange, the story critiques the clerical model of social relations that insists upon the equal exchange of communicating a singular moral or message.

The *Wife of Bath's Shipman's Tale* is a bawdy *fabliau*, introducing a merchant with a young wife who is strikingly similar to the Wife of Bath. Sociable and "revelous" (4), the narrative of the story unfolds from her desire for clothing and from her husband's "nygardye" (172) in failing to buy her enough of it. It is this emphasis on these qualities, especially her interest in clothing and *textus*, that has traditionally led scholars to compare the merchant's wife of the *Wife of Bath's Shipman's Tale* with the Wife of Bath herself and to suggest that the tale

---

[42] Dane, "The Wife of Bath's Shipman's Tale." Dane's discussion of "cancelled intentions" is at 297.
[43] Helen Fulton, "Mercantile Ideology in Chaucer's Shipman's Tale" *The Chaucer Review* (2002) 311-28.

was intended for her. Indeed, an unexpected use of the second person plural in the storyteller's assertion that "[a husband] moot us clothe, and…moot us array" (12) is suggestive of a wifely female speaker. But, I would argue, it is not simply an emphasis on carnality and worldly goods that invites comparison, but also more specifically a focus on the ways that linguistic commerce both constructs and reinforces social relations.

Like Alison, the merchant's wife has a "joly body" (423), suggesting that her voice too is equally noisy, "clinking" and "jangling" like a bell. Echoing the Wife of Bath's self-description in her *Prologue*, the merchant's wife is "jolif as a pye" (209), an epithet that, as we have seen, stresses the empty or idle nature of her voice, but also its potential creativity. The merchant's wife does indeed prove to have an idle tongue as she complains about her husband's miserliness to the monk. Ironically, this betrayal takes place just as the merchant's wife seems to avow her intention to keep wifely counsel, asserting, "sith I am a wyf, it sit nat me/ To tellen no wight of oure privitee" (163-4). The storyteller's choice to frame the merchant's wife's confession in terms of a violation of her marriage vows underscores a key facet of its characterization as idle talk, sound without substance, or 'noise.' Recognizing the opportunity to benefit individually by confessing to the monk, the wife breaks an oath, rendering her words superficial, hollow, and bereft of interior investment. Like the Wife of Bath, she speaks solely for her own benefit rather than for a larger good.

The merchant's wife, however, is not the only superficial speaker in the tale. All three of the main characters—the monk, the wife, and the merchant himself—make and break oaths for their own economic and sexual benefit. The story thematizes spoken social contracts, from the monk's "cosiynage" (36) or sworn brotherhood with the merchant, to the wife's marriage, to the merchant's bill of exchange in Flanders. As we have seen, the wife betrays her marriage vows

220

when it is in her best interest, demonstrating the shallowness of her social relationships. The monk likewise demonstrates the superficiality of his word when he disavows kinship with the merchant, breaking his oath of brotherhood with the assertion that "He is na moore cosyn unto me/ Than is this leef that hangeth on the tree!" (149-50).

Though he does not explicitly break his oaths, the merchant's usurious trade agreement in Flanders is particularly illuminating of the realm of superficial and commodified speaking within the *Shipman's Tale*. As Helen Fulton has demonstrated, the merchant's foreign loan operates in the manner of a bill of exchange, in which one party receives a loan in one country's currency and agrees to repay the loan elsewhere in another currency.[44] Popularized by Italian merchant bankers in fourteenth century as a means of transferring large amounts of money without using cash, the bill of exchange was introduced to England at the end of the fourteenth century.[45] This process of exchange offers narrative structure to the tale on several levels. The merchant buys goods in Bruges on credit, using a bond of twenty thousand Flemish shields as a bill of exchange. He redeems his bill of exchange in Paris where he makes a one thousand franc profit on the currency conversion. In a similar process, the merchant's wife uses the monk as a third party negotiator to borrow 100 francs from her husband to pay off her debt for clothing. The monk arranges a 'currency conversion' from francs to sexual favors. Using the converted currency, the wife repays the loan to her husband and the monk benefits from a favorable exchange rate, earning a commission on the husband's repayment in sex with his own sexual favors.[46]

This overview of the plot should highlight the perfect accounting of social relationships among the three main characters, a model that does not allow for any substantive social

---

[44] Fulton, "Mercantile Ideology," 318-20.
[45] *Ibid.*
[46] This narrative structure is all helpfully outlined in *Ibid.,* 318.

relationships (as we have seen in the broken oaths scattered throughout the tale). In Fulton's words, the tale's structures of social and economic trade are "barren and parasitic" rather than substantial.[47] Money becomes a signifier whose signified referent is unclear or potentially non-existent, making the bill of exchange a fitting metaphor for the "empty" idle talk that structures the tale. That the merchant is "murie as a papejay" (369), or parrot, as he makes a profit on his bill of exchange in Paris invites us to make this comparison. The epithet closely resonates with the tale's designation of his wife as "joly as a pye," suggesting that, like the magpie and the parrot, their voices are superficial, resembling human speech in sound alone.[48]

The close of the tale underscores the exactitude of this barren social exchange. After settling her debt and 'repaying' the monk, the merchant's wife declares her reliability in repaying loans:

> Y han mo slakkere detours than am I!
> For I wol pay yow wel and redily
> Fro day to day, and if so be I faille,
> I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille,
> And I shal paye as soone as ever I may
> (413-17).

If she is unable to repay in cash, the wife invites her husband to keep score, "tallying" on her "tail." Her formulation figures her own body as a surface for writing, for inscribing marks or "tallies," but also homophonically suggests that her voice—her tale—can count as repayment. Chaucer invites us to make the leap from *tail*/*taille* to *tale* with the final lines of the story, in which the Wife asserts "Thus endeth my tale, and God us sende/ Taillynge ynough unto oure lyves end. Amen" (433-34). The abrupt closure of these final lines undermine their punning wordplay, which makes use of linguistic ambiguity, affirming the generative potency of

---

[47] *Ibid.*

[48] Isidore's description of the parrot (*psittacus*) in his *Etymologies*, stresses their imitation of human speech in terms similar to his description of the magpie: "The parrot…[has] a large tongue, wider than that of other birds. Hence it pronounces articulate words so that if you did not see the bird you would think a human was speaking" (265).

linguistic accident and undermining the tale's apparent advocacy of equal social and spoken

exchange. It is in this realm of ambiguity and 'noise' that the Wife of Bath articulates a subtle

model of feminine authority in the tale of the loathly lady that is subtly assigned to her.

Casting up the Curtain on the Wife of Bath

The Wife of Bath's *Tale* extends the dynamic we have encountered in her *Prologue*

between speaking to convey a meaning and "noisy" speaking for pleasure. Ultimately, it is in this

pleasure and play that the Wife finds agency. The *Tale* begins with complaint about friars in

their role as "lymytours," figuring such "lymytacioun" (877) as a kind of disenchantment that

eliminates the strangeness and wonder of natural signs with blessings that circumscribe meaning

by linking such portents to the Christian God. This discussion of clerical "limitation," the

circumscription of meaning, sets the stage for the narrative structure of the tale: a quest centered

on the question of "what women want." The ways that this answer is both vocalized and

destabilized by women over the course of the tale suggests that noise is important to the Wife as

a means of misdirection.

As the Knight takes in the manifold opinions on the matter among the women he

encounters, their voices, mingled with that of the Wife herself, come together in a chorus of

chatter that proves as elusive and resistant to understanding as any silence:

> Somme seyde women loven best richesse,
> Somme seyde honour, somme seyde jolynesse;
> Somme rich aray, some seyden lust abedde,
> And oft tyme to be widwe and wedde.
> Somme seyde that oure hertes been most esed
> What that we been y-flatered and y-plesed.
> He gooth ful ny the sothe, I wol nat lye.
> A man shal win us best with flatterye,
> And with attendance and with bisynesse
> Been we ylymed, bothe moore and lesse.

> And somme seyen that we loven best
> For to be free and do right as us lest,
> And that no man repreve us of oure vice,
> But seye that we be wise and no thing nyce.
> …
> And some seyn that greet deli than we
> For to been holden stable, and eek secree,
> And in o purpose steadfastly to dwelle,
> And nat biwreye thyng that men us telle.
> $\qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad$ (926-38, 945-48).

In the answers to the knight's question we see again the persistence of the Wife's antifeminist tropes and ideas. Much of what women want, according to this list, is the finer things in life like money and "rich array." Or, in keeping with a similar impulse toward sensuality and pleasure, they want flattery or "lust abedde." Tellingly, however, a few more sanctioned desires make their way onto the list, such as "honour" and "steadfast[ness]." The list's inconsistency underscores the misogynist perception of women's fickleness and caprice (a woman does not really know what she wants), which in turn reinforces their associations with emotionality and lack of reason. Yet at the same time that the list of women's desires reinforces such stereotypes, it also raises the possibility that such polyvalence of opinion is part of the point of the knight's quest. At this moment in the Wife's *Tale*, the question's resistance to a singular answer is an answer in itself.

Yet, in contrast to this list, the ending of the Wife's *Tale* would seem to contradict this insistence on multiplicity. At this point, the magical old crone or "loathly lady," who scholars have read as a stand-in for the Wife, seems to complete the Knight's quest by giving him an answer and stabilizing "moral": women desire "sovereignty." But it is important to note that we never hear the old woman offer this answer. Her direct response to the question is hidden to readers as she turns to the knight and "rowne[s]…a pistel in his ere" (1021) The verb *rounen* was often used interchangeably with *janglen.* Both words were was associated with arcane and

mysterious women's 'noise.' The verb *rounen* is etymologically related to the noun *rún* meaning, among other things "whisper," "mystery," and "secret." It also refers to the inscribed characters that comprised the earliest Germanic alphabet, which was largely unknown, even to literate Anglo-Saxons.[49] It thus reinforces the covert and unanswerable nature of the question. Indeed, the answer to the question, "sovereignty," is only articulated "with [a] manly voys" (1036) as the knight reports it to the court upon his return. In other words, the moral of the story is still coming from the knight's own male perspective. The Wife has made her readers "deaf" to the 'true' answer and the meaning of her *Tale* is still veiled to readers. Coupled with the loathly lady's transformation into a beautiful young bride who "obeys [the knight] in every thing" (1255), this insistence on the deceptive surfaces of women's speech seems to undermine the knight's insistence that women most desire sovereignty.

And indeed, feminist scholars have consistently read the ending of the Wife's Tale as an extension of the text's misogyny, a return to privileging male desire over her own. But I argue that the old woman engages in a far more complex masquerade that appears to defer authority to her male counterparts, but which nevertheless maintains a measure of control and agency over her own body and its performances. The knight finally acquiesces and cedes "governance" (1231) to her, persuaded by her argument. In response, the old woman declares that she will be both fair and "trewe" (1243). In a dramatic final gesture, the old woman bids him "Cast up the curtyn, looke how that it is" (1250). It would seem that the magical old crone is inviting the knight to see her as her "true self," unfettered by the magic she has used to masquerade with. Yet in my reading, the image of "casting up the curtain" is theatrical, stressing that the old woman is framing herself anew with a curtain of language and gesture. In addition to acting as a

---

[49] Bosworth, Joseph. "An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online." Rún. March 21, 2010. Accessed December 16, 2014. http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/026037.

225

screen to conceal an object, curtains were also used to set off objects imbued with a mysterious authority, such as altars.[50] Ultimately, the old woman's transformation reinforces her mastery over her own perception through the work of linguistic ambiguity.

And with these words, the voice of the old woman vanishes from the tale, which ends with a shift to the perspective of the knight whose heart is "bathed in a bath of blisse" (1253). This shift, along with the Wife's generic happily-ever-after platitudes at the end as she recounts that "they lyve[d] unto hir lyves end/ In parfit joye" (1257-58), marks the Wife of Bath's own re-masking as she steps away from her powerful fictional avatar and back into her role as a "wicked wife," incapable of telling a story of any concrete or comprehensible substance. With a familiar tone that shrewishly extends her embodiment of misogynist tropes, she ends with a curse that stresses her love of money: "And olde and angry nigardes of dispence,/ God sende hem soone a verray pestilence!" (1163-64).

In response to the Wife's tale, the friar praises her for offering the pilgrims a "scole-matere" of "greet difficultee" (1272), but then asserts that what they really want is "game" (1275), instructing her to "lete auctoritees, on Goddes name,/ To prechyng and to scoles of clergye." This dismissive response recognizes the Wife as a performer, but misses the point of her performance, attesting to the power of the Wife's rhetorical masking. In the friar's view, the Wife can impersonate the voice of a scholar, momentarily transcending her "lewed" nature. In a certain way, she has done so. But more pointedly than this, the Wife has undertaken to demonstrate the utility of a "hollow" poetic voice, defined by its accident, through a performance that embraces linguistic double talk and accident as a force for creation along with deception and for a measure of power in apparent subordination. In other words, my reading of the Wife is in line with the scholars who argue that the Wife's characterization is inextricable from her

---

[50] See MED, "curtin[e]" n. def. 1a

masculine environment. But I am also complicating this view by asserting that the Wife has some agency over her own image. In effect, she is parodying the gendered behaviors that are expected of her.

Chaucer, "What man artow?"

To conclude I want to suggest briefly how might view the Wife of Bath as a model for Chaucer as he worked to forge his own persona (a word I use deliberately for its etymological connotation of "sounding through," *per + sonare*) as a vernacular author. Ultimately, the Wife, who is "somewhat deaf" to language's proscribed meaning, but not to it sounds embodies or personifies poetic rhetoric as an upwardly mobile laywoman. She thus serves as a fitting persona Chaucer could use to forge his own aspiring authority. My observations in this section are by no means conclusive, but instead aim to outline a framework for further inquiry.

Chaucer inserts himself into the narrative of the *Canterbury Tales*, emerging in a single first person pronoun: "me" (694). At the close of the *Prioress's Tale*, Chaucer-the-pilgrim notices the Host eying him up and down before he asks, "What man artow?" (695). This simple exchange immediately calls Chaucer's masculinity into question. It also sets up repeated references by the Host to Chaucer-the-pilgrim's odd and even womanly appearance. The Host stresses that Chaucer is small and doll-like, "a popet in an arm t'embrace/ For any woman, small and fair of face/ He semeth elvyssh by his contenaunce" (1891-93). These hints at the peculiarity of Chaucer's voice implicit in his self-description are made explicit as Chaucer-the-pilgrim begins to tell his "deyntee" tale (1901).

The *Tale of Sir Thopas* momentarily swerves from the pentameter used by many of the pilgrims, including the Prioress, and aligns Chaucer's poetic voice with a "popular" meter

common to minstrel romances.[51] Indeed, early readers of the Canterbury Tales took note of this metrical peculiarity. In many manuscripts, including the Ellesmere and Hengwyrt, scribes conspicuously bracketed of all the tale's rhymes, calling attention to the story's unique poetics and sound.[52] The *Tale of Sir Thopas* initiates a romance narrative centered on the adventures of a knight, Thopas, who ventures into the land of an elf-queen and encounters a stone-throwing giant. Despite such striking characters, nothing much happens in the tale, and this is not just because Chaucer-the-pilgrim gets cut off not long after he begins. Instead, I would argue that he pointedly lingers on "superficial" features of the hero such as his complexion and his clothing and on the festive qualities of the fairy court, for example, its music and dancing. Chaucer-the-pilgrim's choice of "noisy" meter as well as his attention to sumptuous sights and sounds rather than heroic action is consistent with his "effeminate" characterization.

Indeed, the Host responds to the strange effeminacy of Chaucer's voice, cutting off his tale with disgust, saying "Myne eres aken of thy drasty speech…This may wel be rym dogerel" (923-25). This is the first attested use of the term "doggerel."[53] Stemming from the word "dog," the word stresses the unrefined, even bestial nature of Chaucer-the-poet's voice. Likewise, to the Host, Chaucer's rhymes are "drasty," they are literary ruffage, bereft of meaningful content and ultimately "nat worth a toord" (2120). The Host, a man's man among the pilgrims, who admiringly compares the Nun's Priest to a breeding rooster or "trede-foul" (VII. 4641) is disgusted with language that is effeminate in its emphasis on surface sounds, when such language is placed in the mouth of a man. Recalling the Wife's missing "pith" and "flour," the Host compares Chaucer-the-pilgrim's poetic voice to waste. In doing so, he stresses its aural and

---

[51] For more on the oral style of Thopas, see Marianne Børch, "Writing Remembering Orality: Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Sir Thopas'" *European Journal of English Studies* (August, 2006) 131-48.
[52] See notes in *Riverside*, 917.
[53] OED, "doggerel" n.

embodied materiality and its emphasis on the play of sound over meaning or content. Like the

Wife, Chaucer has set aside the flour of language and begun to speak with his jolly body. As he

embraces the pleasure of language's sounds for their own sake, he has begun to sell its bran.

Conclusion

Echo In Time

I return now to the questions with which I began: how did medieval thinkers reconcile the physical experience of language in relation to its meaning, hearing through an echo, ringingly? How might the idea of noise be a useful tool in thinking about how authors in the Middle Ages theorized poetics?

We have seen how religious, philosophical, and literary writing throughout the Middle Ages recognized the ways that sound was inextricable from other senses, especially feeling. Such work reveals how the aural figure of 'noise' was particularly well suited to convey an array of sensory engagement with language as authors grappled with language's imperfect post-lapsarian mediation of knowledge through the body. While the interchange between somatic and semantic aspects of language was at play among Christian authors and thinkers throughout the Middle Ages, at the second half of the fourteenth century, socio-political and religious developments brought the problem of language's "fallen" materiality to the foreground of England's intellectual and sensory landscape. In the wake of the Black Death, the proliferation of untrained clerics, unsanctioned by the official Church, who offered pastoral care in exchange for money or other benefits led to anxieties about the efficacy of preaching and sacramental work. Similarly, the Wycliffite heresy insisted that biblical interpretation required exegetes to dismiss the surface sounds of language in favor of the universal truth that lay beneath them, or else run the risk of speaking and preaching empty noise. At the same time, Wycliffite emphasis on the "literal sense" of scripture, which in the orthodox tradition was tied to elementary education and immature understanding, led orthodox thinkers to label Wycliffite teaching and exegesis as so much babble, bereft of meaningful substance. It was in this intellectual and sensory landscape

230

that the idea of noise became a key concept in understanding what we would now call the poetic and the literary in late-medieval England.

Noise was in the ear and mind of the listener. The figures of Meed and the Wife of Bath, as well as the debates around "lollardy" tell us that voices that made noise were often tied to non-rational or otherwise "incorrect" readers: those who paid attention to superficial sounds rather than ideas or moral content, or those whose attention was on the wrong "sense" of the text. In sum, the idea of noise was, and still is, a way of reinforcing social and political norms by creating categories of knowing and being that lay outside those standards. While gender has been a fundamental category of analysis in this project, I have also touched on others, such age, social and economic position, and mental and physical ability. Women, children and the elderly, peasants, and the insane—all were perceived as non-rational readers and speakers whose voices were simply sound without meaning. These discursive frameworks begin to chart the deep history of our troubled attitude toward the idea of the 'literary' and to the non-rational and 'effeminate' forms of knowledge that were and are thought to accompany it.

Yet despite this widespread medieval desire to ensure that speech had rational substance that grounded such surface-level sounds—a preoccupation that has proven to be remarkably persistent in our own time—we have seen how poets and writers in late-medieval England begin to place value on the somatic aspects of language, understanding such 'noise' as integral to their identities as lay authors. Far from viewing the noisy surface form of language as an impediment that must be overcome, such authors begin to place value on it for its own sake and for the sensual pleasure it conveyed. For Langland, the physical aspects of language were an important way to defer the comprehension of spiritual truth and extend the process of interpretation, which he deemed an ethical action in itself. For Rolle and Kempe, the aural texture of language was a

crucial way of experiencing the spiritual realm; I have argued that their emphasis on feeling sounds demands a reconsideration and expansion of what it meant to be a spiritual "visionary." Moreover, we have seen how the subordinate and gendered associations of language's noisy somatic properties offered both mystics a way of forging new lay modes of religious influence. Similarly, for Chaucer, such physical aspects of language were a crucial raw material for literary creation, one that offered him a curious kind of authority with which he could disguise his radical stance toward the excess, waste, or 'noise' of language. By conceiving of his own poetic creation as 'noise,' Chaucer created a kind of mask for his authorial persona to sound through: one that allowed him to insist on the importance of linguistic pleasure and play without overtly overturning cultural and religious paradigms.

The creative uses of noise among medieval authors complicate histories of sound that locate 'noise' and its influence on artists, poets, and musicians as a hallmark of modernity. The Italian futurist painter and composer Luigi Russolo wrote in his 1913 work *Arte dei rumori,* "In the nineteenth century with the invention of the machines, noise was born."[1] He would go on to make the case that modern musicians should experiment with the infinite variety of sounds that noise offered in their own musical composition. In writing this manifesto, Russolo may not have been aware of the ways that many of his medieval forebears understood their role as sculptors, even collagists, of a different kind of noise, the 'noise' of language itself. Indeed, the name of his work, *Arte dei rumori* or "the art of noises" calls attention to the etymological link between 'noise' and 'rumor,' a connection that Chaucer exploited with great success in *The House of Fame*.

Thus, the dynamic between noise and knowing that we have seen at play in late medieval England has important implications for how we think about the medieval in relation to

---

[1] See Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises*, trans. Barclay Brown (New York, 1986) 23.

modernity. This is an enormous topic, one that I can barely gesture toward in these few final pages. Still I want to begin to outline, with very broad brushstrokes, a genealogy of implications for my project. As a proto-Protestant movement, or even, in the words of Anne Hudson, a "premature reformation," the strand of Wycliffism that runs through this project anticipates the ways that early modern Protestants would come to perceive the sounds and feelings of ornate language. Early Modern England saw a rising concern with plain speech, which Protestant thinkers often contrasted with the "magical" incantations of Catholicism, or the "effeminate" poetry of the court. The Weird Sisters of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* speak in an arcane rhyming sing-song (a throwback, though probably not intentional, to Chaucer's early dream visions). Such incantatory speech conveys their devilish carnality in contrast to the heroic pentameter of figures like the future king, Malcolm.

Similarly, Early Modern literary criticism also conveys a preference for a more spare and vital mode of writing that effectively conveys a point of view. Ben Jonson's posthumous work *Timber Or Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter*, for example, denounces those who "labor only to ostentation; and are ever more busy about the colors and surface of a work than in the matter and foundation."[2] According to Jonson, there are two such types, who place greater focus on the surface sounds or "colors" of language. The first are those who affect a "rough and broken" style that they consider "more strong and manly" in its tendency to "str[i]ke the ear with a kind of unevenness."[3] The second are "Women's poets," who "have no composition at all; but a kind of tuning and riming fall in what they write." Such poetry, Jonson maintains, "runs and slides and only makes a sound."[4] Good poetry strikes a mean, according to Jonson. "Effeminate" writing is overly soft to the senses, sliding into the ear without grounding in mental

---

[2] Ben Jonson, *Timber Or Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter*, ed. Felix E. Schelling (Boston, 1892). 24.
[3] *Ibid*., 25.
[4] *Ibid*., 26.

communication, while "harsh" writing that aims excessively to counteract such tendencies is equally foolish and unnatural. "The true artificer," Jonson concludes, "will not run away from Nature as he were afraid of her, or depart from life and the likeness of truth, but speak to the capacity of his hearers."[5] With his emphasis on moderation and mindfulness of audience, Jonson reinforces the notion that the physical experience and pleasure of sounds should be secondary and auxiliary to the communication of meaning as an author's utmost goal. Decades later, in his 1674 second edition of *Paradise Lost*, John Milton would advance unrhymed pentameter or blank verse as a classical and heroic meter more fit for his lofty subject matter than the "jingling sound of like endings" or the 'noise' of rhyme.[6] Recent scholarship has called attention to Milton's role in in advancing blank verse as the paradigmatic meter of "free thinking" and with it, modernity, a notion adopted and extended by the Romantics.[7]

The tension between sounds and meaning effervesced in Victorian debates around prosody in the nineteenth century as British authors began to engage with the ways that certain sounds, often identified as "rough" or primitive in some fashion, offered a more authentic mode of poetic communication. Such points of view were often tied to the author's medievalism. Writing primarily in the first half of the nineteenth century, the poet Robert Browning explored the issue of ineffability in a secular context through the point of view of the thirteenth-century Italian troubadour, Sordello, who wonders how language can convey individual experience and thought. Sordello ultimately aims to "hamme[r] out" a "rude armor" with which to clothe his

---

[5] *Ibid*, 26-27.
[6] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London, 1998) 55.
[7] Henry Weinfield, *The Blank-Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity* (Cambridge, 2012).

own experience (11. 576-77). As Matthew Campbell points out, the rude and imperfect quality of this armor is an indication that it does not fit; the word does not adequately clothe the thought.[8]

Yet in later poetry, Browning goes on to suggest that such roughness, expressed through the sound-play and patterning in the poems of "On Pacchiarotto," is precisely the point of poetry. In one such poem, Browning alludes to his critics' accusations that he has 'no ear' with verse that revels in its own sing-song noise:

> And, what with your rattling and tinkling,
> Who knows but you give me an inkling
> How music sounds, thanks to the jangle
> Of regular drum and triangle?
> Whereby, tap-tap, chink-chink, 'tis proven
> I break rule as bad as Beethoven
> 'That chord now—a groan or a grunt is't?
> Schuman's self was no worse contrapuntist.
> No ear! Or if ear, so rough gristled—
> He thought that he sung while he whistled!
>   (xxvi)

Browning owns his 'bad ear," pushing his verse so that sound threatens to overwhelm sense, veering into the realm of the absurd in a way that resonates with the nonsense poetry of Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, and other authors associated with writing for children.

As Browning's self-deprecating admission that his poetic song is actually a "whistle" implies, the poets and literary critics of his time were deeply concerned with the interplay between sound patterning and sense. Gerard Manley Hopkins was one such critic, also known for his inventive attention to poetic sounds as well as his medievalism. Hopkins was not an admirer of Browning's work; he wrote that Browning made his characters talk "with the air and spirit of a man bouncing up from the table with his mouth full of bread and cheese and saying he

---

[8] Matthew Campbell, "Rhyme" in the *Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry* ed. Matthew Bevis (Oxford, 2013) 74-92 at 82.

meant to stand no blasted nonsense."[9] Despite this denunciation, both poets were similarly

interested in the "mouthability" of poetry, how the physical properties of language could

communicate a transcendent truth that lay beyond the meaning of the words.[10] Hopkins's

"sprung rhythm," arguably his most lasting contribution to poetry, aimed to capture a certain

quality of "haecitas" or "thisness" (a term taken from the thirteenth century Scottish theologian

Duns Scotus): a transcendent essence of language and of the natural world around him.

Hopkins's aural fluidity and Browning's halting roughness thus offer very different ways of

making meaning through the noise of language. Indeed, Jonson's gendered distinction in

"undesirable" literary styles seems useful in this instance, as Browning approximates what

Jonson might call a "rough and broken style" while Hopkins's verse "runs and slides and only

makes a sound."

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, several decades after Browning and

Hopkins were at their most prolific, the Victorian author and craftsman William Morris, who was

influential in the emergence of the Arts and Crafts Movement in England, founded his Kelmscott

Press, which drew on medieval literary and textual aesthetics in its book publication. One such

text, *A Dream of John Ball*, written by Morris himself, takes the form of a dream vision in which

a Dreamer falls asleep and finds himself among the peasant rebels in the town of Kent as they

plan the revolt of 1381. In order to pay for his food and lodging among the men of Kent, the

Dreamer makes himself known as a traveling poet. When the time comes for him to offer

entertainment, he explains "the words seemed to quicken and grow, so that I knew not the sound

---

[9] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, ed. C. C. Abbott (London, 1935) 74-75.

[10] In his examination of the role of rhythm in Victorian prosody, Michael D. Hurley makes a similar point about the overarching agreement about the importance of poetic sounds among Victorian poets, despite their differences in execution. See Michael D. Hurley, "Rhythm" in the *Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry* ed. Matthew Bevis (Oxford, 2013) 19-35 at 31. Hurley borrows the term "mouthability" from Christopher Ricks (22).

of my own voice, and they ran almost into rhyme and measure as I told it…"[11] The men in the audience around him begin their own song in response, with voices that the narrator describes as "strong and rough, but not unmusical."[12] Morris's reverence for such rough song, which seems to emerge from the singer's body automatically without the influence of the mind, is consistent with his overall ethos of what we might call an aesthetic socialism. This code elevated the pleasure of craftsmanship as an expression of moral truth, an idea that had emerged from the pre-raphaelite medievalism of thinkers such as John Ruskin.[13] Recalling the structures of feeling I have outlined here, perhaps especially Langland's ambivalent embrace of *lollares* and lolling, Morris's reverence for pleasure was at least in part about locating the mutual interdependence of labor and idle pleasure. Indeed, at the end of the *Dream of John Ball*, as the Dreamer awakes, he informs us: "…[I] dressed and got ready for my day's 'work' as I call it, but which many a man besides John Ruskin (though not many in his position) would call 'play.'"[14]

The interplay between sound and sense that we see in Early Modernist and Victorian writing is taken to further extremes in high modernist experimentation with new narrative and poetic forms, especially the stream of consciousness and bizarre verbal bricolage of authors like James Joyce. Joyce shows, for example, the influence of the Anglo-Irish style of Hisperic Latin, an early Latinate form whose influence is felt in the sounds of certain Old English poetry, for example, the *Exeter Book's* "Rhyming Poem."[15] Hisperic Latin, tellingly dubbed by one early twentieth-century medievalist as a "luxuriant culture-fungus of decay," was known for its rhetorical ornamentation and learned vocabulary influenced by languages that were largely

---

[11] William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball* (London, 2001) 21.
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] For a discussion of Morris's medievalism and its debt to Ruskin, see Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York, 1981), 62-65.
[14] *Ibid.*, 102-3.
[15] James W. Earl, "Hisperic Style in the Old English 'Rhyming Poem'" *PMLA* 102.2 (March, 1987) 187-96.

unknown to the monks who composed it.[16]   Thus it is tempting to suggest that part of the appeal

of such macaronic composition was the sound of the language rather than the meaning of the

words.[17] The absurdist use of language associated with Hisperic Latin proved an irresistible

influence to Joyce, known as he was for his virtuosic, but often difficult and non-sensical play

with language. In an early portion of his sprawling final novel *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce

incorporates quotes from the poem *Altus Prosator* ("First Sower"), a hymn about the creation of

the world, into a passage of his own Latin. While Joyce's Latin mimics medieval religious

composition in style and lexicon, its content is nonsensically profane. It narrates the First

Sower's initial excretion into his own hand ("in manum suum evacuavit") which Joyce glosses

with the aside in English "(highly prosy, crap in his hand, sorry!)."[18] He then describes how the

excretions are placed into a vessel and mixed with the incantations of twin monks ("sub

invocation fratrorum geminorum…laete ac melliflue minxit") to produce indelible ink.[19] The

scatological associations of incantation in this section remind us of how Chaucer's Host

compares the poetic sounds of Chaucer-the-pilgrim to a "toord," highlighting the link between

the somatic aspects of language and excremental aural waste. Like Chaucer, moreover, Joyce

suggests that such waste is the very stuff of literary creation.

   Finnegan's Wake is an extended testament to this notion. Indeed, one Joycean scholar

has suggested that the 'echo' is a fitting way to frame the creative landscape of the text: "a

resonant novel full of reverberations where every element has or is an echo, where everything is

---

[16] Eóin MacNiell, "Beginnings of Latin Culture in Ireland" *Studies* 20 (1931) 39-48. See also Michael Herren's
reconsideration of this pejorative phrase in "Hisperic Latin: 'Luxuriant Culture-Fungus of Decay'" *Traditio* 30
(1974) 411-19.
[17] Indeed, such texts invite further investigation on the interplay between sound and sense in the early medieval
literature *before* the focus of this project. For some discussion on the role of sound play in Old English poetry, see
Lears, "Soð and Sense," esp. 79-83.
[18] James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* (New York, 1982) 185.
[19] *Ibid.*

a response to something and even, at overwhelming moments, to everything else."[20] I would add that Joyce seems acutely aware of the very medieval idea that the sounds of language are at a distance from what they signify. Shortly after beginning his novel in the middle of a sentence, Joyce places us in a familiar cosmological view:

> The fall (bababadalgharaghtakamminarronnkonnbronntonner-
> ronntuonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohoohoordenenthurnuk!)
> of a once wallstrait oldparr is retaled early in bed and later on life down through all
> Christian minstrelsy.[21]

Recalling medieval conceptions of the Fall as the crucial moment when language came to exist in time and the body, an echo of the pure *logos*, Joyce's fall initiates a loud noise, which builds upon itself, with many syllables echoing their predecessors, from "ba-ba-ba" to "ronn-konn-bronn" to "den-en" until the noise seems to cease with "thurnuk!" But does the noise actually cease? Like the medieval works I examine, *Finnegan's Wake* invites us to experience how the distance or echo between the sounded sign and the idea itself can be a valuable space for poetic play. Indeed, the novel insists that we must listen to these noises. As we hear at one interjectory moment, early in the text: "Hush! Caution! Echoland!"[22] A fascination with the noise of language reverberates backward and forward in time, from a world of echo to an echoland.

---

[20] Finn Fordham, "Mapping Echoland" *Joyce Studies Annual* (Summer, 2000) 167-201 at 167.
[21] Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*, 3.
[22] *Ibid.,* 13.

Works Cited

Adams, Robert. *Langland and the Rokele Family: The Gentry Background to Piers Plowman.* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013).

Alan of Lisle, *Anticlaudianus,* trans. J. J. Sheridan (Toronto: Toronto Pontifical Institute, 1973).

_____, *Literary Works*, ed. and trans. Winthrop Wetherbee (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

Albin, Andrew. "Auralities: Sound Cultures and the Experience of Hearing in Late Medieval England." Order No. 3439918 Brandeis University, 2011. Ann Arbor: *ProQuest.* Web. 12 Oct. 2013.

Alford, John A. "The Wife of Bath versus the Clerk of Oxford: What Their Rivalry Means" *The Chaucer Review* (Fall, 1986): 108-32.

Allen, Peter Lewis. *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007)

Allen, Valerie. "Broken Air" *Exemplaria* 16.2 (2004): 305-322.

Amos, Mark Addison. "The Gentrification of Eve: Sexuality, Speech, and Self-regulation in Noble Conduct Literature," in Susannah Mary Chewning, ed. *The Word Made Flesh: Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture* (Hampshire: Aldershot, 2005).

An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, ed. Joseph Bosworth and N. Northcote Toller (Oxford 1898).

Angela of Foligno, *Angela of Foligno's 'Memorial': Translated from the Latin with Introduction, Notes, and Interpretive Essay*, trans. John Cirignano, introduction by Cristina Mazzoni (Cambridge, 1999).

_____, *Memoriale*, ed. Enrico Menestò (Firenze: Sismel, 2013).

Aristotle, *De Anima* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle* v. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 641-720.

Arnovick, Leslie. "'In Forme of Speche' is Anxiety: Orality in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *Oral Tradition* 11 (1996) 320-345.

Atkinson, Clarissa. *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

Augustine, *Confessions*, 2 vol., trans. William Watts (Cambridge 1912, reprinted, 1999).

_____, *De Trinitate*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews, trans. Stephen McKenna (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

_____, *Enarrationes in psalmos*. *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956) v. 38-39.

Bacon, Roger. *On Signs,* trans. Thomas S. Maloney (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2013).

_____, "An Unedited Part of Roger Bacon's 'Opus Maius': 'De Signis'," ed. K. M. Fredbourg, Lauge Nielsen, and Jan Pinborg *Traditio* 34 (1978): 75-136.

Baily, Peter. "Breaking the Sound Barrier: A Historian Listens to Noise." *Body and Society* (June, 1996): 49-66.

Barthes, Roland. *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).

Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De rerum Proprietatibus* (Frankfurt: Minerva, 1964).

Beckwith, Sarah. "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe" in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. David Aers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986): 34-57.

_____, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late-Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993).

Benson, Larry D. "The Order of the Canterbury Tales" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* (1981): 77-120.

Biernoff, Suzannah. *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

The Book of Vices and Virtues, ed. W. Nelson Francis (London: Early English Text Society, 1942).

Børch, Marianne. "Writing Remembering Orality: Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Sir Thopas'" *European Journal of English Studies* (August, 2006): 131-48.

Bose, Mishtooni. "The Opponents of John Wyclif" in *A Companion to John Wyclif, Late Medieval Theologian*, ed. Ian Christopher Levy (Leiden: Brill, 2006): 407-56.

Bozon, Nicholas. *Les contes moralisés de Nicole Bozon*, ed. L. T. Smith and P. Meyer (Paris, 1889).

Bull, Michael and Les Black, eds. *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

Burnett, Charles. "Perceiving Sound in the Middle Ages," Mark M. Smith, ed. *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004): 69-84.

Burrow, J. A. "Wasting Time, Wasting Words in Piers Plowman B and C," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 17 (2003): 191-202.

_____, "Fantasy and Language in the *Cloud of Unknowing*" *Essays in Criticism* (1977): 283-98.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

Bynum, Carolyn Walker. *Jesus as Mother* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982).

_____, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

Capella, Martianus. *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts* v. II, ed. William Harris Stahl and Richard Johnson with E. L. Burge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

Carlson, Paula T. "Lady Meed and God's Meed: The Grammar of *Piers Plowman* B3 and C4" *Traditio* 4 (1991): 291-311.

Carruthers, Mary. *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Catto, J. I. "Wyclif and Wycliffism at Oxford 1356-1430" in J. I. Catto and T.A. R. Evans, eds. *The History of the University of Oxford*, v. 2. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992): 175-261.

_____, "1349-1412: Culture and History" in Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 113-131.

Cawsey, Kathy. "Tutivillus and the 'Kyrkchaterars': Strategies of Control in the Middle Ages" *Studies in Philology* 102.4 (Autumn, 2005): 434-51.

Chaganti, Seeta. *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary: Enshrinement, Inscription, Performance* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

Cleanness: An alliterative tripartite poem on the deluge, the destruction of Sodom, and the death of Belshazzar, ed. Israel Gollancz (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1974).

Clifton, Linda J. "Struggling with Will: Jangling, Sloth, and Thinking in *Piers Plowman* B" in *Such Werkis to Werche: Essays on Piers Plowman in Honor of David C. Fowler*, ed. Mícheál Vaughan (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1993): 29-52.

Clopper, Lawrence, *Songes of Rechelesnesse: Langland and the Franciscans* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

The Cloud of Unknowing, ed. Phyllis Hodgson (London: Early English Text Society, 1944).

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

Cole, Andrew. *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Coleman, Joyce. *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Colish, Marcia. *The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, ed. Malcolm Andrew, Ronald Waldron, and Clifford Peterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

Connor, Steven. "The Modern Auditory I" in Roy Porter, ed. *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1997): 203-23.

Coolman, Boyd Taylor. "The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition" *Modern Theology* (2008): 615-632.

Cooper-Rompato, Christine. *The Gift of Tongues: Women's Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

Copeland, Rita. "Why Women Can't Read: Medieval Hermeneutics, Statutory Law, and the Lollard Heresy Trials" in Susan Sage Heinzelman and Zipporah Batshaw Wiseman, eds. *Representing Women: Law, Literature, and Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994): 254-86.

_____, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Crane, Susan. *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

Craun, Edwin. *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Curry, Walter Clyde. *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960).

Dagenais, John and Margaret R. Greer "Decolonizing the Middle Ages: Introduction" *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (Fall, 2000): 431-448.

Davidson, Clifford, ed. *A Tretise of Miracle Pleyinge* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993).

_____, *Festivals and Plays in Late Medieval England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

Davis, Kathleen. *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

de Deguileville, Guillaume. *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, Englisht by John Lydgate, ed. F. J. Furnival (London: Early English Text Society, 1899).

Delaney, Sheila. *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

Denery, Dallas G. *Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World: Optics, Theology, and Religious Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination* trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981)

____, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

DiGregorio, Scott. "Affective Spirituality: Theory and Practice in Bede and Alfred the Great" *Essays in Medieval Studies* 22 (2005): 129-39.

Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

Doob, Penelope Reed. *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1991).

Earl, James W. "Hisperic Style in the Old English 'Rhyming Poem'" *PMLA* 102.2 (March, 1987): 187-96.

Ellis, Roger and Samuel Fanous, "1349-1412: Texts" in Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

English Wycliffite Sermons, v. 1-5, ed. Anne Hudson and Pamela Graydon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

Erlman, Viet. *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

_____, ed. *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

Erwin, Rebecca Schoff. "Early Editing of Margery Kempe in Manuscript and Print" *Journal of the Early Book Society for the Study of Manuscripts and Printing History* 9 (2006): 75-94.

Fasciculi Zizaniorum Magistri Johannes Wyclif Cum Tritico, ed. Walter Waddington Shirley (London: Longman, 1858).

Fordham, Finn. "Mapping Echoland" *Joyce Studies Annual* (Summer, 2000): 167-201.

Frantzen, Allen. "Spirituality and Devotion in the Anglo-Saxon Penitentials" *Essays in Medieval Studies* 22 (2005): 117-128.

Freddel, Joel. "Design and Authorship in the *Book of Margery Kempe*" *Journal of the Early Book Society* (2009): 1-28.

Fulton, Helen. "Mercantile Ideology in Chaucer's Shipman's Tale" *The Chaucer Review* (2002: 311-28.

Galfriedus Anglicus. *Promptorium Parvulorum* (London: A Scolar Press facsimile, 1968).

Galloway, Andrew. "The Account Book and the Treasure: Gilbert Maghfeld's Textual Economy and the Poetics of Mercantile Accounting in Ricardian Literature" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 33 (2011): 65-124.

_____, "Marriage Sermons, Polemical Sermons, and the Wife of Bath's Prologue" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* (1992): 3-30.

_____, *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman*, v. 1 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

_____, "The Rhetoric of Riddling in Late-Medieval England: The 'Oxford' Riddles, the *Secretum philosophorum*, and the Riddles in *Piers Plowman*,' *Speculum* 70 (1995): 68-105.

Gehl, Paul F. "*Competens Silentium*: Varieties of Monastic Silence in the Medieval West," *Viator* 18 (1987): 125-60.

Gellrich, Jesse. *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

Ghosh, Kantik. *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Giancarlo, Matthew. "*Piers Plowman*, Parliament, and the Public Voice," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 17 (2003): 136-74.

Gibson, Gail McMurray. *Theater of Devotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

Gillespie, Vincent. "Vernacular Theology" in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English,* ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 401-20.

Ginsburg, Warren, ed. *Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Thre Ages* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992).

Goodman, A. E. "The Piety of John Burnham's Daughter of Lynn," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker and Rosalind M. T. Hill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978): 347-58.

Gouk, Penelope. *Music, Science, and Natural Magic in Seventeenth Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

_____, "Raising Spirits, Restoring Souls: Early Modern Medical Explanations for Music's Effects," in Erlmann, ed. *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2004): 87-105.

Green, Monica "From 'Diseases of Women' to 'Secrets of Women': The Transformation of Gynecological Literature in the Early Middle Ages *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (Winter, 2000): 5-39.

Gruenler, Curtis. 'How to Speak Like a Fool: Riddle Contests and the Banquet of Conscience in *Piers Plowman,*' *Speculum* 85 (July, 2010): 592-630.

Hanna, Ralph. "Will's Work" in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship* ed. Steven Justice and Katherine Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997): 23-66.

Heckman, Christina M. "The Sweet Song of Satan: Music and Resistance in the Vercelli Book," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 15 (1998): 57-70.

Herren, Michael. "Hisperic Latin: 'Luxuriant Culture-Fungus of Decay'" *Traditio* 30 (1974): 411-19.

Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

Hill-Vasquez, Heather. "Chaucer's Wife of Bath, Hoccleve's Arguing Women, and Lydgate's Hertford Wives: Lay Interpretation and the Figure of the Spinning Woman in Late Medieval England" *Florilegium* (2006): 169-95.

Hoccleve, Thomas. *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles R. Blyth (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999).

Holsinger, Bruce. *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007).

_____, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, ed. C. C. Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1935).

Horace, *Epistolae* Liber 1, ed. Roland Mayer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Hornbeck, J. Patrick. *What is a Lollard?: Dissent and Belief in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Howes, David, ed. *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

Hsy, Jonathan. "Overseas Travel and Language Contact in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *The Sea and Englishness in the Middle Ages: Maritime Narratives, Identity, and Culture*, ed. Sebastian Sobecki (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 159-78.

Hudson, Anne. *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Hudson, Anne and Anthony Kenny. "Wyclif , John (*d.* 1384)." Anne Hudson In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford: OUP, 2004. Online ed., edited by Lawrence Goldman, September 2010. http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30122 (accessed December 10, 2014).

Huppé, Bernard F. "The Date of the B-Text of Piers Plowman" *Studies in Philology* 38 (1941): 34-44.

Irvine, Martin "Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer's House of Fame" *Speculum* (October, 1985): 850-76.

Isidore, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum*, ed. W. A. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911).

_____, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum*, ed. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Jaeger, Eric. *The Tempter's Voice: Language and the Fall in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

Jennings, Margaret. "Tutivillus: The Literary Career of the Recording Demon," *Studies in Philology* 74.5, Texts and Studies (December, 1977): 1-95.

Jesserich, Phillip. *Musica Naturalis: Speculative Music Theory and Poetics from Saint Augustine to the Late Middle Ages in France*, trans. Michael J. Curley and Steven Rendall (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

Johnson, Eleanor, "The Poetics of Waste: Medieval English Ecocriticism," *PMLA* 127.3 (May, 2012): 460-76.

_____, *Practicing Medieval Literary Theory: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

Jonson, Ben. *Timber Or Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter*, ed. Felix E. Schelling (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1892).

Jordan, Mark D. *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997)

Joyce, James *Finnegan's Wake* (New York: Viking Press, 1982).

Judith, ed. Mark Griffith (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997).

Julian of Norwich, *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994).

Kay, Sarah. *Parrots and Nightingales: Troubadour Quotation and the Development of European Poetry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

Keiser, George R. "The Mystics and the Early English Printers: The Economics of Devotionalism" in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Dartington Hall July 1987*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987): 9-26.

Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Meech and Hope Emily Allen (London: Early English Text Society, 1940).

____, *The Book of Margery Kempe: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. and trans. Lynn Staley (New York: Norton, 2001).

_____, "Here begynneth a shorte treatyse of contemplacyon taught by our lorde Jhesu cryste, or taken out of the boke of Margerie kempe of lyn[n]" (London, Enprented in Fletestrete by Wynken de Worde, 1501).

King, Thomas "Performing Akimbo: Queer Pride and Epistemological Prejudice" in Moe Meyer, ed. *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1994): 23-50.

Klitgård, Ebbe. "Chaucer's Narrative Voice in the *House of Fame*" *Chaucer Review* 32 (1998): 260-266.

Knighton, Henry. *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, ed. J. R. Lumby, v. 2 (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1889-95).

Kordecki, Lesley. *Ecofeminist Subjectivities: Chaucer's Talking Birds* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

Kruger, Steven. "Medical and Moral Authority in the Late Medieval Dream" in *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams From Chaucer to Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 55-83.

LaBelle, Brandon. *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

Langland, William. *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*, ed. by Derek Pearsall (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008).

_____, *Langland's Vision of Piers Plowman: Text B,* ed. W. W. Skeat (London: Early English Text Society, 1869, last reprinted, 1950).

_____, *The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts*, ed. W. W. Skeat. 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1886).

_____, *William Langland: Piers Plowman. A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C, and Z Versions*, ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt, *Vol. 1* (London: Longman, 1995).

Lawler, Traugot. "Medieval Annotation: The Example of the Commentaries on Walter Map's 'Dissuasio Valerii,' in *Annotation and its Texts*, ed. Stephen A. Barney (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Lawton, David. "Lollardy and the 'Piers Plowman' Tradition." *Modern Language Review* 76.4 (1981): 780-93.

Leach, Elizabeth Eva. *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Late Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

Lears, Adin Esther "Soð and Sense: Language Problems and Affective Solutions in Anglo-Saxon Treatments of the Guthlac Legend" *Viator* 44.3 (Autumn, 2013): 63-84.

_____, "Something From Nothing: Melancholy, Gossip, and Chaucer's Poetics of Idling in the *Book of the Duchess*" *Chaucer Review* (October, 2013): 205-21.

Lears, Jackson, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 188-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

Lehrer, Seth. *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late Medieval England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Leicester, H. Marshall. *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Levitan, Alan. "The Parody of the Pentecost in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*" *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 11.3 (Spring, 1971): 236-46.

Lewis, Charlton T. and Charles Short, eds. *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1969).

Lochrie, Karma. *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylavnia Press, 1991).

_____, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

Lynch, Katherine. *Introduction to the Parliament of Fowls* in *A Norton Critical Edition: Geoffrey Chaucer Dream Visions and Other Poems* (New York: Norton, 2007).

MacNiell, Eóin. "Beginnings of Latin Culture in Ireland" *Studies* 20 (1931): 39-48.

Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952, rept. 1990).

_____, *Comentarii in Somnium Scipionis,* ed. J. Willis (Stutgard: De Greyter, 1994).

Mahoney, Dhira B. "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power over Language" in Sandra J. McEntire, ed. *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992).

Martin, Priscilla."*Piers Plowman*: Indirect Relations and the Record of Truth" in "'Such Werkis to Werche': Essays on *Piers Plowman* in Honor of David C. Fowler," ed. David C. Fowler and Miceál Vaughn (East Lansing, MI, Michigan State University Press, 1993): 169-90.

Marvin, William P. "Chronological Outline of Historical Evens and Texts in Britain 1050-1550" in David Wallace, ed. *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Mazzio, Carla. *The Inarticulate Renaissance: Language Trouble in an Age of Eloquence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

McGerr, Rosemarie P. *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998).

McGinn, Bernard. "Introduction: Meister Eckhart and the Beguines in the Context of Vernacular Theology" in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite de Porete,* ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1994): 1-14.

McNamer, Sararh. *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

Middle English Dictionary. Regents of the U of Michigan, 18 Dec. 2001.

Middleton, Anne. 'Acts of Vagrancy: The C Version "Autobiography" and the Statute of 1388', in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, ed. by Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997): 208–317.

____"The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," *Speculum* (January, 1978): 94-114.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1998).

Minnis, Alastair. "Affection and Imagination in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*," *Traditio* (1983): 323-366.

_____, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and the Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

Mitchell, A. G. "Lady Meed and the Art of *Piers Plowman*" (London, Chambers Memorial Lectures, 1956).

Morris, William. *A Dream of John Ball* (London: Electric Book Company, 2001).

Musson, Anthony. "New Labor Laws, New Remedies? Legal Reaction to the Black Death 'Crisis,'" in *Fourteenth Century England* v. 1, ed. Nigel Saul (Woodbridge, 2000): 73-88.

The Myroure of Our Ladye, ed. J. H. Blunt (London: Early English Text Society, 1873)

Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972)

The New Testament in English According to the Version By John Wycliffe and Revised by John Purvey About AD 1388, ed. Josiah Forshall and Frederic Madden (Oxford: Clarendon 1879).

The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 8th Edition, ed. Lawrence Lipking and James Noggle, vol. C (New York: Norton, 2006).

Ong, Walter. "Oral Residue in Tudor Prose Style," *PMLA* 80 (June, 1965): 146-148.

_____, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* v. 2, ed. T. E. Page (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916, rept. 1964).

Owst, G. R. "The 'Angel' and the 'Golyardys' of Langland's Prologue, *Modern Language Review* 20 (1925): 27-79.

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Online ed. Ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Oxford English Dictionary Online (Oxford University Press, 2000-).

The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry, ed. Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Palomo, Dolores. "The Fate of the Wife of Bath's 'Bad Husbands'" *The Chaucer Review* (1975): 303-19.

Paster, Gail Kern. *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

Patterson, Lee. *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991): 280-321

_____, Review of Gelrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages*. *Speculum* 63.3 (July, 1988): 664-67

Pearsall, Derek. '"Lunatyk Lollares" in *Piers Plowman,*' in *Religion in the Poetry and Drama of the Late Middle Ages in England: the J. A. W. Memorial Lectures, Perugia, 1988,* ed. by Piero Boitani and Ana Torti (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990): 163-78. Print.

____, Langland and Lollardy: From B to C,' *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 17 (2003): 7-23.

Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

_____, *Timaeus* trans. Peter Kalkavage (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2001).

Pitard, Derreck."Sowing Difficulty: The Parson's Tale, Vernacular Commentary, and the Nature of Christian Dissent" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 299-330.

Potkay, Monica Brzezinski. "*Cleanness*'s Fecund and Barren Speech Acts" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 17 (1995): 99-109.

Pratt, R. A. "The Development of the Wife of Bath," *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Kroll Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961): 45-79.

Priscian, *Institutiones Grammaticae,* in Heinrich Keil, ed. *Grammatici Latini ex Recensione Henrici Keilii* (Lipsiae, 1855-1870).

Pseudo–Dionysius, *Pseudo Dionysius: The Complete Works* trans. C. Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press,1987).

Reddy, Felicity. "Text and Self in the Book of Margery Kempe" in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005): 335-53

Riehle, Wolfgang. *The Secret Within: Hermits, Recluses, and Spiritual Outsiders in Medieval England* trans. Charity Scott-Stokes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

Richard the Redeles and Mum and the Sothsegger, ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000).

Robertson, D. W. *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962).

_____ and Bernard F. Huppé. *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969)

Robertson Pamela. *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

Rolle, Richard. *The Incendium Amoris of Richard Rolle of Hampole* ed. Margaret Deansley (New York: Longman, 1915).

_____, *The Fire of Love and the Mending of Life or the Rule of Living,* trans. Richard Misyn, ed. Ralph Harvey (London: Early English Text Society, 1896).

_____, *The Melos Amoris of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, ed. E. J. F. Arnould (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957)

Rosenfeld, Sophia. "On Being Heard: A Case for Paying Attention to the Historical Ear" *American Historical Review* (April, 2011): 316-334.

Rowland, Beryl. "On the Timely Death of the Wife's Fourth Husband" *Archiv fur das Studium der Neuern Sprachen* (1973) 273-82.

Russell, Henry G. "Lollard Opposition to Oaths by Creatures" *American Historical Review* 51 (1946): 668-84.

Russolo, Luigi. *The Art of Noises*, trans. Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986).

Sands, Donald B. "The Non-Comic, Non-Tragic Wife: Chaucer's Dame Alys as Sociopath." *The Chaucer Review* (1978): 171-82.

Scase, Wendy. *Piers Plowman and the New Anticlericalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Schaeffer, R. Murray. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1977).

Schibanoff, Susan. *Chaucer's Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2006).

Schirmer, Elizabeth "William Thorpe's Narrative Theology," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 31 (2009): 267-299.

Schmidt, A. V. C. *The Clerkly Maker: Langland's Poetic Art* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987).

____, "Lele Wordes and Bele Paroles: Some Aspects of Langland's Word-Play" in *Earthly Honest Things: Collected Essays on Piers Plowman.* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

Schweitzer, Edward C. '"Half a Laumpe Lyne in Latyn" and Patience's Riddle in *Piers Plowman,*' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (July, 1974): 313-327.

Smith, Bruce. *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

_____. "Listening to the Wild Blue Yonder" in Erlmann, ed. *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2004): 21-41.

Smith, Mark M., ed. *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

Somerset, Fiona. "Expanding the Langlandian Canon: Radical Latin and the Stylistics of Reform," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 17 (2003): 73-92.

_____, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard, eds. *Lollards and their Influence in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003).

_____, *Feeling Like Saints: Lollard Writings After Wyclif* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014)

Sontag, Susan. "Notes on Camp" reprinted in Fabio Cleto, ed. *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject, A Reader* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999): 53-65.

Spearing, A. C. "'Purity' and Danger," *Essays in Criticism* (1980): 293-310.

Staley, Lynne. *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

Steiner, Emily. *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

_____, "Commonality and Literary Form in the 1370s and 1380s," *New Medieval Literatures* 6 (2003): 199-222.

Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

Strauss, Barrie Ruth. "The Subversive Discourse of the Wife of Bath: Phallocentric discourse and the Imprisonment of Criticism," *English Literary History* (1988): 527-554.

Strohm, Paul. "Chaucer's Lollard Joke," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* (1995): 23-42.

Symes, Carol. "AHR Roundtable: When We Talk About Modernity" *American Historical Review* (June, 2011): 715-726.

Tacitus, *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, ed. Alfred Gudman (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1898).

Tavormina, Theresa. *Kindly Similitude: Marriage and Family in 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995).

Taylor, Cheryl. "The *Cloud*-author's remaking of the Pseudo-Dionysius's Negative Theology" *Medium Ævum* 75.2 (2006): 202-218.

_____, "Paradox Upon Paradox: Using and Abusing Language in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Related Texts." *Parergon* (2005): 31-51.

Thompson, Emily. *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933.* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

Travis, Peter. *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading the Nun's Priest's Tale* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

_____, "Thirteen Ways of Listening to a Fart: Noise in Chaucer's Summoner's Tale," *Exemplaria* 16.2 (Fall, 2004): 323- 34.

Trigg, Stephanie. "The Traffic in Medieval Women: Alice Perrers, Feminist Criticism, and *Piers Plowman*" *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 12 (1998): 5-29.

Two Wycliffite Texts, ed. Anne Hudson (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 1993).

Utley, Francis Lee. "The Chorister's Lament" *Speculum* 21 (April, 1946): 194-202.

Vance, Eugene. *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts, ed. D. G. Scragg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

Wallace, David, ed. *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Watson, Nicholas. *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

_____, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409" *Speculum* 70.4 (October, 1995): 822-864.

_____, "The Making of the *Book of Margery Kempe*" in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005): 395-434.

Henry Weinfield, *The Blank-Verse tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Wenzel, Sigfried. *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1967).

White, Hugh. *Nature and Salvation in 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Williamson, Beth. "Sensory Experience in Medieval Devotion: Sound and Vision, Invisibility and Silence" *Speculum* (January, 2013): 1-43.

Wyclif, John. *De Veritate Scripturae*, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg, 3 vols. (London: Trubner & Co., 1905-07).

_____, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, trans. Ian Levy (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001).

Yunck, John A. *The Lineage of Lady Meed: The Development of Mediaeval Venality Satire* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963).

Zieman, Katherine. "Chaucer's Voys" *Representations* (Autumn, 1997): 70-91.

_____, "The Perils of *Canor*: Mystical Authority, Alliteration, and Extragrammatical Meaning in Rolle, the Cloud Author, and Hilton" *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 22 (2008): 131-64.

_____, *Singing the New Song: Literacy and Liturgy in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).