LATE MEDIEVAL AUTHORSHIP AND THE PROPHETIC TRADITION

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Tracing the emergence of the author function in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, during which writers began to name themselves and their other works in their own texts, this project examines the hitherto ignored role that prophetic self-representation played in the construction of medieval authorial personae. Building upon already established connections between classical authorship and prophecy, medieval authors exploited the prophetic subject position in order to clarify their function as mediators between subject and audience. More than a mask from behind which to safely advance political critiques, the persona of the prophet allowed medieval authors to define the nature of their authority and their relationships to their readers.

The first half of this project examines the works of two authors, John Gower and Christine de Pizan, who use prophecy to assert their superior analytical skills. Although both authors draw heavily from the tradition of the prophet Daniel, a prophet known for his inspired interpretive abilities, they claim their inspiration from entirely different sources. Gower represents himself as being prophetically inspired by the public voice, which under the maxim, *Vox populi, vox Dei*, is divine. Gower consistently represents himself as the public prophet of England in the *Mirour de l'Omme*, the *Vox Clamantis*, and the *Confessio Amantis*. Christine de Pizan, on the other hand, promotes her career in the traditionally masculine fields of literature and politics by implying that her gender gives her prophetic intuition. In *Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune* and *Le Livre de l'Advision Cristine*, Christine represents her “third sex” role as widow as the sources of her analytical prowess, while in *L'épistre de Othea a Hector*, *Le Chemin de long estude*, *Le Livre de la cité des dames*, and *Le Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc*, she uses the Sibyl to highlight the authority of feminine marginality within the traditionally masculine world of
politics. Both Gower and Christine depict themselves as model readers, who can best uncover the meaning of a text.

The second half of this project looks at the work of two authors, William Langland and Margery Kempe, who represent themselves as struggling interpreters of prophetic truth in order to model how their audiences should approach the task of understanding their work. Langland exploits the ambiguity of political prophecy in *Piers Plowman*, citing predictions that could either refer to an ideal earthly ruler or the second coming of Christ. Through Will’s struggles to comprehend the incomprehensible, Langland reminds his readers to focus on their individual salvation, which they can control. While Langland represents himself as someone who must learn to accept what he cannot know, Kempe represents herself as someone who must learn to trust what she does know. Portraying Margery as skeptical to a fault, Kempe reminds her audience of the pitfalls of disbelief.
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Introduction

While earlier vernacular works were often anonymous, the late fourteenth century witnessed the rise of the late medieval author. Modes of non-lyrical storytelling increasingly employed the first person narrative voice, and this voice was often identified as the author of the text.¹ For instance, the eagle of *The House of Fame* refers to Chaucer as “Geffrey” (ln. 729), and Beatrice refers to the narrator of the *Commedia* as “Dante” (*Purgatorio*.XXX.55). In the first person narrative voice, late medieval authors not only to named themselves but also to referred to their literary occupations, their personal histories, their physical appearances, their patrons, the potential reactions of their audiences, and their other literary works.² These moments of self-representation often reflect upon the cultural role that the author occupies by virtue of his or her vocation. For instance, in *L’Advision Cristine*, the character of Dame Opinion upbraids the author/narrator, Christine de Pizan, for attributing too much power to Lady Fortune in her last work, *Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*. Similarly, in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, the God of Love chastises Chaucer for translating *The Romance of the Rose* and writing *Troilus and Criseyde*. In having these abstract figures attack their works, the authors not only give themselves a chance to defend their writing but also announce their public roles as authors, whose works constitute coherent oeuvres which have been read widely enough to have inspired


strong opinions and reactions. Public authorial identity, founded upon the concept of the literary oeuvre, was also advanced by newly streamlined methods of textual reproduction. Compilations were better organized, meaning that the works of a single author were more often grouped together. As Lawrence De Looze notes, many late medieval authors “took an active part in the compilation of grand codices of their works, in editing corpora which were explicitly or implicitly analogous to their own lives.” Late medieval authorship was therefore greatly influenced by authors’ deliberate self-representation. The role that prophecy played in this self-representation has hitherto been unappreciated. Late medieval writers concerned with cultivating an overt authorial persona represented themselves as prophets—comparing themselves (overtly or implicitly) with prophets of classical, biblical, and folk traditions.

The connection between authorship and prophecy had already been well established in the classical period. J.K. Newman and Philip R. Hardie agree that Virgil identified himself as a vates (a Latin word originally meaning “priest” or “soothsayer” but eventually also meaning “poet”) in order to emphasize the importance of the poet’s role as societal transformer. To speak with the voice of a prophet through poetry was to claim the culturally invaluable voice of reform.

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The association of authorship with prophecy became even more literal through Christian reception of classical texts. For instance, in *De civitate Dei*, St. Augustine quotes Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue, written from the perspective of a prophetic narrator foretelling the birth of an important child. Augustine argues that Virgil’s source is the divinely inspired Cumaean Sibyl, who foretold the coming of Christ. Augustine did not believe that Virgil understood the prophecy himself, but in the famous *Oration of Constantine to the Assembly of the Saints*, recorded in Eusebius’s *Vita Constantini*, the Roman emperor points out what he believes to be an acrostic in the Fourth Eclogue, spelling out “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior, Cross” and insists that the proto-Roman Catholic Virgil made his prophecy intentionally vague in order to escape persecution from pagan rulers.

By the twelfth century, Virgil’s presumably real prophetic powers were even more amplified. The classical poet began to appear among the ranks of Moses, Daniel, Ezekiel, and other biblical prophet/authors in the Laon and Limoges *Ordo Prophetarum* (plays consisting of monologues by a series of prophets). Around this time, Virgil also began to be portrayed as a magician, most notably in John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus*, in which Virgil offers talismans to travelers who later return to seek his bones as relics for France. Following John’s work, numerous histories depicted Virgil as a seer—sometimes of the Christian variety, sometimes of the necromantic, sometimes of both. For instance, Joannes de Alta Silva’s Latin prose work, *Dolopathos*, composed at the end of the twelfth century and subsequently translated into Old French, depicts Virgil as foreseeing the Old Testament story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife by consulting the stars. Reverence for intellect, as well as the desire to claim past great thinkers for

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one’s religion or nation retroactively imbued many authors such as Galen, Hippocrates, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Plato, Horace, Gerbert, Albertus Magnus, St. Thomas Aquinas, with the powers of prognostication.\(^8\)

Just as classical authors were being recuperated into the Christian tradition as prophets, their texts were being recuperated into the Christian tradition as prophetic. Beginning with Arnulf of Orleans’s *Allegoriae super Ovidii Metamorphosin*, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed numerous Christianized readings of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. These readings applied exegetical commentary to notoriously scandalous stories, turning lascivious material into holy allegory. The most famous and well-known example of this phenomenon, the *Ovide Moralisé*, composed by an anonymous Franciscan monk (sometimes identified as Chrétien Legouais) in the early fourteenth century, interprets Apollo as Christ, who slays the serpent representing Satan. This author justifies his choice to edit and translate the controversially lewd, pagan text into Middle French by claiming:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Se l’escripture ne me ment,} \\
&Tout est pour nostre enseignement \\
&\text{Quanqu’il a es livres escript,} \\
&\text{Soient bon ou mal li script (vv. 1-4).} \\
\end{align*}
\]

[If scripture does not lie to me, \\
all is for our instruction, \\
whatever is written in books,]

\(^8\) Ibid, 302.
be the writings good or evil].

This justification places all literature, regardless of its content, in the role of Scripture, as instructive of divine law, making all authors potential prophets. Just as Biblical prophets such as Solomon would not have understood all of the moral and theological meanings of their writing, so might Virgil or Ovid be unwitting authors of the word of God.

To medieval readers, prophecy was an integral part of the textual authority known as auctoritas. Auctor, taken from the Latin, augeo (to make grow), once referred to anyone who made or produced something, especially in the artistic sense. The similar word, actor, taken from the Latin, ago (to make), referred to anyone who made something. Because the two words and their meanings were so similar, manuscripts often used them interchangeably until the medieval period. M.D. Chenu’s famous essay, “Auctor, Actor, Autor” details how medieval manuscripts began to distinguish between these two words. Actor maintained its original meaning, but auctor was erroneously associated with the term, auctoritas, meaning authority. Auctor then came to stand for a special kind of author whose work had gained prestige and recognition. One could base one’s solution to a problem upon the work of an auctor. Building on Chenu’s work, Alaistair Minnis notes that contemporary authors did not attain the status of auctores because that honor was reserved for classical and Scriptural authors, whom time had afforded greater fame. Thus, Minnis wryly observes, “It would seem that the only good auctor was a dead one.”

The association of classical authors and classical texts with prophecy augmented this

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11 Ibid., 81-86.
12 See Cynthia Brown, The Shaping of History and Poetry in Late Medieval France (Birmingham, AL: Summa, 1985), 158, n. 3.
reverence for auctoritas. Minnis remains one of the few critics who has recognized prophecy as a central influence upon medieval authorship. In his Medieval Theory of Authorship, Minnis argues that some late medieval authors made strides to bypass rigid definitions of auctoritas by representing themselves as scriptural prophets. Minnis claims that, unable to claim the fame that time had afforded the classical auctores, medieval authors claimed the inspiration of a higher authority—the divine auctor, God. What Minnis overlooks is that claiming prophetic authority was itself an imitation of the classical auctores as medieval audiences saw them. Prophetic inspiration was not a substitute for classical auctoritas; it was an essential component of it in a community that read Virgil and Ovid as soothsayers and magicians. Furthermore, it was not merely accessed by imitating scriptural prophets (the foundation for Minnis’s theory of medieval authorship) but by invoking a diverse tradition of vatic inspiration.

This study broadly defines a prophet as someone with access to categorical truth. This definition is intentionally wide-ranging precisely because so many seemingly distinct forms of prophecy intersected in late medieval literature. For instance, Christine de Pizan simultaneously invokes classical prophetic authority through the Sibyls, Biblical prophetic authority through Daniel, scientific prophetic authority through her royal astronomer father, and political prophetic authority through references to the Last Emperor predictions. The higher source of knowledge that late medieval authors claimed was not always overtly theological, but it did necessarily relate back to universal truth. Prophecy in literature followed the lead of prophecy in politics, which already combined and conflated a variety of inspirational sources. Political prophecies circulated in letters and manuscripts from the twelfth through the seventeenth century.14 The

14 Many of these prophecies are unpublished. Rupert Taylor was among the first to categorize and catalogue a variety of English political prophecies. See Rupert Taylor, The Political Prophecy in England (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1911). Lesley Coote has since built on Taylor’s work. See Lesley Coote, Prophecy and
circulation of prophecies peaked especially during times of war and political unrest, making it popular in England at the end of the fourteenth century due to the Papal Schism, the Hundred Years War and the usurpation of the English crown by Henry IV. As Rupert Taylor has noted, these prophecies were not written to predict the future so much as they were written to affect the behavior of those who read them. Predictions of victory could inspire support for a war, for instance, especially if they were attributed to a respected authority. The authorities cited in these prophecies varied widely and were sometimes ambiguous. Some were national saints, like Thomas Beckett or John of Bridlington, who were straightforward channels for the voice of the Christian God. Other national prophets like Merlin dealt in sorcery. The oft-cited Sibyl was considered both a Roman and Christian prophet, making the source of her authority somewhat dualistic. Furthermore, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, many famous prophecies were erroneously attributed to the English chroniclers, Gildas and Bede, with little explanation as to why these men were suddenly deemed soothsayers. Perhaps the fact that Gildas and Bede were authorities on the past led readers to believe that these men were especially able to predict the future. “Access to categorical truth” therefore best defines medieval conceptions of prophecy,

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15 See Paul Strohm, “Prophecy and Kingship,” in England’s Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 1-31. The trend in political prophecy continued to grow in popularity in the early modern period, as evidenced by the Tudor legislation against it. Previous bans on prophecy had been directed at smaller subsets of the English population. The 1402 bans were passed to control the Welsh, and the 1406 bans were in reaction to the Lollards. In the early sixteenth century, Henry VIII’s prohibition made it felonious “to declare any false prophecy upon occasion of arms, fields, names, cognizances, or badges” and Elizabeth reinforced a similar law in 1568. See Rossell Hope Robbins, “Introduction,” in Historical Poems of the XIV and XV Centuries (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), xlv.


which were culturally and theologically syncretic and diverse.

Building upon the classical tradition of the classical *vates*, medieval authors found new ways to exploit the position of the prophet in order to justify their own roles as mediators between the stories that they recounted and their readers. Because the prophet is an intermediary figure, transmitting information between a higher power and a larger audience, the prophetic position is one ripe with possibilities for characterizing the medieval author’s role in the compilation, translation, and interpretation.\(^{19}\) Less concerned than modern authors with “intellectual property,” medieval authors openly compiled, adapted, and wove together a variety of stories of other writers. For medieval authors, rewriting received matter was an important individual skill. As Brownlee et al. note, “A number of writers regarded their common mission of perpetuating past culture as, far from being a passive or subservient activity, actually a means of elevating their own contribution to the process of transmission.”\(^{20}\) Like the medieval author, the medieval prophet was a skilled mediator of information. Until the twelfth century, most exegetes characterized the writers of biblical texts as prophets who functioned as scribes to the true author, God. By the thirteenth century, however, exegetes such as Thomas Aquinas, Alexander Hales, and Bonaventure began to discuss the individuals who wrote the biblical texts as actual authors, who had received the word of God as prophets and had crafted it as artists. The differing authorial voices of prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel as well as the disparate styles employed by a single prophet such as David became the focus of study.

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., 428.
especially as exemplary models for sermonic composition. Far from inhabiting a passive role, the prophet spoke with the authority of a higher power but also as an authority unto his or her own self. In this way, the prophet is a natural corollary to the medieval author, who receives and skillfully transmits information, often even actively interpreting it.

The Old Testament figure of Daniel features prominently in the works of late medieval authors such as John Gower, Christine de Pizan, William Langland, and the Pearl-poet precisely because he is a prophet concerned with interpretation. Several stories in the Book of Daniel detail his status as a prophet able to read and analyze what others cannot. Daniel interprets two important dreams for Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonians. One is a dream of a crumbling statue, which Daniel understands as the successive ages of great empires (Daniel 2: 31-49), and another is a dream of a felled tree, which Daniel explains as a vision of the king’s impending madness (Daniel 4: 1-34). Furthermore, in an overt act of textual interpretation, Daniel arrives at the feast of Belshazzar in order to interpret the foreign writing which mysteriously appears on the wall, foretelling the division of the king’s land (Daniel 5: 11-31). In each of these episodes, the Book of Daniel describes how the kings consulted soothsayers who failed to interpret a mysterious text (dreamt or written) properly until the skillful Daniel arrived to elucidate it.

Hardly a mere vessel for a higher voice, Daniel’s talent for analysis is what allows him to communicate God’s words. Comparing themselves with an analytical prophet like Daniel, medieval authors point to their own unique, active, and creative roles in the transmission and translation of higher truths.

Rather than merely claiming generically prophetic authority, medieval authors deliberately invoked specific prophetic traditions to convey the types of relationship that they

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wished to share with their audiences. The subsequent chapters investigate the ways in which four medieval authors—John Gower, Christine de Pizan, William Langland, and Margery Kempe—exploit a variety of prophetic subject positions in order to characterize themselves as inspired mediators of higher knowledge. The first two chapters examine courtly writers, John Gower and Christine de Pizan, who were most concerned with establishing and characterizing their privileged access to categorical truth. These two authors represent themselves as expert readers in the tradition of Daniel and the Sibyl—prophets who are uniquely qualified to pinpoint the precise aspects of the court and society at large which need reform. The last two chapters examine authors writing to a more popular audience, William Langland and Margery Kempe. For Langland and Kempe, personal *auctoritas* takes a secondary role to establishing the theological authority of their texts. They represent themselves as flawed prophets, attempting to learn to interpret and mediate divine knowledge, thereby modeling the ways in which their own imperfect audiences should attempt to read their books. Ironically, the authors addressing courtly audiences of higher statuses, Gower and Christine, are the ones who claim a prophetically superior role while those addressing more popular audiences, Langland and Kempe, represent themselves as prophetic equals. The prophetic subject position allows authors to account for imbalances between the power of their readers and themselves, bolstering their authority when speaking to superiors and subduing it when speaking to the common public. Much more than a tool for claiming generalized authority, prophecy was a tool for characterizing and modifying that authority as necessary.

“Public Prophecy in the Works of John Gower” examines how John Gower represents himself simultaneously as the mouthpiece of the public voice and as England’s own prophet. After the Gregorian reform, in which the church clarified that kings were not appointed by God,
late medieval kings represented their authority as being derived from “the public,” imbuing it with a sort of divine power under the maxim, “Vox populi, vox Dei” (The voice of the people is the voice of God). In the Mirour de l’Omme (c. 1376-1379), the Vox clamantis (c. 1377-1381) and the Confessio Amantis (c. 1386-1393), Gower claims that he speaks with the public voice in order to critique nobility and royalty and also repeatedly likens himself to the prophet Daniel. Unlike prophets who are merely passive vessels for God’s word, Daniel actively interprets the dreams of kings in order to advise them. Using Daniel as a proxy for his own authorial persona, Gower emphasizes his interpretive craft while still deferring responsibility for the moral and political content of his interpretations to God and the public at large.

“Christine de Pizan’s Prophetic Authority of the Third Sex” explores how Christine de Pizan promotes her career in the traditionally masculine fields of literature and politics by implying that her gender gives her prophetic intuition. Throughout her works, Christine uses prophetic feminine guides as proxies of self-representation. In the Mutacion de Fortune (1403), Christine describes herself as gaining access to the palace of Lady Fortune because of her unique gender status as a widow. In the Livre de l’advision Cristine (1405), Christine employs the prophetic guide, Libera, likewise a widow. Libera’s sophisticated predictive interpretations of Scripture and repeated allusions to the analytical prophet Daniel highlight Christine’s own prophetic skills of analysis. The most prominent prophetic authorial proxies in Christine’s works are the sibyls, who appear in L’épistre de Othea a Hector (1400), Le Chemin de long estude (1403), and Le Livre de la cité des dames (1405). The sibyls reflect Christine’s authority as a scholar who brings her feminine insight to the traditionally masculine field of politics. In Christine’s final work, Le Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc (1429), she adopts the language and imagery of two popular prophecies attributed to the Sibyl in order to advance the cause of Joan of Arc and
Charles VII. Retelling stories of how the sibyls were classically ignored by male emperors who later met defeat, Christine implies that the consequences for failing to heed her predictions are dire.

While Gower and Christine liken themselves to interpretive prophets, thereby highlighting their analytical skills, William Langland represents his narrative persona, Will, as unaware of the full meaning of his own prophetic text. “William Langland’s Self-Destructive Prophecy of the Davidic King” explores how the passive prophetic persona of Will in *Piers Plowman* (c. 1360-1387) allows Langland to simultaneously illustrate the unlikelihood of institutional reform and the necessity of individual reform. Within Will’s vision, the allegorical personifications of Conscience and Clergie mimic the discourse of popular fourteenth-century political prophecies which predicted the coming of a David-like king who would reform the courts and the monasteries. Langland formulates these prophecies in such a way that highlights institutional corruption while expressing doubt in the fantasy that it will ever change. In depicting the figure of Will as unable to grasp all of the meanings of his prophecies, particularly those meanings which challenge authority, Langland distances himself from his polemic. Furthermore, Will models the way in which his reader should go about understanding his book—as a call to change one’s self.

Margery Kempe, like William Langland, uses her authorial subject position to model habits of reading for her audience. However, Kempe uses her persona, Margery, to illustrate how *not* to read *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1436) or any other text by or about a female visionary. “Margery Kempe’s Parody of the Self-Doubting Visionary” postulates that Margery Kempe structures her *Book* to defend visionary writing from the external policing of the Church. Writings by and about holy women such as Bridget of Sweden depicted them as being incapable
Kempe parodies the representation of the doubtful, helpless female prophet by taking it to its extreme—writing of how she distrusted vision after vision despite God’s constant reassurances and occasional outright frustration with her. In depicting herself (or rather, the character Margery) as being foolishly unable to trust the authority of God over the authority of her confessors, Kempe problematizes common authorizing strategies of feminine spiritual writing and sheds light on the pitfalls of placing one’s faith in Church officials. In turn, she encourages her audience to approve Margery’s story independently of official scrutiny.

As a discourse, prophecy allows authors to advance social and political critiques because it simultaneously imbues the message with divine authority and identifies the speaker as the messenger rather than the originator of the criticism. Yet the narrative subject position of the prophet allows authors to do much more than shield themselves. In claiming prophetic authority, authors such as Gower and Christine can characterize the personal analytical skills and inspiration that allows them access to that authority. Furthermore, as an intermediary figure, a prophet both conveys and receives information, making it a sufficiently flexible subject position from which authors such as Langland and Kempe can at once make pronouncements and react to them as a reader would. This project contributes to larger dialogues about medieval authorial self-representation by considering that the positioning of the first-person narrative persona addresses aims greater than self-promotion and self-preservation. Medieval authors represent themselves as prophets in order to comment on the issues of mediation inherent to medieval authorship and inherent to the truths that they aim to convey.
Chapter 1: Public Prophecy in the Works of John Gower

Insofar as they all involve extensive social criticism, John Gower’s major literary works required him to invoke the kind of authority that also allowed him to deny speaking from a personal perspective. After all, the moral judgments of an individual only carry so much weight and can certainly deter patronage or earn enemies. In order to advance his criticisms, Gower consistently garners authority by means of two somewhat related sources—the public and God. These are sources of authority which Gower continually combines and conflates, fashioning himself into a sort of prophet of public affairs. Anne Middleton has characterized what she refers to as “public poetry” of the Ricardian period as “poetry defined by a constant relation of speaker to audience within an ideally conceived worldly community,” noting that “in describing their mode of address, the poets most often refer to the general or common voice.”

Middleton bases this classification of public poetry primarily upon two authors, William Langland and John Gower, and argues, “It is [the public poet’s] task to find the common voice and to speak for all, but to claim no privileged position, no special revelation from God or the Muses, no transcendent status for the result, and little in the way of special gifts beyond a good ear.” Yet claiming to be the voice of the public is in many ways like claiming prophetic authority. The Gregorian Reform of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, which clarified that kings were laymen rather than priestly rulers, had a profound influence on the ways in which state authority represented itself.

In the absence of clear divine sanction, kings invoked the authority of “the people,” which was already dominant in the rhetoric of historical Roman law. Public ceremony reflected this shift in

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2 Ibid, 99.
perspective. For instance, in 1328, Holy Roman Emperor Louis of Bavaria was crowned by the senators and people of Rome at Capitoline Hill instead of at St. Peter’s Basilica.  

While the ceremony itself and the nature of the authority granted therein remained the same, the perceived source of legislative authority had altered. Because “the people” had symbolically supplanted divinely sanctioned legal authority, claiming to be the voice of the people was much like claiming to be a prophet, the voice of God. Because the people are the symbolic source of legislative power, the voice of the people is a voice that checks, warns, and even threatens those who hold it. After the English parliament had deposed Edward II, Thomas Walsingham reports that the Archbishop of Canterbury articulated the increasing power of the Commons over the monarchy as God’s very own intention by preaching on the text *Vox populi, vox Dei* at Edward III’s coronation. Regardless of whether “the public” actually demanded the deposition of a king, the notion of popular sovereignty could still be exploited to justify it. In this way, the *vox populi* bore an immediate kind of authority that the *vox Dei* alone had lacked—judgment on earth rather than judgment in heaven.

Like a prophet, compelled to speak by God, an author claiming to speak with the voice of common opinion lacks culpability for the opinions that he or she voices because they are not entirely the author’s own. This was a strategy used in parliamentary political rhetoric. For instance, Sir Peter de la Mare, who had been arrested for his part in the Good Parliament of 1376, made a speech upon his reinstatement, claiming that he spoke for the commons rather than

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5 France’s monarchy was a unique exception. It was able to promote a sacral kingship in ways that England was not. See Lynn Staley, “Inheritances and Translations,” in *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 75-164. Also see Colette Beaune, *The Birth of an Ideology: Myths and Symbols of Nation in Late Medieval France*, trans. Susan Ross Huston (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).
for himself. Gower employs this strategy to similar ends. When speaking of the vice of greed within the clergy in the *Mirour*, Gower claims, “Ce que je pense escrire yci/ N’est pas par moy, ainz est ensi/ Du toute cristiene gent/ Murmur, compleinte, vois et cry” (18445-18448) [What I intend to write here is not from myself only, but is rather the murmur, complaint, voice, and cry of all Christian folk]. His deferral to the authority of the general public is drawn from the logic of the maxim, *Vox populi, vox Dei*, which Gower evokes elsewhere in the *Mirour*: “Escript auçi j’en truis lisant,/ Au vois commune est accordant/ La vois de dieu” (12724-12726) [I also find written that the voice of the people is the voice of the God.] In conflating the word of the public with the word of God, Gower provides his societal criticisms with two strong authorities while denying personal grievances that might motivate his complaints. He presents himself as a prophet of the public, divinely compelled to speak the truth. Gower not only depicts himself as publicly inspired but also singularly inspired, summoning and adopting the voices of a variety of Biblical prophets within his works in order to criticize the church, the state, and the public at large. In this way, Gower can maximize his divine authority by claiming to speak as a humble representative of the many and also claiming to speak as a privileged conduit for the one God. Gower adopts a combination of public and Biblical prophetic identities in each of his major works—the *Mirour de l’Ommme* (c. 1376-1379), the *Vox Clamantis* (c. 1376-1381), and the *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1386-1393).

Gower’s two-part prophetic authority enables him to continually shift perspectives in his early works. In the *Mirour de l’Ommme*, Gower is able to chastise and advise a bureaucratic

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audience, at once as an outside communal voice correcting parliament, the *vox populi*, and as an inside reformed legislator, the prophet, King David. In order to achieve this two-part authority, which involves likening himself to a king, the persona of John Gower himself remains absent from the *Mirour*. Conversely, Gower himself is the central figure in Book I of the *Vox Clamantis*, the dreamer taking part in and reporting his *visio*. In the *Vox*, Gower repeats his language of speaking for the collective but also represents himself primarily in relation to the prophet Daniel. Gower exploits the imagery of Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchanezzar’s dream of the statue in order to represent his authorial role as both an embodiment of the body politic and its analyst. In the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower invokes the *vox populi* not only as a prophetic source of authority but also as a gesture to the threat of popular opinion with respect to potential deposal. Within the *Confessio*, his two sources of authority do not allow him to take on multiple subject positions so much as they allow him to reinforce his message by invoking authorities on heaven and earth. Because Gower gestures to the threat as both a divine and public prophet, I argue that copies of the work dedicated to Richard rather than Henry abound in Lancastrian collections because the work retroactively implies that Richard’s fall and Henry’s usurpation were divinely and publicly sanctioned.

**The Prophet as Peer in the *Mirour de l’Omme***

Very little is known about John Gower’s life. Unlike Geoffrey Chaucer, he did not hold a series of high-profile political appointments, and unlike Christine de Pizan, he did not include a great number of biographical details in any of his works. Yet, as his career progressed, he increasingly identified himself as a speaker and poet in his works, thereby situating his relationship to the estates critiques and moral messages presented therein. For instance, as a

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preface to his estates critique in the *Vox Clamantis*, Gower depicts the Rising of 1381 as a dream in which he is forced to run from rebels and hide in the Tower of London. Here, Gower does not necessarily depict his factual involvement in the event but represents his narrative voice as that of the gentleman, John Gower, whose moral and social concerns are born of his concern for the public at large. In the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower spends the majority of the work speaking from the perspective of what seems to be a young lover, Amans, only to be reminded at the end of the work (in bit of a joke on the audience) that he has been the elderly John Gower all along. However, the preface to the *Confessio* clarifies his poetic voice’s relationship to his text’s subsequent political content. Richard II speaks to Gower and commands that he write a poem in the vernacular “for Engelondes sake.” This interchange signals not only that John Gower is a respected poet who might be read and recognized by the king himself, but also that, as Lynn Staley puts it, “The poem that ensues is therefore produced by the relationship between poet and king.”

Gower, earlier work, the *Mirour* contains no such preface which describes its author in a way which clarifies his personal relationship to the topics at hand or to his audience. Gower’s name is also given nowhere in the one known manuscript of the work (MS Cambridge University Additional 3035.C.G.). Because Gower’s subject position within the *Mirour* is not yet tied to a representation of his public identity as a poet or citizen, he has greater flexibility in developing the identity of its speaker and that speaker’s relationship to the work’s audience.

Since we do not know who owned copies of the *Mirour* or how many existed, it is impossible to know precisely for whom Gower was writing. The implied audience is the public.

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10 The text would most likely have gone unattributed had Gower not listed the *Mirour de l’Omm* (calling it the *Speculum Meditantis*) along with the *Vox Clamantis* and *Confessio Amantis*, as one of his three greatest works in the colophon attached to the *Confessio*, and included it as one of the three books on the effigy above his tomb. It was only through these references that C.G. Macaulay was able to recognize the *Mirour de l’Omm* when he came across it in the Cambridge University library. See Macaulay, “Introduction,” *The Complete Works of John Gower*, xi-lxxi.
at large, since Book II involves a critique of the conduct of all three estates. Yet Book I aims the
text specifically at a legislative audience.\footnote{This likely excludes the king. Gower appears to have had limited access to Richard II or Edward III. See R.F. Yeager, “Politics and the French Language in England During the Hundred Years War: The Case of John Gower,” in \textit{Inscribing the Hundred Years’ War in French and English Cultures}, ed. Denise N. Baker (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 127-157; 149. This does not mean, of course, that Gower would not have included the king in the \textit{Mirour}’s implied audience.}

In support of speculation that Gower practiced law himself, John Fisher has made much of the fact that Gower’s most extensive passage in his estates critique is dedicated to the practice of law and has noted Gower’s technical familiarity with the practices and terms of law such as \textit{client, advocat, plaidour, tort,} and \textit{deslayment}.\footnote{Fisher, \textit{John Gower}, 55-57.} This is, in part, because Anglo-Norman was (and to some degree remains) the language of English law. R.F. Yeager has argued that Anglo-Norman was a curious choice for Gower if he indeed wrote the \textit{Mirour} around 1376, as is typically suggested, since it was so infrequently used as a literary language at this point.\footnote{R.F. Yeager, “Gower’s French Audience: The \textit{Mirour de l’Omme},” \textit{The Chaucer Review} 41.1 (2006): 111-137; 128.} Although Parliament found it necessary to change the language of legal proceedings to English for the sake of the increasingly monolingual general public in 1362, Anglo-Norman remained the language of official and legal documents throughout the fourteenth-century. The Rolls of Parliament were written almost exclusively in Anglo-Norman and Latin. In fact, there are only four English entries to the Rolls prior to 1430.\footnote{See A.C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, eds. \textit{Statutes of the Realm}, 1:375-76, trans. Albert C. Baugh, in \textit{A History of the English Language}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (Englewood Clifes, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 148-49; JD Burnley, “Curial Prose in England,” \textit{Speculum} 61 (1986): 593-614.} Therefore, while an Anglo-Norman literary work might have seemed slightly anachronistic in 1376, it would have perfectly appropriate for a work on moral responsibilities aimed at an audience working in the legal profession.

The allegory of Book I is also aimed at this sort of audience. In it, the Devil holds a
Parliament in which he schemes with Sin, Death, and the World in order to entrap Man. Matthew Giancarlo has observed that, during this parliament, the demons make use of legal procedures for property rights, specifically using the terms *pourchas* and *franchise*, in their attempt to deprive Man of the property of his soul. In establishing the Devil’s Parliament as the force that brings sin into the world, the allegory confronts a legislative audience with a sense of their influence over the morality of mankind. Gower’s choice of allegory, language, and message appears tailored to an audience akin to what Jürgen Habermas would characterize as the Sphere of Public Authority, wherein the ruling class discusses issues concerning the common good under the presumption that their influence is the greatest and their opinions the most informed.

In order to address this audience authoritatively and sympathetically, Gower distances the voice of his poem from his personal identity, instead adopting the flexible voice of a compiler who can align himself with the various voices that he cites. One of these voices is the public at large, which Gower cites frequently. Giancarlo has argued that Gower invokes the *vox populi* as a way to redress the evil parliament described in Book I, correcting a corrupt unified


representative voice with an idealized one. Yet, Gower is more than just the mouthpiece of public opinion; he is also a compiler of authoritative moral literature. As the speaker of the poem, he assumes a prophetic position that is a hybrid of the *vox populi* and the *vox Dei*, as related through Biblical prophets. The Biblical prophets with whom the speaker of the *Mirour* most aligns himself are not only lawmakers, but sinful lawmakers, Solomon and David. Thus, while Gower offers criticism of the legal world from the vantage point of the public at large, mainly outside the governing body, he also offers criticism from the perspective of the model lawmaker, who must come to terms with his own corruption. The prophetic, politically authoritative, contrite peer is an ideal narrative voice with which to offer social criticism, but it is a subject position only available to Gower if he keeps his public identity out of his poetry.  

Throughout the *Mirour*, the speaker cites sententious statements of *auctores*, particularly prophets, in his descriptions of the vices, virtues, and conduct of the three estates. The twelfth century theologian, Peter Lombard, famously compiled the *sententiae* of the various books of Bible and the patristic fathers into a cohesive theological handbook, *Sententiarum libri quatuor*. Within vernacular moral literature, authors cited a wider variety of moral *auctores*. For instance, in his thirteenth century moral treatise, *Liber Consolationis et consilii*, Albertano de Brescia cites the wisdom of the Bible along with Seneca, Cicero, St. Augustine, and anonymous proverbial sayings in order to support his own lessons about morality. While Gower is working within the

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17 For this reason, I will refer to the first-person voice of the poem as “the speaker” and not as “John Gower.”
vernacular moral tradition of Albertano de Brescia, his use of *sententiae* differs in that he frequently uses *auctores* as prognosticating proxies of self-representation. The speaker quotes or paraphrases prophets in order to warn his readers what will happen to them if they engage in the sins which he outlines. For instance, when describing Pride, the speaker explains:

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Par soun prophet Sephonie
Dieus dist que gens de vanterie
D’entour les soens il hostera.
Si dist auci par Jeremie
Que la vantante halte vie
De halt en bas la ruera,
Toute arrogance humilera:
Et ensi dieus nous manaça
Par Salomon et Isaïe:
‘Heu,’ dist, ‘cil qui se vantera!
Par ce toutdis de luy serra
Trestoute vertu forsbanie. (1825-1836).
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[Through his prophet Zephaniah, God said that He would take away vaunting people from the midst of His own. He said also, through Jeremiah, that He would cast down from high to low the vaunting haughty life, and that He would humble all arrogance; and thus God threatened us through Solomon and Isaiah: “Alas for him,” he said, “who shall boast of himself! For from him all virtue shall be
While the words of the prophets, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Solomon, and Isaiah support the moral message of humility at hand, the quotations which the speaker has chosen specifically foretell the fates of men should they not heed that message. Each of these references is also a warning. These men are prophets in the formal sense, in that they speak for God, but the speaker uses their words prophetically in the temporal sense, as they essentially predict an apocalyptic fall at the individual level for sinners who fail to heed their advice.

The speaker makes it clear that he is speaking prophetically at the communal level as well, citing prophets and likening himself to those who encouraged moral reform in towns, cities, and countries. When describing the sin of Detraction, the daughter of Lady Envy, the speaker warns his readers using a passage from Isaiah, describing the torments of hell to Babylon:

Saint Isaïe tielement  
Dist à la Babiloîne gent:  
‘Pource que detrahi avetz  
A mesmes dieu primerement  
Er as ses saïntz communement,  
Vous fais savoir que vous serrez  
Et detrahiz et avilez  
Ou lac q’est plain d’orribletés  
Du bas enfern parfondement.’  
He, comme poët estre espoëntez,  
Que ly prophete ad manacez  
Si tresespoëntablement! (2665-2676)
[Holy Isaiah said to the people of Babylon: ‘Because you have spoken evil first of God Himself and equally of His saints, I tell you that you shall be brought down and debased in the pit full of horrible things, deep in the lowest hell.” Ah, how one could be frightened because the prophet has threatened so frightfully!]

The speaker does not simply cite Isaiah but also gives the context of his prophecy, explaining that it was delivered to Babylon in response to their wicked actions. After quoting Isaiah’s prophecy, the narrative voice of the poem reacts to it personally in declaring, “He, comme poet estre espoentez…” The speaker implies that, despite the fact that Isaiah’s prophecy was originally delivered to the Babylonians, it should still inspire fear because their fate could easily be England’s fate—a collective outcome, suffered together. In this way, the speaker encourages not only individual moral reform but societal moral reform—a theme upon which he will elaborate in the *Vox Clamantis* and the *Confessio Amantis*. In the *Mirour*, Gower mentions a number of prophets who warned cities: Isaiah and Jeremiah speaking to the Babylonians or the Egyptian cities, Job predicting the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses, Ezekial, Baruch, and Jeremiah foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem, and many others. Through his compilation of quotations which warn of future consequences and his application of these quotations to the present day, the speaker casts himself in the role of a divine messenger whose inspiration comes from his textually based, academic authority. While Isaiah speaks to the people of Babylon based on what God has told him, the speaker of the poem compiles written holy messages for his English audience, based on what he has read. He frequently draws attention to his role as compiler not only citing each *auctor* but also interjecting phrases such as “ce truis escrit” (121) [as I find written] into his descriptions.
Gower uses the figure of the prophetic compiler in the *Mirour* as a substitute for his own persona. It allows the speaker of the poem to claim *auctoritas*, to give his message urgency, and to connect with the audience on a personal level. Ironically, a personal connection with a high-ranking legislative audience was only possible if Gower left his personal identity out of the work, instead adopting the persona of the prophet, sinner, and ruler, David. The speaker cites many of the *auctores* that Albertano de Brescia did, such as Seneca or St. Augustine, but he heavily favors the Old Testament, particularly its wisdom literature. Most notably, he cites Solomon forty-five times and David seventy-three times. This is, in part, attributable to the inherently aphoristic format of the Psalms and the Book of Wisdom, which lends the prophets’ work to sentential citation. However, the speaker does not simply quote Solomon and David but offers details of their conduct as exempla both of what to do and what not to do. Stepping into the politically powerful positions of Solomon and David, Gower can speak from an experience that is not his own and model reform for an audience that otherwise might find the true John Gower an unworthy role model.

The speaker often refers to Solomon as an example of an ideal ruler while painting David as a sinful leader who, through penance, returns to God’s good graces. Solomon is the speaker’s example of a man who speaks truthfully:

A male langue est resemblant

L’espeie d’ambe partz trenchant,

Ce nous dist sage Salomon;

Car d’ambe partz ly mesdisant

Des bons et mals vait detrahan:

Don’t ly prophete en sa leçon
Se plaignt et dist, par enchesoun
Qu’il volt suîr bien et resoun,
Luy detrahiront ly alqant.
He, dieus, du langue si feloun
Qui passera? Je certes noun,
Quant si prodhomme n’ert passant. (2785-2796)

[An evil tongue is like a double-edged sword; thus said the wise Solomon. For on both sides the evil-speaker detracts from good and evil people; whereof the prophet, in his teaching, complained and said that because he wanted to follow good and reason, certain persons spoke ill of him. Ah, Lord who will escape from a tongue so wicked? Certainly not I, when such a worthy man did not escape.]

Here, the speaker likens his own potential vulnerability to Solomon’s while also implying that this similarity is due to the fact that, like Solomon, he teaches of goodness and reason. In using Solomon for this example, the poet speaks specifically to the concerns of an audience used to being in a public position of power and potentially coming under similar scrutiny. Solomon is, quite logically, the speaker’s regular example of a man who acts morally in a legislative capacity. For instance, he offers Solomon as the model of discretion in famously calling for the infant to be split in half—deviating from the law in order to prove a point and act through God
(11869-11880). The speaker also commends Solomon’s practice of speaking to advisors before making decisions (14809-14920) and celebrates Solomon’s largesse (16057-16068).

The speaker cites Solomon’s father, David, as an example of both a sinful ruler and a model ruler. In a passage often interpreted as a reference to Edward III’s mistress, Alice Perrers, the speaker warns the king not to be deceived by women, reminding him, “Du Roy David je truis escrit/ Que pour son charnel appétit/ Du Bersabée, qu’il ot conu,/ Vilainement fuist desconfit” (22819-22822) [Of King David I find written that he was basely discomfited because of his carnal appetite for Bathsheba]. He goes on to explain the impact of David’s sins and the importance of royal uprightness: “Ensi le mal du Roy ceux fiert/ As queux le pecché point n’affiért…Dieu ne se venga proprement/De David q’ot fait folement,/ Ainz pour le Roy le poeple quiert” (22837-22845) [Thus the king’s sickness hurts those who are not responsible for the sin…God did not avenge Himself on David, who had acted foolishly, but rather He punished the people because of the king]. This message echoes that which is highlighted in the allegory of the Parliament of the Devil—that the sins of those in charge harm the people as a whole. In using this example, Gower reminds his readers of the sinfulness of the very prophet whom he has cited the most throughout the Mirour. David is a prophet who came to sin through lust for women, a trait which makes him a particularly appropriate authority in an allegory in which Sin is represented as a lustful bawd with seven tempting daughters. Furthermore, he is the ideal example of a high ranking individual whose actions affect the community as a whole, demonstrating that the key to national harmony is personal harmony—a theme to which Gower will return repeatedly in his later works. Most importantly, David is not simply a prophet who delivers God’s messages to sinners; he is a sinner himself. Most of the speaker’s positive

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citations of David are in reference to his penance. For instance, he claims, “Auci David nous fait savoir, / Qe pres de dieu porra manoir / Nuls orguillous,” (11611-11613) [David teaches us that no proud man may dwell near God.] This is a reference to David’s sin of pride and a reminder that he is an example to us because of his contrition.

David’s status as a sinner and a prophet makes him a natural double for the speaker, who presents himself in the *Mirour* as a flawed man in need of penance. Speaking from a first-person authorial perspective, the speaker confesses:

Jadis trestout m’abondonoie

Au foldelit et veine joye

Dont ma vesture desguisay

Et les fols ditz d’amours fesoie,

Dont en chantant je carolloie:

Mais ore je m’aviseray

Et tout cela je changeray,

Envers dieu je supplieray

Q’il de sa grace me convoie;

Ma conscience accuseray,

Un autre chançon chanteray

Qu jadys chanter ne soloie. (27337)

[In olden days I gave myself freely to wantonness and vain joy. I decked myself out in fancy clothes and composed foolish love ditties, which I danced about singing. But now I will take thought,
and I will change all that. I will beg God to accompany me with His favor. I will accuse my conscience, and I will sing a different song from the one I used to sing].

This passage has been taken autobiographically by Fisher, who suspected that Gower was referring to his *Cinkante Balades* when describing his “fols ditz d’amours.” Yet for a poem which in no other way even refers to its author or his other works, this is an unlikely allusion. As R.F. Yeager notes, this passage highlights the shift in the style of the *Mirour* itself, which changes from love allegory and *pscyhomachia* in Books I and II to a ballad dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Book III. The speaker describes his authorial role in a conspicuously musical way, and in doing so, he takes on the role of the prophet David, whom the Book of Samuel describes a harpist. The speaker remarks upon David’s talent in the *Mirour*, relating it to his exemplary kingship: “Ly Rois David estoit harpour…Ensi falt que ly Rois en terre/ Sache atemprer et l’acord fere/ Du pueple dont la governance” (22877; 22909-22911) [King David was a harper…Likewise the king on earth has to know how to tune and to create harmony among the people whom he rules]. In the passage in which the speaker resolves to sing a new song, he is a musician who, like David, once focused on a foolish sort of love. In David’s case, he sinned in loving Bathsheba. When spoken from the speaker’s voice, the confession of foolish love can also be taken to refer to the allegorical personification of Sin herself, whom he had introduced in Book I. When the speaker proclaims that he will sing “un autre chançon,” he is drawing from Psalm 97, which begins, “A psalm for David himself. Sing ye to the Lord a new canticle.” The speaker echoes David’s role as a penitent composer and goes on to proclaim his role as prophet,

telling his readers:

Mais tu q’escoulter me voldras,

Escoulte que ju chante bass,

Car c’est un chançon cordial;

Si tu la note bien orras,

Au commencer dolour avras

Et au fin joye espiritual (27349-27354)

[But you who are willing to listen to me, listen while I sing softly, 

for it is a song of the heart. If you listen well to the melody, you 

will have sorrow at the beginning and spiritual joy at the end.]

The speaker predicts “joye espiritual” for the readers who heed his moral advice, taking on the role of the prophet whom he so frequently quotes and uses as an example.

Paul Miller has spoken of the speaker’s mid-poem conversion as a necessary ingredient of medieval satire, arguing that the “tone of moral indignation (indignatio) which dominates the satira communis in the Mirour must be palliated before the invocation to the Virgin may be introduced.”22 Yet it is important to note that throughout the work, taking on the role of David, the speaker of the poem has been preaching through the subject position of a sinful, penitent legislator—modeling the very outlook which he hopes to see in the reader. This is not a prophetic identity which Gower assumes in any other work. In his later works, the Vox Clamantis and Confessio Amantis, he favors the position of prophets such as Daniel who were advisors to kings, most likely because those prophets reflected his own subordinate position with

respect to his patrons and desired audience.

Because he does not acknowledge his personal position in relation to the work, Gower’s speaker is able to situate himself in a myriad of prophetic positions through his identity as compiler. Although not a judge or a king, Gower could speak with the authority and experience of one in continually invoking the examples of Solomon and David. In this way, Gower employs a similar technique to Chaucer’s in *The Canterbury Tales*, wherein, as Alastair Minnis has noted, Chaucer plays the role of innocent compiler—the hearer of tales. Gower not only uses his position as compiler to distance himself from the claims he makes but also to give his claims the authority which they require—an authority perhaps lacking in the newly enterprising poet, John Gower. This is not to say that Gower was completely anonymous to his original audience for the *Mirour*. He speaks of the *Mirour* as one of his great works in the colophon to the *Confessio* and even includes it as one of the three works on his grave, which seems to indicate that he expected someone to recognize it. The act of compilation draws a great deal of attention to the skill of the author, and this may have been a work which Gower used to convince others of his talents. Yet within the text itself, Gower’s choice to give the speaker of the poem anonymity allows him to take on multiple prophetic voices: that of the *vox populi*, which corrects the corrupt parliament described in Book I, but also that of the reformed legislator, who models behavior for such a parliament. In this way, Gower can advise effectively from two vantage points in relation to his audience.

The Body of the Prophet and the Body Politic in the *Vox Clamantis*

Whereas Gower masks his personal presence in the *Mirour*, Gower presents a conspicuous self-portrait in the *Vox Clamantis*. It is a self-portrait which is continually shifting

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perspectives from that of marginal commentator to central everyman. This dualistic authorial identity is visually represented in MS Cotton Tiberius A.iv and MS Laud 719, which displays two separate depictions of John Gower—a portrait and a riddle. On the left hand of the page, an illustrated representation of Gower stands next to the text of the *Vox*, pointing an arrow at the world. He is literally in the marginal stance, separate from the target at which he, and the satirical critique which his arrow signifies, takes aim. The figure aims his arrow not only at the world but, in the case of the Cotton MS, at the description of his own name on the opposite page. The description reads:

Scribentis nomen si queras, ecce loquela
Sub tribus implicita versibus inde latet.
Primos sume pedes Godefridi desque Iohanni,
Principiumque sui Wallia iungat eis:
Ter caput ammittens det cetera membra, que tale
Carmine composite hominis ordo patet (I.Prol.19-24)

[If you should ask the name of the writer, look, the word lies hidden and entangled within three verses about it. Take the first feet from “Godfrey” and add them to “John,” and let “Wales” join its initial to them. Leaving off its head, let “Ter” furnish the other parts; and after such a line is arranged, the right sequence of the name is clear.]

Gower’s cryptic self-description reflects the world which he will go on to describe—a dismembered body consisting of *pedes, membra*, and a severed *caput*. Beheading imagery
describing the social body abounds in the *Vox*—from the description of the Archbishop Simon Sudbury’s execution in Book I to the headless statue of Nebuchadnezzar in Book VII representing the state of England, along with the repeated metaphorical complaints that, “Caput infirmum membra dolere facit” [A weak head makes the members suffer] (VI.vii.498), and “Infirmo capite priuantur membra salute” [When the head is weak, the bodily members are deprived of health] (VI.vii.549). The title of the work itself, *Vox Clamantis* refers to John the Baptist, a famously beheaded prophet. Gower, stepping into the prophetic role of John the Baptist occupies a dual function. On the one hand, he is the solitary, individual prophet, crying out *in deserto*. On the other hand, his identical decapitation reflects the disordered state of the community which he will go on to empathetically describe, often invoking his prophetic voice as the voice of that very body itself—the *vox populi*. He declares, “Est nihil ex sensu proprio quod scribere, set ora/ Que mihi vox populi contulit, illa loquar,” (IV.i.19) [Nothing I write is my own opinion. Rather I shall speak what the voice of the people has reported to me.] Through his depiction of Daniel’s statue in Book VII and the related tale of Helenus in Book I, Gower combines and exploits prophetic identities in the *Vox Clamantis* in a way that combines his simultaneously individual and communal stance in relation to the audience whom he critiques.

Scholarship on the *Vox* has characterized Gower’s prophetic role as either individual/marginal or communal/central. Alastair Minnis has focused on how Gower represents himself in relation to St. John the Baptist, St. John of Patmos, and Daniel, arguing that Gower “invites comparison between his mode of stylistic and didactic procedures and the procedures found by exegetes in prophetic works of great authority.”24 Minnis notes how, in implying that God was the *causa efficiens* of his work, Gower could indirectly claim *auctoritas* and situate

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himself within a respected literary tradition. In likening himself to these prophets, Gower was able to bolster his position as a unique and separate individual who has been granted the authority to speak for God to the people. Yoshiko Kobayashi has more recently observed that, through frequent references to Ovidian works, Gower invokes the repeated imagery of raped, abused, and widowed classical female characters and likens his lamenting voice to theirs. In describing London as “vidue languard more” (I.880) [weak like a widow] before launching into a description of his own despair, Kobayashi claims that Gower takes on the narrative perspective of Jeremiah’s Lamentations, told from the voice of a widow who describes and experiences the fall of Jerusalem in similarly empathetic terms. While critics have characterized Gower’s prophetic voice as either individual or communal, the parallels between Daniel and Helenus combine Gower’s seemingly incongruous roles as a prophet preaching to and representing his community.

Daniel’s analysis of Nebuchadnezzar’s statue dream holds a special place in Gower’s corpus because it appears both in the final book of the *Vox Clamantis* and the first book of the *Confessio Amantis*. Derek Pearsall has referred to this repetition in the *Confessio* as a “perfectly deliberate” reference to his previous work. It is Gower’s way of emphasizing the relevance of this story to his authorial identity. Most critical attention has focused on the importance of the story to the *Confessio*, with little observation of how Gower’s specific manipulation of the image of the statue and prophet reiterate themselves throughout the work and reflect profoundly on Gower’s self-representation. For instance, Russel Peck has noted that Gower uses Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the statue for its “apocalyptic effects” in both the *Vox* and the *Confessio* and has argued that, in pairing the dream with Daniel’s interpretation of

Nebuchadnezzar’s other dream of madness and eventual recovery in the Confessio, Gower emphasizes the possibility of penance in a way that he does not in the Vox. Elizabeth Porter has discussed the ways in which Nebuchadnezzar’s statue serves two functions in the Confessio Amantis: “Not only does it stand for disorder within the political macrocosm; it also represents disorder within the ethical microcosm and asserts that political ills are the consequence of disorder within the little world of man.” Peck’s and Porter’s observations of the function of the statue in the Confessio are applicable to the Vox, but little attention has been paid to the way in which the Vox uniquely alters the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the statue by incorporating the beheading motif that recurs throughout the work. When bookended with the story of Helenus in Book I, the beheaded prophet and guardian of the Palladium, the story also conveys the message that the social body cannot think or function without the guidance of its prophet—that indeed the body of the prophet and that of the body politic are one and the same.

In the original dream related in the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar sees a statue with a head of gold, arms and chest of silver, a stomach and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay. The statue is struck by a stone from heaven, which causes it to crumble to pieces and become a mountain. Nebuchadnezzar calls upon various seers of Babylon to interpret his dream, but only Daniel can understand it. Daniel explains that the statue foretells the increasingly inferior kingdoms which will proceed from Nebuchadnezzar’s, ultimately leading to the end of creation. Subsequent Christian scholars such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas interpreted the gold head as representing Babylon, the arms and chest of silver as Persia, the bronze stomach and thighs as Greece, the iron legs as Rome, and the feet of iron and clay as contemporary

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Europe, on the brink of apocalypse. In Book VII of the *Vox*, rather than describing a stone which hits the statue, causing the entire thing to crumble, Gower describes how “Nunc caput a statua Nabugod prescindit auri,/ Fictilis et ferri stant duo iamque pedes” (VII.1.5-6) [The golden head of Nebuchadnezzar’s statue has now been cut off, yet the two feet of iron and clay still stand.] Drawing on Ovid’s notion of the successively inferior ages of man represented as gold, silver, brass, and iron, Gower’s image of an entirely decapitated head of gold emphasizes the degree to which the present age is cut off from the golden age. This image not only speaks to the distance of fourteenth-century England from that of the golden age; it also speaks to the lack of leadership in England’s body politic.

The head which is supposed to govern the rest of the body is absent. As Eve Salisbury has noted, this is a particularly striking image since it follows Book VI, in which Gower advises the young Richard not to trust false advisors. In Book VI, Gower uses metaphors for poor governance which foreshadow the image of the statue: “Caput infirmum membra dolere facit” (VI.vii.498) [A weak head makes the members suffer], and “Infirmo capite priuantur membra salute” (VI.vii.549) [When the head is weak, the bodily members are deprived of health]. In these passages, Gower speaks not of a severed head, but of a weak one—language which reflects his general censure for the entire nobility for being inferior in quality. In an Ovidian slant on Daniel’s original interpretation, Gower explains the statue: “Nobilis a mundo nunc desinit aurea proles,/ Pauperies ferri nascitur atque sibi” (VII.1.7-8) [The noble, golden race of men has departed from the world and a poor one of iron has sprung forth from it], but he goes on to mourn, “Non modo pauperibus spergit sua munera largus,/ Nec fouet in mensa vix modo diues...”

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Vix pietate modo nudos quis vestit egenos, Nee capit hospicio quos scit egere vagos” (VII.1.11-14) [No generous man now scatters his gifts among the needy and the rich man scarcely feeds them at his table now. He scarcely clothes the naked poor with piety, or receives the wanderers who he knows lack shelter]. Gower now makes it clear that the previous “golden race” was magnanimous and cared for the lowly. In this way, Gower’s representation of Nebuchadnezzar’s imagined statue not only represents great civilizations throughout the ages; it represents the embodiment of a dismembered England. The ideal body politic was represented by the original statue of Nebuchadnezzar described in the Book of Daniel. Those at the top, made of true gold, governed the weaker body with care and generosity, but now they are nowhere to be found. Ironically, the avaricious, because of their love for gold, are the spiritual equivalent to hardened iron. Gower grieves, “Iam noua sunt silicis circum precordia vene, Et rigidum feri semina pectus habet” (VII.2.125-126) [The modern heart is girt round with vein of flint, and the unyielding breast contains seeds of iron]. Unlike Nebuchadnezzar’s statue in the Book of Daniel, which is merely degenerating from the top down, the entire body politic of this statue is becoming infected with inferior metal, and the deficiencies at the top are the most threatening to the body as a whole.

Focusing on the top of the statue, Gower’s criticism seems out of step with his Visio Angliae in Book I, which negatively portrays the lower classes of England. As Stockton has observed, in Books II-VII, Gower “finds that all three estates are guilty—which is inconsistent with Book I, where only the serfs are reprehensible and all others their innocent victims.” What Stockton deems inconsistent, however, is Gower’s method of exploiting the prophetic dream genre in order to best aim social criticisms. By characterizing the rebels as animals, Gower

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distances himself from them, while harnessing the power and terror of their fury so that he might call for reform. Not under the constraints of realism as a chronicler or eyewitness to the Rising of 1381, Gower employs the dream vision genre in order to discuss the Rising in terms of symbolism that provides him with the safety to criticize the his audience. As Steven Justice has noted, Gower dehumanizes the voices of the people taking part in the Rising, representing their cries as braying and squawking. In doing so, Justice argues, Gower removes the competing *vox populi* of the rebels so that Gower can claim to speak for the people. Book I’s disdain for the incomprehensible rebels makes it clear that, in Books II-VII of the *Vox*, when Gower repeatedly claims that he writes, “humana que vox communis ad extra/ Plangit in hac terra, scribe moderna mala” (III. Prol. 55-56) [of present-day evils of which the common voice of mankind outwardly complains in this country] and that his criticisms were inspired by “voces plebis” (VI.25.1448) [the voice of the people], he is not speaking on behalf of those responsible for the Rising. Yet Gower characterizes the rebels’ anger as a manifestation of God’s anger, giving his prophetic admonishments all the more urgency.

God’s wrath in the abstract sense was terrifying enough, but the wrath of the people and its potential destruction of wealth and wellbeing would have been a very palpable fear for Gower’s audience. Gower’s *Visio Angliae* harnesses this fear, demonstrating how the voice of God speaks through the peasantry’s actions as a kind of punishing plague. In describing the rabble as swarms of frogs and flies, Gower draws a comparison between the Rising and the famous Biblical plague of Exodus, making the similarities between them explicit: “Non fuit horridior Egipti musca nociua,/ Nec magis ingenuous terruit ipsa viros,” (I.8.593-594) [The noxious fly of Egypt was not more horrible, and it did not frighten freemen more]. Gower also

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invokes classical comparisons to cities justly punished by their gods. When describing the peasants as wild, murderous dogs, Gower says, “Bestia pestifera, nuper quam misit Athenas, /Destruat vt ciues, mota Diana palam / Vrbis in exilium,” (I.v.453-455) [Nor, when Diana was openly driven into exile from the city, did the dangerous beast which she sent to Athens to destroy the citizens offer such battles]. Here, Gower refers to the boar which Diana sent to ravage the city after Athens had neglected to pay tribute to her. Gower’s biblical and classical examples alike associate the Rising with divine retributions for communal transgressions. Dehumanizing the rebels transforms them into the plagues themselves, not the sinners who are punished. The punished are the audience to whom Gower addresses his societal criticisms. As Judith Ferster has noted, despite the fact that most believe that Gower wrote Book I after Books II-VII, the moral examples of Book II conspicuously reference the animal imagery of Book I.32 Gower declares that “Omnis in orbe fera iusti virtute subacta/ Est, draco sicque leo, quos sibi subdit homo,” (II.5.265-266) [Every wild animal in the world—the dragon as well as the lion—is subdued by the virtue of the just man; he subjugates them to himself]. Ferster argues that, because Gower’s examples of men who subdued or failed to subdue animals and nature include Biblical kings such as David, Saul, and Nebuchadnezzar, this is a particular attack on Richard’s failure to subdue the rebels, who are represented as beasts and storms. Yet Gower also includes examples of the Hebrew people at large and, most plentifully and prominently, prophets such as Elisha, Daniel, Moses, and Jonah who could command all creatures and weather through their

personal conduct. This emphasizes Gower’s message that God’s punishments come to communities who turn their backs on God but that these plagues can be abated through the guidance of prophets such as himself.

Gower’s voice in the Vox Clamantis is unmistakably prophetic. The plot of Book I involves a dream vision and a celestial voice telling Gower to record it because, “somnia sepe futurum/ Indicium reddunt” (I.20.2049-2050) [dreams often furnish an indication of the future]. Gower overtly likens himself to John the Baptist through the work’s title and draws comparisons between himself and John of Patmos through his invocation: “Insula quem Pathmos suscepit in Apocalipsi, / Cuius ego nomen gesto, gubernet opus,” (Prol.58) [May the one whom the Isle of Patmos received in the Apocalypse, and whose name I bear, guide this work]. He similarly compares himself to the apocalyptic prophet, Daniel, in his testimony that “Ex Daniele patet quid somnia significarunt,” (Prol. 8) [What dreams may mean is clear from Daniel]. Gower’s reference to these prophets within the prologue highlights the fact that his subsequent apocalyptic vision, like those of John and Daniel, consists of elaborate descriptions of various beasts and speculates on the coming on the Antichrist. Furthermore, Gower solidifies his connection to Daniel by including his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s statue in Book VII. Yet it is through his invented description of the execution of a classical seer, Helenus, that Gower articulates the relationship between a community and its prophet. In the Visio of Book I, Gower depicts England using characters drawn from classical Troy. He describes the execution of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Sudbury, as the execution of Helenus, the brother of Cassandra and fellow prophet, who foresaw the fall of Troy. It is not a precise comparison. Helenus, like Sudbury, is a priest of sorts, but Sudbury made no famous predictions of note.

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33 II.v.7-17.
Furthermore, Helenus was not murdered, according to tradition. In fact, he was one of the survivors of the fall of Troy. However, obvious symbolic correspondence is not a necessary component of the dream vision genre. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton has highlighted several of the features of the dream vision which medieval authors would have found useful, including “the possibility of allegorical complexity” and “freer treatment of symbolism.”

Dream visions, like dreams themselves, do not rely on one-to-one symbolism wherein one object or person stands in for one specific meaning. Helenus is not simply Sudbury. He is also a Christ figure and a prophet with similarities to the book’s author, Gower.

The symbolic terms in which Gower describes Helenus’s murder give it a clear relationship with the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in Book VII. Gower introduces him as:

“O qui palladium Troie seruabat ab ara, / Helenus Antistes” (I.xiv.1001-1002) [The high priest Helenus, who served Troy’s Palladium]. The Palladium is the statue of Pallas, goddess of wisdom, whose theft famously allowed for the Greeks to conquer Troy. As long as the statue was safe, the city was safe, but when the statue was stolen by the Greeks, the city was made vulnerable. In the context of the Vox Clamantis, the Palladium serves as a classical mirror of the statue of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. As Elizabeth Porter has argued, in representing the country as a body, the statue in the first book of the Confessio demonstrates the relationship between self-governance and state-governance. The statue that Daniel interprets in the Vox is different

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35 Eric W. Stockdon has called this an “ill-chosen” comparison, since Gower was a supporter of Sudbury, yet Helenus was a notorious traitor to Troy. In the classical tradition, Helenus revealed to the Greeks that the secret to overtaking the city was to steal the Palladium. However, recent work by Conrad van Dijk has shown that Helenus was represented heroically in the sources with which Gower would have been most familiar, Benoît's Le Roman de Troï and Guido delle Colonne's Historia destructionis Troiae. See Conrad van Dijk, "Simon Sudbury and Helenus in John Gower's Vox Clamantis," Medium Aevum 77 (2008): 313-318.
36 Porter, “Gower’s Ethical Microcosm,” 143.
from that of the *Confessio* because Gower describes it as having been beheaded. Yet it serves a similar function, representing an embodied version of a disordered state that suffers because its individual citizens are likewise disordered in their thinking—not using their heads and hardening their hearts with inferior metals. In the case of Troy, it is the statue itself which not only reflects the city’s wellbeing but ensures it. According to classical myth, the Greeks were only able to pillage Troy using the horse because Odysseus and Diomedes had secretly stolen the Palladium, which protected the city. As a prophet, a priest, and the keeper of the statue representing the goddess of wisdom, Helenus can be seen as a moral guardian of the city, who symbolically protects the ethical soundness of Trojan individuals just as he literally protects the soundness of the Palladium. Just as Gower altered the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream so that the statue is beheaded, he alters Helenus’s story so that the prophet himself is beheaded. Gower makes it clear that it is this beheading which will cause the destruction of Troy. Like the statue which he protects, the prophet himself embodies the fate of the city.

Gower depicts Helenus’s decapitation as a perverse crucifixion whereby all are cursed and no one is redeemed. The entire civic body suffers the wound which it has inflicted upon its prophet. Just before describing the execution, Gower reminds us of when the revolt took place: “Ecce Iouis festiua dies de Corpore Cristi” (L.xiii.919) [Behold, it was Thursday, the Festival of Corpus Christi]. As Mervyn James has observed, the feast of the Corpus Christi formally celebrated the Eucharist, the body of Christ, but also gave late medieval towns the opportunity to affirm, question, and reflect upon the concept of the social body. St. John Chrysostom articulates the connection between Christ’s body and the social body in his famous sermon, read at matins in the Corpus Christi season: “Christ hath infused himself with us, and infused his

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Body with our bodies, that we may be one together, as limbs of one body." Gower summons bodily imagery throughout the Vox in order to illustrate the connection between the individual and the community, but the specifically Christian overtones of this imagery are most overt in the description of Helenus’s death. Gower describes Helenus as a “crucifer” (I.xiv.1087) [cross-bearer] who was “cruciatus” (I.xiv.1088) [crucified]. Calling upon the language which often ties the priestly office to Christ himself through metaphor, Gower refers to Helenus as the “pastor” (I.xiv.1084) [shepherd] whose flock had hacked him to pieces. In this way, Helenus becomes a Christ figure, and by extension, so do Sudbury and Gower.

However, this is a crucifixion that will not bring about redemption. The passage describes how the town which has chosen to decapitate the “head” of its church has essentially inflicted violence on its own civic body, bringing only damnation: “Non ignorant eos maledicció debita Cristi, / Qui cum sint membra, sic coluere caput” (I.xiv.1053-154) [Christ’s righteous curse did not ignore those who cherished the head (of their Church) in this fashion, even though they were members]. Drawing on puns which already reflect the bodily language present in parishes, Gower emphasizes that doing violence to the “caput” will come at the expense of the “members.” Gower warns, “O tibi commissos vrbs que lapidare prophetas Audes, quo deleas est tibi causa satis….o maledicta manus caput abscisum ferientis!” (I.xiv.1125-1126, 1129) [O city which dares to stone prophets entrusted to you, you have reason enough to grieve for this…O

39 Eve Salisbury suggests that Gower subtly represents the death of Sudbury as justified since Gower draws a line from Ovid’s Tristia, which describes a ritual pagan sacrifice, in order to describe Sudbury’s execution. Van Dijk has refuted Salisbury’s historical claims that Gower would have reason to despise Sudbury for his supposed abuses of authority. There seems to be little evidence to assume that Gower held any ill will toward the deceased Archbishop. The connection which Salisbury observes between the Archbishop’s death and ritual sacrifice is most likely to do with the fact that Christ himself has long been traditionally depicted as a ritual sacrifice, the Agnus Dei. See Eve Salisbury, “Violence and the Sacrificial Poet: Gover, the Vox, and the Critics,” in On John Gower: Essays at the Millennium, ed. R.F. Yeager (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007): 124-143; 134. Van Dijk, "Simon Sudbury and Helenus,” 316.
cursed is the hand carrying the severed head!] Troy, of course, was a cursed city which fell because it lost its Palladium to the Greeks. In murdering the keeper of the Palladium, the Trojans inadvertently give over their civic body to the enemies. In altering the story so that the Trojans collectively murder the prophet who could have prevented the fall of their city, Gower sends the message that the entire civic body is responsible for its destruction. In Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s *Roman de Troi*, Helenus, like his sister, Cassandra, warns Paris not to attack Greece and predicts that Troy will fall if he does. It is not simply one ruler who failed to heed the prophet in the *Vox*; it is the entire city.

On one level, Gower is claiming that London will suffer because its rebels have slaughtered the city’s moral leader, the Archbishop. On another level, Gower warns his audience of the dangers of destroying their own prophets, lest they destroy themselves in the process. After all, the beasts of Gower’s *Visio* need not only correspond to the rebels who took part in the Rising. The true danger lies in what they could represent, as the voice of Wisdom (similar to the spirit of Pallas, who guided Helenus and whom Helenus guarded) tells Gower that “somppnia sepe futurum/ Indicium reddunt,” (I.xx.2049-2050) [dreams often furnish an indication of the future]. In Books II-VI, Gower gives his audience cause to see themselves in the descriptions of the plague of beasts. For instance, when criticizing the monks of the present day, he observes that “Frater Burnellus, crescit et ille magis,” (IV.xxiv.1190) [the holy order which friar Burnel sanctioned still remains, and it is growing larger]. Here, Gower refers to the character of Burnel the Ass in the satirical *Speculum Stultorum*, a character who foolishly founds his own order of monks based on his own preferences for comfort and luxury. This allusion is particularly noteworthy since the *Speculum Stultorum* served as an obvious source text for Gower’s *Visio* in
Book I, which begins with people transformed into asses. Gower directly refers to the text and its main character when describing the rebels:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Vt vetus ipse suam curtam Brunellus inepte} \\
&Caudam longari de nouitate cupit, \\
&Six isti miseris noua tergaque longa requirunt, \\
&Vt leo de cauda sing et Asellus idem. (I.ii.201-204)
\end{align*}
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[Just as old Burnel foolishly wanted this short tail newly made long, in order that the ass and the lion might have the same kind of tail, so these wretched creatures wanted new, straight backs.]

Furthermore, several of the lines of Book I are direct quotations pulled from the *Speculum Stultorum*. This reference therefore reminds the monks that their behavior is not so different from that of the rebels whom Gower has so negatively depicted. The imagery of Nebuchadnezzar’s statue, which has lost its head and whose heart is infected with inferior metals, not only refers to the present age’s detachment from the golden age or the degeneracy of the nobility at the top of the social body; it also refers to the state of an individual who has lost the faculties of his or her mind and fails to be governed by wisdom. Book I shows the dangers of a culture which has figuratively lost its mind, descending into the ranks of beasts. The execution of Helenus serves as a warning to Gower’s audience that they too could suffer a similar loss of wisdom and social order in refusing to heed the wisdom contained in his work.

Gower most likely faced no risks of an actual death, but his book could have been

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censored or his voice could have simply fallen on deaf ears. Gower’s stories of these prophets, Daniel and Helenus, and their respective analysis and guardianship of statues representing the greater social body, reminds the audience how integral the prophet is to that body’s wellbeing. On the one hand, he is the distant analyst, like Daniel, observing and predicting the future of the social body. On the other hand, he is the body itself, like both Helenus and the Palladium, intimately tied to the future of his community. Gower reminds us that his seemingly detached prophetic observations come from the community of whom he speaks: “Quod scripsi plebis vox est, set et ista videbis,/ Quo bonus est audit bona, set peruersus obaudit” (VII.xxv.1469-1470) [What I have set down is the voice of the people, but you will also see that where the people call out, God is often there]. In ignoring the wisdom of the prophet, they ignore themselves. Through the examples of Daniel and Helenus, Gower embodies this dualistic relationship between the marginal and central prophet.

Confessio Amantis as Public Prophecy and Retrospective Propaganda

After having dedicated the Confessio Amantis to Richard II in 1390, Gower famously rededicated it to Henry, Duke of Lancaster, in 1392. Upon Richard’s deposition and Henry’s coronation, Gower was a notable Lancastrian apologist, composing In Praise of Peace, the Cronica Tripertita, and Cinquante Ballades in celebration of the new king. Yet the vast majority of surviving manuscripts of the Confessio produced after Henry’s coronation in 1400 correspond to the first recension, dedicated to Richard II. Of the surviving manuscripts of the Confessio, only nine are dedicated to Henry, while thirty-two are dedicated to Richard.41 Furthermore, all thirty-two of the surviving copies dedicated to Richard were produced after Henry’s

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41 Fisher, John Gower, 124.
coronation.\footnote{John Gower, \textit{The English Works of John Gower}, ed. G.C. Macaulay, cxxxviii-cli; Fisher, \textit{John Gower}, 116. In fact, the earliest extant copies of the work are those dedicated to Henry when he was not yet king.} Gower’s biographer, John Fisher, notes that “Just how or why so many of this early, politically embarrassing, version should have been produced after Richard’s deposition remains a question.”\footnote{Fisher, \textit{John Gower}, 116.} This question becomes even more compelling when one considers that the majority of copies dedicated to Richard were bound in manuscripts owned by members of the House of Lancaster.\footnote{See Kate Harris, “Ownership and Readership: Studies in the Provenance of the Manuscripts of Gower’s \textit{Confessio Amantis},” Unpublished Dissertation, 1993, 119-156. Davis notes, “The ‘Lancastrian’ copies probably attest more firmly to the prevalence of the first recension of the text than they do to a preference amongst their owners for the form of dedication to be found in the second or third versions of the poem” (121). Davis herself offers the explanation that the first recension may have been the only one available to copyists. However, M.B. Parkes’s work suggests that at least three of Gower’s friends could have supplied copyists with corrected copies. See Parkes, “Patterns of Scribal Activity and Revisions of the Text in early copies of works by John Gower,” in \textit{New Science Out of Old Books: Studies in Manuscripts and Early Printed Books in Honour of A.I. Doyle}, ed. Richard Beadle and A.J. Piper (London: Scolar Press, 1995), 81-121.} However, a closer look at Gower’s prophetic engagement with the tradition of \textit{Fürstenspiegel} demonstrates that keeping the original dedication to the former king Richard actually enhanced the work’s value as Lancastrian propaganda.

Within Book VII of the \textit{Confessio}, Gower takes a distinctly prophetic admonitory approach to the \textit{Fürstenspiegel} genre, in which a poet advises a ruler. After the prologue addressed to Richard, the \textit{Confessio} does not offer much in the way of direct kingly advice until Book VII, which interrupts Genius’s advice to Amans with Genius’s recount of Aristotle’s counsel to the young ruler, Alexander. Book VII is a conspicuous mirror for princes, in which Gower speaks of Richard’s obligations through the voice of Aristotle (itself mediated through the voice of Genius).\footnote{The implied comparison between Aristotle and Gower as well as Alexander and Richard II is flattering for both poet and patron. Nevertheless, as Diane Watt has noted, Book III of the \textit{Confessio} had described Alexander’s death by poison in Babylon and his lack of fulfillment as a poorly self-governed king. The comparison itself is a foreboding admonishment. See Diane Watt, \textit{Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 127.} As Judith Fester has noted, the \textit{Fürstenspiegel} praises the king to which it is
dedicated but also subversively disciplines him with public reminders of his obligations. The Confessio is particularly disciplinary in that Gower’s advice in Book VII not only reminds Richard of his obligations but also reminds him of the consequence of falling short of them—deposition. In Book VII, Gower tells a series of cautionary tales of Old Testament kings who were dethroned. These tales feature a series of unheeded prophets to whom the kings should have listened, highlighting Gower’s role as the prophet Daniel, the voice of God, in the prologue to the Confessio. Gower also includes cautionary tales of Roman kings deposed at the command of the voice of the people. In the tale of Rehoboam, Gower highlights his own unique rhetorical position as both vox Dei and vox populi, implying that he is an advisor best suited to help Richard avoid deposition. The emphatically prophetic character that the Confessio assumes when addressed to the already deposed Richard makes it particularly useful Lancastrian propaganda because it implies that Richard’s fall was fated, divinely approved, and therefore all the more justified.

In Book VII of the Confessio, Aristotle employs an exemplum from the Old Testament Book of Kings when counseling Alexander about the importance of heeding proper advice. When warning of the dangers of flatterers, Aristotle tells the story of King Ahab of Israel. Ahab asks the prophets in his kingdom if he will win the battle against Ramoth Galaad, and all respond with flattering affirmations except Micaiah, who tells Ahab that he overheard the voice of God plotting with a spirit to deceive him by sending false messages to his prophets. Ahab rashly has Micaiah thrown in prison and goes on to lose the battle, in which he is slain. Ferster has argued that, since God himself sends false prophets, “The whole enterprise of getting advice from

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46 See Ferster, Fictions of Advice, 40.
counselors seems futile.” Yet Gower alters the biblical story in such a way that Ahab is more at fault for his unwillingness to listen to Micaiah, suggesting that true prophecy (and by extension, poetry) is difficult but not impossible to distinguish from false prophecy. Gower adds the detail that Ahab had always had a bad habit of supporting flatterers: “Bot who that couthe glose softe / And flatre, suche he sette alofte / In gret astat and made hem riche” (2531-2533). Furthermore, Ahab taught his court to ignore the truth: “Bot thei that spieken words liche / To trouthe and wolde it noght forbere, / For hem was non astat to bere, / The court of suche tok non hiede” (2534-2537). Therefore, in Gower’s version, the false prophets who appear to the king are not so much deceived by God as they are motivated by reward. Gower describes the primary prophet, Sedecias, as “a flatour” (2572) when detailing his assertion that Ahab would be victorious. Gower also adds the detail that Josaphat, King of Judah “was in gret doute, / And hield fantosme al that he herde” (2588-2589). In the original biblical passage, Josaphat hears and believes Sedecias’s prophecy as Ahab does, but Gower makes him a discerning foil to Ahab, illustrating that the king had reason to be skeptical of those who offered flattering prophecies. In contrast, Gower gives a lengthy description of Michaiah’s honesty, emphasizing that “Micheas upon throuthe tho / His herte sette” (2618-2618). Gower adds the history that Ahab is biased against Michaiah because he “liketh nevere yit to sein / A goodly word to mi pleasance” (2599). Gower’s Michaiah describes how God specifically claims to send Ahab a “flaterende prophecie” (2652), not just a false one. Thus, God punishes Ahab’s habit of rewarding flatterers with the precise instrument of his folly. God gives Ahab a last chance by also sending a true prophet, Michaiah, but because Ahab is predisposed by his own folly to ignore Michaiah’s words, the

47 Fictions of Advice, 118.
king dies. Through this story, Gower gestures to Richard’s opportunity to avoid Ahab’s demise by avoiding his mistake of cultivating a court of flatterers. In choosing a story that involves a prophetic warning, Gower signals to Richard the possibility not only of dying an untimely death but also of becoming a cautionary tale in the Confessio itself as yet another king who failed to listen to advice and suffered as a consequence. By the same token, Gower casts himself as Micaiah, an advisor dedicated to communicating the truth at all costs.

Gower includes in Book VII passing examples to other kings who suffer similar fates for similar transgressions, such as Saul, who fails to listen to the prophet Samuel and ends up losing his kingdom to David. These stories highlight Gower’s role as Daniel in the prologue and the end of Book I. Time and time again, when the king does not listen to the appropriate advice, not only does the kingdom suffer but the king himself pays with penance or his life. Although Gower’s story of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar in the prologue of the Confessio seems to emphasize the interrelated fates of a country and its individuals, his retelling of a second story of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar at the end of Book I emphasizes the personal consequences, particularly to a king, who fails to heed warnings. In the prologue, Gower describes how Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a statue with a head of gold, arms and chest of silver, a stomach and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay.\(^{49}\) When struck by a stone from heaven, the statue crumbles to pieces. Nebuchadnezzar calls upon various seers of Babylon to interpret his dream, but only Daniel successfully gleans that increasingly inferior kingdoms will proceed from Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon, ultimately leading to the end of creation. Gower steps into the role of a present-day Daniel, drawing a metaphorical connection between the cracks in the statue and the divisions among Christian people. He describes the “lond divided” (893) because “The

\(^{49}\text{Daniel 2: 1-49.}\)
werees ben so general / Among the cristene overall,” (897-898). Individuals, like the statue are fissured: “The bodi and the Soule also / Among hem ben divided so, / That what thing that the body hateth / The soule loveth and debateth” (995-998). In desiring things of body which are inimical to the soul, a human is divided by sin: “For Senne of his condicioun/ Is moder of divisoun” (1029-1030). In exposing division “noght only of the temporal / Bot of the spiritual also” (855), Gower connects the macrocosm of history and the microcosm of individuals: the statue is at once a representation of the various troubled empires of history and an individual human form. In this sense, all of Gower’s potential readers are equally responsible for the fate of England, and his advice is therefore equally pertinent to all of them. However, Nebuchadnezzar’s second dream, described at the end of Book I, demonstrates how the sinful king himself can suffer consequences for sin as well.

At the end of Book I, devoted to the sin of pride, Gower returns to the king, prophet, and dream trope of the Prologue. Genius tells Amans of how the king Nebuchadnezzar dreamt of a tree, lush with fruit and full of birds, until a “vois on hih” (2832) called out that the tree should be hewn down and all of its fruit destroyed but that the stump should be left standing. The voice also declares that the root’s heart will be turned into that of a beast, “Til that the water of the hevene/ Have waissen him be times sevenc” (2845-2846). As in the Bible (Daniel 4:3-5), Nebuchadnezzar consults numerous soothsayers who cannot tell him the truth until Daniel finally comes to explain that the tree represents Nebuchadnezzar himself, who has grown so powerful and high that God wishes to teach him a lesson in humility by chopping him to the ground and transforming him to a beast for seven years until he learns to humbly pray, asking for mercy. The second dream’s imagery strongly echoes that of the first. Since Gower has clarified that the cause of the cracks or “divisoun” in the statue is sin and that the cause of the tree’s felling is one
particular sin, pride, he is essentially retelling the same story. The statue, struck by a stone and crumbling to inevitable destruction resembles the tree, struck by an axe and felled to the ground. Russell A. Peck has noted that the second dream is “distinctly different from the apocalyptic view embodied in the first dream” in that it shows that one “can learn and improve himself through penitential acts.”50 Yet this second story is also distinct from the first in that it focuses on the individual consequences of sin. Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the statue broadly predicts the end of all civilization, whereas his dream of the tree predicts his own, personal downfall based on his individual transgressions. While the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s contrition points to penance as the antidote to divisive sin, the tale also emphasizes how important listening to sound advisors is in the penitential process. Gower describes how Daniel implored the king, “Amende thee, this wolde I rede…For so thou myth thi pes pourchace/ With godd, and stoned in good acord” (2934, 2938-2939), but Nebuchadnezzar “let it passe out of his mynde” (2951) until he has suffered for seven years as Daniel predicted, finally returning to human form when he asks God for forgiveness. This dream’s consequences were potentially preventable, and Nebuchadnezzar could have saved himself seven years of suffering had he merely listened to Daniel and repented in the first place. In this way, Gower also uses Daniel to reflect on the importance of his own authorial advice. If Richard were to neglect the moral lessons of the book and let them “passe out of his mynde,” he too might suffer consequences.

Gower combines stories of Old Testament kings dethroned by God with Roman kings deposed by the people. As Lynn Staley has observed, the audience of Fürstenspiegel broadened in the late fourteenth century so that the poet was not only addressing the king but also a wider

audience of readers concerned with governmental issues. The *Confessio* is Gower’s only major work in English. Writing it in the vernacular tongue, Gower can reach a larger, more “popular” audience for his warnings to Richard. This public audience is also the instrument that holds Richard accountable. Parliament had similarly used the symbolic will of “the people” in order to threaten Richard with deposition long before he was dethroned in 1399. The Lords Appellant had, in 1386 and again in 1387, threatened to depose Richard if he did not heed their political advice, arguing, according to Knighton’s chronicle:

> There remains one thing more for us to show to you on behalf of your people. It is permitted by another ancient law—and one put into practice not long ago, unfortunately—that if the king by malignant counsel or foolish contumacy or contempt or wanton will or for any other improper reason, should alienate himself from his people...then it is lawful for them, with the common consent of the people of the realm to pluck down the king from his royal throne, and to raise to the throne in his stead some very near kinsman of the royal house.

The Appellants’ mention of the right of ancient law “put into practice” is a reference to Edward II, whom Parliament had deposed in 1327. In mentioning the “common consent of the people,” the Lords Appellant remind Richard of the very rhetoric that they had summoned to support Edward’s deposition, a rhetoric which they could invoke once again. Like the Lords Appellant, Gower characterizes the people at large, who are also the implied audience of his work, as the

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potential instrument of Richard’s downfall should he fail to listen to wise advice.

At the end of Book VII, Gower recounts Livy’s stories of two Roman royals who raped innocent women, Lucrece and Virginia, and were dethroned as a result by the will of the people. Although Aristotle introduces these as stories with the lesson that “It sit a king wel to be chaste” (4547), the stories most emphatically demonstrate how citizens have the power to depose abusive rulers. Gower specifically describes how, after hearing the report that Arrons, son of King Tarquin, had raped Lucrece:

…the comun clamour told

The newe schame of Sennes olde.

And al the toun began to crie,

‘Awey, awey the tirannie

Of lecherie and covoitise!’

And ate laste in such a wise

The fader in the same while

Forth with his Sone thei exile,

And taken betre governance (5116-5123).

Here, Gower describes the “comun clamour” as a singular voice, driving out an unjust ruler and his entire royal line. The story is modified to invoke the threat of deposition rather than revolution. Whereas Livy describes Lucrece’s rape as instigating the abolishment of the Roman monarchy altogether, Gower simply refers to Rome’s resolve to take on “betre governance.” In this way, Gower makes the tale less seditious and more relevant to Richard, who had little reason to fear the dissolution of the monarchy but had much reason to fear being replaced with another king. In the story directly following that of Lucrece, Gower similarly describes how, after
Appius attempted to enslave and rape Virginia, the people of Rome, “Thurgh comun conseil of hem alle / Thei have here wrongfull king deposed” (5294-5295). Gower alters the language of the story to make it more applicable to threats facing Richard’s rule. Although Appius was of the council of the decemviri and not a monarch, Gower describes him as a king, and although his corrupt actions led to the dissolution of the decemviri for the reestablishment of the Roman Republic, Gower describes his removal as a deposition.

The violated women, Lucrece and Virginia, echo violated Rome itself, leading the plebs to overthrow their exploitative lovers/rulers. As several critics have noted, Gower’s retelling of the story of Lucrece lacks the anti-feminist tone of contemporary accounts, which expand upon Augustine’s notorious insinuation of Lucrece’s cupidity. Yet Gower’s description of how Lucrece “lay ded oppressed” (4987) as Arrons raped her is not necessarily a defense of feminine virtue so much as a synecdochal characterization of the oppressed empire of Rome. While both Lucrece and Virginia die tragically to protect their honor, the empire itself has the power to seek revenge against the cruel, self-serving lover/ruler in “common clamour” and “comun conseil.”

The greater narrative of the Confessio is written as advice to a lover, Amans, praying to Venus to gain the love of his lady, who seems to scorn him. Venus’s priest, Genius, instructs Amans in the ways to govern himself by aiding him in confessing his sins of love, organized in the order of the seven deadly sins. Elizabeth Porter has argued that because Aristotle’s advice to Alexander is

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53 Gower differs little from his source, Livy, in this respect. Livy himself compares the outrage inspired by Virginia’s capture to the outrage inspired by Lucretia’s rape, and he frames both events as those which led to major political upheaval. See Titus Livius, Ab Urbe Condita III.44.i. The collective sovereignty of the plebs is a major trope in Roman political rhetoric and serves as the basis for English notions of legal power granted by the people. See Kantorowicz, “Kingship and Scientific Jurisprudence,” 95.

based on ethical self-rule, it illustrates how the other seven books of Genius’s advice are likewise pertinent to kingship because they also emphasize individual ethics. These two tales of overthrown rapist monarchs at the end of Book VII signal a deeper metaphorical connection between Aristotle’s advice to a king and Genius’s advice to Amans: Richard is himself like a lover who has potentially lost the affections of his country and must take the necessary steps to be shriven of his sins in order to be reconciled to her. Gower’s contemporary, Richard Maidstone, similarly represents Richard II and London as estranged lovers in his *Concordia.* Yet, where Maidstone exploits the gendered metaphor of marriage to endorse the feminized public’s subservience and the masculine king’s authoritarianism, Gower uses the gendered metaphor of rape to warn Richard of the threat of public retaliation in the face of abusive authority. If the king fails to respect his lady kingdom, raping it (the metaphor for utter exploitation), the public will depose him—just as they did after the rapes of Lucrece and Virginia.

Gower makes it clear that sovereignty is granted by both God and the people and that pleasing one means pleasing the other. He advises in Book VII that a king should conduct himself “So that the hihe god in hevene / And al the people of his nobleie / Loange unto his name seie” (3922-3923), meaning that maintaining the kingdom means satisfying both God and the people. Gower articulates the view that pleasing the people means pleasing God, noting, “And wel the more god favoureth, / What he the comun riht socoureth” (3621-3622), just as angering

55 Elizabeth Porter has argued that because the substance of Aristotle’s advice to Alexander involves ethical self-rule, Book VII illustrates how the other seven books, focused on individual ethics, are also pertinent to advising the king. See Porter, “Gower’s Ethical Microcosm,” 135-162.
God means angering the people, because, “Of the king his god misserveth, / The people takth that he descerveth” (3933-3934). The key to comprehending what both God and the people want, Gower claims, is cultivating good advice: “What king wole his regne save” (1813) must have “such conseil which is to believe” (3816). A good advisor is like a prophet, speaking the will of God. Gower’s ideal advisor understands God not through visions or visitations but through consulting and comprehending the will of the public.

Gower most clearly characterizes this kind of publicly prophetic advisor in the story of Rehoboam, the story which also most clearly responds to Richard’s own regal hardships. Gower describes how, after the death of Solomon, the people of Israel come to the new young king, Rehoboam, and asked that he lower their extraordinarily high taxes. After consulting “wise knyhts olde” (4067), who tell him to listen to the people, Rehoboam consults men who “yonge were and nothing wise” (4077). These men tell him to threaten the people into subordination. The people desert him and chose another king. The story is extraordinarily suited to Richard’s reign because it speaks to the criticisms often leveled at him by the Parliament and the Commons. Increased taxes, suggested by Richard’s advisors, were one of the key factors that had led to the Rising of 1381. The request of Michael de la Pole, Richard’s Lord Chancellor, to raise taxes once again had led the “Wonderful Parliament” of 1386, which, spurred by the indignation of the Commons, resulted in the chancellor’s impeachment. In general, Parliament admonished Richard’s choice of young political favorites, such as Robert DeVerre and Michael de la Pole, both of whom the “Merciless Parliament” of 1388 sentenced to death. After Henry took the throne, Gower would go on to write, in the Cronica Tripertita, that Richard “stultorum vile sibi consilium iuuenile / Legerat, et sectam senium dedit esse reiectam” (15-16) [took the base,
immature counsel of fools to himself, and caused the principles of older men to be rejected].

Gower alters this story, with its overt Ricardian parallels, to emphasize the importance of appeasing both divine and public sovereignty.

Gower describes the people of Israel in modern terms as “a Parlement” (4031), claiming that they “avised were of on assent” (4032) and spoke to Rehoboam “with comun vois” (4034). Gower invokes the language of the unanimous public, used by the English Parliament to justify Edward II’s deposition and suggest Richard II potential to be deposed as well. When the people of Israel essentially depose Rehoboam, Gower summons this language again: “With comun vois / A king upon here oghne chois / Among himself anon thei make / And have here yonge lord forsake” (4123-4126). Although this is a story of an Old Testament king who, like all of the others mentioned in Book VII, fails to listen to God’s advice and ends up losing his throne, this time, God’s advice comes directly through the people. The story involves no overt prophets, just wise elderly advisers who know how to represent the voice of the people. Judith Ferster had asserted that “Gower seems to be saying that the more important dyad consists of the king and his people. Advisers matter less than the people as a whole.”

However, it is clear that if Rehoboam had listened to the elderly advisors who spoke with respect for the common voice, he never would have lost his throne.

In these elderly advisors with awareness of public concern, Gower gestures to his own advanced age and literary career as the vox populi. In a semi-surprise twist at the end of Book VIII, when Venus asks who the lover Amans is, he reveals that he is not just a narrative persona but the author himself: “‘Ma dame,’ I seide, ‘John Gower’” (2321). In self-deprecating fashion,

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58 Fictions of Advice, 128.
Gower describes how Venus declares him to be an unfit lover because, “It scheweth wel be the visage / That olde grisel is no folie / Tehre ben fulmanye yeres stole / With thee and with suche other mo” (2407-2410) and reminds him to “Remembre wel hou thou art old” (2439). Ironically, having Amans identify himself as John Gower actually illustrates how very incongruous this narrative persona is with that of the author. Even Venus notes this incongruity when she suggests to him, “And tarie thou mi Court nomore, / Bot go ther vertu moral duelleth, / Wher bent hi bokes, as men telleth, / Whiche of long time thou hast write” (2924-2927). In this way, Gower reminds his audience that he is not the young courtier of his narrative but John Gower, elderly author of books of moral virtue. In suggesting that his virtuous scholarly career is antithetical to that of the courtly lover, Gower juxtaposes himself against the very advisors who “yonge were and nothing wise” (4077) and whom Rehoboam and Richard were wont to consult.

Furthermore, like the elderly advisors of Rehoboam, Gower speaks for the people. In fact, the *vox populi* is one of his dominant modes of self-representation. In the Prologue to the *Confessio*, Gower offers his most direct social criticisms, evocative of the estates critiques in the *Mirour* and the *Vox*. Just as he does in his prior works, Gower reminds his readers several times that his critiques come not from himself but from the public. When condemning the flaws of rulers, Gower claims to speak with “the comun vois, which mai noght lie” (124) and in criticizing war cites “the comun woldes speche” (174). When characterizing the general lack of morality in England, Gower claims that “the comun clamour” (514) is “that the world is al miswent” (517), and that the divisions of the country “bringth in the comun drede” (1082).

Gower is himself the wise, ignored, prophetic advisor whom he represents so often in the stories.

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59 William George Dodd and C.S. Lewis have famously observed that the revelation that Amans is the elderly Gower comes as quite a shock, since up until this moment in the text, Amans has seemed every bit the impetuous young lover. See Dodd, *Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1913), 81-83; C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in the Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 210.
of kings who should have listened.

In assuming the subject position of the Old Testament prophet, who merely receives and repeats the word of God (itself absorbed into the voice of the people), Gower runs the risk of denying his own artistic agency, wisdom, and creative talent. Yet, by recounting two extended stories of Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams in the prologue and at the end of Book I of the *Confessio*, Gower most emphatically aligns himself with an unusually active, interpretive prophet, Daniel. While most prophets such as Micaiah or Samuel hear the voice of God directly, Daniel interprets dreams. In the stories from the Book of Daniel that Gower retells, it is Nebuchadnezzar, the dreamer, who is God’s passive conduit. Daniel’s skill in interpreting and deriving moral truths from the king’s dreams is analogous to Gower’s skill in interpreting and deriving moral truths from the various stories which he recounts in the *Confessio*. In this way, Gower is able to emphasize his interpretive craft while still deferring responsibility for the moral and political content of his interpretations to God and the public at large. Although Nebuchadnezzar pays the penalty for not listening to Daniel for seven years, he eventually heeds his words and resumes his kingship. In making Nebuchadnezzar’s story central to the *Confessio*, Gower implies that Richard can prevent his own downfall if he listens to the Gower’s warnings.

In continually gesturing to the possibility of deposition, Gower does not prophesy a certain future but merely suggests what could happen if Richard were to ignore his advice. In retrospect, however, Gower’s words to Richard, embedded in prophecies made to Old Testament kings, read as true prophecies. In no case is this more flattering to Henry IV than in Gower’s cautionary example of Saul, who refused to listen to Samuel, by showing unnecessary clemency toward the rival king, Agag and, as a result, “Himself, both fro his regalie / He schal be put for everemo, / Noght he, bot ek his heir also, / That it schal nevere come ayein” (3842-3845). Gower
offers the story as a warning against excessive mercy to one’s political enemies, describing the penalty as removal from the throne and the end of one’s royal line. Saul was deposed by God, and his divinely appointed replacement was David, whom Gower describes as an ideal king. Reading this section of kingly advice in retrospect, it is only too easy to see Henry as King David, father of the new house of kings, sent to replace the ruler whom God overthrew. This is precisely the public image that Lancastrians desired for Henry IV.

Because he had seized the throne by force, Henry’s supporters found it necessary to convince the public that his reign was legitimate. Paul Strohm has detailed Lancastrian attempts to produce convincing causes for Richard’s deposition, including “perjuries, sacrileges, sodomies, insanity, the impoverishment of his subjects and their reduction to servitude, and the feebleness of his rule.” Henry’s father, John of Gaunt, was purportedly involved in a campaign to forge chronicles proving his son to be the legitimate heir, thus justifying Richard’s deposition by claiming that he was never supposed to be king. One of the Lancastrians’ alternate or supplementary strategies to feign legitimacy was the retrospective use of prophecy. Strohm notes that “Henry IV’s accession was accompanied by a blizzard of prophecy, most newly generated, but all presented as matter already known, the pertinence of which is suddenly recollected under incentive of emergent events.” Gower himself references three of these popular prophecies in one Latin poem, “H. aquile pullus,” which appears in six known manuscripts compiled around the time of Henry’s coronation in 1400:

60 Temperance between mercy and punishment was of central concern in Gower’s works, particularly the Mirrour de l’Omm. See Yoshiko Kobayashi, “Principis Umbra: Kingship, Justice, and Pity in John Gower’s Poetry,” in On John Gower: Essays at the Millennium, ed. R.F. Yeager (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007): 71-103.
63 Ibid., 7.
H. aquile pullus, quo nunquam gracior ullus,
Hostes confregit, que tirannica colla subegit.
H. aquile cepit oleum, quo regna recepit;
Sic vteri iuncta stipiti nova stirps redit uncta.

[H. son of the eagle, than whom no one is ever more graceful,
Has broken his enemies, and subjugated tyrannical necks.
H. the eagle has captured the oil, by which he has received the rule of the realm;
Thus the new stock returns, anointed and joined to the old stem.]\(^6^4\)

Gower is referring to the “Prophecy of the Eagle,” an excerpt from the Merlin prophecies in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britannie*, also cited in the *Chronicon de Adae de Usk AD 1377-1421*.\(^6^5\) Within the prophecy, “H” the eagle travels across the sea to depose the white king. Several circulating excerpts of Merlin’s prophecies had interpreted Henry as the eagle because his father, John of Gaunt’s namesake, was John the Evangelist, who was represented as an eagle. Also, Edward III’s badge featured an eagle, and he was Henry’s grandfather.\(^6^6\) Furthermore, in describing “H. the eagle who captured the oil, by which he received the rule of the realm,” Gower is referencing the “Oil of Thomas à Becket.” The Virgin Mary purportedly visited Becket and gave him the oil during his exile in France, and it was intended to anoint the future king who would reunite all of England and the Aquitaine. Richard had supposedly found


\(^{6^5}\) For more on Usk’s use of the prophecy, see Strohm, *England’s Empty Throne*, 13.

\(^{6^6}\) R.F. Yeager has quipped, “Little notice was given to Edward's status as Richard's grandfather also.” See “H. Aquile Pullus,” 46, notes. Merlin’s prophecies in particular were popular for centuries after their composition because their format of using animals to ambiguously represent people made it easy to adapt them to modern political applications.
the oil himself, but it was too late for his own anointing, so it passed to Henry. In this way, the prophecy highlights the affirmation that Henry, rather than Richard, was chosen by the Virgin to be king. In declaring at the end, “The new stock returns, anointed and joined to the old stem,” Gower also invokes the “Vision of Edward the Confessor,” purportedly delivered to the king by two holy men in Normandy:

If a green tree is cut in the middle and the part lopped off is moved three jugera from the stem, when the part moved away shall of its own accord and without the aid of any human hand unite itself to the trunk and begin to flourish and bear fruit, then for the first time can a respite from such great evils be hoped for.

For centuries, the prophecy has been interpreted to support a variety of political opinions, but Gower appears to be using it here in order to imply that a portion of the royal family tree (Richard II) had to be removed in order for the tree to “flourish and bear fruit.” All of these prophecies aid in Lancastrian efforts to legitimate Henry’s claim to his usurped throne by implying that Richard’s deposal was fated, that it could not have happened any other way and that God had intended for it to happen.

Versions of the Confessio Amantis with a prefatory dedication to the former King Richard would have inspired similar conclusions. When Richard is included in the preface, it is difficult to read Gower’s admonitions without thinking of the king’s failure to heed them. Gower, who when writing the Confessio was a potential prophet by analogy to Old Testament figures such as Daniel, Michaiah, and Samuel, became, in retrospect, a prophet in earnest, who tried to prevent but instead foretold the folly and fall of a king. Henry, in comparison, appears to

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68 Quoted in Taylor, The Political Prophecy, 8.
be God’s newly elect and chosen ruler—the David to Richard’s Saul. It should not be quite so surprising, then, that the first recension is the version of the poem that proliferated after Henry’s accession to the throne. Gower’s dramatic efforts to warn Richard ultimately became one of the methods by which Lancastrians could justify his deposal.
Chapter 2: Christine de Pizan’s Prophetic Authority of the Third Sex

Like John Gower, Christine de Pizan bases a great deal of her authority in her ability to read. As the daughter of the preeminent astrologer to Charles V, Thomas de Pizan, Christine received an impressive literary education within the royal court. In *Le Livre des Faits et Bonnes Moeurs du roi Charles V le Sage* (1404), Christine writes of her intimate knowledge of Charles V’s library and the books contained within it (III.xii). As Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet notes, “the mise-en-scène of Christine’s writing is often anchored in a scene of reading.”¹ Her framing narratives highlight Christine’s familiarity with *auctores* and even, as Deborah McGrady has pointed out, a range of scholarly reading techniques.² Illustrations of Christine in the Queen’s Manuscript (London, British Library, MS Harley 4431) repeatedly depict the author in her study in front of an open book, reading.³ Christine is an author whose elite education authorizes her ability to comprehend matters of the present day. Like Gower, Christine uses pointed comparisons to specifically interpretive prophets, including Daniel, in order to represent herself as an expert reader of society—capable of analyzing cultural patterns in order to understand the future.

However, neither Gower nor Christine relies entirely upon his or her status as a great reader to claim prophetic authority. Even within a relatively secular genre of composition,

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³ See Ibid., 164-175.
prophecy based entirely upon formal education lacks sufficient individual charismatic origins. Prophetic knowledge must, to some degree, be based in more mysterious powers. Gower roots his status as privileged reader within the increasingly deified public voice, while Christine roots hers within her unique gender role as a widow and woman author. From the classical tradition of hermits and oracles to the Judeo-Christian tradition of the *vox clamantis in deserto*, prophets often occupy a marginal space in society. Their insight comes from their outsider’s perspective or their status as chosen ones among the sinful. As a widow and a woman working within a traditionally masculine field, Christine represents herself as a doubly marginal person whose position beyond normal categories of gender imbues her with special analytical powers. Gower’s source of inspiration, the voice of the people, involves his absorption into a larger group and aids him in distancing his political critiques from his personal voice. However, Christine’s source of inspiration is thoroughly personal. As Kate Langdon Forhan has noted, Christine’s gender ironically enables her to represent her political opinions as more personal because she, as a woman, could not be taken for an active player in the world of politics.

Christine highlights her gendered, analytical prophetic authority through her relationship with female prophetic guides. Noting that the majority of Christine’s female literary predecessors such as Hildegard of Bingen and Marguerite Poirete often had the institutional authority of the Church or at least the direct authority of God behind them, Maureen Quilligan asserts, “Unable to appeal to a religious imprimatur, [Christine] locates her authority as a writer in various allegorical and prophetic female figures: the sibyls or the personifications of Raison, Justice, and

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Droitture who narrate the *Cité des dames*.

These guides not only grant Christine the authority to write; they reflect attributes that Christine would like to emphasize about herself. They are women with special intuition into the future, and she gains access to their authority precisely because of her status outside the normal boundaries of gender. In *Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune* (1403), Christine is first able to access the palace of Lady Fortune because she is a woman and apprentice to the lady of the house, but she is only able to read and analyze the pictures on Lady Fortune’s walls because of her symbolic transformation via widowhood from a woman to a man. Here, Christine uses a series of three Ovidian tales of gender transformation in order to highlight how her unique gender status allows her the power to read and understand the whims of Fortune. In *Le Livre de l’Advision Cristine* (1405), Christine’s guide and authorial proxy, Libera, expertly analyzes the content of scripture and implicitly compares herself to the interpretive prophet, Daniel. Libera bears striking similarities to Christine, particularly in her widowhood. In placing her political prophecies in the mouth of a prophetic guide so similar to herself, Christine keeps her more controversial political messages at a safe remove from her own narrative voice while also subtly highlighting her reading abilities. Christine also repeatedly employs the sibyls as authorial proxies in works such as *L’épistre de Othea a Hector* (1400), *Le Chemin de long estude* (1403), and *Le Livre de la cité des dames* (1405). As women whose

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6 Maureen Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan’s Cité des Dames* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 203. Unlike female mystics, who typically must turn to the male authorizing voice of God and the clerisy, Christine’s feminine sources of authority themselves assert and advertise feminine wisdom. Christine’s use of prophetic guides is more inspired by the literary tradition of political poetry than that of mystical writing, which Quilligan points to. For instance, male authors such as Dante, Chaucer, and Langland also represent their authority as being handed down from prophetic guides. Examining the numerous similarities between Chaucer’s and Christine’s authorial personae, Theresa Colletti has attributed most of their commonalities to their similar positions at the periphery of their respective royal courts. Theresa Colletti, “‘Paths of Long Study’: Reading Chaucer and Christine de Pizan in Tandem,” *Studies in the Ages of Chaucer* 28 (2006): 1-40. Also see Christiane Marchello-Nizia, “Entre l’histoire et la poétique: le ‘Songe politique,’” *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 55 (July-September 1981): 39-53. As Marchello-Nizia has notes, authors making political critiques found the prophetic guide particularly useful in articulating potentially controversial political opinions at a safe remove from themselves.
marginal voices repeatedly correct masculine errors in world of politics, the sibyls closely correspond to Christine’s own novel role as a female political advisor. However, in her final work, the *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc* (1429), which was certainly written for supporters of Charles VII (if not for the man himself), Christine does not use the Sibyl as a guide and double for herself. Instead, Christine adopts the prophetic subject position and discourse of the Sibyl, mimicking and adapting popular political prophecies attributed to her. By her final work, Christine has utterly dispensed with all separation from her political words. Rather than the passive prophet, receiving the vision from the greater analytical mind, Christine is, in the *Ditié*, a straightforward Sibylline Oracle.

The Three Genders of Prophetic Authority in *la Mutacion de Fortune*

In the first book of the *Mutacion de Fortune*, Christine de Pizan describes her husband’s death as the event which has led to her privileged access to Fortune’s dwelling. Because Fortune is jealous of Christine’s service to the marital god, Hymen, she arranges for Christine to voyage back to her palace, resulting in her husband’s death and Christine’s residence among the various murals of history in Fortune’s hall. In making this hardship central to her own authority as a reader of history and politics, Christine places herself in the tradition of the imprisoned Boethius and the exiled Dante, who are likewise only granted privileged comprehension of fortune after suffering misfortunes. As a woman, however, Christine cannot present herself as a typical author in the clerkly tradition, and as Kevin Brownlee has noted, she acknowledges this distinction from her literary predecessors in choosing widowhood, a personal rather than political misfortune, as the source of her insight.  

7 Most dramatically, Christine’s personal misfortunes differ from

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Boethius’s or Dante’s in that the struggles culminate in an allegorical gender change. Christine tells her reader at the start of the poem that she:

…devins masle
Par Fortune, qu’ainsy le voult;
Si me mua et corps et voult
En homme naturel parfaict (vv. 142-145).  

[...was transformed from a woman into a man by Fortune who wanted it that way. Thus she transformed me, my body and my face, completely into those of a natural man] (91).  

Christine’s widowhood not only grants her access to Lady Fortune’s palace but also transforms her into a thrice-gendered subject. Christine makes this uniquely gendered identity central to her prophetic authority.

Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski has observed that Christine’s transformation into a man “is announced and commented on by the stories of Circe, Iphis, and Tiresias, representing a variety of metamorphoses” which “cover the whole spectrum of metamorphosis: a one-way...transformation of men into pigs; a two-way gender change of man into woman into man;

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and finally a transformation of a woman into a man.”

Building on Blumenfeld-Kosinski’s observations, I would like to argue that in strategically prefacing her own transformation with three tales of gender transformation from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Christine draws attention to all three gender roles that she inhabits as a widow—woman, “third sex,” and man—and implies that each of these gendered identities imbues her with the gift of prophecy. Furthermore, these three distinct prophetic identities contribute to the three different meanings of the title, the *Mutacion de Fortune*.

The first Ovidian metamorphosis that Christine recounts is how Circe transformed Ulysses’ men into pigs. Christine’s retelling ironically evokes a greater connection with the feminine transformer, Circe, than with the transformed, Ulysses’s men. Christine’s transformation differs from that of Ulysses’s men, because their transformation is a horrifying one, particularly because Christine does not mention that Circe eventually restores the men to their natural form. If Christine had simply wanted to shorten the story, she could have recounted the part where Circe turns the swine back into men, illustrating a positive transformation. It seems strange that Christine would parallel a moment of charity on the part of Fortune, done to help Christine survive, with a horrific work of witchcraft. Furthermore, rather than escaping Circe, as Ulysses and his men eventually do in Christine’s source, the *Ovide Moralisé*, Christine dwells with and serves Fortune, making her most similar to the sorceress Circe.

Unlike the subsequent stories of Tiresias and Iphis, which are told from the limited omniscient perspective of the transformed subjects, this story is entirely focused on Circe and almost celebratory of her transformative abilities and cunning powers of seduction:

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…En faisant semblant d’amer,
A ses chevaliers on tendi
Buvrage, qui les estendi
A la terre comme chetis,
Et en pors furent convertis (vv. 1046-1050).

[…Pretending to welcome his knights, had them served a drink
which caused them to fall to the ground as if they were ill, and they
turned into pigs] (102).

Christine presents Fortune as the real source behind Circe’s powers, saying, “Ma dame meismes
destrempa/ Le boire, qui les attrapa” (vv. 1051-1052) [My lady Fortune herself prepared the
drink which trapped them] (102). Like Circe, Christine is an allied female subordinate to
Fortune. In referring to Fortune as “ma dame” Christine reminds the audience of this
relationship.

In Christine’s sources, the Consolation of Philosophy and the Divine Comedy, Boethius
and Dante emphasize Lady Fortune’s gender, using feminine power and the fear that it inspires
as a metaphor for Fortune’s ostensible irrationality. In the Consolation of Philosophy, Boethius
carakterizes Fortune as an unreliable surrogate mother who defends herself by saying:

Cum te matris utero produxit, nudum rebus omnibus inopemque
suscepi, meis opibus foui et, quod te nunc impatientem nostri facit,
fauore prona indulgentius educaui, omnium quae mei iuris sunt
affluentia et splendore circumdedi. nunc mihi retrahere manum
libet… quid igitur ingemescis?
[When nature brought you forth out of your mother's womb, I received you naked and wanting all things, and I nourished you with my riches, and was ready and eager to sustain you through my favor: and now that makes you impatient with me. And I surrounded you with all the abundance of all the goods that are in my control. Now it pleases me to withdraw my hand...Why do you complain then? (II.28-29)]

Boethius’ maternal imagery emphasizes humankind’s dangerous dependence upon an unreliable, even heartless matriarch whose withdrawal can suddenly reduce a grown man to the status of a helpless new born child, “naked and wanting all things.” In Canto 7 of the Inferno, Virgil explains that God has appointed Fortune as a “general ministra e duce/ che permutasse a tempo lib en vani/ di gente in gente e d’uno in altro sangue,/ oltre la difension d’I senni unmani” [general minister and leader who would transfer from time to time the empty goods from one people to another, from one family to another, beyond any human wisdom to prevent (Inf. VII.78-79).]

Giuseppe Mazzotta refers to Dante’s Fortune as a “mockery of human attempts at mastery and control over the things of the world.” While patriarchal culture has mastered wealth and rule, the matriarchal figure of Fortune ironically and frighteningly trumps male authority. For male authors such as Boethius and Dante, the character of Fortune is particularly foreign in her

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13 Mazzotta, Dante, Poet of the Desert, 321.
femininity—a metaphor for what they cannot control. As a female author, however, Christine can claim a likeness to Fortune unavailable to her literary predecessors.

As a woman, Christine is neither coddled nor tortured by Fortune but rather pressed into her service. Yet, it is through this very service that Christine becomes an apprentice of Fortune’s craft, especially weaving. Christine describes her mistress’ weaving skills in ominous terms:

Dame Fortune est appellee,
Qui a ourdi mainte tellee
A maint si dure que texir
Ne la scevent, n’eulx en yssir (vv. 485-488).

[She is named Lady Fortune, and she has warped many a cloth for many people, so tightly that they could not weave it themselves, nor could they escape from it] (95).

Here, Fortune is likened to the three classical fates who spin the thread of life. Like Boethius, Christine is at the whim of Fortune as her servant, but as Nadia Margolis notes, Christine is also an apprentice of sorts, learning Fortune’s trade of weaving in fabricating a historical record. In recounting a tale in which she bears more in common with the transforming sorceress, Circe, than the transformed men, Christine draws attention to the fact that she is not actually, as she often insists, a man but, in fact, a female author who brings a woman’s intuition to a secular

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14 Boethius, of course, counterbalances the frightening feminine figure of Fortune with the comforting feminine figure of Philosophy, as Dante does with Beatrice.

15 Nadia Margolis, “The Rhetoric of Detachment,” Nottingham French Studies 38 (1999): 170-181. Margolis argues that “Christine, just as Arachne did with Pallas in Ovid’s Metamorphoses (VI, 1-145), will dare to compete with Fortune, though in writing, not in deeds” (173). While the apprentice Christine could, as Margolis suggests, be a benevolent weaver, untangling the fabrics of Fortune, Circe’s story also implies that Christine has the threatening power to assist her mistress, either by foretelling or recording unhappy events in her own text(ile).
clerkly genre.

The second Ovidian tale of metamorphosis that Christine uses to preface her own gender change is that of Tiresias. In Christine’s source, the *Ovide Moralisé*, once Tiresias has changed from a man into a woman and back into a man, he is caught in the midst of an argument between Juno and Jupiter. These gods send for Tiresias to be the judge of their conflict, and when Tiresias agrees with Jupiter that women enjoy sex more than men, Juno strikes him blind. However, Jupiter counters this punishment by endowing Tiresias with the gift of prophecy. In the *Ovide Moralisé*, it is the wisdom that Tiresias possesses by having been both male and female which leads the gods to consult him in the first place, ultimately leading them to bestow even more wisdom upon him.

The wisdom that Tiresias gained through being doubly-sexed parallels the wisdom that fifteenth-century widows such as Christine were thought to gain through their status as a “third sex” in Church teachings. Widows were believed to bear a special knowledge through their experiences inhabiting the roles of both woman and man. Chaste women in general were to some degree considered outside the realm of traditional womanhood. In his commentary on Paul’s letters to the Ephesians, Jerome asserts:

\[\text{Quamdiu mulier partui servit et liberis, hanc habet ad virum differentiam, quam corpus ad animam. Sin autem Christo magis voluerit servire quam sæculo, mulier esse cessabit, et dicetur vir.}\]

[While a woman serves for birth and children, she is different from man, as the body is from the soul. But]
if, on the other hand, she wants to serve Christ more than the present world, she shall cease to be a woman and is called a man].¹⁶

Jerome is drawing from Paul’s assertion:

Et mulier innupta et virgo cogitat quae Domini sunt ut sit sancta et corpore et spiritu quae autem nupta est cogitat quae sunt mundi quomodo placeat viro.

[And the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she that is married thinketh on the things of the world, how she may please her husband.]¹⁷

Both Jerome and Paul agree that while women are wives, they are distracted from spiritual matters. Jerome more specifically contrasts the bodily woman to the spiritual man. In defining women according to bodily offices of childbirth and childrearing and men according to spiritual office of contemplation, a woman no longer married and no longer producing children falls into the category of man. While Jerome speaks of chastity in general, medieval widows enjoyed a special cultural status that virgins did not. As Cindy L Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl note, “Widows gained…mobility through their active choice to remain chaste” while “virgins were

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¹⁶ Jerome “Commentarium in Epistolam ad Ephesios.” Patrologia Latina 26: col. 533; translation is my own.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:34, Latin Vulgate. Translation Douay-Rheims.
seen as being in need of protection to prevent them from the temptations of the world.”

Christine’s contemporary and sometimes literary ally, Jean Gerson, preaches that while wives focus on pleasing their husbands, and virgins focus on pleasing God, a widow, “belongs to both states, that is the active and contemplative life.” The widow’s duties to her family require her to remain resourceful, but her newfound virginity imbues her with spiritual enlightenment. As both and yet neither wife nor virgin, the widow maintains and balances the virtues of both roles. For this very reason only widows were appointed as leaders of medieval French double monasteries such as Fontevrault.

Widows occupied a third-sex not only spiritually but also occupationally. Finished with their wifely offices, many widows moved into the offices of their husbands, training apprentices and overseeing their trades. Scriptural tradition also reflected on how, with this new responsibility came a new kind of wisdom. Writing of Deborah, St. Ambrose claims, “Haec enim docuit non solum viri auxilio viduas non egere, verumetiam viris esse subsidio: quae nec sexus infirmitate revocata, munia virorum obeunda suscepit.” [She showed not only that widows have no need of the help of a man, inasmuch as she, not at all restrained by the weakness of her sex, undertook to perform the duties of a man, and did even more than she had undertaken.] Ambrose describes how the widow overcomes the presumably feminine attribute of fear and takes on the presumably masculine attribute of bravery. For Ambrose, Deborah’s skills also come from her ability to apply feminine wisdom to the masculine world. He argues:

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18 Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl, Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 3.
20 Affiliated houses existed in Poitou, the Limousin, Périgord, Haute-Bruyère, Maine, Berry, Orléans, Toulouse, and Brittany. See Melot, Michel, L’Abbaye de Fontevrault (Paris: Jacques Lanore, 1971).
Et ut discas non publicis copiis domesticas necessitates fuisset subnixas, sed domesticis disciplinis munus publicum gubernatum, domo propria filium ducem producit exercitus, ut agnoscatis quod possit instituere vidua bellatorem: quem quasi mater erudiit, quasi Judex praeposuit, quasi fortis instituit, quasi prophetissa victoriae certae transmisit.

[And to show that the needs of the household were not dependent on the public resources, but rather that public duties were guided by the discipline of home life, she brings forth from her home her son as leader of the army, that we may acknowledge that a widow can train a warrior; whom, as a mother, she taught, and, as judge, placed in command, as, being herself brave, she trained him, and, as a prophetess, sent to certain victory.]22

Deborah is a successful war strategist due to her intimate knowledge of the “discipline of home life.” While not an appropriate soldier, the widow is the perfect advisor because of her combined domestic wisdom and tenacious spirit. Widowhood is an opportunity for women, once freed from their traditional wifely duties, to bring their domestic skills to the public world. Christine herself depicts this gender transformation in her section on widow queen regents in Book 1 of the Livre de la Cité des Dames. For example, Queen Fredegund declares to her late husband’s troops, “Je lairay ester toute paour feminine et armeray mon cuer de hardiesce d’omme a celle fin de croistre le couraige de vous” (713) [I will abandon all feminine fear and arm my heart with

22 Ibid., col. 248C-248D.
a man’s boldness in order to increase your courage] (59).²³ Fredegund motivates the men as a mother would, with “promesses et doulces parolles de bien faire” (714) [promises and sweet words of encouragement] (59), nursing her own infant, at which sight the soldiers “plus couragieux estoyent de garder son droit” (714) [waxed all the braver in order to protect his rights] (59). Although Christine has not stepped upon the battlefield, she is akin to a figure like Fredegund in advising her numerous male royal patrons, even, as in the case of her Fais d’armes et de chivalerie (1410), advising them in battle strategy. By entering the traditionally masculine work force, Christine followed the paths of other widows into the role of the “third sex.” Her particular shift into the almost entirely male-dominated literary world made her especially akin to the doubly gendered Tiresias.²⁴

Unlike her source, the Ovide Moralisé, Christine ends Tiresias’ story with his transformation back into masculine form, entirely omitting his subsequent dealings with Jupiter and Juno. In doing so, Christine once again desexualizes the tale, focusing on Tiresias’ dual gender status rather than his role as both male and female during sex. Christine describes Tiresias’s change primarily one of altered gendered social roles rather than mere bodily transformation, detailing how Tiresias “fila et laboura / De tieulx mestiers, que femmes font” (vv.1080-1081) [sewed and labored at women’s tasks] (103) for the seven years in which he lived as a woman. Christine emphasizes that once Tiresias was transformed into a woman, “En tous les cas, ou s’esprouva” (vv.1076) [such (s)he was in every situation which (s)he experienced] (103). By stressing gender roles over actual physical transformation, Christine


makes Tiresias’s gender change more similar to her own transformation based on lived experience. Christine does not overtly claim powers of prophecy but could assume that an audience familiar with Ovid would remember the rest of Tiresias’ tale. In positioning Tiresias at the midpoint of the Ovidian tales that preface her transformation, Christine emphasizes her still dual social role as male and female—a role which imbues her with a special kind of foresight and wisdom.

Of the three Ovidian tales which Christine uses to preface the allegorical description of her gendered transformation, the third tale of Iphis is the longest and most closely mirrors Christine’s own story. Christine describes how Iphis’ father ordered the murder of any daughters that he might have because “de fille n'avoit il cure” (vv. 1102) [he had no desire to have a daughter] (103). In Book 1, Christine describes how her father had similar hopes for a boy:

Mon pere, dont j’ay mencion

Faite cy, ot devocion

Et tres grant voulenté d’avoir

Un filz masle, qui fust son hoir,

Pour succeder sa richesce (vv. 379-383).

[My father, whom I have already mentioned here, very strongly desired and wished for a male child who could be his heir and inherit his riches] (94).

While Christine’s father certainly does not kill her, she still complains that French laws of female inheritance have prevented her from becoming heir to her father’s wealth, arguing that men inherit, “plus par coustume que par droit” (vv. 419) [More because of custom than justice] (94).
Like Iphis, Christine’s outward form is keeps her from inheriting her father’s wealth. In the case of Iphis, her mother disguises her as a boy until the night before she will be betrothed to a wealthy woman, when the goddess Vesta comes and transforms her into a true man.

It is important to note that Christine changes the conditions of the marriage a great deal from her source, the *Ovide Moralisé*. In the *Ovide Moralisé*, Iphis, while still a woman, falls in love with Hyante. Then the Goddess, Isis, performs a gender transformation on Iphis in order to allow her to marry her love, Hyante. In the *Mutacion*, Iphis’ parents have arranged the marriage with an anonymous bride to secure their family’s status, which displeases Iphis because her sex will be discovered. In omitting Iphis’ homosexual love, Christine discourages implications about her own sexuality that might be inferred in the context of her association with Iphis. Christine replaces Iphis’ motivation of erotic love with that of familial honor. In order to emphasize this, she also changes the goddess involved in the transformation from Isis, goddess of erotic love, to Vesta, goddess of the home and family. Through Christine’s alterations of the *Ovide Moralisé*, Iphis’ gender change is no longer integral to romance but to inheritance.

Because Iphis is able to marry her bride and inherit her father’s fortune through her transformation into a man, it seems logical that Christine is asserting that her own parallel gender change has allowed her to similarly inherit the fortune that would have been denied to her as a woman. This comparison draws sharp attention to the treasures that Christine describes her father as possessing at the beginning of Book 1. She tells us of her father’s two “belles pierres précieuses” (vv. 213) [precious stones of great value] which he gathered in the fountain on Mount Pernasus. Christine claims that the first of these stones can tell its finder “Les choses qui

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sont a venire;/ Celestial fait devenir” (vv. 253-254) [The things which are to come/ The happenings of celestial affairs] while the second stone “garist de tous malages” (vv. 299) [cures all illnesses] (93). Representing her father’s wisdom, the stones essentially enhance qualities ascribed to gemstones in ancient and medieval lapidary traditions. Because of stones’ presumed association with the planets, ancient astrologers prescribed stones and talismans to their patrons in order to ward off the storms, illnesses, or wars that they foretold. Christine’s choice to use gemstones to signify the source of her father’s power “avis[er]/ Les princes, qui regnent sur terre,/ ou de grant paix, ou de grant guerre” (vv. 262-264) [to advise the great princes who rule the earth about the future occurrence of either lasting peace or great war,” (92) is especially appropriate because her father, Thomas de Pizan, was a trusted astrologer and physician to Charles V. The stones, which Andrea Tarnowski has noted also derive from the two crystals in Guillaume’s fountain of love in Le Roman de la Rose, suggest eyes, through which Christine’s father can see into the future. In prefacing her own transformation from woman into man with the story of Iphis, Christine draws attention to the fact that, as a man, she can now inherit her father’s position as a scholar and advisor by implying that she has allegorically inherited the stones which represent his presumably real powers of prophecy and healing.

26 The first translation is my own.
29 See Lori Walters, “Translatio Studii: Christine de Pizan’s Self-Portrayal in Two Lyric Poems and in the Livre de la mutacion de fortune,” in Christine de Pizan and the Medieval French Lyric, ed. Earl Jeffery Richards, (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1998): 155-167. Walters has observed: “Christine’s attitude toward her acquisition of her father’s learning was twofold: on the one hand, she realized that as a woman lacking formal credentials she would never be a court advisor as her father had been; on the other hand, her comparison of herself with the Cumaean Sibyl in the Chemin de long estude and Tiresias’s gender change in the Mutacion implies that she possessed the gift of prophecy that made her the equal of her father, who could read the future in the stars” (161). Walters’s observation sheds light on the importance of the Ovidian references’ three-part structure. Had Christine
Christine later describes this inheritance in a way that mimics her gender change. She describes, how, despite the dust in Fortune’s home, the stones in her crown “plus cleres furent/C’onques mais et grandement current / A celle heure que home devins, / Et certes par leur vertu vins / A port, et a cognioistre appris” (vv. 1443-1447) [remained more clear than ever, and they grew much bigger at the moment when I became a man; and it is certain that I was able to arrive at port [of Lady Fortune’s palace] through their power] (108). Here, Christine refers to a crown earlier given to her by her mother, Nature, containing precious stones. Christine had complained that she was not entirely satisfied with the crown that Nature had given her, noting “Assez bel, il me doit souffire; / Pourtant, ne vueil je mie dire / Que meilleur...avoir” (vv. 545-547) [In my opinion, it was very beautifully made, and I should be satisfied with it. However, I do not mean that I would not have desired better] (96). Here, Christine is subtly lamenting her status as a daughter. Although she has intellectual gifts, they are not as great as they would have been had she been a son. Christine almost certainly draws on parallels between stones and testicles in order to characterize the wisdom that came with her transformation into a man. 30 In describing how the stones of her less satisfactory crown grew bigger and clearer upon her gender transformation, Christine not only symbolically describes her transformation into a man; she also draws a parallel between the stones which allowed her father to see into the future and the stones in her own crown which allowed her to find Fortune’s property. In this way, Christine points to her ability to carry on her father’s legacy. Christine makes it clear that it is her gendered transformation that allows her to read the murals on Lady Fortune’s wall. Although Christine had simply claimed to be a man, she could not have claimed her father’s legacy. It is through her statuses as woman and third-sex that she can claim insight that is equal to her father’s. 

30 The comparison is fairly discrete, however, since Christine’s most prominent literary debate involved her critique of the lewd word, “coilles,” in the Roman de la Rose. See Debate of the Romance of the Rose (The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe), trans. David F. Hult (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
once dwelt with Lady Fortune before her shipwreck, she explains how, “Or fus je retourné arriere, / Au lieu dont pieça partis yere, / Mais trop mieulx consideray l’estre / Du lieu et quell y pouoit estre/ Que je n’oy fait” (vv.1417-1421) [Thus I returned back to the place from which a while before I had departed, but I now understood the status of the place, and of what sorts of things might happen there much better than I had] (107). Because Christine has been subject to Fortune’s whims herself, she now understands what kinds of fates Fortune can spin. She is also wiser and better able to apply lessons to the future because of her gender transformation in particular.

Ultimately, Christine presents herself with three separately gendered identities, which combine to create a multiplicity of interrelated meanings for the title of her book, Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune. The first and most foreboding meaning refers to the changeable nature of the fates of men. Christine draws directly from Canto 6 of Dante’s Purgatorio, relating the fratricides of the Guelphs and the Ghibellines and even reminds her readers of the fates of more recent figures, such as Richard II, who fell into misfortune through a combination of fate and poor choices. The Mutacion de Fortune refers to how quickly one man’s fortune can change and how tenuous one’s wealth and power truly are. Also implied within the idea of “the change of fortune” is the notion that one might also actively change fortune through proper actions. In this way, Christine, the feminine servant of Fortune, affirms free will but also makes her own visionary skills paramount to her patron’s success in navigating free will. The second meaning of Christine’s title for this work refers to the physical transformation that she has undergone through Fortune’s intervention, giving the widow Christine a uniquely gendered identity that imbues her with special political and spiritual insight. The title’s third potential meaning refers to Christine’s inheritance of her father’s intellectual wealth. In Latin, fortuna can refer to one’s fate
or monetary riches. Likewise, *mutare* can refer to a transformation or an exchange. Thus, the *Mutacion de Fortune* can also refer to the exchange of riches that implicitly occurs when Christine becomes a man and inherits her father’s wisdom, allegorically represented by his gemstones. While this alternate meaning of *mutation* enters current usage after the period when Christine wrote her poem, it seems especially appropriate that her intellectual inheritance from Thomas de Pizan to be discernable through Italian roots. All three potential meanings of the title of this work reinforce Christine’s place within the text as an insightful, prophetic guide through Fortune’s permutations.

**Christine’s Interpretive Prophetic Persona in *L’Advision Cristine***

The *Advision Cristine*, composed two years after the *Mutacion*, in 1405, reflects a shift in Christine’s allegorical cosmology. Rather than emphasizing the power of Fortune, Christine emphasizes the power of the individual—that is, the royal individual. In Book II of the *Advision*, Christine has a long discussion with the allegorical personification of Opinion, who chastises the author for presenting Fortune as more powerful than she actually is in the *Mutacion*. When discussing great leaders of Rome, Dame Opinion argues, “N’ay je esté celle qui les succeseurs d’iceulz ay amonnestez d’emprendre les grandes et merveilleuses choses, lesquelles, par l’aide de Fortune a eulz propice, tant esploitierent par leur traveil, aide et sens en long espace de temps qu’ilz conquesterent le monde” (79) [Was I not the one who advised the successors of these men to undertake great and astonishing things, which by the aid of Fortune, propitious for them, they did so successfully through their work, assistance, and good sense for such a long time that they]

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conquered the world?] (78). Through the words of the personified Dame Opinion, Christine illustrates that, although luck plays a part in one’s political career, great rulers are not simply subject to the whim of Fortune; the soundness of their decisions has an even greater bearing on their success. In this way, Christine affirms free will. However, she makes it clear that some opinions are far more powerful than others.

As a testament to her wide reaching influence, Dame Opinion notes, “Regarde et avises qulez discors je mez meismement entre les princes, qui sont d’un sang et amis naturelment…Car chascun dit qu’il a droit et ainsi le veult soustenir” (80) [Behold and consider the discords I bring about even among the princes who are of one blood and naturally friends…For each says he is right and intends to maintain it] (78). This example would be particularly familiar to Christine’s patrons. The early owners of the three surviving manuscripts of the *Advision* were King Charles VI’s cousins, constable Charles of Albret and John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy, as well as either or possibly both the king’s brother, Louis of Orléans, and uncle, Jean of Berry. During the reign of Charles VI, who was by all accounts insane, Louis of Orléans and John the Fearless continually struggled for power over territories and guardianship of Charles’s children. Despite Jean of Berry’s attempts to reconcile the two, Louis of Orléans was fatally stabbed in the streets of Paris by the Duke of Burgundy’s men in 1407, igniting the Armagnac-Burgundian civil war, which would eventually lead to the Burgundians’ alliance with the English during the Hundred Years War. Although the feud between Louis and John had not yet reached its peak when the *Advision* was composed, it would have been apparent to both author and audience that Dame

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Opinion’s example of warring princes referred to France.

As Dame Opinion goes on to describe how these princes’ feuds affect the populations of their territories, one also gains the distinct impression that there may be no right or wrong—that the entire conflict boils down to, and may indeed stem from, rather useless differences of opinion:

Mais de leurs discors fais je sourdre par toutes places nouveaulx
debas entre leurs menistres et adheres, et par toute la ville en
deviser negativement l’un contre l’autre. Et meismes a de ceulx qui
ne les cognoissent en estranges terres, en qui je me fiche
diversement, si les fais entrebatre souventefois et questioner
meismes es choses qui riens ne leur touche, disant l’un contre
l’autre: tel seigneur a droit pour tel cause; et pour telle, l’autre
replique que non. Et ainsi par: <<non a, --si a, --non fu, --si fu>>,
fais gens entreoccire souvencesfois” (81).

[But from their arguments, I everywhere cause new quarrels to
arise among their ministers and followers; throughout the town
each speaks negatively against the other. And even [among] those
who do not know them in foreign parts, in whom I am diversely
established, so that I make them often fight each other and question
even things that do not concern them at all, one saying against
another: that such a lord is right for such a reason, and the other
replying no for another such reason. And so by ‘he has not, yes he
Dame Opinion’s characterization of these arguments illustrates that even if the original dispute had some merit, it does not justify the wars that follow it—fought by people who have no personal interest whatsoever in the conflicts. In this way, Christine shows how Opinion, not Truth, rules the world. Truth itself may be nobler, but it is the opinions, right or wrong, of those in power that truly impact the course of history and the state of a nation.

Christine cannot afford to overtly scold and criticize the royal family because personally offending any of them could result in the loss of patronage at best or punishment for treason at worst. Furthermore, as a female interloper in the traditionally masculine territories of literature and politics, Christine’s authority as a royal advisor rests in an especially delicate position. She averts these problems by assuming a prophetic role in the Advision. Within the first section of the Advision, Christine continually refers to Old Testament prophets in order to align her discourse with theirs and interprets biblical passages to make predictions about the future of France. The intermediary figure of the prophet is an ideal subject position for Christine because a prophet is authoritative with respect to subject matter yet subordinate with respect to compositional agency. The prophet is often compelled to speak a truth with which he or she was simply blessed or cursed. Yet, in the Advision, Christine does not claim to be a passive prophet, visited by God. Although she frames the Advision within the pseudo-mystical literary trope of a dream vision, Christine’s primary mode of prophecy is analytical in nature; she uses Scripture to predict future events. Christine’s predictions are, in reality, simple deductions: if the bickering among ducal families continues, France’s people will suffer. In articulating her misgivings about the future of France as prophecies derived from complex Scriptural interpretation, Christine finds a way to
highlight her analytical skills, safely express her political opinions, and imbue those opinions with divine authority.

In Book I, when Christine meets Libera, the allegorical representation of France, Libera repeatedly makes reference to Old Testament prophets who foresaw plague, decline, corruption, or destruction for great kingdoms, particularly the kingdom of Israel. Nearly every prophet whom Libera mentions—Daniel, Samuel, Gad, and Jonah—is discussed in reference to a king whom he had to warn—Nebuchadnezzar, Saul, David, and the King of Ninevah. Libera’s (and implicitly Christine’s) message is that although France, like Israel, is a holy and blessed nation, it may still fall into decline and ruin if those in power do not listen to and understand reason when they hear it.34 Although Christine continually mentions prophets in tandem with kings, she never emphasizes the prophets’ actions and knowledge. For instance, Libera praises the unnamed King of Nineveh: “O saige roy de Ninyve bien conseillez, qui creuz le prophette Jonas quant Dieu par lui te manda que, pour les pechiez de toy et de ta cité, tu avoies encouru sentence de destruction dedens XL jours,” (48) [Oh wise, well-advised King of Nineveh who believed the prophet Jonah when through him God ordered you that within forty days you have incurred the sentence of destruction for your sins and those of your city!] (51). She goes on to describe the king and his subjects’ many actions of repentance, “criant a Dieu mercies, vestus de sacs, cendrez sur les testes” (48) [crying to God for mercy, clothed in sack cloth, ashes on your heads] (51), not at all elaborating upon or even referring to the longer, more colorful story of Jonah, who resisted God’s initial orders and ended up in the belly of a whale. The king is the figure whose actions and

decisions matter in each scenario. His primary task is to pay heed to truthful advice—advice which, as the King of Nineveh’s example illustrates, can reverse the king’s course of fate if followed. This is, of course, fitting for Christine’s audience of powerful princes. In emphasizing the gravity of the king’s responsibility in each story, she reminds her readers of their own duties to pay attention to the signs around them, particularly to her own text.

Another clear reason for Christine to downplay the personal characteristics of the prophets whom she mentions is that, while her message is similar to theirs, her mode of prognostication is not.\(^35\) Rather than speaking the words given to her by God, Christine, through the voice of the character Libera, reads passages of Scripture as \textit{figurae} which allow her to predict, through interpretation, the future of her nation. Figural interpretations of the Bible were used by nearly all early Latin Church Fathers, who spoke of Adam as the \textit{figura} and Christ as the fulfiller, or Eve as the \textit{figura} and Mary as the fulfiller. Exegetes believed that Old Testament figures were historically real but also symbols or shadows of things to come in the New Testament.\(^36\) Because the New Testament also includes predictions of the Apocalypse, exegetes also applied Old Testament \textit{figurae} to future events. For instance, the third-century exegete Lactantius wrote of the Seven Days of Creation as \textit{figurae} for the seven millennia which would constitute the world’s age, which was almost at an end.\(^37\) Chroniclers such as Vincent de Beauvais used this structure of history in their works well into the thirteenth century. Although Joachim of Fiore’s Doctrine of Trinity was condemned as heretical at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, his techniques of figural interpretation continued to influence political prophecies for centuries. By the mid-thirteenth century, pseudo-Joachimist works abounded in southern Italy,

\(^{35}\) With the exception of Daniel, whom I will discuss later (92).


\(^{37}\) Ibid. 35. Auerbach notes that this was already a “speculation widespread” by the time that Lactantius wrote of it.
interpreting prophecies such as those of Jeremiah and Isaiah as prefiguring the coming of the anti-Christ, Frederick II.\textsuperscript{38} Libera mentions Joachim in the \textit{Advision}, noting:

> Et se sur ce croire n’en voulons des ancients les prophecies, si comme Merlin, les Sebilles, Joachim et mains autres qui nous dient tout plainement les advenemens de noz adversitez et trebuchement—et se veoir les veulz en mains lieux, les trouveras plainement et a la lettre, lesquelz ditz je laisse pour ce car aucuns dire pourroient que, comme ilz soient apocriphes, ne doivent estre recitez a cause de certain prevue--, les tieuxtes des saintes Escriptures, que nyer ne pouons et ou n’a mençonge, nous doivent a tout le mons estre fondement de paour (41).

[And if we wish not to believe the prophecies of the ancients about this such as Merlin, the Sibyls, Joachim, and many others, who tell us in great detail about the arrival of our adversities and downfalls—and if you want to see these, in many places you will find them recorded fully and literally which said [texts] I omit since some might say they are apocryphal and should therefore not be cited as certain proof—then similar texts from the Holy Scriptures, which we cannot deny and in which there are no lies, should at least be for us the basis of fear] (44-45).

Here, Christine nods to popular political prophecy, noting Merlin, the Sibyls, and Joachim of Fiore, who were frequently cited together in political manuscripts. Although Libera claims that she is not going into detail about these popular political prophets because some might doubt their authenticity, she is certainly citing them as authorities and noting that their claims can be proven true via similar prophecies based on Scriptural readings, that is, *figurae*. Ironically, Christine’s alternative to citing the prophecies of the controversial Joachim is to engage in the kinds of figural Scriptural interpretation which he foregrounded.

Within Book I, Libera (and therefore her author, Christine) makes original figural prophecies based on Old Testament stories. For instance, Libera tells of how Samson tied several foxes together by their tails, attached a fire to them, and threw them into the grain houses, fields, and vineyards of his enemies, the Philistines, in order to defeat them. She recounts the story in a way that is true to her source, Judges 15, but glosses it morally, fashioning it into a unique political prophecy. Libera claims that Samson is the *figura* for “ung de mes filz” (37) [one of my sons] (41), which can most likely be taken to mean a member of the royal family. Libera makes it clear that she is making a prediction, exclaiming “note la prophecie du temps de ma gloire!” (37) [mark the prophecy of the hour of my glory!] (40). Andrea Tarnowski has characterized this reading as an example of politico-historical prophecy, which “mime la prophétie; la prédiction banale, et même la réflexion sur le passé, épousent ses contours,” explaining that Christine “assure ses lecteurs qu’un prince—Charles VI—rétablira la gloire de la

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39 See Reno and Dulac, *L’Avision*, 159, Note XXIII/19.
France, vainquant ses ennemis comme Samson dompta les Philistins.” Yet Christine’s prophecy is not of the predictable political variety. Rather than interpreting Samson as the figura for a great warrior king who will destroy France’s enemies (the English, for example), symbolized by the Philistines, Libera reads Samson’s story as a moral allegory, predicting that a noble man will rid the French court of its vices. She predicts that “cellui destruira ses ennemis par estrange malice…annemis de sa vertu, qui ma terre et moy par long temps ont persecuté,” (37) [by a curious device this individual will destroy his enemies—that is…the enemies of his virtue—who have persecuted me and my land for so long] (41). Libera has already shown Christine the various personified vices inhabiting and destroying her realm. Therefore, within the world of the allegory, this future ruler will defeat these vices in a battle of sorts. However, the fulfillment of the prophecy will, in reality, not be a war campaign like Samson’s. Within her prophetic glossing of the story, Libera reveals that the key to resolving the abuse that she has endured at the expense of the Vices is for men in power to conquer the vices within themselves. Libera specifically says that he will conquer the enemies of “sa vertue,” meaning enemies of his own virtue, in order to save France. Libera then glosses the other figures of the story, claiming, “Les regnars sont les soubtilz avis de son meisme sens qu’il prendrea” (37) [The foxes represent the clever ideas of his own mind which he will use] (41). Christine’s message is that each of the princes reading the story could potentially be the subject of the ambiguous prophecy and that each simply needs to employ his own reason in order to conquer his vices and save France from ruin. Far from the passive prophetic conduit of knowledge, Christine actively and conspicuously shapes the meanings of her prophecies from passages in unexpected ways. This meaning of the

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prophecy would hardly be self-evident if Libera had not explained it. The reader is therefore not persuaded of his own intuition but rather reminded of his obligation to digest the information with which the author is supplying him.

Like John Gower, Christine draws heavily from the interpretive episodes of the Book of Daniel in order to highlight her analytical skills. However, in offering a figural interpretation of the episodes, Christine adds an extra analytical layer to the prophecy. Libera complains of a subtle wind that blows through her country, causing the people who dwell in higher places (that is, the nobility) to become swollen and puffed up with greed and pride. She then offers a prophecy based on Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the tree, found in chapter 4 of the Book of Daniel. Although Libera refers to the dream as coming from the book of the “prophet Daniel,” she erases the prophet himself from the story, taking on his role and explicating the dream in a way that directly contradicts Daniel’s interpretation. The original episode from the Book of Daniel is told from the first person perspective of Nebuchadnezzar, who tells his audience first that he had a dream, then, that he sent for many men to solve it, and that finally, Daniel came to him and interpreted it for him. He then recounts the dream itself. In the version in the *Advision*, Libera tells the dream from the third person perspective, leaving out any description of Daniel’s interpretation. She explains that Nebuchadnezzar dreamt of a tall tree that had many branches, fed many animals with its fruit, housed many birds, and sheltered many animals. Then a voice from heaven commanded that the tree be cut down “lez de terre” (32) [to the surface of the earth] (37), that all of the birds and beasts fly from it, and all the fruit be lost. Libera’s recounting of the dream corresponds, for the most part, with Daniel 4. The only major differences are that, as we have already seen, in the Book of Daniel, the voice from heaven also commands, “Nevertheless leave the stump of its roots in the earth, and let it be tied with a band of iron, and of brass, among
the grass,” and, “Let his heart be changed from man's, and let a beast's heart be given him; and let seven times pass over him.”  

These details are significant in Daniel’s interpretation of the dream. Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar that the tree represents him, the king, because he has grown so mighty, but that the order from heaven to chop it down signifies that God will cast him out of the company of men and into that of beasts. Patristic readings explain Nebuchadnezzar’s heart being turned into that of a beast as a signification of his madness. In his commentary on the Book of Daniel, St. Jerome explains, “Because he displeased God, Nebuchadnezzar was turned into a madman and dwelt for seven years amongst the brute beasts,” and notes that the bands of iron and brass binding the stump reflect how “all maniacs are bound with chains to keep them from destroying themselves or attacking others with weapons.” Daniel predicts that Nebuchadnezzar will dwell with the beasts (remain mad) for the next seven years but that the stump signifies that the king can return to his kingdom once that he realizes that it is subordinate to God’s power.

The applicability of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and fate to the situation of the French monarchy in 1405 seems quite obvious. Their king was subject to bouts of madness. Furthermore, Libera has already described herself, the nation of France, as a plant grown from a shoot taken from the golden tree of Troy, whose various branches represent different stages of the French monarchy. It would be easy to claim that Nebuchadnezzar’s transformation into an animal represents Charles VI’s madness and that the chopping down of the tree signifies the destruction of the kingdom of France. Working against the obvious correlations between the Old Testament story and the current political situation in France, Christine does not place blame on

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42 Daniel 4:12-13, Douay-Rheims.
44 Ibid., 51.
Charles VI for the ills of his country. Libera has previously portrayed Charles as a wounded eagle: “O Fortune…[l]e ruas jus par ton soufflement si durement qu’il demoura estendu tout desrompt, non mie seulement les plumes mais tout le corps” (24) [Oh Fortune…you threw him to the ground so abruptly with the blast of your gale that he laid out, not only the feathers but the whole body torn asunder] (29). This passage describes Charles VI’s first bout with madness sympathetically. A comparison with Nebuchadnezzar, whom God had punished with madness, would be a poorly advised criticism of the king.

Neglecting to mention Daniel’s interpretation of the dream, Libera intervenes at this point with her own figural interpretation, which is not at all self-evident. Rather than symbolizing the king, the tree “segnefie les enflez devant dist res puissans qui sont logiez es haulz dongions de ma terre…lequelz sont de si grant estat, force et puissance qu’a pou cuident attaindre au ciel” (32) [signifies the swollen ones mentioned before, the powerful who live in the high towers of my land…who have such rank, force, and power that they believe they will easily reach heaven] (37). Furthermore, Libera predicts that the tree, which will be “coupez et excipez” (33) [cut down and uprooted from the earth] (37) rather than left as a bound stump means that “par volenté de Dieu, la force et puissance d’iceulz enflez finera et sera retrentchee les degittant de leurs haultesces,” (33) [by God’s will, the force and power of these swollen individuals will end and be removed, and they will be thrown down from their high positions] (37). Christine therefore greatly alters the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream to suit an indictment of proud behavior in the French court and a warning to her audience that such behavior will lead to their downfall. In having Libera offer this interpretation, she is not claiming that Daniel’s interpretation was incorrect but rather that history, particularly scriptural history, can be used to understand future events. Through the divine illumination of something Joachim called
spiritualis intellectus, Christine the exegete can read other meanings into older prophecies as signs of things to come. She is the highest model of responsible readership, not only digesting what she has read but also, through her skills, interpreting its complex meaning. In this way, Christine takes on the role of Daniel, not only inserting herself into his stories but, like the prophet, offering her own interpretations and predictions.

Christine once again takes on the role of Daniel in her retelling of the story of Belshazzar’s feast inside the temple walls, in which the Babylonian king abuses holy sacramental vessels by dining upon them. During the feast, Belshazzar sees a hand writing the foreign words mene, tekel, phares upon the wall of his dining hall. Although Libera does mention that the story comes from the book of Daniel, she does not tell how Belshazzar sent for several prophets, who could not interpret the words until the prophet Daniel was finally able to read them and explain that God had numbered Belshazzar’s days, weighed his good and bad deeds, and would divide his kingdom between the Medes and the Persians. Instead, immediately after Libera describes how Belshazzar “leva les yeulx et en la paroit de sa sale vi d’une main qui escripsoit telz trios mos: <<mene, thecel, pharés>> (47) [raised his eyes and saw on the wall of the room a hand that wrote these three words: mene, tekel, phares] (49), Libera explains what they mean to the reader and tells of the Belshazzar’s fate:

Le premier mot, <<mene>>, c’est a dire <<nombre>>, et estoit a entendre que Dieu avoit nombré les jours de sa vie et que venue en

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45 See Andrea W. Tarnowski, “Perspectives in the Advision,” Christine de Pizan 2000, ed. John Campbell, Nadia Margolis, and Angus Johnston Kennedy (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000): 105-114. Tarnowski makes a similar argument with respect to Christine’s glossing of her own allegories within the Preface, noting, “The bird, she writes, can figure the king, or a pope. When she honors the bird, she lauds the king. But the same words of praise, she tells us, seek to denounce the pope; the reader must understand that in this case, Christine means the opposite of what she says. Only her instructions, and authority, allow such opposing glosses to stand simultaneously; offered by her reader, they would seem arbitrary” (113).
The first word mene means number and indicated that God had numbered the days of his life and their end had come. The second word tekel is weight, which signified that God had weighed his good and bad deeds and found him light in the good and heavy in the bad. The third word phares meant division, which signified that God had divided his kingdom and separated it from him (49-50).

The elimination of Daniel from the narrative makes the connection clear between the words on the wall and the words on the page; furthermore it makes the connection clear between the king in the story and the princes reading it. Rather than Daniel explaining the meaning of the words to Belshazzar, Libera explains them to the readers, implying that her readers are the ones who should truly heed its warning.

In the case of Belshazzar’s feast, Libera offers the very same interpretation that Daniel does, but in that of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, Libera does her own prophetic figural interpretation by reimagining what each element of the dream signifies. In this way, Christine works well within the tradition of Daniel, whose place she occupies through the proxy of
Libera. Daniel is distinct from the other prophets whom Libera mentions in Book I because he is an interpretive prophet rather than a visionary one. In the twelfth century, Thomas Aquinas had declared that God no longer granted prophetic gifts to declare new doctrine but that:

> The interpretation of speeches is reducible to the gift of prophecy, inasmuch as the mind is enlightened so as to understand and explain any obscurities of speech arising either from a difficulty in the things signified, or from the words uttered being unknown, or from the figures of speech employed, according to Dan. 5.15, “I have heard of thee, that thou canst interpret obscure things, and resolve difficult things.”

In quoting from Daniel, Aquinas uses him as a model for the modern prophet—someone who can discern information by reading for deeper meaning. Nebuchadnezzar had visions but was not himself a prophet because he did not understand what they meant. In referring to Daniel as the author of the stories of Belshazzar’s feast and Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and then omitting his role in the text, only to step into this role by offering interpretations herself, Christine, much like Gower, is presenting herself as a modern Daniel—a prophet with the power to discern and interpret. In reading *figurae* against their more obvious political interpretations, Christine illustrates that this is not a role that just anyone can fill. Like the Old Testament prophets, she has a privileged access to knowledge.

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Although Christine has clearly written the prophetic figural readings in the *Advision*, she places them in the mouth of Libera, the allegorical representation of France, who appeared to her in this dream and asked her to compose poetry based on her experience: “Et n’ot orreur d’enjoindre a moy gemme telle honneur comme de m’instituer estre antigraphe de ses aventures, et voulte que par moy oroisons et chançons en fussent faictes,” (16) [And she feared not to do me, a woman, such an honor as to appoint me antigraphus of her adventures of old, and she wished me to compose songs and speeches about them] (22). Christine Moneera Laennec points to this narrative structure as an indication of Christine’s reluctance to claim authorial agency: “De Pizan portrays Christine the apprentice as a mere scribe, writing only with the aid of figures more informed than she, who have themselves provided the substance of the work.”48 However, as Christine Reno and Lillian Dulac note, in having Libera ask her to transcribe what she says, Christine is evoking the tradition of the Apocalypse, in which the voice of the Lord tells John, “What thou seest, write in a book, and send to the seven churches which are in Asia, to Ephesus, and to Smyrna, and to Pergamus, and to Thyatira, and to Sardis, and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea,” as well as Dante’s *Purgatorio*, in which Beatrice tells Dante, “Tu nota, e si come da me son poste/ cosi queste parole segna a’ vivi/ del viver ch’è un correre a la morte,” [Do you take note and just as they come from me write these words to those who live the life that is a race to death] (*Purg.* XXXIII.52-54).49 In subordinating her authorial persona to Libera within the

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allegory, Christine is also asserting her role as apocalyptic prophet as well as vernacular *auctor*, in the tradition of St. John and Dante, respectively. Libera’s appointment of Christine as her recorder is based on Christine’s intellectual skills. Libera declares, “Amie, a qui Dieux et Nature ont concedé outre le commun ordre des femmes le don d’amour d’estude, areste parchemin, ancre et plume et escrips les paroles yssans de ma poitrine” (16) [Friend, to whom God and Nature have conceded the gift of a love of study far beyond the common lot of woman, prepare parchment, quill, and ink, and write the words issuing from my breast] (22). Christine’s uncommon gender status (as a woman passionate about traditionally male fields of study), combined with her intellectual skill, grant her the honor to record and transmit Libera’s wisdom. Christine’s status as an author is therefore enhanced rather than diminished by her choice to put the most analytical speeches in the mouth of Libera. As a self-described widow, Libera, much like many of Christine’s other prophetic guides, is an obvious double for Christine. The *Advision* is one of Christine’s most autobiographical works, and in it, she provides lengthy descriptions of the financial and social woes that she endured as a widow (III.6). Likewise Libera describes herself as a widow, stripped of her husband (presumably the esteemed former king, Charles V) by cruel Fortune, who is “sans pitié avoir de ma vesveté” (23) without [pity for my widowhood] (28). As an allegorical personification of the nation of France, Libera’s identity is fairly flexible. Christine’s choice to explicitly describe Libera’s misfortunes as parallel to her own serves several functions. It reminds the reader that Christine herself has composed all of Libera’s most analytical and interpretive prophecies while still distancing Christine’s narrative persona from some of her more polemic claims.\(^{50}\) Furthermore, Christine implies that her own

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\(^{50}\) Marchello-Nizia classifies the *Advision* as a “Songe politique” in the tradition of Philippe de Mézière’s *Songe du Vieil Pelerin* and Honoré Bouvet’s *Apparicion Maistre Jehan de Meun* (among others). Marchello-Nizia notes how
personal hardship as a widow is part of what has granted her access to the wisdom of the kindred figure, Libera. Throughout Christine’s work, her similarities to her female prophetic guides simultaneously distance Christine from her politically controversial claims while drawing attention to the gender traits that imbue Christine with prophetic insight.

**Sibylline Authority in the *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc***

Christine’s final work, the *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc*, reflects her shift to overt political prophecy. Whereas Christine placed all of her prophecies in the mouth of Libera in the *Advision Cristine*, she begins the *Ditié* with the words, “Je, Christine,” and speaks in her own voice throughout the poem, making specific political predictions. In the *Ditié*, dated 31 July of 1429, after Joan of Arc’s victory at Orléans and Charles VII’s coronation at Rheims, Christine participates in explicit political propaganda, urging public support for Joan and French unification under the leadership of Charles VII. As in the *Mutacion*, Christine invites comparison between herself and classical prophetic figures in the *Ditié*. However, rather than amending and adapting the stories of these figures to make such comparisons possible, as she does in the *Mutacion*, Christine instead tailors her prophetic discourse to be consistent with the traditions surrounding one figure in particular—the Sibyl.

The *Ditié* celebrates Joan of Arc’s triumphs as a sign of providential grace and makes two connected prophesies—the first foreseeing a great ruler of France who may or may not be Charles VII and the second prophesying Joan’s defeat of the English and the conquering of the Holy Land in aid of this great ruler. Between these two prophesies of her own, Christine references prophets often cited in popular anonymous political prophetic verse—Merlin, the

the dream format of these poems, in which the narrator is the scribe rather than the speaker, allows the author to more freely express political criticisms. See Marchello-Nizia, “Entre l’histoire et la poétique,” 39-55.
Sibyl, and Bede.⁵¹ She offers their testimony in support of Joan’s validity as an agent of God, arguing:

Car Merlin et Sebile et Bede,
Plus de Vc ans a la virent
En esperit, et pour remede
En France en leurs escripz la mirent,
Et leurs prophecie
Disans qu’il pourteroit baniere
Es guerres françoises, et dirent
De son fait toute la maniere (XXXI, 241-248).

[For more than 500 years ago, Merlin, the Sibyl and Bede foresaw her coming, entered her in their writings as someone who would put an end to France’s troubles, made prophecies about her, saying that she would carry the banner in the French wars and describing all that she would achieve.]⁵²

Christine’s reference to these prophetic authorities is in keeping with her defense of Joan, whom she has just compared to biblical figures Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Esther, Judith, and Deborah in previous passages. The prophecies of Merlin, the Sibyl, and Bede, all presumably inspired by God, are further evidence that Joan’s victories are miracles, also inspired by God. Furthermore,

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⁵² Christine de Pisan, Ditité de Jehanne d’Arc, ed. Angus J. Kennedy and Kenneth Varty (Oxford: The Society for the Study of Mediaeval Languages and Literature, 1977); all further quotations of the French text and (except where noted) translations are from this edition, hereafter cited in the text.
in placing this reference between two of her own prognostications, Christine invites comparisons between these prophets and herself. Christine takes care to characterize them as writers like herself, describing how they “en leur escripz la mirent” [entered her into their writings]. She does not repeat their individual prophecies but only summarizes their message in general terms, echoing her own, that Joan will be triumphant in remedying France’s troubles.\footnote{Kevin Brownlee has asserted that the central prophet, the Sibyl, is a particularly conspicuous reference, arguing that her appearance within the \textit{Ditié} is “overdetermined as a result of her singular importance in Christine’s earlier works.”} The Sibyl’s role in the \textit{Epistre d’Othea a Hector}, the \textit{Livre de la cité des dames}, and the \textit{Livre du chemin de long estude} establishes her as a prophetic double for Christine, whose paramount role as a royal advisor emphasizes the importance of intellectual feminine insight into masculine authority. Whereas Christine had always subtly implied her own prophetic insight through comparisons to the Sibyl, she actually co-opt the role of the Sibyl in the \textit{Ditié}, no longer implying but asserting her prophetic power.

The Sibyl’s role in Christine’s model for princes, the \textit{Epistre d’Othea} (1400), is particularly prominent in that she is the last of one hundred moral examples offered by the goddess Othea in a letter to the Trojan prince, Hector. Each section of the \textit{Othea} contains a four line verse fable, attributed to Othea, followed by a prose gloss and allegory—Christine’s allegorical explanation of the goddess’s fable as well as an elucidation of its moral meaning. Othea is a goddess invented by Christine, who glosses her name as Greek for “sagece de femme” \footnote{Christine also does not specify a particular Sibyl, as it was common Medieval practice to conflate the identities of the Sibyls. See Jeanne Baroin and Josiane Haffen, \textit{La Prophétie de la Sibylle Tibutine} (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1987); William L. Kinter and Joseph R. Keller, \textit{The Sibyl, Prophetess of Antiquity and Medieval Fay} (Philadelphia: Dorance, 1967).}

(199) [wisdom of woman] (32). In the very last of Othea’s one hundred fables, Christine collapses the identities of the Cumaean sibyl, the narrative voice of Othea, and her own authorial identity, writing, “Cent auctoritez t’ay escriptes,/ Si ne soient de toy desrites,/ Car Augustus de femme apprist/ Qui d’estre aouré le reprist,” (340) [I wrote one hundred authorities to you;/ May you not despise them,/ For Augustus learned from a woman/ Who reprimanded him for being worshiped] (40).55 This passage evokes the tradition of the one hundred-mouthed Cumaean Sibyl of the Aeneid: “Excisum Euboicae latus ingens rupis in antrum,/ quo lati ducunt aditus centum, ostia centum,/ unde ruunt totidem uoces, responsa Sibyllae,” (VI.42-44) [The huge side of the Euboean rock is hewn into a cavern, into which lead a hundred wide mouths, a hundred gateways, from which rush as many voices, the answers of the Sibyl].56 Just as the cave mouth through which the Cumaean Sibyl speaks echoes and answers with one hundred voices, the narrator Othea has offered advice to Hector, and the author Christine (who actually wrote all of Othea’s words) has offered advice to her patrons, the dukes of Orleans, Berry, Burgundy, and Charles VI, with a chorus of one hundred examples.57 By closing with the example of the Sibyl, Christine confronts her princely readers with the story of a woman who famously humbled a powerful male ruler. Her gloss explains the story of the Ara Coeli legend, in which the Sibyl shows Caesar Augustus the image of the Virgin Mary and Christ in order to teach him that he


57 Sandra Hindman has come to a similar conclusion: “By alluding to the teaching of wisdom, an activity shared by Christine, Òthéa, and the sibyl, the chapter may even intentionally merge the roles of all three women. As the sibyl addresses the emperor, Òthéa addresses Hector, and Christine addresses the present rulers of France.” See Sandra Hindman, Christine de Pizan’s Epistre Òthéa: Painting and Politics at the Court of Charles VI (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1986): 59.
should not allow himself to be worshipped by his subjects. The Sibyl’s task is similar to Christine’s own project in writing the Othea, wherein she provides religious and moral lessons to fallible royal readers. In associating herself with the prophetic Sybil, Christine implies that she possesses similar intuition and insight, especially due to her gender. Christine’s reminder that “Augustus de femme apprist,” (340) [Augustus learned from a woman] (40) carries a double meaning, given that Augustus learned the lesson of humility both from the image of a woman, Mary, in the sky, as well as from the prophetess before him. Christine’s emphasis on the femininity of Augustus’s teacher(s) harkens back to her first gloss of the name Othea as Greek for “sagece de femme” (199) [wisdom of woman] (32). Othea is not simply a fictitious goddess but a symbol of feminine insight. Nadia Margolis has argued that “the Sibyl predicts not only the triumph of translatio studii (with an eye toward translatio imperii) but also the growing role of women in shaping the New World Order.” Not only might the Golden Age of Rome, which Augustus represents, return to Italy and spread to France; it will best flourish with feminine aid. The story of the Sibyl reinforces the notion that women possess a special understanding of virtues such as humility that are advantageous for male leaders to study.

In the Cité des dames (1405), Christine takes the project of compiling feminine insight to a new level, enlisting the Sybils in a prominent role in this task. Rosalind Brown-Grant notes that

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58 Although the Ara Coeli legend which Christine recounts in this section is traditionally attributed to the Tibertine Sibyl, Christine attributes the story to the Cumaean Sibyl. As Gabriella Parussa points out in her Notes to the Épistre, Christine’s source, the Légende Dorée (a French translation of the Legenda Aurea) does not specify which Sibyl offered the prophecy to Augustus and that the Cumaean Sibyl was often associated with the Nativity due to her association with Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue (453-454). Karen Green notes the Cumaean Sibyl’s relationship to Aeneas and argues that, “Since the Épistre Othea is largely devoted to stories from Troy, it was undoubtedly because of this association that Christine chose to attribute the prophecy of Augustus to her” (122). See Karen Green, “Philosophy and Metaphor: The Significance of Christine’s ‘Blunders,’” Parergon 22:1 (Jan. 2005): 122. Whether or not Christine intentionally changed the provenance of the Sibyl, the fact that she refers to her as the Cumaean Sibyl makes associations with the Aeneid natural.

the Cité “marks an important genre shift from Christine’s previous works such as the Othéa and
the Avision: from the instructive mirror for male readers she switches to a commemorative
catalogue of women’s laudable deeds addressed to a female readership.”  
In the Cité, the
allegorical personifications of Raison, Droitture, and Justice offer examples of righteous women
to Christine, among which are the Sibyls, who represent a feminine tradition of Christian
prophecy which exceeds the masculine one of the Old Testament, as Christine points out: “Et
meesmes de l’advenement Jhesu Crist qui de moult longtemps vint aprés, en parlerent plus
clerement et plus avant que ne firent, si qu’il est trouvé, tous les prophettes” (787-788) [They
even spoke more clearly and farther in advance of the coming of Jesus Christ, who came long
afterward, than all the prophets did] (100). Maureen Quilligan has described how the sibyls lay
the framework for Christine as a female author, but contrasts what she characterizes as the
sibyls’ “female knowledge, exercised face to face” with Christine’s literary occupation.  
However, it is important to acknowledge the degree to which Christine portrays the sibyls’
knowledge as written. After a catalogue of all ten sibyls, Christine tells the extended story of two
Sibyls, both of whom, as Kevin Brownlee has observed, are “poets, writing their prophecies in
‘vers rimés’ (793), in ‘dittiez’ (790).”  
The first, Erythrea, she describes as writing about the
future of the Roman Empire and the coming of Christ “en son livre” (790) [in her book] (101).
Focusing on the Erythrean Sibyl’s scripted authority, Christine includes the Greek letters with
which she wrote her acrostic prophecy, “Jesus Christ, son of God, Savior”: Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ νίος σωτήρ (790, 101). In emphasizing their roles as authors, Christine places herself in the
tradition of these inspired female authorities.

60 Rosalind Browne-Grant, Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women, (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1999), 128.
61 Ibid., 130.
62 Kevin Brownlee, “Authority,” 142.
Another extended description of a Sybil in the *Cité* offers the story of an equally scripted authority, the Cumean Amalthea:

> Aucuns pouettes faignirent qu’elle fust amee de Phebus, que ilz appelloyent dieu de sapience, et que par le don d’icelluy Phebus elle acquist si grant scavoir et vesqui si longuement: qui est a entendre que pour sa virginité et purté elle fu amee de Dieu, le souleil de sapience, qui ‘enlumina de clartéde prophecie, par laquelle elle a predit et escript plusieurs choses a avenir (792).

[Several poets claimed that she was loved by Phoebus (whom they called the god of wisdom) and that, through this same Phoebus’s gift, she acquired such great learning and lived so long. This should be taken to mean that because of her virginity and purity she was loved by God, the sun of wisdom, who illuminated her with the prophetic brilliance through which she predicted and wrote of many things to come] (103).

Christine alters the traditional story of the Cumaean Sibyl and Apollo famously told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, glossing the language as symbolic of a deeper Christian truth. The Sibyl combines traits of Mary and the Old Testament prophets, appointed as the vessel of God’s word because of her purity. V.A. Kolve has observed Christine’s own similarities to the Virgin Mary in the beginning of the *Cité*. Kolve notes that in many artistic representations of the Annunciation “rays of light, emanating from God the Father, enter the Virgin’s room in a way no natural light could possibly enter” and argues that “The mysterious ray of light that falls upon
Christine—before a more generalized radiance fills the room—invites us to remember this Annunciation tradition."63 Rather than ask Christine to give birth to a child, Raison, Droitture, and Justice ask her to build and write the Cité. In this way, Christine represents the Cumaean Sibyl with the same Marian iconography with which she represents herself, drawing parallels between their shared roles as inspired female authors.

In her interaction with the Roman king, the Cumaean Sibyl plays the familiar role of feminine advisor to a misguided male patron. The Sibyl writes nine prophetic books for her patron, King Tarquin, who refuses to pay the fee that she demands, prompting Amalthea to burn them one by one until she is paid for her work, which so accurately predicts the future that the Roman emperors preserve it for years to come. Although the Cité offers numerous examples of feminine virtue, the Cumaean Sibyl’s occupation as a writer for a royal patron aligns her with Christine in a special way. The story conveniently reminds Christine’s own royal patrons not to undervalue her work, which also contains valuable, perhaps even prophetic, feminine insight. Droitture asks Christine, “Sy me dy, je t’en pry, ou fu oncques homes qui ce fist?” (794) [Tell me then, please, where was there ever a man who did this?] (104), emphasizing not only that God deigns to grant his insight to women but that he communicates some of his greatest wisdom through them rather than speaking directly to kings like Tarquin.

Whereas the stories of Sibyls subtly parallel Christine in the Othea and Cité, the Livre du chemin de long estude (1403) makes the relationship and transfer of authority between the Sibyl and Christine clear by actually portraying their interaction with one another. Christine’s journey in the Chemin is explicitly patterned after Dante’s in the Comedia, and Christine’s counterpart to

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Dante’s guide, Virgil, is the Sibyl, who was, of course, the original guide for Dante’s source and counterpart, Virgil’s Aeneas. Just as Virgil’s role as guide establishes him as a classical mentor emulated by Dante, the Sibyl’s establishes her as a classical mentor emulated by Christine.

Whereas Virgil is a purely artistic mentor for Dante, the Sibyl is a political liaison for Christine, introducing and recommending her to Lady Reason, who, from her domain in the heavens, has just hosted a debate among allegorical personifications regarding the destruction of war. Reason instructs Christine, “Tu rapporteras noz debas/ Si com les a oîs, la bas/ Au monde aux grans princes français” (6325-6327) [Report our debates, just as you have heard them, down on earth to the great French princes] (87). In this way, Christine metaphorically follows in the footsteps of her guide, the Cumeaen Sibyl, who likewise delivered divinely inspired messages to Caesar Augustus and King Tarquin. In the Epistre Othea, Cité des dames, and Chemin de long estude, the Sibyl trumps the authority of the male rulers whom she ultimately aids. Although she is clearly a double for Christine in her intelligence, femininity, and position as writer and advisor to kings, the Sibyl’s prophetic similarity to Christine is only implied throughout her work. It is not until the Ditié that Christine explicitly echoes the Sibyl’s role as prophet by directly engaging in two Sibylline prophecies—the Last Emperor and the Ara Coeli—in order to emphasize the importance of her feminine authority and insight.

Before praising Joan or mentioning the prophecies of Merlin, the Sibyl, and Bede, Christine directly addresses Charles VII, reminding him that while no one believed that he could regain his country, he has regained it through Joan’s help. She takes his unlikely success as “divine preuve” [divine proof] (XII.90) and explains that she believes that God “ait donné

destiné/ D’estre de tresgrans faiz le chief” [has destined you to be the author of very great deeds] (XV.119-120).  

She goes on to deliver the Second Charlemagne prophecy:

Car ung roy de France doit estre
Charles, filz de Charles, nommé,
Qui sur tous rois sera grant maistre.
Propheciez l’ont surnommé
“Le Cerf Volant,” et consomé
Sera par cellui conquereur
Maint fait (Dieu l’a à ce somé),
Et en fin doit estre empereur.

[For there will be a King of France called Charles, son of Charles, who will be supreme ruler over all Kings. Prophecies have given him the name of ‘The Flying Stag,’ and many a deed will be accomplished by this conqueror (God has called him to this task) and in the end he will be emperor.] (XVI.121-128).

Here, Christine is citing, without attribution, the popular prophecy of the Second Charlemagne Prophecy, which famously began “Karolus filius Karoli” [Charles, son of Charles] and predicted that a French ruler would take over England, Spain, Aragon, Lombardy, and Italy before being crowned Roman Emperor and leading the Crusades to regain Jerusalem at the end of days.  

First translation is my own.

*Ditié* editors Kennedy and Varty note that “the specific prophecy contained in *huitain* XVI that a French King would arise who would surpass all monarchs and one day become Emperor was one that was long-established and continually revived...It was probably given its widest currency...in the so-called “Second Charlemagne Prophecy” (63). For discussion of the dissemination of the prophecy, see Marjorie Reeves, “The Second Charlemagne,” *The
The Second Charlemagne Prophecy was a derivative of the Sibyl’s Last Emperor Prophecy and was often attributed to the Tiburtine or Cumaean Sibyl. The story of the Last Emperor Prophecy, is part of a larger prophecy delivered by the Tibertine Sibyl to one hundred Roman senators. Each senator had the same dream of nine suns, stained with blood, and the Sibyl explained this dream by describing the future in nine stages. In the fourth stage, she described how Christ would be born, making her a classical Christian prophet in the eyes of medieval audiences. In the ninth stage, the Sibyl delivered a list of future rulers and wars, identified only by their initials (making them easily adaptable to a variety of political propaganda). The Sibyl’s list of future rulers culminates in the Last Emperor Prophecy, in which she predicts that the last great ruler will conquer pagan temples and territories and convert the Jews. Due to its religious and political applications, the Sibyl’s Last Emperor Prophecy enjoyed especially wide circulation in Latin throughout Europe between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries and was also translated into vernacular French versions, known as the Prophetie.


67 In his Chroniques, Jean Froissart tells the story of how Charles VI adopted the flying stag as an emblem after having a dream of a stag with wings who helped him retrieve a falcon. See Chroniques de J. Froissart, ed. Gaston Raynaud (Paris, 1897) vol X: 256-8. In his Songe du Vieil Pèlerin, Charles VI’s tutor, Philippe de Mézières, cites the Second Charlemagne Prophecy in order to persuade Charles to pursue peace with England. Among the allegorical images the Philippe uses for Charles is the “crowned flying stag.” Deschamps’s 67th balade also calls Charles VI by the name of “le cerf volant.”

Sebile.⁶⁹ The story also appears in the Ovide Moralisé. At least one of the extant copies of the vernacular French versions of the prophecy describes the Last Emperor as a “serf volant et ligier” [a light and flying stag].⁷⁰ Although Christine is clearly repeating the Sibyl’s popular prophecy, she does not mention her as the source of this particular prediction. In this way, Christine makes it clear that she is not simply referring to a prophecy but asserting it in her own authorial voice.

In repeating the prophecy without attributing it to the Sibyl, Christine is stepping into the role of the Sibyl herself. Furthermore, in tenuously applying the prophecy to King Charles VII, Christine is stepping into the Sibyl’s traditional role in her works, the Epistre Othea, the Cité des dames, and the Chemin de long estude, as a female advisor to a potentially misguided male ruler. She warns Charles, “Je prie à Dieu que cellui soies” [I pray to God that you may be the person I have described] (XVII.130), emphasizing that while the prophecy remains true, he may or may not fulfill it. Christine portrays her hope in Charles VII but reminds him that his choices will determine his future success. After praising Joan and referencing Merlin, the Sibyl, and Bede, Christine returns to the Last Emperor Prophecy, this time applying it solely to Joan:

En Chistienté et l’Eglise
Sera par elle mis concorde,
Les mescreans dont on devise,
Et les herites de vie orde

⁷⁰ This late fourteenth-century MS is Lyon 768, fol. 95v-97v. See Abed, “Reading”: 155-156. In this version of the prophecy, the scribe appears to be substituting the Sibyl’s traditional prophetic disguise of initials with Merlin’s traditional prophetic disguise of animals. For more on these trends in English manuscripts, see Taylor, The Political Prophecy in England, 30-34.
Destruira, car ainsi l’acord
Prophecie, qui l’a predit,
Ne point n’aura misericorde
De lieu, qui la foy Dieu laidit.

Des Sarradins fera essart,
En conquerant la Saintte Terre.
Là menra Charles, que Dieu gard!
Ains qu’il muire, fera tel erre.
Cilz est cil qui la doit conquerre.
Là doit-elle finer sa vie,
Et l’un et l’autre gloire acquérre.
Là sera la chose assovye (XLII-XLIII, 331-344).

[She will restore Christendom and the Church. She will destroy the unbelievers people talk about, and the heretics and their vile ways, for this is the substance of a prophecy that has been made. Nor will she have mercy on any place which treats faith in God with disrespect. She will destroy the Saracens, by conquering the Holy Land. She will lead Charles there, whom God preserve! Before he dies he will make such a journey. He is the one who is to conquer it. It is there that she is to end her days and that both of]
them are to win glory. It is there that the whole enterprise will be
brought to completion.]

Here, Christine recommences her predictions of the Last Emperor, once again characterizing
what she is saying as a “prophecie” but not identifying its speaker, making the authoritative
prophetic voice her own. Christine is once again stepping into the role of the Sybil by applying
her predictions to contemporary events and figures. This time, she applies the more specific
predictions contained in the Sibyl’s Last Emperor prophecy—the conquering of the Holy Land—
to Joan, specifying that it is Joan who “Là menra Charles” [(will) lead Charles there]. It is
important to note that Christine does not specify to which Charles she is referring, reminding the
reader of her prediction of the Second Charlemagne, “Charles, filz de Charles” [Charles son of
Charles], who may or may not be Charles VII. While Joan is most certainly a part of Christine’s
predictions for the future, Charles VII is only the most likely candidate for the victorious leader.
Thus, Christine warns Charles that his loyalty to Joan will determine whether or not he is
destined to be the great World Emperor. Likewise, Charles’s decision to heed Christine’s
prophetic advice and perhaps patronize her future works, could also have an impact upon his
political fate. Charles has already enjoyed success through the aid of one female prophet, Joan.
In stepping into the role of the Sibyl, Christine encourages him to ally himself with another in
order to enjoy more successes.71

Christine emphasizes her role as royal prophet by participating in another major Sibylline
prophecy, that of the birth of Christ to Mary, the Ara Coeli legend that Christine retold at the end
of the Epistre Othea. The Tibertine Sibyl (often conflated with the Cumaean Sibyl) was not only

71 It is not clear if the Ditié was patronized by Charles VII or by his supporters nor is the ultimate audience of the
poem discernable. The Berne Manuscript—the earliest and most complete—was compiled by Nicolas du Plessy at
Sens, just after the city had declared its allegiance to Charles VII. Nicolas’s manuscript contains both pro-Charles
known for preaching the coming of Christ and the Virgin Mary in her interpretation of the fourth sun in the dream of the Roman Senate; she was also known for showing Augustus Caesar a vision of the Madonna and Child in the heavens. According to legend, Caesar had consulted the Sibyl to ask if there would someday be a greater man than he, and the Sibyl humbled him by showing him the image of the Virgin and Christ. Caesar then called the Virgin Mary the *Ara Coeli*, or “altar of heaven” and erected an altar in her honor. The *Ara Coeli* legend, perhaps because it accomplishes the task of Christianizing the classical world, is one of the most famous sibylline legends and was recounted in famous works such as Archbishop Jacobus de Voragine's thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* (translated into the French *Légende dorée* by Jean de Vignay) and Christine’s own *Epistre Othea*.

Christine actively participates in the Sibyl’s tradition of announcing the birth of Christ by using Christian imagery to describe Charles, and Marian imagery to describe Joan. At the beginning of the *Ditié*, Christine describes Charles as “le degeté enfant” [rejected child] (V.33) and tells her readers to praise God, “qui l’a maintenu,/ Criant ‘Noël!’ en hault huer,” [who has kept him safe, and shouting ‘Noël!’ in a loud voice] (VI.47-48). In describing Charles as an exiled child, returning to become the true king, Christine evokes Christ’s early years, when he was in hiding from Herod’s Massacre of the Innocents. Her choice of the word “Noël” as the greeting for the new king summons nativity imagery because it is the word for birth most often applied to the holy birth of Christ. His coming marks the end of a dark period for the country. Just as Christ saved humankind from hell, Charles can save the French from English war and occupation.

Christine then continues her nativity imagery by introducing Joan as the virgin who has brought this young king into the world. She notes:
Chose est bien digne de memoire
Que Dieu, par une vierge tendre,
Ait adès voulu (chose est voire!)
Sur France si grant grace estendre (XI, 85-88).

[It is a fact well worth remembering that God should nevertheless have wished (and this is the truth!) to bestow such great blessings on France, through a young virgin).]

Rather than referring to Joan by name, Christine chooses to characterize her as “une vierge tendre.” Christine continues to refer to her as “la Pucelle” (XIII, 102; XIV, 111; XXI, 161; XXVIII, 224), “la Pucellette” (L, 393), and “Une fillete de XVI ans” [A little girl of 16] (XXXV, 273). This draws attention to the role in which the poem casts her—that of the Virgin Mary—rather than any other roles, such as that of the soldier or prophet, that Joan’s name might evoke. Like Mary, Joan has the power to reverse the fortunes of the formerly ill-fated. Christine presents her as the answer to prayers, the fulfillment of prophecies, and (as the woman who crowned Charles VII herself) the woman who brought the redeeming King into the world. When she finally names and addresses Joan, Christine calls her “Jehanne…Pucelle de Dieu ordonnee,/ En qui le Saint Esprit réa/ Sa grant grace” [Joan…Maiden sent from God, into whom the Holy Spirit poured His great grace] (XXII 169, 171-172). According to the Apostle’s Creed, Christ was “conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.” Just as Mary is gratia plena through the Spirit, so is Joan. She is not only a holy virgin, like Mary, but also a maternal figure, who “donne à France la mamelle De paix et doulce norriture” [feeds France with the sweet, nourishing milk of peace] (XXIII 189-190).
Despite the fact that Joan was known to hear the voices of Saints Margaret, Catherine, and Michael, Christine does not depict Joan as a prophet. Christine may be distancing Joan from her prophetic role in order to protect her from public criticism of witchcraft, instead aligning her with Mary, the symbol of righteous femininity. However, Christine may also be deemphasizing Joan’s prophetic powers in order to co-opt them herself. Joan plays the role of the Virgin Mary while Christine plays that of the prophet—the Sibyl who announces the coming of a savior, the interceding virgin mother, and the final unification before the end of days. Just as the Sibyl had warned Caesar Augustus and all one hundred members of the Roman Senate to humble themselves in the presence of Mary, so Christine warns her politically influential audience to show allegiance to their savior’s “mother,” Joan. As both the Christ figure whom the Sibyl Christine announces and the Augustus figure whom she advises, Charles VII occupies a hopeful but nevertheless tenuous position in the Ditié. Christine’s poem is ultimately about the feminine power that makes masculine triumph possible. In taking on the role of the Sibyl, Christine presents herself as the ideal royal advisor—a true prophet whose guidance enables her patrons to avoid error and fulfill their potential.

72 That is, she does not present Joan as a figure who delivers divine predictions about future events. Stephen Nichols has pointed to Joan’s role as a new Moses in the Ditié, yet Nichols distinguishes that Joan is the “prophet-figure,” while Christine is the “prophetic voice.” See Stephen Nichols, “Prophetic Discourse: St. Augustine to Christine de Pizan,” in The Bible in the Middle Ages: Its Influence on Literature and Art, ed. Bernard S. Levy, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 89 (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992): 51-76, 70. Christine presents Joan as similar to the prophet Moses in that she delivers her people from the oppression of an enemy nation.
Chapter 3: William Langland’s Self-Deconstructing Prophecy of the Davidic King

John Gower and Christine de Pizan identify their authorial personae with interpretive prophets such as Daniel and the Sibyl, who illuminate the meanings of others’ dreams. Both authors represent themselves as superior prophetic readers—intellectuals, capable of digesting complex patterns, past and present, in order to determine future events. In *Piers Plowman*, William Langland’s narrative persona is a prophet in training—someone faltering but learning how to best read the visions before him. All of these authors are working with the genre of the dream vision, but Langland, unlike Gower or Christine, embraces the blurred distinction between author and reader that the genre inspires. As Helen Phillips has noted, the narrative persona of the *chanson d’aventure* (of which the dream vision is one variety) is a “dreamer, wanderer, and overhearer, passing through successive frames into scenes which gradually unfold their content to him or her,” who therefore acts as the “alter ego of the reader or audience, experiencing the process of gradually entering the realm of fiction.”¹ The dream vision genre itself began within a tradition of lyrical poetry that often did not name an author.² However, many authors found the form adaptable in order to highlight their authorial wisdom. For instance, through the *Commedia*, Dante is in the subordinate position, constantly being led and taught through his travels. However, in making Virgil his guide through the *Inferno*, Dante also establishes himself as an apprentice—the heir apparent in the Virgilian tradition of the Roman epic.

Gower and Christine likewise adapt the dream vision model in such a way that announces their superior intellectual prowess. In the *Vox Clamantis*, Gower awakens after the *visio* and spends the majority of the work illuminating the meaning of the dream in his own authoritative persona. In using apocalyptic Biblical referents of John of Patmos and Daniel to introduce the

² See Huot, *From Song to Book*.
dream, Gower represents himself as much more than an alter ego for his audience. He is also a privileged visionary, uniquely capable of interpreting the truths first revealed to him through obscure dream symbols as Daniel did. In contrast, Langland’s Will never gets to awaken for long. *Piers Plowman* is a series of dreams—sometimes even dreams embedded within dreams. Will is always disoriented, attempting to make sense of the world around him. Furthermore, unlike Christine de Pizan, Langland does not (or at least not often) align himself with his prophetic guides. Although Christine’s narrative persona in *L’Advision Cristine* is a passively sleeping consumer of knowledge, her source of that knowledge, Libera, is quite apparently another version of Christine, able to impressively analyze Biblical prophecies. On the other hand, Langland’s guides are often external sources of authority such as Holy Church, Scripture, and Clergy. Langland highlights his role as a compiler and imitator of discourses rather than a producer of them. This is not to say that Langland’s craft was in any way inferior to Gower’s or Christine’s but merely that Langland chooses not to draw a great deal of attention to his authorial craft through the persona of Will.

Will is not a figure who expertly glosses and digests information for his audience in the manner of Christine de Pizan or John Gower. Langland represents himself as an everyman attempting and sometimes failing to understand a higher truth along with his readers. Will clearly represents the author of the text in which he appears. Imagynatif accuses Will of wasting his time on poetry, accusing him, “þow medlest þe with makynges and myȝtest go sey þi sauter” (B.XII.16). Will begins the penultimate passus by saying, “Thus I awaked and wroot what I hadde ydremed” (B.XIX.1) and ends it with the similar line, “And I awakned þerwiþ and wroot
as me mette” (B.XIX.481), making the connection between the speaker and author explicit. However, Will does not simply represent the poet, William Langland, but also the personification of the human will. In this way, despite Middleton’s classification of them both as public poets, Will is aligned with his audience in a way that Gower’s narrative persona is not.

The line between audience and author is further obscured by the fact that Langland provides no straightforward account of himself in propria persona. While long didactic Latin and English works such as Gower’s Confessio Amantis contain some kind of introduction relating the occasion or intent of the poem, Langland provides no such context for his work. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton has argued that Langland’s reluctance to openly identify himself may have been a means of political self-preservation. Robert Adams has more recently suggested that the name Langland, itself a pseudonym, may have been adopted at the request of the author’s extended family of high status, the Rokeles.

While external factors most likely did influence his decision to avoid straightforward self-identification, Langland’s willingness to absorb his identity within the allegorical concept of the human will also reinforces Piers Plowman’s internal message that ultimate knowledge is only partially accessible to humankind. Langland uses prophecy not as a tool to highlight his authorial insight but as a discourse which is fittingly confusing, even to the narrative authorial voice, when conveying higher truth. The prophecies in Piers Plowman do not

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3 This is, partly a matter of Langland’s following the conventions of the chanson d’aventure, which typically involves the trope of the poet-as-scribe. However, since Langland adapts and alters a variety of genres to suit his aesthetic sensibilities, he could have easily omitted this aspect of the dream vision.


6 Kerby-Fulton, “Langland and the Bibliographic Ego,” 67-143. She muses, “Isn’t it just as well for Langland after all that John Ball either did not know his name or chose not to use it if he did?” (78).

7 See Robert Adams, Langland and the Rokele Family: The Gentry Background to Piers Plowman, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), 17; 77-123.
illuminate much at all. In fact, they exacerbate what we do not know.

The preponderance of prophecies in *Piers Plowman* foretelling the coming of a king who will usher the world into an ideal age has led many readers to classify Langland as a reformist visionary. In Passus III, Conscience foretells a new King David who will reign over all Christian countries, converting the Jews and the Saracens. Reason continues this prophecy in Passus IV, describing this king’s role in the reign of Reason to come. In Passus X, Clergie also prophesies of a king who will reform the monasteries and other holy orders. Morton Bloomfield has argued that “Langland is a prophetic poet—a poet who felt himself privileged to reveal to his fellow men a coming renewel of justice and love that would transform society and through it the individual.”

Bloomfield controversially reads the entire work as being influenced by Franciscan Joachimist prophecies which foretold a pre-apocalyptic age of perfection. However, Langland employs these prophecies for their ambiguity rather than for their certainty. Pulling from already extant prophetic political propaganda, Langland has characters recount these predictions in ways that critique contemporary politics and their manipulation of Biblical prophecy. By adapting each prophecy so that it could either refer to a living king or the Second Coming of Christ, Langland repeatedly poses the question of whether a reformed government and church can come about through human actions alone. Far from predicting an ideal, pre-apocalyptic age of the Holy

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Spirit, Langland uses prophecy to question the degree to which reform at the communal level is even possible. The prophecies themselves expose the corruption of the government and Church, but no prophet steps in to elucidate their meaning or suggest specific reforms.

Through Will, Langland emphasizes that such reform is impossible for any common individual to enact. Whereas Gower and Christine wrote works that were addressed to kings, nobility, and archbishops, manuscript evidence indicates that Langland’s audience was a less politically influential one, holding posts primarily related to education and pastoral care. Thus, while Gower and Christine stress the importance of specific actions of reform that only the most powerful could execute, Langland instead urges his less influential audience to recognize injustice and hypocrisy in greater institutions of power and not to put a great deal of stock in the false promises that they offer but to ultimately abide and improve themselves. Langland implies that the only true reform available to the common public is in the context of their own, personal, spiritual lives. The stumbling prophet, Will, serves as a guide to this audience, learning to interpret his visions only insofar as they apply to his personal salvation and to leave the larger, albeit unlikely, reforms to those in power.

**Conscience’s Prophecy: Subverting the Triumph of the Davidic King**

Rather than critiquing greater institutions of power from the vantage point of a wise prophet, Langland manipulates these institutions’ own discourses, including prophecy, in a way that reveals their hypocrisy. James Simpson has observed how Langland adopts a variety of genres or discourses in *Piers Plowman* corresponding to the social and ecclesiastical institutions that he examines. For instance, Holy Church addresses Will in the sermon format because that is

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10 For Langland’s audience, see Anne Middleton, “The Audience and Public of ‘Piers Plowman,’” 104. As Judith Ferster has noted, the *Fürstenspiegel* genre was often only nominally addressed to a king and was truly intended as a way for subjects to discuss the decisions which the government was making on their behalf. Therefore, while works like the *Confessio Amantis* may have never reached Richard II, it is still a work most concerned with kingship and rule. See Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*.
a discourse that sustains the institution of the Holy Church. Simpson argues that, while adopting these genres, Langland is “exploiting or questioning the authority of the institutions from which the genre derives.”  

While Simpson provides a useful schema for understanding Langland’s multi-faceted approach to genre and sophisticated approach to societal critique, he conspicuously ignores Langland’s engagement with the discourse of popular political prophecy, employed primarily by war profiteers who held sway over the monarchy. In adopting the tropes and symbols of contemporary political prophecy, Langland not only critiques the monarchy but also the discourses with which the monarchy promotes itself. The political debate that precedes Conscience’s prophecy, particularly Lady Mede’s complaint against the Treaty of Brétigny and Conscience’s example of Saul’s downfall, frame a political prediction constructed to critique the rhetorical foundation of political prophecies and the monarchy that they support.

At the end of the third passus of the A and B versions of *Piers Plowman*, Langland produces a political wartime prophecy that, through its mimicry of popular predictions about the Hundred Years War, highlights all that is sacrilegious and avaricious about political wartime prophecy. Lady Mede and Conscience play a game of dueling advisors, arguing over who has done the best and worst job counseling kings. The debate begins when Conscience warns the King: “Youre fader [Mede] felled þoruʒ false biheste” (B.III.127). This accusation, that Lady Mede played a part in the downfall of Edward II, loosely identifies the allegorical King represented in *Piers Plowman* as King Edward III (or perhaps more accurately, simultaneously an abstract notion of kingship and the real historical personage of Edward III). Subsequent

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13 The debate is most likely removed from the C version because its references to the Hundred Years War, specifically the Treaty of Brétigny, were no longer relevant to contemporary politics by 1388, when Langland finished it. For an overview of the evidence dating all three versions of the poem, see Ralph Hanna III, *William Langland, Authors of the Middle Ages, 3: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1993).
dialogue continues this conceit by intermittently referring to issues in Edward III’s reign. Lady Mede defends herself from the charge that she was a bad advisor to Edward III’s father, Edward II, by accusing Conscience of poorly advising the King to sign the Treaty of Brétigny with France, which prevented Edward’s ascension to the French throne. Conscience turns blame back to Lady Mede by citing the Biblical example of King Saul, who also fell from power through her influence. Conscience goes on to prophesy the future fall of a Saul figure and the rise of a David figure, who will “be diademed and daunten hem alle, / And oon critene kyng kepen [vs echone]” (B.III.288). In the B version, Conscience also describes this Davidian King as bloodlessly converting the Jews and the Saracens. Since allegorical readings of the Bible strongly link David as the type to Jesus’s antitype, most critics have read this as a prophecy of the coming of Christ, represented by David, after the temporal rule of earthly kings, represented by Saul. This reading is supported by Conscience’s apocalyptic quotations from Isaiah 2:4: “Conflabunt gladios suos in vomeres & c.” [They shall turn their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into sickles] (B.III.308) and “Non levabit gens contra gentem gladium & c.” [Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they be exercised any more to war] (B.III.324).

Because Conscience is prophesying the end of days, much critical attention has been devoted to whether Langland’s description of the apocalypse is orthodox or influenced by Joachim of Fiore’s more controversial Trinitarian view of history. However, the fourteenth-century political context of the prophecy has gone entirely ignored.

Conscience’s prediction of the fall of Saul and rise of David, a unifying Christian

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15 Translations taken from Douay Rheims Bible Online.
16 See Bloomfield, Piers Plowman; Kerby-Fulton, Reformist Apocalypticism; Aers, Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination, 62-79; Adams, “Some Versions of Apocalypse,” 194-236; Emmerson, “‘Yernen to Rede Redels?’” 27-76.
emperor, as well as his prediction of the peaceful conversion of the Jews and Muslims is all derived from popular English war propaganda used to promote Edward III. Without pointing to specific poems or tropes, Rupert Taylor has observed of Conscience’s predictions, “These passages sound very much as if they were deliberate parodies of actual prophecies then popular.” However, Taylor describes this parody as one inspired by “opposition to belief in prophecies”—little more than Langland’s attempt to mock superstition. Langland does indeed use Conscience to parody political prophecies, but he does so in order to launch a critique on the greed inherent in contemporary politics.

Langland uses strategic juxtaposition in order to make Conscience’s prophecy a critique of Edward III. This is a typical Langlandian technique, especially when it comes to political criticism. In the Prologue of the B and C versions of *Piers Plowman*, the description of the King’s coronation is followed by the fable of the rats that attempt to bell the cat. Langland makes it clear that the animal fable is applicable to the current king because it comes immediately after the description of the coronation so closely mirroring that of Richard II. In similar fashion, Conscience’s prophecy comes immediately after Lady Mede’s reference to the Hundred Years War, specifically the Treaty of Brétigny, signed in 1360. Conscience’s subsequent prophecy invokes Biblical references to Saul and David that popular poems and prophecies about the Hundred Years War and Treaty of Brétigny frequently employed. Through the juxtaposition of Conscience’s prophecy with Lady Mede’s complaint against the treaty, Langland encourages readers to notice the critiques of Edward embedded within Conscience’s Biblical prophecy. The prophecy illustrates that Edward’s decisions to enter into a peace treaty and to re-enter into war were both motivated by money above all else. In this way, Langland

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18 Ibid, 127.
19 To avoid confusion, I refer to the character of the King who appears in *Piers Plowman* with a capital K.
employs the discourse of prophetic political propaganda to interrogate the royal institution which it customarily upholds. His indictment is not only of the greed of the monarchy but also the co-opted Biblical symbolism that the monarchy uses to endorse that greed.

Just before Conscience’s prophecy, Lady Mede blame her rival advisor, Conscience, for the King’s bad decision “in Normandie” (B.III.187)—an overt reference to Edward III’s controversial decision to sign the Treaty of Brétigny in 1360, withdrawing his claim to the throne in exchange for a ransom payment of 3,000,000 écus for King John II of France. Here, Mede portrays Edward’s decision as one of cowardice. She describes how Conscience:

Crope into a Cabane for cold of þi nayles;

Wendest þat winter wolde han ylasted euere;

And dreddest to be ded for a dym cloude,

And [hastedest þe] homeward for hunger of þi wombe” (B.III.191-194).²⁰

Conscience (perhaps because he specifically represents the King’s conscience at this point) seems most motivated by self-preservation, although Mede is haughtily inclined toward understatement. Her reference to the “dym cloude” corresponds to a detail in Froissart’s account of a tempest of thunder and hail that frightened the English army, causing the king to vow to the Virgin Mary that he would accept the terms of peace.²¹ Mede describes Conscience’s motives as “cowardly” (B.III.206), mocking his fear of the weather and describing his hunger in the feminine terms of a pain in his “wombe.” Mede’s cruel tone makes it possible to disagree with

²⁰ I quote the B version here because, apart from minor poetic wording revisions, it does not differ a great deal from the A version and contains a lengthier version of Conscience’s prophecy, predicting the conquering of the Holy Land. The C version removes mention of Normandy and specific details such as the “dym cloude” (most likely because the particulars of the events were no longer fresh in the public mind) but still refers to the peace treaty as a disaster.

²¹ Froissart, Chronicles, 284.
her estimation of Conscience, who may indeed have had reason to fear for himself and his troops.

On the other hand, Mede’s financial critique of the King’s treaty is exceptionally straightforward. Her primary complaint against the treaty is, appropriately, its economic repercussions. Edward gave up his claim to the French crown in exchange for a hefty ransom for King John II of France. While having Lady Mede speak in opposition to a rich ransom may seem contradictory, the rationale of her critique is that the king and his subjects could have made much more money had they stayed in the war. She refers to the ransom as “a litel siluer” (B.III.207), a paltry sum in contrast to ruling France, “þe richest Reaume þat reyn ouerhoueþ” (B.III.208). Lady Mede’s rebuke of Conscience represents the increasingly common negative public opinion of Edward’s decision, especially among powerful magnates who had profited a great deal from the war. At the time of the treaty, the French had not defeated the English in battle in fifteen years, and the influx of French ransoms and spoils of plunder during the 1340’s and 50’s had given the English a taste of economic prosperity. Froissart’s Chroniques describe the anger of the English captains in particular, who had to sell off their various properties when ordered to evacuate territories lost in the treaties. Langland composed the A version of Piers Plowman between 1368 and 1374, during which this negative opinion of the truce formed in Normandy in 1360 began to grow. After the peace treaty failed, and the war began again in 1369, the English began to suffer more casualties and more economic losses. An increasing number of English citizens developed a negative view of the treaty, believing that the negotiation had prevented them from winning the war back when they held the upper hand. Lady Mede’s complaint, “He

24 Barnie, War in Medieval English Society, 14.
sholde haue be lord of þat lond in lengþe and in brede, / And [ek] kyng of þat kษ his kyn for to helpe, / The leeste brol of his blood a Barones piere” (B.III.203-205) echoes that of the Anonimalle chronicler, who claims that the treaty was entered into a graunt perde et damage al roy Dengleterre et a ses heirs pur toutz iours, qare bien pres toute la communalte de Frauns fuist en subieccion et raunsoun a eux et si purroient les ditz captains od lour gentz deinz brief avoir conquis la roialme de Frauns al oeps le roy Dengleterre et ses heirs sil les voldroit avoir soeffre.

[to the great loss and harm of the king of England and his heirs for ever, for nearly the whole of the community of France was in subjection and ransom to them; and within a brief period the said captains and their men could easily have conquered the kingdom of France to the advantage of the king of England and his heirs, if he had allowed them.]²⁵

Langland uses Lady Mede to voice the popular opinion that the treaty was a poor financial decision, not only for the king himself, but the entire realm of England, which had suffered without the King’s largesse. Mede’s counsel, “It bicomeþ a kyng þat kepeþ a Reaume / To yeue [hise men mede] þat mekely hym serueþ / To aliens, to alle men, to honouren hem with ȝiftes” (B.III.209-211), draws attention to the King’s economic responsibility to his citizens and his personal failure to take that responsibility into consideration when making the decision to sign a peace treaty.

Mede’s critique of the treaty not only outlines the ways in which it was a financially poor decision; it also highlights the greed of Edward and others who supported entering the war in 1337 and reentering it in 1369. When Langland wrote the A version of *Piers Plowman* (sometime between 1368 and 1374), Edward was in the process of once again declaring war on France. As Denise N. Baker has argued, Mede’s “opposition to peace serves to interrogate the values of the warrior class and Edward III himself.”^26^ Mede’s championing of the cause of Edward’s war is even more damning to him than her criticism of his handling of the Treaty of Brétigny. Mede’s lamentations over what Edward had lost through the treaty, such as “The leeste brol of his blood a Barones piere” (B.III.205) highlight the less noble motives that Edward had for entering into the war and reentering into it again. Furthermore, in putting the opinions of those who complained about the treaty in the mouth of Lady Mede, Langland highlights the self-interest inherent in that political position. Never does Lady Mede invoke the rhetoric that Edward is the rightful ruler of France. Her focus on the financial boons of war illustrates how money motivated Edward and his army to enter and reenter the war.

However, indicting those who financially critique the peace treaty is hardly Langland’s way of supporting the treaty. Conscience’s extended examples of David and Saul, taken from the first Book of Samuel, subtly highlight how the peace treaty itself was also motivated by money. In response to Lady Mede’s claim that she is helpful to kings in wartime, Conscience reminds Mede of the story of Saul and David. Through his explication of the kings’ story, Conscience illustrates that Mede was to blame for Saul’s loss of life and crown. He explains that God spoke to Saul through Samuel, instructing him to exact divine vengeance upon the people of Amalec:

“Forþi,” seide Samuel to Saul, “god himself hoteþ [þ]ee

Be buxom at his biddynge his wil to fulfille.

Weend to Amalec with þyn oost and what þow fyndest þere sle it.

Burnes and beestes, bren hem to depe;

Widwes and wyues, women and children,

Moebles and vnmoebles, and al þow myȝt fynde,

Bren it; bere it noȝt, þow shalt spede þe better” (B.III.264-272).

Conscience points to greed (the love of Lady Mede) as the source of Saul’s transgression against God’s orders to burn everything and take no prisoners: “And for he coueited hir catel and þe kyng [Amalec] spared, / Forbar hym and his beestes bope” (B.III.273-274). Because Langland places this prophecy immediately after Lady Mede’s complaint against the Treaty of Brétigny, it is easy to note the parallels between Saul’s decision to hold King Amalec for ransom (instead of following God’s orders) and Edward’s decision to take John II’s ransom (instead of pursuing his supposedly divinely mandated claim to the throne). Lady Mede’s tirade against the treaty illustrates how much the war was really an exercise in pillaging and title-seeking. However, Conscience’s allusion to Saul’s ransom money implies that the peace treaty was also motivated by avarice—desire for the “siluer” which Mede had disparaged as a lesser form of remuneration. While Edward III paid for the war with the spoils of plunder and taxes on the English people, all of John’s ransom went into Edward’s own pocket.27 Chronicles of the late fourteenth century depict Edward’s decision as one of self-interest above all else. Froissart reports that Edward would have continued the war had it not been the remonstrance of his cousin, the Duke of Lancaster, who argued, “This war…is not too favorable to you. Your people are the only real

gainers by it.” Many people saw Edward’s decision not only as an unwise economic one for the country, as Lady Mede communicated, but also as a personal act of greed—a scathing critique which Conscience can only intimate, not explain:

The culorum of þis cas kepe I noȝt to [shewe];
On auenture it noyed m[e] noon ende wol I make,
For so is þis world went wiþ hem þat han power
That whoso seip hem sopes is sonnest yblamed (B.III.280-283).

Conscience’s declaration that he does not care to interpret the story only drops more hints that the story of Saul’s greedy transgression is an indictment of the King. He is not at liberty to analyze it because the story relates to one who “han power” and is in very close proximity. This is Langland’s way of signaling to his readers that Conscience’s description of Saul and David is directly relevant to and not complimentary of the King.

Langland’s decision to use Saul and David in Conscience’s example to Mede is also a pointed one, since these two kings played such a prominent symbolic role in pro-Edwardian war propaganda. For instance, the anonymous Latin poem, “An Invective Against France,” warns France in apostrophe:

Spiritus aspirans bonus a te, Saule, recessit,
Ad David accessit, felicia prælia spirans.
Est David Edwardus, sancto cum crismate clerens,
Philip corde carens Saul est ad prælia tardus.

[The good spirit blowing from you, Saul, withdrew,

It came to David, ushering favorable battles.

Edward is David, shining with holy consecrated oil,

Phillip, lacking in heart, is Saul, slow to battle.]²⁹

The poem, written in support of the English war effort, depicts Edward as a new David who will defeat the old king, Phillip/Saul, because God has given his favor to his anointed king, Edward/David. The sixth chapter of the Prophecy of John of Bridlington, whose primary purpose was to shore up support for Edward’s reentrance into the war with France, also compares Phillip to Saul and Edward to David, recalling, “Rex Saul erravit quærens occidere David, / Quem Deus elegit,” [King Saul erred trying to kill David, whom God chose.]³⁰ These works play upon longstanding associations of the French kingship with an anointed leader in the tradition of David. God’s election of David, manifested through Samuel’s anointing him, symbolized a theocracy, legitimized by God himself. This symbolism was especially useful during regime changes, wherein the new ruler could claim God as the source of his authority. The legitimacy of a king who ousted another king might easily be questioned by his new subjects. Such a king could be painted as both a tyrant and bully, but the example of David, the king whose very victory signaled his favor from God, aided in sanctioning even the most violent regime change. For instance, when Pepin deposed Childeric in 751, Pope Zachary anointed him to symbolize his Davidian status. Zachary and subsequent popes referred to the Carolingian rulers as novus Moyses novusque David, implying that the Merovingian kings, like Saul, had fallen out of favor

with God.\textsuperscript{31} As Lesley Coote has noted, the French kings, “either called themselves, or claimed
to be, David, with a right to be the secular leader of the Christian world.”\textsuperscript{32}

The English co-opted this symbolism during their own attempt to supplant the French
kings. Beginning in the reign of Edward II and peaking in the fifteenth century, after the
coronation of Henry IV in 1399, a prophecy attributed to St. Thomas Becket circulated, relating
how the Virgin Mary had appeared to Becket. She purportedly presented him with a flask of oil
and said:

\begin{quote}
Est eternim rex futures qui per ista[m] unccionem ungetur qui
terras a parentibus amissas videclicet Normanniam & Aquitaniam
recuperabit sine vi. Rex iste maximus erit inter reges & est ille qui
recuperabit multas ecclesias in terra sancta & effugabit omnes
paganos de Babilonia & ibidem plures ecclesias sanctas edificari
faciet.
\end{quote}

[Truly, it is a future king who will be anointed with this oil, who
will recover the lands lost by his ancestors, that is, Normandy and
Aquitaine, without force. This king will be the greatest among
kings and it is he who will win back many churches in the Holy
Land and will drive all the pagans out of Babylon and he will
cause many holy churches to be built there.]\textsuperscript{33}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{31} See Josef Funkenstein, “Samuel and Saul in Medieval Political Thought,” Hebraic Political Studies 2.2 (Spring
\textsuperscript{32} Coote, Prophecy and Public Affairs, 96.
\textsuperscript{33} Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg. iv. 25, fol. 61v. Quote and translation taken from Coote, Prophecy and
Public Affairs, 95. This prophecy exists in at least twenty manuscripts, all nearly identical. The first dates from
roughly 1340, although it was later exploited by Lancastrian propagandists who sought to legitimize Henry IV’s
\end{flushright}
Ironically, Thomas Becket, who was famously martyred for defying Henry II’s orders that he simultaneously hold the offices of Royal Chancellor and Archbishop of Canterbury, becomes through this prophesy, the site of reconciliation between the ecclesiastical and monarchical rule.

To Becket, Mary prophesies the coming of a last world emperor, a Christian king over many great nations. Poems such as “An Invective Against France” augmented this traditional association of the king of England with the anointed king David by reporting rumors that the vessel holding Clovis’s holy oil had run dry before the coronation of King Phillip. The poem thus asserts that Edward III, who presumably had Thomas’s flask of oil, was God’s chosen King David to replace Phillip’s Saul. The prediction of the English king as the last emperor was extremely widespread and found its way into other prophetic predictions. For instance, the prophetic “Adam Davy’s Dreams,” describes how “þe kyng Eward com corouned myd gret blis; / þat bitokeneþ he shal be / Emperour in cristianete” (3.80-82).

As a variant on the Last Emperor Prophecy (cited by Christine de Pizan in the Ditié), these prophecies not only promote the cause of English rule of France but also English imperialistic translatio imperii and divine right. In a time when the papal office was asserting its supremacy to monarchies, and tending to favor the French during the Hundred Years War, these prophecies affirm the English kingship as usurpation. See T.A. Sandquist, “The Holy Oil of St. Thomas of Canterbury,” in Essays in Medieval History Presented to Bertie Wilkinson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 130-144.

This is an explicitly English variant on the Last Emperor Prophecy, associated with the Tiburtine Sibyl. The Oracula Sibyllina is a Christian prophecy delivered to ancient Rome by the proto-Christian sibyl. She foretells the coming of Christ and the Resurrection and, in the fourth section of her prophecy, foretells the coming of a Last Emperor, ruling as rex Romanorum et Grecorum. Medieval copies of the prophecy all preserve the passage about the Last Emperor, inserting references to Lombard and German rulers. The text became an oft revised and circulated means of political propaganda. For an in-depth examination of the spiritual and political rationale behind the circulation of this prophecy, see Holdenried, The Sibyl and Her Scribes.

See Thomas Wright, “Introduction,” Political Poems and Songs, xviii-xix. This is an explicitly English variant on the Last Emperor Prophecy, associated with the Tiburtine Sibyl. The Oracula Sibyllina is a Christian prophecy delivered to ancient Rome by the proto-Christian sibyl. She foretells the coming of Christ and the Resurrection and, in the fourth section of her prophecy, foretells the coming of a Last Emperor, ruling as rex Romanorum et Grecorum. Medieval copies of the prophecy all preserve the passage about the Last Emperor, inserting references to Lombard and German rulers. The text became an oft revised and circulated means of political propaganda. For an in-depth examination of the spiritual and political rationale behind the circulation of this prophecy, see Holdenried, The Sibyl and Her Scribes.

Ibid., xviii-xix.

F.J. Furnivall, ed., Adam Davy’s Dreams about Edward the Second, Early English Text Society (London: Trübner and Company, 1878), 13. Although originally about Edward II, this poem circulated into the fifteenth century. For information about the manuscript, see Coote, Prophecy and Public Affairs, 8.
divinely appointed and approved.\textsuperscript{38}

England was not the only country to adopt the tradition of Saul and David to defend foreign conquest. In one of his famous, controversial political letters, “The Letter to the Emperor Henry VII (Letter VII),” Dante urges Henry, the Holy Roman Emperor, to put down rebellious Florence, arguing, “Yahweh has anointed you king over Israel. Yahweh sent you on a mission and said to you, ‘Go, put these sinners, the Amalekites, under the ban and make war on them until they are exterminated.’ For you too have been anointed king in order to kill Amalek and not spare Agag.”\textsuperscript{39} Here, Dante alludes to the story of Saul’s downfall to warn Henry not to be too lenient. God has appointed him, but should he fail to live up to his responsibilities to subjugate the Florentines, God might remove his favor from Henry as he did from Saul. However, if Henry were to succeed, he could be like another David, who did conquer Amalek. The choice, Dante implies, is Henry’s. Dante draws from this tradition when writing to Henry VII because Henry, as the Holy Roman Emperor, has inherited the Carolingian tradition of the Davidian kingship. England’s adoption of this similar rhetoric speaks English aspirations to becoming a new Holy Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{40}

Numerous prophecies about Edward III predicted his conquering the Holy Land and Babylon after his victory in France. These prophecies built on the image of Edward as the Davidic king, anointed and therefore chosen by God to conquer and rule other lands. The “Last Kings of the English,” written in the style of the “Prophecia Merlini” was a popular Arthurian

\textsuperscript{38} For the power struggle between church and state after the Gregorian Reform, see Michael Wilks, \textit{The Problem of Sovereignty in the Later Middle Ages: The Papal Monarchy With Augustinus Triumphus and the Publicists} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964) and Ernst H. Kantorowicz, \textit{The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology} 1957 Reprint (Princeton University Press, 1997). For the papacy’s favoring of France in the conflict with England, see Barnie, \textit{War in Medieval English Society}, 12.


\textsuperscript{40} For discussion of “Adam Davy’s Dream” and an English Holy Roman Empire, see Taylor, \textit{The Political Prophecy in England}, 93-95.
strain of prophecy that was also popular during Edward I’s reign. The poem recounts a series of English hero-kings and foretells a series of new ones, represented by various animals and culminating in Arthur redivivus, the resurrected Arthur who would rule England and its empire at the end of the world.\textsuperscript{41} Political propagandists associated Edward III with several of these symbolic kings. The popular fourteenth-century version of the Brut chronicle describes how the Boar will “whet his tieþ vppon þe ȝates of Parys” and conquer “the Burgh of Jerusalem.”\textsuperscript{42} Another fourteenth-century chronicle, the Eulogium Historiarum, describes Edward as a Leopard “Qui pede calcabit cancrum” [who will grind underfoot the Crab],” representing Scotland who will tear apart the lilies of Gaul, representing the French.\textsuperscript{43} The Leopard will then go on to conquer the world:

\begin{quote}
Ecclesie subquo libertas prima redibit
Hunc babilon metuet crucis hostes nam teret omnes
Acon Jerusalem leopard posse redempte
Ad cultum fidei gaudebunt se redituras
Imperium mundi sub quo dabit hic heremita.
\end{quote}

[Under him the initial freedom of the Church will return; Babylon will fear him, for he will grind down all the enemies of the Cross. Saved by the Leopard’s power, Acre and Jerusalem will rejoice at their return to the cult of the faith; the empire of the world as the

Much of the war propaganda in favor of Edward not only predicted him as the conqueror of France but as a conqueror of the world. The Holy Oil of Thomas Becket also draws from this tradition, predicting, not only that the king “Normanniam & Aquitaniam recuperabit” [will recover Normandy and Aquitaine] but also that, “Rex iste maximus erit inter reges & est ille qui recuperabit multas ecclesias in terra sancta & effugabit omnes paganos de Babilonia & ibidem plures ecclesias sanctas edificari faciet” [This king will be the greatest among kings and it is he who will win back many churches in the Holy Land and will drive all the pagans out of Babylon and he will cause many holy churches to be built there.] As Lesley Coote has observed, “The war in France was viewed as the opening salvo in a campaign which would lead to world domination, and a campaign under a great Davidic King to free the Holy Land.”

Conscience overtly invokes the tradition of the Davidic political prophecies, predicting in both A and B versions of Piers Plowman that, “Saul shal be blamed” (B.III.286) and that “Dauid shal be diademed and daunten hem alle, / an oon cristene kyng kepen [vs] echone]” (B.III.287-288). The B version includes extended descriptions of this reign, including the conversion of the Jews and Saracens: “And the myddel of a Moone shal make þe Iewes torne, / And Sarȝynes for þat siȝte shul synge Gloria in excelsis, / For Makometh and Mede myshappe shul þat tyme” (B.III.326-328). Given the exceptional popularity of political prophecies about the Hundred Years War, fourteenth-century readers would most likely recognize this as a prediction that an English king will conquer France and go on to be the next Holy Roman Emperor. However

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45 Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg. iv. 25, fol. 61v. Quote and translation taken from Lesley A. Coote, Prophecy and Public Affairs, 95. This prophecy exists in at least twenty manuscripts, all nearly identical. The first dates from roughly 1340, although it was later exploited by Lancastrian propagandists who sought to legitimize Henry IV’s usurpation. See T.A. Sandquist, “The Holy Oil.”
46 Coote, Prophecy and Public Affairs, 115.
Conscience’s example of Saul’s greed, which precedes this prophecy, implies that Edward is not God’s appointed king, since he, like Saul, has been seduced by Lady Mede. In this way, Langland formulates an incisive indictment of the hypocrisy behind the rhetoric sustaining Edward III’s war efforts. This political rhetoric co-opts and re-contextualizes the sacred stories of the Bible itself for its own greedy purposes. Langland depicts such a Biblical opportunist in Lady Mede herself. She attempts to defend herself by quoting Solomon’s Proverbs 22:9 out of context, arguing, that “holy writ telleþ: Honorem adquiret qui dat munera” [He that maketh presents shall purchase victory and honour] (B.III.335-336). Conscience then reminds her to read the rest of the line which warns, “Animam autem aufert accipientium” [but he carrieth away the souls of the receivers] (B.III.350). Here, Mede embodies the opportunistic Biblical readers whom Langland has been parodying throughout the entire passus. Edward, Langland illustrates, is no David, in spite of what the war propagandists have to say about the matter. Like the King, they too are caught up in the allure of Lady Mede.

By simultaneously invoking the language of nationalist political prophecy and the Second Coming, Langland reveals the disparity between the two and thus Edward’s unfitness to fulfill the role of the savior king. A more likely candidate for the “cristene kyng” whom Conscience describes is Christ himself. The prophecy of Ezechiel 37:22-24 also describes a future national unification of Israel, “And I will make them one nation in the land on the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be king over them all… And my servant David shall be king over them.” The Glossa Ordinaria identifies this king as Christ.47 Furthermore, “Christ” means “anointed one.” David is the king who prefigures Christ in the Bible, so prophesying the coming of David could

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47 Textus biblie Cum Glosa ordinaria, Nicolai de lyra postilla, Moralitatibus eiusdem Pauli Burgensis additionibus Matthie Thoring replicis: Repertorium alphabeticum (Basel: Johannes Petri and Johannes Frobenus, 1506-1508), vols. 4, fol. 263r.
easily be a prophecy of the Second Coming.\(^{48}\) However, it is not *necessarily* a prophecy of the Second Coming. Langland exploits this ambiguity, inherent in the heavily symbolic discourse of prophecy. By adopting the style and content of political prophecies, Langland examines the public’s expectations for a savior king. Subtly through the figure of Saul, he points to the ineffectiveness of the current king to live up to these expectations. Ironically, the king’s major shortcomings stem from the warring practices heartily endorsed by these kinds of prophecies. Prophecies of the coming English savior king promoted the war with France, but Langland, through Mede and Conscience’s speeches preceding the prophecy, has illustrated that the war with France is, from all sides, motivated by greed.

Although Conscience’s prophecy describes a king who will conquer the Holy Land, he describes it as a peaceful conversion, not one brought about by war: “swich love shal arise / And swich pees among the peple and a parfit truthe / That Jewes shul wene in hire wit, and wexen wonder glade.... And have wonder in hire hertes that men beth so trewe” (B.III.300-304). Here, Conscience describes how the Jews will observe how Christians are finally living up to their own ideals. He only then predicts that “the myddel of a Moone shal make þe Iewes torne / And Sarȝynes for þat siȝte shul synge *Gloria in excelsis*, / For Makometh and Mede myshappe shul þat tyme” (B.III.326-328). Using analogous riddles from the *Secretum philosophorum*, Andrew Galloway has identified the “myddel of a Moone” as the beginning of a popular riddle whose answer is *cor*, or love.\(^{49}\) Therefore, love will cause the Jews and Muslims all to convert and peacefully join the Christian kingdom. Conscience’s assurance that “Makometh and Mede” will meet with misfortune emphasizes that the two are directly related. The Davidic tradition always stressed moral integrity on the part of the conqueror. After all, David gains God’s favor because

\(^{48}\) For more discussion of this association, see Adams, “Some Versions of Apocalypse,” 222.

he has not morally offended God in the way that Saul has. Conscience’s prophecy of the reign of David emphasizes morality even further by speaking of conquering and uniting lands but removing all reference to battle. The prophecy focuses entirely on the Davidic king’s moral victories, which supplant his need for military prowess by allowing him to conquer the hearts of his enemies instead of their armies.

Because it is ambiguous, the prophecy does not entirely rule out the possibility of an earthly king fulfilling it. However, Langland shows that such an earthly king would need to reform himself entirely. According to tradition, David is a reformed king, whose realm suffered because of his own relationship with Bathsheba, just as Edward’s kingdom suffers for his relationship with Lady Mede. By invoking David as a model of kingship, Conscience implies that Edward too could reform and prove successful in his reign. Much of Conscience’s advice to the King comes from David’s psalms. He poses the central question of kinship with David’s question, “Domine, quis habitabit in tabernaculo tuo? / Lord, who sahl wonye in þi wones wiþ þyne holy seintes, / Or resten in þyne holy hills: þis askeþ Dauid” (B.III.234-236). Then Conscience describes how “Dauid assoileþ it hymself” (B.III.237) by answering:

Qui ingreditur sine macula et operatur Iusticiam.

Tho þat entren of o colour and of one wille
And han ywroght werkes wiþ right and wiþ reson,
And he þat vseþ noȝt þe lyf of vsurie,
And enforceþ pouere [peple] and pursueþ truþe”

Qui pecuniam suam non dedit ad usuram et munera super innocentem (B.III.238-242).

Conscience ends the answer with a direct quotation from Psalm 15 specifically dealing with
usury and bribes because he is denouncing Mede. Conscience sets up David as a model king to
the King in the story, and therefore to Edward III. Thus, like Dante, whose letter warns Henry of
the possibility of becoming like Saul or like David, depending upon his actions, so too does
Conscience’s prophecy. However, instead of urging war in order to bring about a Davidian reign,
Langland singles out the banishment of Mede—the vice which caused Saul to fall in the first
place. In the subsequent passus, the allegorical King fulfills Conscience’s prophecy that “Reson
shall regne and Reaumes gouerne” (B.III.285) by sending for Reason to advise him and
ultimately banishing Mede from his court. In this way, Langland demonstrates a path to reform
but ultimately leaves it up to question whether a real king would take such necessary actions to
reform his war and legal policies in order to rule according to reason.

A positive answer to that question becomes increasingly unlikely when, in Passus IV,
Conscience begins to doubt the soundness of Reason’s advice to the King. Conscience’s
misgivings illustrate that, even if a drastic change in Edward’s governance is possible, it might
not be tenable, since just rule depends upon a just society. In Passus IV, Reason gives what many
have described as a continuation of Conscience’s prophecy in Passus III. However, it is truly an
iteration of and justification for his lack of mercy when “Som[me] radde Reson to hauw ruþe on
þat shreve [Wrong]” (B.IV.110). Reason explains that he will lack mercy until a long litany of
conditions is met. Reason employs repetition, claiming, “Til lords and ladies louen alle truþe”
(B.IV.113), “Til clerkene coueitise be to cloþe þe pouere and fede” (B.IV.119), and “Til
Bisshopes Bayardes ben beggeris Chaumbres” (B.IV.124). Reason names all of the ways in
which the people of the realm must alter their behavior in order for him to show mercy. Reason’s
conditions are extremely strict, and Conscience warns the King, “but þe commune wole assente /
It is [wel] hard, by myn heed, herto to brynge it, / [And] alle youre lige leodes to lede þus euene”
(B.IV.182-184). The King insists that he will still obey Reason, but his last line is a somewhat foreboding endorsement of the King’s new ruler: “goddes forbode [he faile]!” (B.IV.194). Reason’s purist moralistic reign may indeed fail without the support of the people, who could always rebel or find ways around the King’s court. Of course, we never find the success of the King and Reason’s partnership because Will wakes up five lines later. Reason’s riddle, “For Nullum malum man mette wip inpunitum / And bad Nullum bonum be irremuneratum,” a play on the motto “Let no evil go unpunished and no good unrewarded,” is essentially the same as the promise of the pardon that Truth sends to Will in Passus VII. Donald Howard has argued that the pardon confounds both the priest and Piers Plowman because, “It is for perfect, not for fallen men.”50 It appears that only the Second Coming of Christ could fulfill Conscience’s prophecy, since, even if the King were to attempt to follow Reason, he governs an imperfect kingdom.

Conscience’s ambiguous prophecy of the Davidic king therefore confronts at the level of government what the rest of Piers Plowman confronts at the level of the individual—the matter of how and if it is even possible to do well, better, or best when one knows that perfection is not possible and sin is inevitable. Conscience outlines the best way to rule, but cannot assure us that a real king is capable of following this advice in the face of his own corruption and that of his subjects. The prophecy touches upon the central tension of the work: can individuals and communities begin to approach perfection, even if it is occasionally flawed, or are they doomed to live in a sinful society until God intervenes? This tension within the work is what has led scholars such as Morton Bloomfield and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton to identify Conscience’s

prophecy as Joachimist. Joachim of Fiore believed that there would be a final, third age of history before the apocalypse in which humans would live in an ideal Christian manner. Conscience’s prediction of a reign of David/Reason easily resembles a pre-apocalyptic Age of the Holy Spirit in the Joachimist tradition. However, one does not need to look to Joachim of Fiore’s obscure and heterodox apocalyptic doctrines to find Langland’s inspiration for his description of Davidian Christian king. This figure abounded in English political prophecy, and Langland invokes him to cast doubt on the government’s ability to fulfill the hopes that he represents. Langland is less preoccupied with advancing a specific theological doctrine of the end times than he is with questioning the ability of individuals and nations to approach and abide by the ideals that the Holy Church claims to uphold, namely “true,” in an age increasingly motivated by monetary wages. Counterbalancing this awaited King figure, who may be human or divine, is the title character, Piers Plowman, who is at once human and divine but also living by his labor in perfect poverty. In this sense, Langland appears to be questioning the king-as-savior narrative while providing his own alternate hero who provides a connection between earth and heaven.

**Clergie’s Prophecy: Clerical Reform From Within**

Clergie’s prophecy in Passus X of the B version of *Piers Plowman* harkens back to Conscience’s prophecy of Passus III by predicting the coming of a savior king who can ambiguously symbolize either the King of England or Christ himself. In this case, Clergie predicts the coming of a king who will return England’s religious orders to their original,

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51 See Kerby-Fulton, *Reformist Apocalypticism*, 171-172. Kerby-Fulton concedes that she is dealing in the realm of speculation. Of her Joachimist reading of the prophecy, she says, “If this reading is correct (and we have no way of knowing whether it is or not), then all the symbols would be somehow associated with the saving of mankind from tribulation and death” (172).

52 For more on the relative obscurity of Joachim of Fiore in relation to other teachings on apocalypse, see Emmerson, “‘Yemen to Rede Redels?’” 53-54.

53 For more on the Trinitarian view of history see Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy*, 18-19, 129-132, 135-144.
uncorrupted states. This prophecy, like Conscience’s previous one, illustrates reformist actions that the king should ideally take while ultimately posing doubts that he can or will take them. Langland once again turns to the method of juxtaposition to illustrate all that is flawed with applying the idealistic, nationalistic rhetoric of political prophecy to the real world of vice which Piers Plowman satirizes. Clergie’s speech preceding the prophecy and Scripture’s observations on kingship and wealth following it diagnose the problems inherent in relying upon a corrupt monarchy to regulate the corrupt religious orders. Langland uses popular prophecy combined with popular rhetoric for monastic reform in order to characterize the sorely misplaced trust upon which these royalist discourses are founded. While Clergie endorses and hopes for clerical reform at the national level, his ultimate solution in the face of crippling national moral stasis is that of self-correction at the individual level.

Clergie’s prediction of the king who will bring about clerical reform marries prophetic political propaganda to more specific contemporary legislation related to the endowments of monastic orders. Clergie foretells:

Ac þer shal come a kyng and confesse yow Religiouses,
And amende Monyals, Monkes and Chanons,
And puten [hem] to hir penaunce, Ad pristinum statum ire;
And Barons wiþ Erles beten hem þoruþ Beatus virres techyng;
[Bynymen] that hir barnes claymen, and blame yow foule:
Hij in curribus et hij in equis ipsi obligati sunt.
And þanne Freres in hir fraytour shul fynden a keye
Of Costantyns cofres [þer þe catel i Inne]
That Gregories godchildren [vngodly] despended.
And þanne shal þe Abbot of Abyngdoun and al his issue for euere
Haue a knok of a kyng, and incurable þe wounde (B.III.322-332).

This prophecy is inspired by the same traditions of political prophecy that informed
Conscience’s prophecy. Versions of the Merlinic “Last Kings of the English” in the Eulogium
Historiarum chronicle, contemporary with Langland’s composition of the B version, describe a
king named Sextus, the Leopard, who symbolizes Edward III.54 The prophecy is primarily war
propaganda, predicting the Leopard’s conquering of France. However, it goes on to describe how
he will reign over the world and free the Holy Places:

Multa capit medio voluntans sub fine resumet
Orbemn subvertet, relicko clerumque reduct
Ad statum primum semi renovat loca sancta
Hinc terrena spuens, sanctus super ethera scandit.

[In the middle he will conquer much, turning towards the end; in
the remainder he will overthrow the world, he will lead the clergy
back to their original state; in the half he renews the Holy Places:
thence, rejecting earthly things, he ascends, blessed, above the
heavens.] 55

54 By the time that Langland had written the B version, Edward III had died, and Richard II had been crowned, but
his references to political prophecy are still those related to Edward III, since chroniclers had yet to develop a
coherent tradition of prophetic propaganda devoted to Richard at the very beginning of his reign. This was
especially the case because Edward, the Black Prince, had been his father’s heir apparent until his sudden death in
1376. Works such as The Prophecy of John of Bridlington had formulated predictions around hopes for the Black
Prince’s future reign, but Richard was not yet featured in such prophecies because no one had expected him to be
king.

55 Eulogium Historiarum, 417. Translation quoted in Coote, Prophecy and Public Affairs, 75. For more information
on the prophecies of the Sextus Leopard, see Coote, Prophecy and Public Affairs, 114-115.
Clergie’s prophecy of the king who will lead the clergy back to their “prisitinum statum ire” (B.X.325) echoes the popular prophecy of the Leopard king who would lead the clergy back to their, “statum primum.” In the condensed account of Clergie’s prophecy, reassigned to Reason in the C version of Piers Plowman, Langland makes it apparent that this is the popular prophetic tradition with which he is working. Reason describes, “Ac ar that kyng come, as cronicles me tolde, / Clerkes and holy kyrke shal be clothed newe” (C. V.179). The “cronicles” to which Reason refers are those like the Eulogium Historiarum that contain the Merlinic prophecy of a king who will bring about general clerical reform. Clergie’s prophecy of the coming king, like that of the Leopard, speaks of a king whose actions will somehow lead the clergy to generally reform themselves the way that he will also lead the Jews and Saracens to convert.\(^{56}\) However, Clergie’s prediction also points to a more specific legislative action that the King could take—a reformed endowment redistributed to monks and friars alike.

Clergie’s prophecy makes allusions to specific legislative politics regarding the redistribution of endowment which looks to the intervention of the monarchy to change the current state of the religious orders. Referring to endowments, Clergie foretells, “And þanne Freres in hir fraytour shul fynden a keye / Of Costantyns cofres [þer þe catel is Inne] / That Gregories godchildren [vngodly] despended” (B.X.330). Here, “Gregories godchildren” are the British monks, first established by Pope Gregory. These monks, Clergie claims, have “[vngodly] despended” the riches that they have been given. “Constantyns cofres” refers to the “Donation of Constantine,” which the emperor purportedly bequeathed to Pope Sylvester and his successors. Rhetoric in favor of clerical disendowment often invoked this tradition of Constantine because it

\(^{56}\) Both the Leopard prophecy and Conscience’s prophecy contain the rhetoric of a bloodless conversion. Of Sextus, the Eulogium says, “Acon Jerusalem leopard posse redempte” [Acre and Jerusalem will rejoice to return to the cult of the faith]. Eulogium Historiarum, 418-419. Translation quoted in Coote, Prophecy and Public Affairs, 115.
portrayed the government as the source of the clerisy’s wealth.\textsuperscript{57} If an emperor had originally donated the money, presumably, the current king (as his successor of via \textit{translatio imperii}) has every right to govern how that money was distributed and spent. Clergie does not endorse complete disendowment. Instead, his prophecy describes a plan for redistribution that involves giving the friars some of the monastic endowment. This was one of many solutions to clerical reform being discussed publicly at the time when Langland was writing the B version. In 1371, some friars put a petition before the English Parliament, asking them to appropriate funds from clerical orders and distribute those funds to the friars.\textsuperscript{58} While some friars argued that they were simply more deserving of the money, Clergie seems to point to the funding as a way to prevent the friars from begging—something which Dame Study has just complained about their doing in the previous speech.\textsuperscript{59}

Although \textit{Piers Plowman} launches much criticism of corrupt friars who beg and steal work from other clerics, support for guaranteed, albeit modest, funding for all clergy is also a recurring theme in the text. Piers himself claims that poor hermits “shul haue payn and potage and [a pitaunce biside], / it is an vnresonable Religion þat haþ riȝt noȝt of certain” (B.VI.150-151). Furthermore, in the C-text’s condensed retelling of this prophecy, Reason says:

\begin{verbatim}
Freres in here fraytour shal fynde that tyme
Bred withoutenbeggyng to lyue by euere aftur
And Constantyn shal be here cook and couerour of here churches,
For the abbot of Engelonde and the abbesse his nese
Shal haue a knok vppon here crounes and incurable the wounde (C.V.173-177).
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{58} See Kerby-Fulton, \textit{Books Under Suspicion}, 4.
\textsuperscript{59} For arguments of friars who supported endowment of friars \textit{instead of} monks, see Scase, \textit{Piers Plowman and the New Anti-clericalism}, 100.
Here, Langland makes the aspects of redistribution in Clergie’s prophecy even clearer:

“Constantyn,” symbolizing the king and his government, will provide for the friars so that they can live “withouten beggyng” (C.V.174). Anima provides more support for reorganization of monastic endowment in Passus X, also referring to the “Donation of Constantine”:

When Costantyn of curteisie holy kirke dowed

Wiþ londes and ledes, lorshipes and rentes,

An aungel men herden an heigh at Rome crye,

“Dos ecclesie þis day haþ ydronke venym

And þo þat han Petres power arn apoisoned alle”…

Takeþ hire lands, ye lords, and letēþ hem lyue by dymes (B.X.558-560, 563-564).

Here, Anima argues for total disendowment, something that no other character in Piers Plowman does. This is, perhaps, a more draconian solution than that which Clergie’s prophecy foretells.

After all, not every character in the work has the same opinion on how to approach the problems facing the world. Nevertheless, both Clergie and Anima make it clear that the monks’ endowments have prevented them from tending to their original charitable purposes. Clergie’s prophecy of a king who would redistribute the wealth of the monasteries to include the friars therefore appears to be a solution that Piers Plowman’s audience is to take seriously as an ideal outcome.

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60 This reattribution and alteration of Clergie’s prophecy is most likely cautiously worded in order to soften Clergie’s more forceful predictions of disendowment, made dangerous since the various threats to the monks in the Rising of 1381. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton has argued that Langland significantly revised many parts of the C version of Piers Plowman as a reaction to the rebels’ appropriation of his poem. See Kerby-Fulton, Books Under Suspicion.

61 Sixteenth-century readers did, however, see Clergie’s prophecy as a foretelling not only of the disendowment but the dissolution of the monasteries. This was one of the reasons that Piers Plowman was so popular in sixteenth-century England—because readers saw the book as genuinely prophetic of events over a century in the future. See Scase, Piers Plowman and the New Anti-clericalism, 85. A closer reading of Clergie’s words indicates only that the King will provide for the friars, not that he will disendow the monasteries. Only through conflating Anima’s preaching with Clergie’s prophecy can one arrive at the pro-Tudor conclusion that Langland both advocated and predicted the disendowment of English monasteries.
The dialogue surrounding the prophecy, however, casts doubt upon the practicality of having a king institute this solution. Presumably because his prophecy has just painted the monarchy in such a positive, reformist light, Will asks Clergie, “Thanne is dowel and dobet…dominus and knyȝthode?” (B.X.335). Scripture immediately interjects:

I nel noȝt scorne…but scryueynes lye,

Kynghod [and] knyȝthod, [for auȝt] I kan awayte,

Helpeþ noȝt to heueneward [at] oone [y]eris ende,

Ne richesse [ne rentes] ne Reaute of lorde (B.X.337-340).

Since Will’s question is prompted by the prophecy, Scripture’s retort, although technically about Do-Well and Do-Better, is also a commentary on the prophecy. If kings and their knights are solely motivated by money, how can they be the proper agents to reform the greed of the monastic orders and friars? This comment reminds readers of Clergie’s speech before the prophecy addressing the importance of self-correction before the correction of others. Clergie quotes Matthew 7:3, “Qui[d] consideras festucam in oculo fratri tu, trabem in oculo tuo non vides? [Why seest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye; and seest not the beam that is in thy own eye?] (B.X.268). Clergie thus emphasizes the particular importance of self-reform when it comes to those who preach, advising, “Forþi, ye Correctours, claweþ heron and correcteþ first yowselue” (B.X.289). Clergie’s lesson sets up his subsequent prophecy because it establishes the particular need of those in religious offices to reform themselves before preaching to others. Scripture’s comment illustrates, however, that the same standards apply to the king. If those who correct others must correct themselves first, how can the nation count on the king, who “Helpeþ noȝt to heueneward [at] oone [y]eris ende” (B.X.339), possibly be the appropriate candidate to redistribute the wealth of the monastic orders?
The sharp retort that Scripture delivers to Will also, through irony, draws attention to the other possible candidate for the king in the prophecy, Christ himself. Despite the fact that Will had asked if Do-Well and Do-Better were “dominus and knȝthode,” Scripture rebukes him for supposing that “kynghod and knȝthode” might bring about the reform suggested in the prophecy. Will’s identification is itself ambiguously formulated, since “dominus,” even more explicitly than “king” can refer to either an earthly lord or the heavenly Lord. If “dominus and knȝthode,” refers to the Lord and his angels, Will is correct (even if unaware of it) in assuming that they can enact the change predicted in Clergie’s prophecy. As with Conscience’s prophecy, these predictions could also be a foretelling of Christ’s Second Coming, in which he returns to judge and punish everyone, including the clergy. Langland makes this possible interpretation clear by having Clergie predict as part of this prophecy, “Ac er þat kyng come Cayn shal awake, / Ac dowel shal dyngen hym adoun and destruye his myȝte” (B.X.334-335). This reference to Cain appears to be a reference to the Anti-Christ, whom the archangel, Michael, will conquer before the Second Coming.

Like Conscience’s prophecy, Clergie’s predictions are a stern warning for reform in the face of judgment either on earth or in heaven—perhaps on both. Although the prophecy is another about the King, it is truly the clergy which the prediction warns through the instrument of the King. The prediction that “Barons wiþ Erles beten hem þoruȝ Beatus virres techyng” (B.X.326) refers very dramatically to the possibility that not only the King but the lords will join in overthrowing and punishing the clergy for their greed—a threat reinforced by Anima’s later prediction that, “If knyghthod and kynde wit and þe commune [and] conscience / Togideres loue leelly, leueþ it wel, ye bisshopes, / The lordship of londes [lese ye sul for euere]” (B.XV.553-555). While Clergie’s prophecy casts doubt on the certainty that the King’s guidance could bring
about such a reform, it alludes to the much more certain Last Judgment, in which all of the
members of religious orders will need to atone for their sins.

The ambiguity of the prophecy speaks to both communal and personal reform,
demonstrating the latter to be more reliable than the former. Just before his prophecy, Clergie
emphasizes the importance of personal salvation in the face of communal sin, arguing, “For
goddess word wolde noȝt be lost, for þat wercheþed euere; / [Thouȝ] it auailled noȝt þe commune
it myȝte auaille yowselue” (B.X.277-278). In having the personification of Clergie deliver this
warning specifically to the clergy, Langland reinforces this goal of self-reform. Whereas the
prophecies of authors like John Gower and Christine de Pizan warned royal leaders to make
specific reforms, Langland’s mode of prophecy, not commissioned or patronized by a courtly
audience, has less immediate political ends. It functions instead as satire, diagnosing the most
endemic and therefore least curable societal flaws. Each prophecy, delivered in a spirit of hope
for reform, ultimately questions how possible that reform is at the societal level. However, hope
does remain in these predictions for the actual coming of Christ, who is the only figure who can
feasibly fulfill them. In this way, the prophecies remind the reader of societal ills while
encouraging him or her to personally overcome these flaws at the individual level in order to
achieve salvation at the time of Judgment.

Ymaginatif as Prophetic Author

In order for Will, and by extension the audience, to truly comprehend salvation from his
confusing visions, Langland very briefly provides the narrative with an authorial, interpretive,
prophetic figure in the form of Ymaginatif. By allowing the mental faculty responsible for
visions to articulate the vision’s meaning, Langland can maintain his depiction of himself as a
humble everyman, struggling along with his audience to predict what they need to do in order to
enter heaven. Essentially, Ymaginatif fulfills the more authoritative prophetic authorial functions that Will, as peer to his reader, cannot. As both Morton Bloomfield and Alistair J. Minnis have noted, Ymaginatif, the mental faculty responsible for producing images, would have been the authority responsible for producing the images in Will’s dream. In this sense, Ymaginatif is the author of the work, and he therefore steps into the role of the prophetic analyst. Because he strategically appears after a dream-within-a-dream, he is the one character other than Will who analyzes any of the dreams that make up the poem. Ymaginatif serves as a prophetic coach for the struggling prophet, Will. The result of Ymaginatif’s analysis is to keep Will, and by extension the reader, in his or her place—to remind them of all that is unknowable and to teach them how to proceed in salvation despite that.

Initially, after his second vision, Will is a fairly competent reader, able to piece together the most critical messages of his visions, even when he lacks all of the facts. At the end of Passus VII, Will first claims that he did not understand his vision of Piers Plowman and the pardon that he tore apart. He then dismisses the dream entirely, saying, “I haue no sauour in songewarie for I se it ofte faille” (B.VII.154). However, he begins to reflect on “How Daniel diuined þe dre[mes] of a kynge” (B.VII.158). He also remembers how Joseph had a dream and “Thanne Iacob iugged Iosephes sweuene” (B.VII.167), predicting his reign in Egypt. Inspired by Daniel and Jacob’s examples, Will then declares, “Al þis makeþ me on metels to þynke” (B.VII.173). Will goes on to interpret his dream despite the information that he lacks. He claims that he loyally believes in pardons because the Pope has the power to grant them. However, “to truste [on] þise triennials, trewely, me þynkeþ / It is noȝt so siker for þe soule, certes, as is dowel” (B.VII.185-186). Will concludes that, although he cannot discredit pardons (because that would discredit the Pope), it is

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still much safer to focus on Do-well than to rely upon a pardon. Here, Will is an exemplary reader, coming to conclusions about how to proceed despite the knowledge that he does not have (whether or not pardons truly pardon). Not nearly as impressive as Daniel or Jacob in his skills of interpretation, he is nevertheless able to glean this divine meaning from his dream and is, in that sense, a prophetic figure, able to predict the best path to salvation.

In his next vision, Will ceases to be this insightful. Throughout his third vision, from Passus VIII-XII, Will models a particularly bad form of disbelieving readership. He is a poor interpreter of his own dream, particularly because he attempts to argue with the various authorities he encounters. In his quest to find Do-Well, Will questions a group of friars as well as Thought, Kynde, Wit, Studie, Clergie, Scripture, Lewte, and Reason. Finding all of their answers unsatisfactory, Will bickers with them instead of listening to them. This begins immediately in the first passus of the vision, when Will asks the friars where Do-well is and they claim that he dwells with them. Will says, “’Contra!’ quod I as a clerc and comsed to disputen...” (B.VIII.20).

Although critics debate the precise nature of Will’s (and by extension, Langland’s) education, Will’s use of the word “as” emphasizes that Langland is speaking outside of his station, “as a clerc.” 63 He is in over his head, using the Latin terms of formal dispute presumably without having the training to do so. Here, Will argues that because the friars, like all men, must sin, Do-well cannot possibly live with them. His purism prevents him from understanding what the friars are attempting to tell him. They compare sin to waves that toss the soul, but stress that charity is the ship that prevents one from being engulfed entirely. Despite a fairly straightforward explanation with helpful imagery, Will misses the point but begins to notice that the fault is with his own level of understanding: “’I haue no kynde knowing,’ quod I, ‘to conceyuen [þi] words /

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Ac if I may lyue and loke I shal go lerne bettre” (B.VIII.57-58). While Will was once fairly adept at interpreting visions in which he did not have all of the facts, he now finds himself making rash accusations in the face of his shortcomings.

Throughout the third vision, Will continues to argue with authority figures, pointing out the inconsistencies in their rhetoric. He once again uses the language of *disputatio*, this time against Scripture herself when she claims that the rich cannot enter heaven: “‘Contra!’ quod I, ‘by crist! þat kan I [wiþseye], / And preuen it by [þe pistel þat Peter is nempned]: / That is baptizd beþ saaf, be he riche or pouere” (B.X.349-351). Scripture goes on to refute Will’s argument, but he cannot keep up. He simply complains, “This is a long lesson…and litel am I þe wiser” (B.X.377) and then speaks at an even greater length than Scripture about various theological issues of salvation that confuse him. Here, Langland has Will raise the complaints that one might anticipate of a contentious reader. Will’s inability to understand his teachers is, at times, ironic since they explain themselves fairly well. His primary fault, however, is his attitude toward learning. When he does not understand his teachers, he assumes that they are incorrect.

Dame Studie complains about men whose attitudes closely resemble Will’s within the third vision:

I haue yherd heij[e men etynge at þe table
Carpen as þei clerkes were of crist and of hise myȝtes,
And leyden fautes vpon þe fader þat formed vs alle,
And carpen ayein cler[gie] crabbed wordes:
“Why wolde oure Saueour suffer swich a worm in his blisse
That bi[w]iled þe woman and þe [wye] after,
Thoruȝ whic[h werk and wil] þei wente to helle,
And al hir seed for hir synne þe same deep suffrede?

Here lyeþ youre lore,” þise lordes gynþ dispute,

“Of þat [ye] clerkes vs kenneþ of crist by þe gospel:

_Filius non portabit iniquitatem patris & c._

Why shoulde we þat now ben for þe werkes of Adam


These hypothetical men, mocked by Studie, closely resemble Will. They use scripture to dispute with people in holy orders and assume themselves to know better than the authorities. They also raise questions that any reader (who is, after all, represented by Will) has likely pondered: Why would God allow the snake into the garden in the first place? Why punish all of humanity with original sin just for the transgressions of Adam and Eve? After her complaint, Studie makes it clear that she was referring to Will’s behavior, advising him, “Ymaginatif herafterward shal answere to [youre] purpos.” (B.X.119). Here, Studie defines Ymaginatif as the faculty which can best resolve Will’s theological questions.

When Will wakes from his dream within the dream of his third vision, Ymaginatif is there to help him interpret it. Ymaginatif is strategically positioned to be within the outer dream, as an allegorical personification, but also the person whom Will sees after the inner dream.

Medieval theories of cognition define the _virtus imaginative_ (imaginative power) as a faculty that aids reason and memory. Richard of St. Victor describes how the imagination can aid individuals who are not yet capable of understanding spiritual matters with reason: “And so it is þat þof al a mans soule may not ȝit gete þe lyȝt of goostly knowyng in þe reson, ȝit it þinke þ it sweet to holde þe mynde on God & goostly þinges in ymagynacioun.”64 Albertus Magnus argues that

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imagination, the ability to compose vivid visual images, is a useful mnemonic device and therefore helpful in aiding audiences in following sermons. Ymaginatif appropriately embodies these aspects of the mental faculty, using various images to aid Will in understanding the major questions that he had proposed in his dream. For instance, Will had, within his dream, argued to Scripture that “Arn none raþer yrauysshed from þe riȝte bileue / Than are þise [kete] clerkes þat konne manye bokes” (B.X.463-464). Ymaginatif refutes Will’s anti-intellectual assumption by comparing an educated man and an uneducated man who have fallen into sin to a man who can swim and a man who cannot swim who have fallen into the Thames. The educated man, like the man who knows how to swim, can best find his way out. Likewise, Ymaginatif uses the example of a flightless peacock, weighed down by its feathers, to explain to Will why the wealthy cannot enter heaven, even when they are baptized. These examples aid Will in comprehending all of the questions that had previously troubled him, and for the rest of the poem, he no longer disputes with the various figures whom he meets.

Visual examples are certainly not exclusive to Ymaginatif. Many of the figures that Will meets, including those with whom he argues in the third Visio, use imagery to aid them in teaching. For instance, the friars attempted to explain how Do-Well can dwell with sin by using the example of the tossing ship. Part of why Will can learn from Ymaginatif is that, in the world of the allegory, Ymaginatif is the faculty which Will is now using. Therefore, Will is suddenly using his newfound sense of Imagination to consider issues that he had only hitherto examined with Reason. Imagination is what allows Will to understand concepts that cannot be explained by Reason alone. One of Will’s most burning questions is why great pre-Christian thinkers, like Aristotle, are in hell. Ymaginatif explains of Aristotle:

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Wheiper he be saaf or nost saaf, þe soþe woot no clergie,
Ne of Sortes ne of Salomon no scripture kan telle.
Ac god is so good, I hope þat siþþe he gaf hem wittes
To wissen vs [wyes] þerwiþ þat wiss[en] to be saued—
That god for his grace gyue hir soules reste,
For letted men were lewed yet ne were lore of hir bokes.” (B.XII.270-276)

Ymaginatif offers an imaginative answer to the problem of salvation. Although we cannot know what happened to Aristotle and the other “righteous heathens” after death, he suggests that we can imagine that God has taken care of them. As Alistair Minnis puts it, “Ymaginatif has provided plausible hypotheses rather than necessary truths.” As a superior interpreter of visions, Ymaginatif builds on the skills that Will previously demonstrated when explaining the meaning of his dream of the pardon. Will can use his imagination to dispel his doubts and choose the best course of moral action, thereby prophetically reflecting on his dream in order to prepare himself for the future of his soul’s salvation. Through his trials in becoming a dream interpreter in the tradition of Daniel or Jacob, Will functions as a model reader for his audience, coached by the superior prophet, Ymaginatif.

Not only is Ymaginatif a prophetic instructor for Will; he is also an authorial proxy for Langland. Will’s interaction with Ymaginatif allows him to defend his profession as a writer of an entertaining, vernacular religious text. In their brief discussion of Will’s occupation, Langland illustrates that just as Ymaginatif supplements Reason, Piers Plowman supplements Holy Scripture. In the most overt meta-commentary of Piers Plowman, Ymaginatif scolds Will for his writing:

And þow medlest þee wiþ makynge and myȝtest go seye þi suater,

And bidde for hem þat ȝyueþ þee breed, for þer are bokes y[n]owe
To telle men what dowel is, dobet and dobest boþe,
And prechours to preuen what it is of many a peire freres. (B.XII.16-19)

By having Ymaginatif question Will as to why he continues to write a vernacular work in the style of diversionary lyric poetry about salvation when “þer are bokes y[n]owe” and preachers, Langland gives himself a chance to defend the theological merits of *Piers Plowman* from within. Will strategically turns to Cato to first defend his writing: “Caton conforted his sone þat, clerk þouȝ he were, / To solacen hym som tyme; [so] I do whan I make: / Interpone tuis interdum gaudia curis” (B.XII.21-23). By invoking Cato, Will not only defends the importance of literature that “confort[s],” but also refers to a text which is itself supplementary to the Psalter. Young medieval students, many on the path to the priesthood, would uniformly begin their studies by reading *puerilia* comprised of Cato’s *Distichs* alongside the *Psalms*.67 Theologians such as Hugh of St. Victor considered these proverbial texts a necessary step on the path to understanding more intellectually challenging theological works.68 By citing Cato to defend reading non-scriptural literature, Will implies that his writing, like Cato’s, is supplementary to the Psalter. This is borne out by Langland’s writing style which, more than any other vernacular medieval text, mingles in quotation after quotation from the Bible. In fact, Ymaginatif’s rebuke to Will to “seye þi sauter” is something of an ironic joke since Will, whom Ymaginatif now subtly acknowledges to be the same as the author of *Piers Plowman*, is clearly extraordinarily well-versed in Scripture. Ymaginatif’s manner of critiquing Will therefore defends him as it ostensibly challenges him. Best of all, it gives Will, speaking for the first time in *Piers Plowman* overtly as the author, the impetus to articulate the purpose and value of his book.

67 Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 121.
68 Ibid., 121.
Will argues that *Piers Plowman* is not only supplementary to other theological material; it also fulfills a need that other Biblical and para-Biblical literature has yet to do. Will argues, “If þer were any wight þat wolde me telle / What were dowel and dobet and dobest at þe laste, / Wolde I neuere do werk” (B.XII.25-27). Here, Langland combines Will’s position as both the allegorical personification of his entire audience and the singular author of the work. When he claims that if there were anyone “þat wolde me telle” (emphasis added) what Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best are, he is speaking as his audience, and when he says, “Wolde I neuere do werk” (emphasis added), Will/Langland’s argument is that if all of the other theological literature and preaching were sufficient to satisfy the human will for salvation, he would personally give up pursuit. However, the public is in need of his guidance. Ymaginatif’s subsequent guidance of Will ironically models the very purpose of poetry that Will has just defended to Ymaginatif. Passus XII is therefore a moment where Langland uses two authorial proxies to confront one another and arrive at a defense for his book—the sort missing due to the absence of a formal prologue.

Like Christine de Pizan and her various intellectual female guides, Langland uses his prophetic guide, Ymaginatif, as an authorial proxy. However, the comparison is quite temporary and ultimately reinforces all that Will, and by extension, Langland, does not know. In this way, Langland exploits the ambiguous authority of the prophetic subject position. Exegetes reading the Bible worked on the supposition that those who wrote scripture had only a limited understanding of the truths that they revealed. For instance, Augustine claimed that Ezekial “took signs of spiritual things for the things themselves, not knowing what they referred to.”⁶⁹ Authors such as John Gower and Christine de Pizan represent themselves specifically as analytical prophets like Daniel and the Sibyl—prophets famous for interpreting others’ dreams.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Nichols, “Prophetic Discourse,” 51-76, 57.
instead of serving as mere vessels. Langland likewise mentions the examples of Daniel and Joseph but does so when Will is struggling to interpret his dream. Will is someone who aspires to be a Daniel or a Joseph, but has limited knowledge upon which to base his speculations. Will’s limited ability to understand his visions makes him simultaneously more akin to a prophet like Ezekiel, unaware of the full implications of his predictions, while also akin to his reader, attempting to unpack the various meanings before him. Langland takes on the persona of the simple reader both to distance himself from his sharper political critiques and to emphasize individual salvation above all other reform. When Will resolves not to worry about whether or not the pope’s pardons are truly backed by God and instead “to truste [on] þise triennials, trewely, me þynkeþ / It is noȝt so siker for þe soule, certes, as is dowel” (B.VII.185-186), Langland avoids making an outright statement against the pope but also reminds his reader to focus on that which he or she can change (his or her own soul) and to avoid reflecting too much on the unchangeable. While it is tempting to view the latter intention as a cover for the former, especially in light of the role that Piers Plowman played in some of the rebels’ rhetoric surrounding the Rising of 1381, Will’s foolhardiness and Ymaginatif’s patient correction of his overreaching seem to testify to the sincerity of both motives for Will’s approach to prophecy.70 Furthermore, the skepticism behind the two prophecies of the Davidic king who will come and reform the courts and the clergy seem to point to a cynicism that any real reform is possible or probable. Langland avoids speaking from the vantage point of the enlightened prophet not only because it would not be politically wise, but because, frankly, there would be no point.

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70 For readings of connections between Piers Plowman and the Rising of 1381 see Justice, Writing and Rebellion.
Chapter 4: Margery Kempe’s Parody of the Self-Doubting Visionary

Christine de Pizan and John Gower both primarily represent themselves as interpretive prophets rather than passive ones. Drawing from the traditions of the sibyls and Daniel—prophets who elucidate the meaning of dreams—they imply that their privileged access to knowledge of the present and future originates from their learned analytical skills. By explicating complex visions and texts in unexpected ways, Christine and Gower emphasize their authoritative centrality to the meanings of their texts and encourage readers to defer to their judgments, particularly those relating to choices which will impact future events. Christine and Gower’s prophetic authority is clerkly although hardly secular. The secular, as Charles Taylor has argued, depends upon the absence of “some notion of ultimate reality.”¹ To speak with a voice that is prophetic is, by its very nature, to claim access to a monolithic reality. While Christine and Gower compare themselves to Christian prophets (or prophets incorporated into the Christian tradition, in the case of the sibyls), their means of accessing ultimate reality are not religious; they are the product of study and social station. Both writers demonstrate aptitude with their encyclopedic knowledge of literature while also using their personal experience, as widow and citizen, respectively, to claim a special relationship to truth. The prophetic authority that Margery Kempe exercises comes from a much more mystical tradition. She does not claim prophetic insight through her learnedness; she claims it through direct and emphatically non-literary inspiration from God.

The introduction of The Book of Margery Kempe (1436) makes it apparent that Kempe is both the author of the text and illiterate. By warning the audience, “Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr, euery thing aftyr oþer as it wer don, but lych as þe mater cam to þe creatur [Margery] in

mend whan it schuld be wretyn” (5), the introduction establishes that Kempe’s story has been taken down from dictation by a scribe but that it has hardly been revised, even to account for chronological accuracy.² As Lynn Staley has noted, a number of medieval authors, including Chaucer, employed scribes and explicitly mentioned them in their texts. Therefore, the presence of a scribe is hardly cause to discount Kempe’s role in the composition of her text.³ Kempe emphasizes her illiteracy by repeatedly mentioning how she was dependent upon confessors to read to her. *The Book* tells of how Margery “herd neuyr boke, neyþyr Hyltons boke, ne [B]ridis boke, ne Stimulus Amorys, ne Incendium Amoris, ne non other that euyr sche herd redyn þat spak so hyly of lofe of God but that sche felt as hyly in werkyng in hir sowle” (39). Here, not only does Kempe stress her inability to read; she also draws attention to the ways in which her book and inspiration mirror those depicted in the works of Walter Hilton, Bridget of Sweden, as well as the *Stimulus Amoris*, and *Incendium Amoris*. Margery hears these texts in a way that the majority of her audience cannot because the texts remind her of her own, lived experience of the same phenomena. Thus, while Gower and Christine represent themselves as having superior knowledge to their readers because they, as authors, are more well-read, Kempe represents herself as having superior knowledge to her readers because she, as a visionary, has experienced

² Meech and Allen, eds., *The Book of Margery Kempe*. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
³ See Lynn Staley Johnson, “The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe,” *Speculum* 66.4 (October 1991): 820-838; Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994). A.C. Spearing, noting that “much of the language [in *The Book of Margery Kempe*] appears clerkly” (93) rather than colloquial, has more recently argued for a returned attention to the role of the scribe in composing the work, claiming that understanding of the text “would surely be improved by an experimental envisaging of *The Book of Margery Kempe* as *The Book of Robert Spryngolde About Margery Kempe*” (97). See A.C. Spearing, “Margery Kempe,” in *A Companion to Middle English Prose*, ed. Anthony S.G. Edwards (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2010): 83-97. Since the extent of scribal involvement in composition is impossible to determine, I defer to *The Book’s* representation of Kempe as the person who dictated and therefore authored its content. Since so much of the text appears to have been structured in reference to other holy works and not simply based upon experience alone, I also accept and adhere to Staley’s distinction between Kempe, the author of the text, and Margery, the main character of the work and a construction of Kempe’s.
something that they can only read about.

Margery’s lack of formal education is part of what gives her access to prophetic authority. Christ tells Margery, “I fare with the myth of my God heed; it may not be seyn wyth mannys eye, and ȝyt it may wel be felt in a sympl sowle wher [me] likyth to werkyyn grace, as I do in þi sowle.” (182). It is Margery’s “sympl sowle” which allows God’s grace to work through her. The popular literary tradition of sacred biography in which Kempe situates her own life story often depicts God’s messengers as artless feminine vessels, who can experience God’s presence and accurately report it precisely because of their lack of cunning. For instance, Bridget of Sweden’s confessor, Mathias, writes of her, “It was an unlearned woman who set this forth… a humble widow, she would not have been able to make it up even had she wanted to, since she was a simple and gentle soul” (I.Prol.41). According to Mathias, because Bridget lacks the learning to fabricate her visions, they appear all the more reliable. Hildegard of Bingen once described herself in a letter as ego paupercula feminea forma, “I, a poor little figure of a woman.” Barbara Newman notes that Hildegard’s self-representation as a Marian vessel was successful in promoting her as a prophet because, “It followed that, if only the humble could be exalted, women had a paradoxical advantage.” This is why the voices of female visionaries and mystics were so prominent in political struggles of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; they spoke from a position so marginalized within church bureaucracy that they could convincingly

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critique church practices without political motive. Male clerics who wanted to critique their peers, superiors, and rivals found themselves turning to prophetic women for validation. For instance, Pope Boniface IX found it advantageous to affirm Bridget’s canonization at the Council of Constance in 1415 because her predictions legitimized his right to the papal office during the Papal Schism. At a time when two men had claimed the right to be pope, Bridget of Sweden’s marginal voice, which spoke for God outside of established ecclesiastical channels, was one which could convincingly grant authority, even to the church’s highest leader.

Paradoxically, these marginal prophets, who claimed direct access to God rather than access mediated by the Church, had to turn to the Church for validation. Church officials spoke and wrote extensively on the dangers of unchallenged visionaries who, at best, might misunderstand the meaning behind a vision or, at worst, might mistake a vision sent by the Devil for a vision inspired by God. In his *De probacione spirituum* (1415), Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, argues for increased scrutiny of Bridget of Sweden’s *Revelations* on the following grounds:

Omnis doctrina mulierum, maxime solemnis verbo seu scripto,

reputanda est suspecta, nisi prius fuerit…et multo amplius quam

doctrina virorum. Cur ita? Patet ratio, quia lex communis nec

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7 A variety of factors contributed to the rise in feminine mystical spirituality in the fourteenth century. Most historians agree that after the Gregorian Reform had so thoroughly excluded women from ecclesiastical involvement, many turned to mysticism because it was a form of spirituality which, by its very nature bypassed clerical authority. Furthermore, the longstanding, largely negative associations between the feminine, the bodily, and the emotional, supported by Aristotelian scientific theory, made it easier for women to claim affective inspiration from God. Finally, as Dyan Elliott has argued, the plague, the papal schism, and the Hundred Years War led to “a vacuum of institutional authority” which some very prominent female visionaries helped to fill through their marginal authority. For instance, the Roman papacy was able to cite the prophecies of Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena as divine proof of the Avignon papacy’s illegitimacy. Likewise, Charles VII turned to Joan of Arc to authorize him as the true ruler of France. See Dyan Elliott, “Seeing Double,” 26; Bynum Walker, “Women Mystics in the Thirteenth Century,” 170-246.

8 See Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*, 44.
qualiscumque sed divina tales arcet. Quare? quia levius seductibiles, quia pertinacius seductrices, quia non constat eas esse sapientiae divinae cognitrices.

[Every teaching of women, especially that expressed in solemn word or writing, is to be held suspect, unless it has been diligently examined, and much more than the teaching of men. Why? The reason is clear; because not only ordinary but divine law forbids such things. Why? Because women are too easily seduced, because they are too obstinately seducers, because it is not fitting that they should be knowers of divine wisdom.]

While holy women could claim that their inspiration came from mental and spiritual simplicity, the Church could also claim that that very simplicity left them vulnerable to misunderstanding their own visions. As prophecies and visions of holy women became more popular, laws mandating the thorough discernment of prophecies and visions began to proliferate across the continent and especially in England. In 1393, the Pope condemned the Beguines on grounds of their unregulated visions; in 1402, English Parliament passed legislation against prophecies spread by poets, musicians, and vagabonds; and in 1406, the York Minster clergy mandated the largest campaign of visionary discernment ever set forth in England—essentially conducting an inquisition of anyone claiming divine inspiration. Because of the intense legal scrutiny of visions, especially written ones, almost all of the late medieval texts relating the lives and

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revelations of lay holy women included prologues or appendices by a high ranking, male, clerical confessor, who assumed responsibility for compiling the work and verifying the validity of the visions reported therein. For instance, the Dominican scholar, Thomas de Cantimpré, wrote the life of Christina Mirabilis; Cardinal Jacques de Vitry composed Marie d’Oignies’s vita, and Catherine of Siena dictated most of her Dialogues to the Dominican friar, Raymond of Capua.

In many ways, the confessor was more trouble than he was worth when it came to authorizing visionary writing. The visionary, through his or her direct communication with God, bypasses the authority of the Church as a necessary intermediary between heaven and earth. The confessor’s very presence in visionary texts calls the authority of mysticism into question by indicating that mystics have no way of understanding their own visions and require the liaison of the Church to adequately communicate with God. Furthermore, to the readers of holy women’s lives, confessors’ rhetoric had the potential to cultivate skepticism even as it attempted to abate it. In his *Epistola solitarii ad reges*, Alfonso of Pecha outlines his methodology for discerning spirits—the act by which one tells if visions are divine or demonic—using Bridget of Sweden as an example. His treatise is instructional, inviting readers to view Bridget’s visions with his eyes.\(^{11}\) Alfonso teaches readers the difference between spiritual and intellectual visions before relating Bridget’s visions and declaring them to be entirely holy. This method of writing assumes a skeptical audience. Rather than encouraging them to dismiss their skepticism, this rhetoric

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teaches them to be skeptical as the confessor and compiler would be in order to arrive at a positive verdict for the holy woman at hand. Of course, this was not always the reader’s response. Another, more powerful and learned cleric could always come along and claim that the original confessor had misread the visions and approved them too hastily. For instance, Jean Gerson wrote De probacione spirituum, his treatise on discernment, specifically to discredit Bridget of Sweden’s visions. In doing so, he used Alfonso’s very own examples and terms from the Epistola solitarii. Gerson refuted the case for Bridget’s status as a true visionary, fueling the intense debate of her reaffirmed canonization at the Council of Constance that year.

Most scholars have understood The Book’s continual references to the books and lives of other holy women, particularly Bridget of Sweden, as a tactic for presenting Margery’s case for sainthood. For instance Carolyn Dinshaw has observed, “Canonization was perhaps not absent from the minds of the men who wrote down [Kempe’s] book as she dictated it, shaping her reminiscences to fit into a long line of holy women.” However, Kempe’s references to these holy women illustrate her efforts to authorize them and not the other way around. God tells Margery, “Ryght as I spak to Seynt Bryde, ryte so l speke to þe, dowyr, & I telle þe trewly it is trewe euery word þat is wretyn in Bride’s boke, & be þe it xall be knowyn for very trewth” (47). God’s assertion that Margery will prove Bridget to be a true saint may seem like a form of Kempe’s self-aggrandizement, but The Book’s relentless attention to the issue of validating visions illustrates that Kempe took this claim seriously. One of The Book’s central preoccupations is the defense of visionary spirituality as a self-legitimizing form of divine

13 See Colledge, “Epistola solitarii ad reges” 19-49; Anderson, The Discernment of Spirits, 201; Voaden, God’s Words, Women’s Voices, 42; and Elliot, “Seeing Double.”
prophecy. Saint Bridget of Sweden’s book was indeed in need of defense when The Book of Margery Kempe was written in 1436. At that time, the Council of Basel (1431-1449) was debating the authenticity of Bridget’s visions. The council ultimately concluded that her book, Revelations, contained 123 errors, thus overruling the written testimony of Bridget’s confessors.15 The Book of Margery Kempe strategically circumscribes the Church’s regulatory authority over visionary inspiration and texts. Presenting God as a superior alternative to earthly confessors, Kempe represents the process of visionary inspiration as one that is self-authorizing. Despite God’s regular reassurances of Margery’s autonomous power to understand her own visions, The Book stages repeated episodes of Margery’s excessive doubt, satirizing the trope of skepticism in popular works of and about holy women.

Margery’s Scribe and the New Tradition of Faithful Discernment

The Book begins with an account of its unusual composition, which explicitly conveys Margery’s scribe’s lack of editorial revision in asserting that, “Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr, euery thing aftyr oþer as it wer don, but lych as þe mater cam to þe creatur [Margery] in mend whan it schuld be wretyn” (5). Far from an authorial figure, Margery’s scribe is primarily a reader, who begins by re-writing the portion that Margery originally dictated to an Englishman living in Germany. Margery’s priestly scribe believes that only “special grace” (4) will allow anyone to read the book. He has trouble understanding it not only because “it was neiþyr good Englysch ne Dewch” (4) but also because he lacks faith in Margery due to the there being “so euel spekyng of this creatur” (4). He begins to avoid her and put off writing her book “for cowardyse” (4), yielding his obedience to public opinion rather than obedience to God. As he

listens to the people who are “so evel spekyng” of Margery, he perceives Margery’s book as “so evel wretyn” (4). It is only when Margery comes to this priest praying “to God for hym & purchasyn hym grace to reden it & wrytyn it also” (5) that he, “trustynge in hire prayers, be-gan to redyn þis booke, & it was mych mor esy, as hym thowt, þan it was be-forn-tym” (5). It is the priest’s trust that grants him the grace to read and understand Margery’s book.

In introducing her book by describing her scribe’s struggle with doubt, Kempe dramatically reinvents the skeptical tradition of discernment inherent in the framing narratives of most holy women’s *vitae* and revelations. Many of these works similarly describe the priest who wrote them but grant him much more agency in the composition of the work. For instance, in her *Revelations*, Christ instructs Bridget, “Entrust all of the books of revelations to my bishop, the hermit, who will write them, and elucidate the hidden matters, and preserve the orthodox meaning of my inspiration.”¹⁶ Christ himself is cautious that Bridget will misinterpret or misunderstand the messages with which he has entrusted her and therefore appoints a secondary, learned, interpretive prophet in his process of divine revelation. Bridget’s confessor must find what is “hidden” in her testimony and make sure that it conforms to teachings that are “orthodox” within the Church—meaning that the true meaning of Bridget’s visions are not only elusive to her but also that they must be judged in accordance to their agreement with already known holy doctrine. This relationship between confessor and visionary essentially prevents her from delivering any original prophecy. God can only communicate through holy women what is already known to the Church, making revelation merely an act of affirmation. Margery’s scribe deviates from this model by reading rather than composing. His task is not to revise Margery’s visions into ecclesiastically palatable episodes but rather to understand her visions as they are,

¹⁶ Quoted and translated in Voaden, *God’s Words*, 79.
even if it means changing his own perspective in order to read her works properly.

Kempe repeatedly depicts her scribe as a reader who must learn to be faithful in order to read accurately. Kempe begins Chapter 62 by drawing a strong connection between those who believe in her visions and those who are particularly accomplished in textual interpretation. When “seyd summe men þat sche had a deuyl wythinne hir” (150), a friar and a bachelor of law come to Margery’s defense. Kempe describes their credentials extensively, calling one “a worshepful doctowr of diuinite, a White Frer, a solem clerk and elde doctowr, & a wel a-preyld, whech had knowyn þe sayd creatur many ȝerys of hir lyfe & beleuyd þe grace þat God wrowt in hir” (150) and the other “a worthy man, a bacheler of lawe, a wel growndyd man in scriptur & long exercisyd” (150). Kempe clearly mentions the qualifications of the holy men in order to boost her own authority, but she also implies that it is this learned authority which allows them to recognize her holiness. In the same passage, Kempe speaks of the friar at her church, who she is careful to note, “was as þat tyme neyþyr bacheler ne doctowr of diuinyte” (152). Rather, he had “gret fauowr of þe pepyl” (152). He condemns Margery’s gifts of tears, “neyþyr ȝeuyng credens to þe doctowrys wordys ne the bachelerys, trustyng mech in þe fauowr of þe pepil” (151). Here, Kempe directly contrasts the doubt of the lewed friar and public with the belief of the other learned holy men. Scholarly skill allows them to break with the crowd in order to interpret and believe what is true. Kempe implies that knowledge of holy works allows people to understand God’s meaning. While social paranoia produces doubt, true learning and understanding of God lead one to believe in what is true.

Within the same chapter, Kempe returns to the connection between her scribe’s faith and his reading ability and in doing so, models a new process of discernment based upon belief rather than doubt. She describes how, fearing Margery’s tears, much of the town of Lynn turned their
backs on Margery “& durst not wel spekyn wyth hir, of þe whech þe same preyste was on þat aftirward wrot þis boke” (152). Here, Kempe abruptly reintroduces her scribe as a member of a thoughtless crowd. However, because he “red of a woman clepyd Maria de Oegines…& of þe plentyuows teerys þat sche wept” (152-153), the priest “louyd hir mor & trustyd mor to hir wepyng & hir crying þan euyr he dede be-forn” (152). Kempe specifically describes how her scribe read the nineteenth chapter of Marie d’Oignies’s vita, wherein a priest who bans Marie from sobbing in his church is then himself afflicted with tears through God’s intercession and believes. As Roger Ellis has noted, the story that the priest reads of Marie d’Oignies meaningfully echoes Kempe’s priest’s own story not only because it involves a holy woman with a gift of tears but because it involves a priest who goes from disbelief to belief.\footnote{Roger Ellis, “Margery Kempe’s Scribe and the Miraculous Books,” in Langland, the Mystics and the Medieval English Religious Tradition: Essays in Honour of S.S. Hussey, ed. Helen Phillips (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 161-176.} However, unlike the priest of Marie d’Oignies’s story, Margery’s eventual scribe first learns to understand her spiritual gifts through the act of reading. In this way, Kempe affirms the role that sacred biographies play in public faith. The priest is fully capable, without the help of divine intervention, of understanding and believing in Margery’s gifts. He must merely educate himself.

Kempe’s unnamed priest-scribe’s choice of reading material is firmly within the mystical spiritual tradition. After finishing Marie d’Oignies’s life, he goes on to read The Prykke of Lofe, the Stimulus Amoris, the Incendio Amoris, and the treatise of Elizabeth of Hungary. In contrast, Alfonso of Pecha, who wrote Bridget of Sweden’s Revelations, presents a series of criteria that he used to evaluate her visions, asserting, “The ferst most serteyn sygne is yat ye vision is of god when yat persone seinge visions is really meke and levis undir obediens of sum spiritual fadir.
Whereas Alfonso’s very first criteria in validating a visionary is her willingness to submit herself to the authority of the Church, Margery’s scribe’s criteria comes from his willingness to submit himself to the authority of the works of holy women and mystics. In this way, Kempe uses her scribe to outline an alternate mode of discernment, where the onus is upon the discerner to approach the visionary with faith and the willingness to study rather than the other way around.

God as Margery’s Internal Confessor

The primary reason that Kempe can get away with presenting a text that validates its scribe instead of a scribe who validates the text is that she effectively dispenses with the need for a priestly confessor within The Book. Rather than a single confessor, the Book describes Margery as visiting a string of holy men for validation. Margery spends the first part of Book I shoring up high profile ecclesiastical endorsements, even including that of Thomas Arundel, the strict archbishop famous for writing the 1407 Constitutions which narrowly defined heresy as the act of reading the Bible in English or preaching in public without Church license. Margery continually shows her life and visions to any church official that she can find, both in England and abroad. While some believe her, others strongly doubt her. The preponderance of clerical authorities serves a double function. It validates Kempe’s text, but it also undermines the credibility of the notion of a confessor who can discern visions. As Sarah Beckwith has noted,

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18 Epistola solitarii ad reges, Appendix fol. 252v.: 7-10. The appendix cites the Middle English translation of the work.

19 It is easy to see why Kempe would advocate such a method for understanding her book since, as Gail McMurray Gibson, Karma Lochrie, and others have noticed, so many of its descriptions and episodes are adapted from other holy texts. See Gail McMurray Gibson, “St. Margery: The Book of Margery Kempe,” in The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 47-66 and Karma Lochrie, Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991). This is also how some of Kempe’s earlier readers apparently consumed her text. The fifteenth- and sixteenth-century notes written in the margins of the only extant full manuscript of The Book point out connections to works on affective piety such as the Inecendium Amoris and The Pricke of Love.
every new perspective on Margery’s inspiration demonstrates that priests’ opinions are too differing to be a viable measure of visionary authenticity. Through her obsessive quest for church approval, Margery illustrates that very approval to be meaningless. Kempe’s only true confessor is God himself, who can explain the visions that Margery is too simple to understand. Because this process occurs in her mind, Kempe essentially constructs an intellectual masculine element of herself that allows her to speak freely without risking heresy. In this way, Margery manipulates gender to affirm not only her own authority but also the authority of all female visionaries to speak for God without the intercession of the Church.

God represents himself to Margery as her only true confessor. When the anchorite who discerns her visions is no longer available to her, God declares, “Dowtyr, I am mor worthy to thy sowle þan euyr was þe ankyr & alle þo whech þu hast rehersyd er alle þe werld may be, & I xal comfortyn þe myself, for I wolde spekyn to þe oftynar þan þu wilt latyn me” (169). God insists that he is the only advisor that Margery needs, and Margery clearly does need him. Kempe depicts Margery like other holy women—as an untaught feminine vessel who requires a male authority figure to explain her feelings. However, Margery’s aid comes from God himself. Kempe describes how, “Sum-tyme sche was in gret heuynes for hir felyngys, whan sche knew not how þei schulde ben vndirstondyn…tyl God of hys goodnesse declaryd hem to hir mende. For sumtyme þat sche vnirstod bodily it was to ben vnirstondyn gostly” (220). God plays the part of the confessor, explaining to Margery the intellectual spiritual meanings of the visions which she first received only at a basic, bodily level. This process takes place internally, since God declares her feeling to “hir mind.” In a similar instance, Kempe relates how Margery “had

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sumtyme so gret trubbl wyth swech felyngys whan it fel not trewe to hir vndyrstanding, that hir confessowr feryd þat sche xuld a fallyn in dyspeyr þerewyth. And þan aftyr hir turbele & hir gret fere it xuld ben schewyd vn-to hir sowle how þe felyngys xuld ben vndyrstondyn” (55). Here, Kempe mentions the presence of an earthly confessor who “feryd” presumably because he had no power to comfort Margery by properly interpreting and teaching her the meaning of her visions. Contrasting her ineffectual earthly confessor with her true spiritual confessor, Kempe illustrates that only God can understand and comfort her. Again, the process occurs internally instead of externally, because God shows the meaning “unto hir sowle.”

This process, when considered from a practical standpoint, is needlessly circuitous. God gives visions to Margery and then, in a later step, explains to her how to understand these visions. From a logical perspective, God might have just as easily had the second conversation with Margery and left out the first, more confusing one. However, this method of understanding God in segments is a vestigial feature of the genre of feminine spiritual writing, which requires a male confessor. Kempe’s construction of visionary authority which does not require an external, male, clerical interpreter results in this strangely inefficient process of divine communication whereby God both delivers and explains Margery’s visions. Although Kempe essentially trades one authorizing male figure, the confessor, for another, God, the latter is subsumed within her own mind and soul. God makes this abundantly clear, telling Margery that she should never doubt her visions or desire them to be discerned by a confessor because “euery good thowt & euery good desyr þat þu hast in þi sowle is þe speche of God” further clarifying, “I am as an hyd God in þi sowle.” (204-205). Like Christine de Pizan, Kempe does not claim an authority which is wholly feminine or masculine but one which is a combination. As a woman, she is pure and innocent enough to receive the Holy Spirit. Yet, as a woman with an internal masculine voice
guiding her, she has the authority to understand her own visions.

_The Book_ continually parses out the difference between Margery, the submissive, unknowing feminine vessel and God, the internal, masculine confessor, especially when he appears to her. At times, when God is not immediately and obviously present, Margery trusts and integrates God’s “hidden” confessor’s voice into her own thought process. When she is in Rome, Margery visits Saint Bridget’s chapel on her feast day. Margery observes a storm and its effects and then actively interprets its meaning:

> Owr Lord sent swech tempestys of wyndys & reynes and dyvers impressyons of eyrs þat þei þat wer in þe feldys & in her labowrys with-owntyn-forth wer compellyd to entyr howsys in socowryng of her bodijs to enchewyn dyuers perellys. þor swech tokenys þis creatur supposyd þat owr Lord wold hys holy Seyntys day xulde ben halwyd & þe Seynt had in mor worship þan sche was at þat tyme (95).

Not only does Margery not distrust her feelings or fear the tempest; she interprets the manifestation of divine will through her own reason. The mention of laborers in the field not only emphasizes how strong the storm is but how little Saint Bridget’s feast day is being observed. The church had dictated that no work or court sessions could be held on public feast days or Holy Days. This inspired scrutiny among fifteenth-century theologians such as Jean Gerson and Nicolas de Clémanges, who were concerned that feast observations were an undue burden on poor field laborers.\(^\text{21}\) Since Kempe specifies that Margery discerned the purpose of the

\(^{21}\) See Edith Cooperrider Rodgers, _Discussion of Holidays in the Later Middle Ages_ (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 81-85.
storm “through such tokens,” it appears that she is speaking of the laborers fleeing the fields. Here, Margery uses logic to make the assumption that God is using the storm to stop the labor that offends him on Saint Bridget’s feast day. In the manner of a prophet like Daniel, who can read the writing on the wall and interpret how it relates to God’s anger with Belshazzar, Margery can read God’s signs of vengeance upon Rome—a vengeance that he has exacted because they have failed to appropriately honor St. Bridget. Trusting Margery and recognizing their fault, the people of Rome ask her to intercede with God and apologize on their behalf. God grants Margery’s request to stop the storm.

This episode illustrates more than one way in which Margery Kempe defends Saint Bridget’s honor. She preserves the celebration of her feast day, but more importantly, she depicts a method of self-discernment that affirms the independent authority of visionary experience. God promised to Margery earlier in Book I: “Ryght as I spak to Seynt Bryde, ryte so I speke to þe, dowtyr, & I telle þe trewly it is trewe every word þat is wretyn in Bride’s boke, & be þe it xall be knowyn for very trewth” (47). God indicates that he speaks to Margery in the same manner that he spoke to Bridget, implying that Bridget, like Margery, could discern her own visions. When God says that, by Margery, Bridget’s book will be known as true, Kempe alludes to the fact that, keeping Margery’s model of effective self-discernment in mind, rulings like those against Bridget’s Revelations at the Counsel of Basel are baseless. In this way, Margery Kempe exploits the gendered visionary/confessor relationship to affirm the independence of mystical spirituality from Church rule.

Readers have long noted Margery’s ability to defend herself from the charges of high ranking ecclesiastical authorities, particularly in her trial before the Archbishop of York.22

22 See Staley, Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions, 120-121;
Margery is able to defend herself so brazenly in public because she is so submissive to God privately. God has assured Margery, “Drede þe nowt, dowtyr, for þow schalt have þe vyctory of al þin enmys. I schal ȝeve the grace j-now to answer every clerke in þe love of God” (17).

Margery’s public persona, authorized by God, is not a full integration of God’s masculine voice into her weak, feminine one. Hardly a virago, Margery speaks with the simplistic, kind assuredness of someone who has been well-advised. Her seemingly artless argumentation outsmarts her spiritual opponents in a way that a more apparently complex rhetoric could not. For instance, when a priest accuses her “Now wote I wel þat þu hast a deuyl with-inne þe” (85), Margery replies, “Ser, I hope I haue no deuyl with-inne me, for, ȝyf I had a deuyl with-in me, wetyth wel I schuld ben wroth with ȝow and, sir, me thynkyth þat I am no-thing wroth wyth ȝow for no-thyng þat ȝe can don on-to me” (85). This causes the priest to leave Margery “wyth heuy cher” (85). Her language is unsophisticated and unassuming, prefaced with phrases like, “Ser, I hope.” Margery speaks with this simplistic tone in nearly all of her public dialogues. This is not the voice of a woman thinking up clever quips on the spot so much as it is the voice of a feeble woman, so surely guided by God that she happens to say the very thing that will silence and even humiliate her opponents. The priest cannot argue with Margery’s response, which sweetly insists that she cannot possibly be inhabited by the Devil because she still views him with Christian charity despite his oppression. Margery’s sweet and simplistic delivery thinly masks a sharp, biting critique—authorized because it comes from her male advisor, God. In this case, behind her kind admission that she is not angry with the accusing priest is the more sophisticated and subversive point that Margery would know if she were inhabited by the Devil because she is capable of discerning herself by observing signs like the absence or presence of anger.
Kempe’s Artless Devil

Kempe makes a strong case for self-discernment largely because *The Book* repeatedly and resolutely represents the Devil as an artless and straightforward tempter, not a clever, deceitful one. For instance, when Margery visits Julian to “wetyn yf ther wer any deceyte” in her visions (18.959-960), Julian responds not with a pronouncement but with instructions. She advises Margery to “be obedient to the wyl of owyr Lord God and fulfyllyn with al hir mygthys whatevyr he put in hir sowle yf it wer not ageyn the worship of God and profyte of hir evyn christen, for yf it wer, than it wer nowt the mevyng of a good spyryte but rathyr of an evyl spyrit” (I.18.962-965). Julian does not tell Margery that she should only believe her visions when they conform to official Church doctrine but simply that she should follow her visions as long as they do not go against the worship of God and the profit of Christians. This gives Margery a great deal more leeway than a traditional confessor’s scrutiny.

Furthermore, by saying that visions that do go against the worship of God are “nowt the mevyng of a good spyryte but rathyr of an evyl spyrit,” Julian implies that Margery can easily discern between true and false visions herself by simply assessing their content with her conscience. Julian does not warn Margery of the “evyl spyrit” so much as she warns Margery that fearing evil spirits may prevent her from being obedient to the will of God. She cautions Margery of the perils of doubt: “He that is evyrmor dowtyng is lyke to the flood of the see, the which is mevyd and born abowte with the wynd, and that man is not lyche to receyven the gyftys of God” (I.18.970-972). The true danger, Julian argues, is not being misguided by the Devil but being so doubtful that one closes one’s self off to God. In this way, Julian characterizes disbelief as the ultimate form of disobedience. Julian reassures Margery that she will be able to know that her visions are holy because, “The Holy Gost mevyth nevyr a thing ageyn charité” (I.18.965),
stressing the validity of a simple process of self-discernment. Margery will know if her visions are false because they will be inconsistent with basic Christian concepts of charity.

Julian is the ideal herald for this message because she is a woman who simultaneously holds institutional and visionary authority. To have a male confessor teach Margery that she does not need the external validation of a male confessor would be paradoxical. In having a fellow visionary deliver this message, Kempe can make a broader point about the ability of visionaries to judge the validity of their own revelations. While Julian’s appearance in The Book is often characterized as an attempt of Kempe’s to borrow Julian’s authority, the episode also effectively defends Julian as a self-authorizing visionary. As her work gained popularity in wider circles, most scholars agree that Julian strategically altered her Revelations of Divine Love in order to deemphasize what B.A. Windeatt has characterized as “the specialness of the author’s role in revelation.” Julian downplays her prophetic role and even disguises her gender in later revisions, distancing herself from the controversial visionary narratives of holy women circulating in England. While the works of more famous visionaries like Hildegard of Bingen were protected by papal approval, lesser-known, local holy women like Julian had to be cautious about claiming equal authority. Most likely aware of the scrutiny that Julian faced both during and after her lifetime, Kempe’s inclusion of Julian’s advice in The Book is as much a defense of Julian as it is a defense of Margery. This perspective affirms both Margery and Julian’s capabilities to discern their own revelations.

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24 For arguments that Julian’s revisions were based upon her awareness of wider circulation, see Vickie Jeanne Larson, “The Pious Fringe: Julian of Norwich’s Readers and Their Books, 1413-1843” (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2009).
25 Whether this defense of Julian is intended for the broader audience consuming her Revelations when Kempe was writing or whether it was intended for the Carthusian circles that already supported feminine mystical writings and
The self-discernment that Julian first sets forth to Margery subtly dismisses the threat of demonic visions so emphatically stressed by discernment proponents like Jean Gerson. These proponents considered the Devil a particular threat due to his cunning. The Constitutions of Thomas Arundel refer to the Devil as an “old sophister,” capable of “feigning vices to be virtues” and fooling people into believing false messages through false prophets and visionaries.\(^{26}\) Most *vitae* of holy women find creative ways to get around charges that prophetic messengers are subject to deception. Jacques de Vitry’s *Life of Marie d’Oignies* describes a priest who sees visions inspired by a demon. The demon presents himself “as though he were constant in truthfulness and, like a sophist…strive to obscure his falsehood.”\(^{27}\) Unlike the priest, Marie “perceive[s] the pretence of the cunning sophist” when he (the Devil) appears to her, doubting the vision and battling him with her prayers until he reveals himself. The demon explains to Marie, “I appear to many in sleep as Lucifer—especially to monks and religious.”\(^{28}\) In this episode, Jacques de Vitry presents Marie in the role of the discerner, unmasking the demon for the holy man deluded by his false visions. Jacques thus inverts the traditional roles of priest and female visionary, making Marie the voice of reason. Marie employs no process of formal logic or scriptural interpretation in order to detect the demon. Rather, her status as a divinely appointed visionary allows her to see the Devil in his true form in a way that priest cannot. In this way, Jacques de Vitry concedes the potential of deceptive visions but dismisses the possibility that Marie could fall prey to them, instead depicting those who normally act as


\(^{28}\) Ibid., 61.
discerners, the clergy, as the most vulnerable.

Kempe’s approach is not to imply that the clergy are vulnerable to demonic trickery but to deny the Devil’s cunning entirely. The Book gives little credence to the notion that the Devil can be artful or deceptive toward a holy visionary. Margery herself fears the influence of the Devil, but after God is exasperated by these fears in Chapter 59, he actually allows the Devil to haunt Margery for several nights so that she can learn first-hand the difference between divine and demonic inspiration. The Devil “daly[ies] unto hir with cursyd thowtys liche as owr Lord dalyiid to hir beforntyme with holy thowtys” (I.59.3422-3423). Sending her visions of naked priests, among whose genitals she must pick a favorite, the Devil illustrates the level of depravity of which he is capable.29 An angel explains to Margery that God allows the Devil to send her these visions “tyl thu belevyn that it is God which spekyth to the and no devil” (I.59.3446-3447). Kempe depicts a Devil whose visions are only misleading because they prey upon human desires, not because they could pass for actual holy visions. God illustrates to Margery that if she were being shown demonic visions, she would be sure of it because their content would be depraved. In this way, God builds upon Julian’s advice to Margery, teaching her the art of self-discernment. By denying that the devil can send convincing, seemingly virtuous dreams, Kempe can outline a straightforward, airtight method of self-discernment which requires no book learning or ecclesiastical understanding.

**Margery’s Parodic Self-Doubt**

Although Kempe sets up a method of self-discernment by depicting God as an internal confessor and the Devil as an artless tempter, her primary means of circumscribing the Church’s

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role in discerning visions is through Margery’s excessive doubt. Margery’s skepticism of her own visions parodies that of popular continental holy women, exacerbating and exposing all that is foolish about the constant policing of holy revelation. Self-doubt is a common feature of sacred biography. After first appearing to Bridget of Sweden in her *Revelations*, God chastises her, “Why were you afraid of my words? Why were you wondering whether they came from a good or an evil spirit? Tell me, did you find anything in my words that your conscience did not dictate to you? Or did I command you anything against reason?” (I.4.1) to which Bridget simply responds, “I was badly mistaken” (I.4.2). Here, *Revelations* is adhering to the same logic that Julian presents to Margery in *The Book of Margery Kempe*—that Bridget should be able to tell that God is speaking to her and not the Devil because he did not command her to act against her better judgment. Rosalynn Voaden has discussed the ways in which Alfonso attempts to depict Bridget as capable of understanding her own visions, arguing, “While [Bridget] is required to be submissive to the judgment of her spiritual directors, in order to reassure her judges she must also be capable of distinguishing an angel from a demonic illusion.” Alfonso’s narrative of Bridget’s revelations empowers Bridget to understand her visions, but only at the most basic level. For instance, when Bridget expresses concerns at having followed the advice of her confessor against her better judgment in *Revelations*, God responds, “I have been so much more pleased, that you have obeyed your director against your will, than if you had followed your will against his command.” When Bridget confesses to Christ that she struggles to obey her confessor, Christ responds, “I am present in him to whom you have been given to obey” (VI.xliii.93). In both of these instances, *Revelations* emphasizes that Mathias and Alfonso, as

Bridget’s divinely appointed confessors, have the true power to understand God’s will in a way the visionary, Bridget, lacks.

Self-doubt was a common rhetorical tool for reassuring an audience of the veracity of a holy woman’s revelations. Skepticism is particularly salient in the popular Liber Spiritualis Gratiae, or The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn, as it was titled in the Middle English translation. Mechtild of Hackeborn was a thirteenth-century mystic and Benedictine nun who lived in Helfra, Germany. Although there is no proof that Margery Kempe read Mechtild’s book, Karma Lochrie and Theresa A. Halligan have both provided support that Kempe could have had access to it through her visits to Syon Monastery and Germany.³³ Regardless of whether Mechtild was a direct influence on Kempe, Mechtild’s strategies for authorization further establish the trope of self-doubt in women’s spiritual writing, a trope of which Kempe was surely aware.³⁴ The Liber Spiritualis Gratiae was purportedly penned surreptitiously by two of Mechtild’s fellow sisters, a fact that upsets Mechtild until God reassures her that he intended for this to happen. Because the Liber Spiritualis was written by nuns rather than a male cleric, the book emphasizes Mechtild’s skepticism in order to compensate for the absence of a male confessor figure. During one of her earlier visions of Christ, Mechtild suspects that she is seeing a demon or a trick produced by a demon: “when this maydeng harde thes wordes in here sowle, sche dredde in awntere hit hadde bene some feynynge or deceyte of the feende.”³⁵ Immediately,

³⁴ As Hope Emily Allen notes, “In Lynn many literary and hagiographical reminiscences, which had come over the trade routes and the pilgrim routes, must have circulated among pious persons in the form of gossip” (liii). See Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, eds., “Prefatory Note,” in The Book of Margery Kempe, Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), liii-lxviiii.
³⁵ Theresa A. Halligan, ed., The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1979, 120.
though, “Oure lorde comforthed here ande sayde: ‘I am he whiche haffe sawhtelde the wrath of my fader in hevene, ande whiche haffe reconsylede man to God in myne blode.’”36 Mechtild believes that she does indeed see Christ, but this does not stop her from temporarily doubting future visions or suspecting other causes to distrust what she sees. During one vision of salvation, Mechtild fears to herself, “These be nowȝt þe words of God, botte happily thay bene the words of thyne sawle to comfort þyne sawle.”37 Mechtild does not fear demonic influence here but that her mind is inventing pleasurable visions of the afterlife to reassure itself. God allays her worries by telling her, “þay bene my wordys, for þyne sawle es myne sawle, and myne sawle es þyne sawlle.”38 In this way, Mechtild confronts a variety of skeptical readings of her own visions by adopting them herself.

Mechtild’s habit of doubting various visions at their onset only to be reassured by God, in turn, reassures the reader that the visionary did not accept each vision unquestioned. This tactic was enough to satisfactorily authorize Mechtild’s prophecies in the eyes of the Church. Despite the absence of a formal discerner within the narrative, Mechtild’s book did not face known censorship and went on to become one of the most popular holy lives in all of Europe.39 Halligan attributes this to the extraordinarily orthodox and apolitical nature of Mechtild’s prophecies: God’s revelations to Mechtild reiterate various church teachings, endorse the Benedictine rule, and emphasize the importance of monastic obedience.40 Furthermore, Mechtild never leaves her convent or even attempts to share her revelations with anyone but her fellow sisters. Temporary skepticism is therefore an effective means of self-authorization for such an orthodox prophet.

36 Ibid., 120-121.
37 Ibid., 224.
38 Ibid., 225.
40 Ibid., 55-57.
Kempe imitates the doubt of visionaries like Bridget and Mechtild but does so to the extent of absurdity. Unlike Mechtild, who voices her concerns only to be comforted by God’s reassurances, Margery repeatedly refuses to believe in the visions that God sends to her even after God’s assurances that they are true. Kempe makes it clear from the beginning that this is due to the rules of discernment endorsed by the Church—thus establishing that the Church is what prevents Margery from properly receiving the visions and predictions with which God has blessed her. When God tells Margery to take a ship to Rome, he reassures her, “Drede þe not, dowtyr, þer schal no man deyin in þe schip þat þu art in” (75), but Margery is “in gret heuynes & gret diswer” (76). Margery develops a course of action to respond to God’s orders: “ȝyf þu be þe spiryt of God þat spekyst in my sowle & I may preuyn þe for a trew spiryt wyth crowounsel of þe chirche, I xhal obey þi wille” (76). Here, Margery overtly endorses ecclesiastical measures of discernment, and God is offended, responding, “þu fondist me neuyr deceyuabyl, ne I bid þe no-thing do but þat whech is worshep to God & profyte to thy sowle ȝyf þu wilt do þer-aftyr” (76). God responds to Bridget and Mechtild with similar hurt feelings when each does not believe in him in the first moments of a visitation, but Kempe’s narrative describes God taking offense at Margery’s specific desire to seek Church approval of her visions—an entirely different matter. The Book acknowledges institutionalized doubt in a way that no other sacred biography does. By having Margery explicitly tell God that she cannot believe him until a priest has given her the approval to do so, Kempe exposes the excessive bureaucracy inherent in the Church’s stance on discerning spirits.

Kempe makes her subtle critique of compulsory probatio clear through God’s persistence and obvious frustration in his attempts to get Margery to accept his revelations. For instance, when Margery “had oftyn felyng” (171) that the former prior of Lynn would return, “Sehe wolde
3eve no credens þerto” (171). A discerning church official might have lauded Margery’s decision ignore her “felyng,” since the body is easily corrupted. Not willing to be ignored, God then sends a sweet smell to Margery and even explains its meaning to her: “Be þis swet smel þu mayst wel knowyn þat þer schal in schort tyme be a newe Priowr in Lynne, & that xhal ben he whech was last remownd þens” (171). Whereas Margery merely had a feeling before, God gives her a smell and his direct words to assure her that her feeling that the prior would return is a true prophecy. Nevertheless Margery still does not trust her that her communications with God are genuine. God attempts to reiterate his prediction, providing her with more specific details of the date: “Dowtyr, as loth as þu art to leuyn my steryngys, ȝet schal þu se hym of whom I schewyd þe be- forn Priowr of Lynne er þis day seuenyth” (171). God’s wording of “as loth as þu art” gives the distinct impression that he is growing impatient with Margery. Kempe then quite comically describes, “& so owr Lord rehersyd hir þis mater ech day þe seue-nyth tyl sche sey it was so in dede, & þan was sche ful glad & joyful þat hir felyng was trew” (171). Despite the fact that God visits Margery every day for a week to try to convince her to believe his prediction, she still will not believe it until it has already happened. Her disbelief negates the traditional purpose of a prophecy, which is to warn or prepare people—in this case, the priest who had asked Margery if she could tell him if his master, the prior, would remain in Lynn. Her “joyful” response to what she should have realized over a week beforehand emphasizes the foolishness of Margery’s doubt. Kempe goes above and beyond traditional skepticism of visionary texts, taking the self-doubting perspective to its most extreme end.

Kempe depicts God as being so bothered by Margery’s distrust that it actually causes him to remove his grace on occasion. She describes:
& as wel & as goodly owr Lord visityd hir on nyght as on day, 
whan he wolde, & how he wolde, & wher he wolde, for sche 
lakkyd no grace but whan sche dowtyd er mistroystyd þe goodness 
of God, supposyng er dredyng þat it was þe wyle of hir gostly 
enmy to enformyn hir er techyn hir oþerwise þan wer to hir gostly 
hele. Whan sche supposyd þus er consentyd to any swech thowtys 
thorw steryng of any man er thorw any euyl spiryt in hir mende þat 
wolde many a tyme a don hir left of hir good purpos, had þe 
mighty hand of owr Lordys mercy not withstande hys gret malyce, 
þan lakkyd sche grace and dezucyon & alle good thowtys & alle 
good mendys (201).

Because Kempe writes from the third-person, the narration carries an authority that lacks 
subjectivity on the surface. Here, Kempe outlines the message that the kind of doubt cultivated 
by ecclesiastical insistence upon proving visions leads to separation from God. Specifying 
multiple times that it was the fear of an “evyl spirit” that prevented Margery from understanding 
God, Kempe subtly points to critical entities like the Counsil of Basel or the discerners of York, 
who use fear of the Devil to cultivate suspicion toward the visions and prophecies of professed 
 holy women. Ironically, Margery’s fear and supposition that “hir gostly enmy” is truly behind 
the visions has itself been inspired “thorw any evyl spiryt in hir mende.” Thus, Margery’s fear of 
the influence of evil spirits is actually caused by evil spirits who want her to abandon her good 
works. In this way, Kempe levels the common charge that holy women are mislead by the Devil 
back at the skeptics themselves, arguing that it is their skeptical thoughts that are most likely

41 See Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, 98.
demonically influenced. Conversely, Kempe describes, “Whan sche beleuyd þat it was God & no euyl spiryt þat ȝaf hir so mech grace of deuocyon, contricyon, & holy contemplacyon, þan had sche so many holy thowtys, holy spechys, and dalyawns in her sowle techyng hir how sche xulde louyn God” (201). The omniscient narrative voice iterates that only belief and openness to God lead to grace.

Margery’s extreme doubt in her visions is precisely what leads her to needlessly seek out the approval of confessors, staging a direct conflict between Margery’s obedience to the Church and obedience to God. Throughout The Book, God speaks to Margery about his supremacy to her confessors. For instance, God tells Margery to go on pilgrimage to Rome despite the fact that her confessor has said that she does not need to go. God is careful to first praise Margery’s obedience to the Church, declaring, “I am wel plesyd wyth þe, dowtyr, for þu stondist vndyr obedyens of Holy Cherch & þat þu wylt obey þi confessowr & folwyn hys cownsel” (72). The Book’s message is not that confessors have no place in the lives of inspired individuals. However, God then clarifies, “Not-wythstondyng al þis, I comawnde þe in the name of Ihesu, dowtyr, þat þu go vysite þes holy placys & do as I byd þe, for I am aboue al Holy Cherch” (73).

Through God’s voice, Kempe clarifies that, although holy women should obey their confessors most of the time, they have license to disobey them because their orders come directly from God. God continually justifies disobedience to Margery. When the Bishop of Lincoln refuses Margery’s request for permission to wear the white garments of a virgin, God instructs Margery, “Sey hym, I xuld as wel han excusyd hym ȝif he had fulfyllyd þi wyl as I dede þe chyldren of Israel whan I bad hem borwe þe goodys of þe pepyl of Egypt & gon a-wey þerwyth” (35). God stresses that his direct instructions overrule the otherwise unbreakable laws of the Church. Just as the Jews were not wrongful in escaping from Egypt under God’s orders, the bishop would not be
wrong in bending the Church’s traditional rules on special costumes for Margery. Through this rather dramatic metaphor, God implicitly compares Margery to Moses. The bishop, like the “children of Israel” doubts the orders that he has been given because they seem to break the law. However, he is unaware that Margery, like Moses, delivers the message of a higher law because she is God’s own prophet. Kempe later alludes to this connection when she mentions that Margery once had “a staf of a Moyses ȝerde” in Jerusalem (118). Moses is famous not only for freeing the Israeli people from Egypt but also for giving them a new set of laws by which to abide, the Ten Commandments. Although Margery is hardly a lawmaker, God implies through this subtle comparison, that Margery, and by extension all women to whom he makes revelations, obey a higher law than that of the Church.

The end of Book I leaves its audience with a dark impression of Margery’s refusal to accept the higher law of God. The last chapter describes how, “Sum-tyme sche was in gret heuynes for hir felyngys, whan sche knew not how þei schulde ben vndirstondyn many days togedyr, for drede þat sche had of deceytys & illusyons” (220). Her “drede” comes from her extreme fear of not knowing whether her visions are genuine. Despite the fact that the chapter describes how “God of hys goodnesse declaryd [the meaning of the visions] to hir mende” (220), Kempe claims that “sche had no joye in þe felyng tyl sche knew be experiens wheþyr it was trewe er not” (220). This assertion relates back to Margery’s various refusals to believe God’s predictions or assurances until after they have already occurred—a nonsensical method of confirming prophecy. Karma Lochrie has postulated that this ending of Book I is Kempe’s way of defending the supremacy of bodily experience when establishing proof. Lochrie argues, “By testing her feelings against her experience—and against the text, since the mystic text is always
engaged in the act of self-verification—Kempe firmly positions truth in that experience.” Yet, this passage highlights the ways in which Margery doubts the truth of her visionary experience, only accepting prophecies after they have been confirmed by the actual events of history and not by her physical experiences of revelation. Here, Kempe does not emphasize what Margery knows through her lived revelatory experiences which are inaccessible to her readers. Instead, she highlights what Margery should know but refuses to understand, due to her ecclesiastically-endorsed fear. The last impression of Margery in Book I is of her dread—her lack of joy in God’s communication, which is entirely due to her internalization of the logic surrounding probatio. The transition between the two parts of The Book is ominous, rather than hopeful, dwelling on Margery’s deep unhappiness in her gifts.

**God Versus Margery’s Confessor**

Book II builds upon the theme of Margery’s doubt by staging an all-out battle between God and Margery’s confessor. Kempe illustrates how Margery’s adherence to Church pronouncements on the approval of divine visions, feelings, and commands, stands in the way of her obedience to God. While Margery waits for her daughter-in-law to be shriven, she claims, “Lord, ȝyf it wer þi wille I wolde takyn leue of my confessowr & gon wyth hir ouyr þe see” (225). Here, Margery seems to pick the most opportune time to ask God whether or not she should go to Germany because she is already in the church, where she can ask her confessor for permission to go. God does not respond with a clear answer about Germany but instead focuses on not involving her confessor in the decision at all: “Dowtry, I wote wel, yf I bode þe gon, þu woldist gon al redy. þerfor I wyl þat þu speke no word to hym of þis mater” (225-226). Most likely anticipating that Margery’s confessor will not want her to go, God commands her to avoid

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speaking to him about it. God seems affronted at the notion that Margery should have to ask her confessor for permission, since his is the final word. Margery, however, disobeys God’s request that she not involve her confessor, even repeating the language that she just used to ask God permission: “Syr, ȝyf ȝe wele biddyn me, I xal gon with hir my-self” (226). When her confessor tells her not to go, Margery prefers this answer, remembering her “gret perell” (226) on her last trip overseas. Here she appears to be the reluctant prophet, in the tradition of Jonah, who likewise preferred not to follow God’s orders to travel overseas to Ninevah. Although she is “comawndyd in hir hert for to gon ouyr þe see wyth hir dowtyr,” (226), she ignores the command and “excusyd hir-self to owr Lord in hir mend, seying, ‘Lord, þu wost wel I haue no leue of my gostly fadyr, & I am bowndyn to obediens. þerfor I may not do thus with-owtyn hys wil & hys consentyng’” (227). Not only does Margery violate God’s request not to involve her confessor, but she attempts to reason with God that her confessor’s command outranks his. This allows The Book to articulate precisely why a visionary’s obedience to a confessor should not be compulsory. If God requests something of which a confessor disapproves, God’s word should have supremacy in the mind of the visionary. Kempe articulates this through God’s outrage. He answers, “I bydde þe gon in my name, Ihesu, for I am a-bouyn thy gostly fadyr” (227). God’s words do not overtly disapprove of all confessors, but they do severely limit confessors’ jurisdictions.

Janette Dillon, Rosalynn Voaden, and Jane Chance have all emphasized Margery’s relative disobedience when compared to holy women like Bridget of Sweden. Margery, after all, disobeys her confessor’s commands and travels over the sea to Germany. However, what

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these critics are really noticing is the degree to which Kempe’s God requires Margery to be disobedient. Nowhere in *Revelations* does God ever ask Bridget to go against her confessors. *The Book* makes God the truly bold renegade against the Church—a sound decision, since he is the one figure who can convincingly challenge ecclesiastical authority. In contrast, *The Book* highlights Margery’s excessive obedience to the Church. Despite the fact that God has just reassured Margery that she does not need her confessor’s permission to go to Germany and that he would provide for her on her trip, Margery insists upon going to see a Grey Friar to ask his permission to travel. Margery seeks this friar out because God’s words to her, “Yf I be with þe, ho schal ben a-geyns þe?” (227) remind her of “þe cherch wher þe frer seyd þe sermown, a famowes man, & a gret audiens had at hys sermown. And many tymys he seyd þes wordys, ‘ȝif God be with us, ho schal be a-geyns us?’” (227). She begins to trust in God’s words because they remind her of something that a famous preacher said. Here, Kempe illustrates the ways in which Margery honors the Church over God, taking comfort in the worldly fame of certain priests instead of the actual word of God. Margery trusts the person citing God more than she trusts God himself. Margery tells the friar, “I was consentyd to do as I was meuyd in my spirit, & þis is to me gret drede & hevynes” (228). The dread which Kempe describes at the end of Book I returns, as she presents yet another episode of Margery’s distrust in her God-given feelings. The friar responds to Margery, “ȝe schal obey þe wil of God, for I leue it is þe Holy Gost þat spekyth in þow, & þerfor folwyth þe mevying of þowr spiryt in þe name of Ihesu” (228). This response echoes God’s own words to Margery, “I bydde þe gon in my name, Ihesu” (227). Yet, whereas God’s words of comfort fill Margery with fear, after speaking to the friar, ‘Sche was meche comfortyd with hys wordys & toke hir leue, goyng forth to þe see-syde wyth hir felaschip’” (228). It is the friar’s reassurances and not God’s that convince Margery to obey God’s commandments.
to her soul. One can almost imagine God in heaven rolling his eyes when, after he has told her that she does not need to ask a confessor’s permission, she asks two clerks’ permission.

Kempe makes God’s frustration with Margery’s lack of faith in him all the more apparent on her trip. Margery is still paranoid about her own visions and finds herself unable to accept them. She demands of God, “Sche we þu art sothfast God & non euyl spiryt þat hast browte me hedyr in-to þe perellys of þe see, whoys cownsel I haue trustyd & folwyd many ȝerys” (230). Margery’s words draw attention to the fact that she is not only doubting, despite continual assurance, that she should be traveling on the sea, but that she is doubting that the last several years of God’s counsel were even genuine. After all of the episodes in which God had to convince Margery that her feelings and visions of him were true, she is willing to dismiss them as the workings of an evil spirit. Hearing this, God “blamyd hir of hyr feerdnes” (230). God is extraordinarily hurt by Margery’s lack of faith, questioning, “Why dredist þe? Why art þu so aferd? I am as mythy her in þe see as on þe londe. Why wilt þu mistrostyn me?” (230). The reason for Margery’s distrust is apparent in her words. She has trusted the Church’s rhetoric of discernment too strongly. She prioritizes validation of her visions over her visions themselves and therefore remains paranoid at every turn. Margery may be able to verbally combat her opponents through God’s inspiration, but her greatest opponent is internal. Margery has failed to abandon the Church’s insistence upon discernment despite the fact that God’s words and actions prove it daily to be a false priority.

During Margery’s trip, she begins to learn to trust God again. He comforts her, “Why dredist þe? þer schal no man don non harm to þe ne to non þat þu gost with” (233). After this, Margery begins to convince the man who travels with her that God will protect them. When a large man with a weapon approaches them, the man accompanying Margery says to her, “Lo,
what seyst þu now?” (234). His words chastise her for her previous faith in their safety since that safety now seems to be compromised. However, Margery steadfastly responds, “Trust in owr Lord God & drede no man” (234). Kempe explicitly describes how Margery’s attitude toward her feelings and visions began to change. While sitting in a Church, God promises her “ful meche grace in þis lyfe & aftyr þis lyfe to hauyn joy & blysse with-owten ende” (245).

Margery’s response, rather than fear or dread, is simply trust; “Sche was so comfortyd in þe swet dalyawns of owr Lord þat sche myth not mesuryn hirself ne gouerne hir spirit aftyr hyr owyn wyl ne aftyr discrecyon of oþer men, by aftry þat owr Lord wolde ledyn it & mesuryn it hys-sel” (245). Here, Kempe seems to refer to the end of the conflict between Margery’s obedience to the Church and her obedience to God. Her use of the word “discrecyon” here is pointed because she refers to Margery’s constant need to affirm what God tells her with men trained in the arts of discretion. On this trip away from home, Margery is finally able to distance herself from the visionary skepticism that Church teachings had cultivated in her for her whole life.

It would seem, therefore, that the book ends triumphantly with Margery’s freedom from the Church’s needless strictures on her visionary experience. However, upon her return home, “sche obeyd hir to hir confessowr” whereupon, “He ȝaʃ hir ful scharp wordys, for sche was hys obediencer” (247). This is the very last image from Book II—Margery being scolded by a confessor to whom she once again swears her obedience. Margery’s return to her confessor ominously gestures to her return to self-doubt. This is confirmed by her final prayer, in which Margery pleads:

As wistly as it is not my wil ne myn entent to worschepyn no fals deuyl for my God, ne no fals feith, ne fals beleue for to han, so wistly I defye þe Deuyl, & al hys fals counsel, and al þat euyr I
haue don, seyd, er thouȝt, aftyr þe counsel of þe Deuyl, wenyng it
had be þe counsel of God & inspiracyon of þe Holy Gost. Yf it
hath not ben so, God, þat art inseare & knowar of þe preuyte of alle
mennys hertys, hafe mercy on me þerfor. (249)

It seems that Margery has learned nothing from God’s repeated pleas that she believe that his
visions are true, since she apologizes to him in case she has been inspired by the Devil all along.
In the end, Margery is an example of the pitfalls of blind ecclesiastical obedience. Kempe is best
able to critique the unnecessary strictures of submission and discernment by depicting a
protagonist who wholeheartedly endorses those structures. In making Margery the epitome of
skepticism, Kempe illustrates the alienation from God that occurs when one cultivates a tradition
of doubt surrounding divine communication.

**Parody and Feminine Authority**

Doubtful Margery and her faithful scribe represent alternate paths for *The Book’s* readers.
They are respective models of doubt and faith not only of Margery’s visions but of visionary
authority in general. While Margery dreads her visions, ultimately waiting for her predictions to
come true before believing in them, her scribe seeks wisdom by reading other visionary texts and
faithfully submits himself to study. Kempe’s depiction of the scribe’s study, based on faith, is
subversive of the tradition of *probatio*, based on skepticism. However, her depiction of the scribe
as the rational learned man, contrasted with Margery as the emotionally doubtful woman, also
conforms to standard gender tropes in sacred biographies. While Margery’s scribe does not in
any way correct her behavior, he does serve as a rational foil to her irrational disbelief. In this
way, Kempe tempers her subversion of ecclesiastical skepticism with a vehement, parodic
adherence to standard gender roles.
Parodic belief is often the safest way for medieval women to challenge authority. For instance, Christine de Pizan begins *La Cité des Dames* by challenging the anti-feminist tradition. However, she does so through her excessive belief. Christine reads *Les Lamentations de Malthéolus* but abruptly stops herself because “la matiere ne me semblast pas moult plaisant a gent qui ne se delittent en mesdit” (617) [the subject seemed to me not very pleasant for people who do not enjoy lies] (3). While Christine can safely offer her genuine reaction to Malthéolus, a famously misogynist writer whom Christine herself deems “de nulle autorité” (617) [of no authority] (3) and “traitte en maniere de trufferie” (618) [intended as a satire] (4), she is less safe in critiquing the greater *auctores* like Jerome or Ovid, to whom she only implicitly refers in her subsequent reflection:

Mais la veue d’icelluy dit livre…ot engendre en moy nouvelle penssee qui fist naistre en mon couraige grant admiracion, penssant quelle puet estre la cause, ne dont ce puet venir, que tant de divers hommes, clerces et autres, ont esté, et sont, sy enclins a dire de bouche et en leur traittiez et escrips tant de diableries et de vituperes de femmes et de leurs condicions. (617-618)

[Just the sight of this book…made me wonder how it happened that so many different men—and learned men among them—have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many devilish and wicked thoughts about women and their behavior.] (3-4)

Christine avoids naming the greater authorities who commit the same offense as Malthéolus,
claiming, “tous orateurs desquelz les noms seroit longue chose” (618) [it would take too long to mention their names] (4). She further defends herself in her task of criticizing auctores, even indirectly, by satirically believing in them. Despite the fact that she claims that her rational thoughts did not find such estimations of women to be consistent with reality, she goes against her better judgment:

J’arguoye fort contre les femmes, disant que trop fort seroit que
tant de si renommez hommes—ai sollemnelz clercs de tant hault
et grant entendement, si clerveans en toutes choses, comme il
semble que ceulx fussent—en eussent parlé mencongieusemenet et
en tant de lieux, que a paine trouvoye volume moral, qui qu’en soit
l’oteur, que avant que je l’aye tout leu, que je n’y voye aucuns
chappitres ou certaines clauses au blasme d’elles. (619)

[Yet I still argued vehemently against women, saying that it would be impossible that so many famous men—such solemn scholars, possessed of such deep and great understanding, so clear-sighted in all things, as it seemed—could have spoken falsely on so many occasions that I could hardly find a book on morals where, even before I had read it in its entirety, I did not find several chapters or certain sections attacking women.] (4)

Christine relinquishes her natural logic to the unquestionable word of authorities, lamenting, “Et en conclusion de tout, je determinoye que ville chose fist Dieux quant il fourma femme” (619-620) [I finally decided that God formed a vile creature when He made woman] (5). Through her
rhetorical device of unquestioned belief in *auctoritas*, Christine illustrates just how foolish that authority is. She not only doubts her own logic but ultimately doubts God’s creation rather than questioning the word of the antifeminist *auctores*. Despite the fact that Christine knows logically that women are not evil, it takes the divine intervention of the personified Ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice for Christine to believe it.

In order to combat the authority of the Church and the literary canon, respectively, Kempe and Christine use the strategy of excessive, parodic belief—taking the opinions that they wish to challenge to their natural ends. In both cases, this means a dramatic rejection of God. Both authors also place themselves in the position of the passive prophet, who must be taught and educated by heavenly authorities not to believe what the earthly authorities have wrongly told them. Because Christine’s project is specifically to combat the antifeminist tradition of literary representation, her prophetic messengers are, themselves, learned women—Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice. Margery Kempe, however, exploits God’s paternalistic power over her precisely because it allows her to challenge the more proximate paternalistic power of earthly confessors. While a less confrontational and tradition-flouting visionary like Julian of Norwich might be able to depict Christ as a mother figure, thereby challenging religious patriarchy, Kempe, whose project is to undermine the policing of spiritual visions, depicts a male authoritarian God who is in direct conflict with earthly authorities. In *La Cité des Dames*, Christine de Pizan ultimately depicts herself as a figure more like Margery’s male scribe—an initially doubtful reader going from skepticism to understanding. Kempe grants herself no such resolution as she continues to doubt herself and God.

The scribe is the figure with which the audience can best identify. One can assume that most of *The Book*’s audience was not receiving visions from God and was accustomed to reading
the lives of holy women. The provenance of the only extant manuscript, which appears to be an early copy, attests to this. The hand at the top of The Book declares it to be “of Mountegrace”—a Carthusian monastery in Yorkshire.\textsuperscript{44} Furthermore, the marginal and interlinear commentaries of a fifteenth century reader appear to be those of Carthusian monks from Mount Grace.\textsuperscript{45} The Carthusians were known for collecting and disseminating women’s spiritual writing. In fact, Julian of Norwich and Marguerite Porete’s works were initially collected exclusively in Carthusian circles.\textsuperscript{46} Kathryn Kerby-Fulton has argued that Carthusian monasteries, together with Bridgettine orders, played a key role in what she characterizes as “knowledge of Continental ‘left-wing’ women’s religious culture in late medieval England.”\textsuperscript{47} While we cannot know the precise audience to which Kempe wrote (or if she, indeed, wrote for a particular audience), her work appears particularly relevant to groups like the Carthusians, who were interested in issues of spiritual discretion and Bridgettine defenses.\textsuperscript{48} Through the life of Margery, Kempe offers a creative defense of autonomous visionary authority. Margery is at once a figure set up to be fully authorized to understand her visions and a figure utterly resistant toward that authority. She is a character constructed to exacerbate all that is wrong with the skeptical culture of probatio surrounding the reception of holy women’s texts. It is therefore unsurprising that this work, dedicated to changing issues of reception, begins with a description of Margery’s scribe, a reader. It is equally unsurprising that The Book should be read in a community dedicated to the distribution and defense of holy women’s writing.

\textsuperscript{44} See Sanford Brown Meech, “Introduction,” in The Book of Margery Kempe, vii-lii, xxxii.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., xxxvi.
\textsuperscript{46} See Kerby-Fulton, Books Under Suspicion, 260-271. Margery herself visits the Carthusian Shene Abbey in The Book.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 261.
\textsuperscript{48} See Ibid., 261.
Conclusion

Whether through Gower’s and Christine’s expert interpretations or Langland’s and Kempe’s struggling ones, medieval authorial prophetic self-representation consistently reflects upon the writer’s role in mediating categorical truth. The result is a prophet who is a compiler or translator of sorts. Alistair Minnis has contrasted the prophet/author, Gower, with the compiler/author, Chaucer. Minnis claims that Gower situates his work in the rhetorical situation of a biblical text and therefore himself in the rhetorical situation of a biblical prophet while Chaucer eschews the role of auctor, instead insisting upon his role as compiler (in the case of *The Canterbury Tales*) or translator (in the case of *The Troilus*).\(^1\) However, the roles of prophet and compiler/translator are not as rigidly distinct in medieval literature as Minnis implies. Both are intermediary figures who discern and disseminate meaning. Dante is a prime example of an author who influentially combines both functions. In making the classical author, Virgil, his prophetic guide, Dante not only represents himself as Virgil’s heir apparent; he also represents his own unique position as a prophet/compiler, adapting the works of a classical author to reveal higher religious truths.\(^2\) As a studied polyglot, writing of religious matters in the vernacular, Dante represents himself as a new kind of prophet—one who both literally and figuratively translates the moral lessons contained in the classics to his Italian-speaking, Christian audience. Dante does not merely adopt the prophetic voice as a substitution for classical auctoritas; he adopts it as a means of reflecting on, characterizing, and personalizing his authority as a textual mediator.

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In this sense Chaucer’s self-representation as a compiler is consistent with that of the authors who represent themselves as prophets. Yet Chaucer is notably distinct from authors like Gower, Christine, Langland, and Kempe because, although they may embrace the role of compiler, he does not readily adopt the mantle of prophet. In fact, he actively mocks it in *The House of Fame*. Regarded by some to be a parody of Dante’s *Commedia*, the *House of Fame* directly addresses the hollowness of the trope of the poet as prophet.\(^3\) Before relating his dream, Chaucer reflects briefly upon the dubious source and trustworthiness of reported dreams, questioning, “Why that is an avision / And why this a revelacion…Why this a fantome, why these oracles” (7-8, 11).\(^4\) Essentially, Chaucer points to the seemingly impossible task of discerning something lighthearted like an “avision” or “fantome” from something bearing great import like a “revelacion” or “oracles.” In doing so, Chaucer subtly suggests that one cannot ever truly know the difference. Yet he merely continues by asserting that someone who knows “bet then I” will have to explain before he goes on to relate his very own dream. In this way, Chaucer undermines his own method of storytelling before he even begins. He is about to share a dream that he had, but he has just alluded to its lack of credibility. Chaucer’s reluctance to take on a prophetic voice deserves more scrutiny, particularly because he represents himself as a mediator of stories, just as the authors representing themselves as prophets do. Ultimately, the prophet supplied the ideal subject position through which authors could assert their expertise and draw attention to their roles in compiling the information read by their audiences. In this way the prophet, as a device, reference point, analogy, and source of inspiration, is quite central to self-

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conscious authorship. By examining the previously overlooked aspects of prophetic self-representation in late medieval writing, it is possible to highlight and illuminate the intricacies of the mediator/translator role and the complexities and possibilities of self-conscious authorship.
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