Christening Women, Men, and Monsters:

Images of Baptism in Middle English Hagiography and Romance

by

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List of Abbreviations

Arthour *Of Arthour and of Merlin*

Boeve *Boeve de Haumtone*

EETS ES Early English Text Society, Extra Series

EETS OS Early English Text Society, Original Series

Instructions *Instructions for Parish Priests*

MED *Middle English Dictionary*

OED *Oxford English Dictionary*

SEL *South English Legendary*

Sir Beues *The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun*

Sowdon *The Sowdone of Babylone*

Tars *The King of Tars*

Vernagu *Roland and Vernagu*

All unattributed transtlations are my own.

Abstract

In *Christening Women, Men and Monsters*, I argue that baptism as it appears in Middle English texts allowed authors and audiences to explore transgressive thoughts, narratives, and bodies as mechanisms for the construction of communal and individual identity. Baptism, though often overlooked by modern critics of medieval texts in favor of the more controversial sacraments of the Eucharist or confession, was a vital ritual that created systematic boundaries between cultures and individuals. But, because baptism was a rite of initiation, it formed a necessarily permeable boundary that could change the very community it produced. I have focused my work on several compilations of vernacular saints' legends, a variety of romances, and references to baptism in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. To situate these texts in their historical and philosophical contexts, I have analyzed them alongside English church decrees, chronicles, and the works of prominent theologians including Thomas Aquinas and John Wyclif. My work draws on the methodologies of Miri Rubin, who has explored social identity through the ritual of the Eucharist. Adding to the work of David Aers and Sarah Beckwith, who explore the uses to which religious symbols could be put in vernacular literature, my study reveals that baptism was a productive religious symbol for authors and translators. Baptism is represented in Middle English texts as an unchanging sacrament that unites all Christians diachronically and synchronically, even as various writers adapted their particular representation to reflect local concerns and anxieties. The tension between baptism's idealized function and the penchant for it to be put in the service of specific arguments leads to a multiplicity of identities available to the medieval Christian. I have found that baptism was sometimes depicted, most often by hagiographic texts, as a means to diversify what constitutes a Christian identity (what I refer to as an "inclusive baptism"). By comparison, baptism was also used, primarily in Middle English romances, to limit that which was acceptable as Christian (an "exclusive baptism"). Literary baptism, used as a means to symbolize identity, reveals that the sacramental foundation of Christian identity was continually being determined.

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Introduction:

John Mirk's *Instructions for Parish Priests* and the Elements of Baptism

In the last quarter of the fourteenth century, the Augustinian canon John Mirk wrote a

text in the vernacular designed to help semi-learned priests perform their duties diligently and

properly. In *Instructions for Parish Priests* (*Instructions*)*,* Mirk urges the priests reading his text

to instruct all their parishioners, particularly pregnant women and midwives, in the performance

of baptism:

> And teche the mydewyf neuer the latere,
> That heo haue redy clene watere,
> Thenne bydde hyre spare for no schame,
> To folowe [baptize] the chylde there at hame,
> And thaghe þe chylde bote half be bore,
> Hed and necke and no more,
> Bydde hyre spare neuer þe later
> To Crystene hyt and caste on water;
> ...
> Teche hem alle to be war and snel [cautious and vigilant]
> That they conne sey þe wordes wel,
> And say the wordes alle on rowe
> As a-non I wole ȝow schowe;
> Say ryȝt thus and no more,
> For non othere wymmenes lore;
> I folowe the, or elles I crystene þe, in the nome of
> The fader and þe sone and the holy gost. Amen.
> Or elles thus, Ego baptiȝo te N. [nomen] In nomine patris
> And Filii and spiritus sancti. Amen.
> Englysch or latyn, whether me seyþ,
> Hyt suffyseth to the feyth.[1]

Mirk's instructions in the performance of baptism focus only on the basic elements of the

sacrament, a focus that allows modern audiences a glimpse at what was at the core of a proper

baptism in late medieval England. Mirk does not attempt to teach his readers anything about the

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[1]John Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Edward Peacock, EETS OS 31 (London: Trübner & Co., 1868), 3-4 (*Instructions*, 87-94, 122-32). All quotations from *Instructions for Parish Priests* will be from this edition and will be cited with an abbreviated title and line numbers in parentheses.

complex theology that had developed around baptism as an idea rather than a ritual, nor about

the possibility of reaching heaven without it.[2] Similarly, Mirk's work stands out against the

Sarum Missal, the liturgical book that probably best reflects actual religious ritual as performed

in medieval English churches.[3] Unlike the Missal, Mirk offers no prayers, no blessings for the

water or family, no exorcism, no catechism, nor any reference to godparents. Instead, he offers

only the essentials that an uneducated audience needed to understand if any of them were called

upon to perform the ritual. He uses three different words for performing the ritual: *fulwen*,

cristnen, and the Latin *baptizare*, thereby ensuring there is no confusion based upon

terminology.[4] Moreover, Mirk describes only those elements that are absolutely necessary to

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[2] Thomas Aquinas attempted to reconcile the position of unbaptized martyrs, the potential salvation of the patriarchs, and St. Augustine's fifth century baptismal theology, which suggested that baptism was necessary to cleanse Original Sin and gain salvation. In *Summa Theologicae*, Aquinas offers three forms of baptism: baptism of water, of blood, and of the spirit. The first is the full sacrament, the second refers to baptism through martyrdom, and the third describes the effect of the sacrament and is bestowed upon those who desire baptism but are kept from participating in the ritual. *Summa Theologicae* 3a, 66, 12. All citations of the *Summa Theologicae* will come from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, ed. and trans. James J. Cunningham, 60 vols., (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co. in conjunction with Blackfriars, 1964) and will be cited with title, part, question, and article numbers. For a brief but comprehensive summary of St. Augustine's writing on baptism and the later effects of his theology, see Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: from the New Testament to the Council of Trent* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 63-67. Spinks' work has proven invaluable to my study. See also Marcia L. Colish, *Peter Lombard*, vol. II (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 532-48 for a summary of the Lombard's understanding of the sacrament along with a brief summary of the various debates surrounding baptism during the twelfth century.

[3] The Sarum Missal was the most prevalent order of service used in Medieval England. It originated under St. Osmund, the bishop of Salisbury, in the eleventh century, and was in constant use until the Reformation. For further information see Martin R. Dudley, "Sacramental Liturgies in the Middle Ages," *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, ed. Thomas J. Hefferman and E. Ann Matter (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), 193-218. For a text of the Missal, see *The Sarum Missal: edited from three early manuscripts*, ed. J. Wickham Legg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916).

[4] Mirk uses *fulwen*, derived from the Old English *gefulwian*, and the Latinate *cristnen* interchangeably, using the one in line 90 and the other in 94 and both in line 128. According to the *MED* examples for both words appear in Middle English as early as 1175. The earliest form of the Middle English *baptisen* appears in 1300. See *MED*, s.v. 'fulwen,' 'cristnen,' and 'baptisen.' According to the *OED*, the Old English *gefulwian* derives from the Old English *fullian*, meaning 'completely,' and the Old Germanic *wîhêjan*, 'to consecrate.' See *OED*, s.v. 'full,' v.1. Since the different words appear to be used interchangeably as they are in Mirk's *Instructions*, I have not analyzed the use of

create a felicitous baptism, a baptism that, as he puts it, "suffyseth to the feyth" (*Instructions*, 132).[5] Through Mirk's *Instructions*, I will describe four elements that must be present in order for baptism to be said to have occurred: the catechumen must be physically present, an administrator must perform the rite, there must be a ritual performance consisting of words and actions, and God must enact a spiritual effect. Before proceeding, I will discuss each of these elements by way of introducing the necessary terminology and ideology for this study.

According to Mirk, one cannot baptize someone who is not physically present. In other words, baptism was a physical ritual and the physical body of the catechumen was necessary; without it no baptism could be said to have taken place. Mirk calls attention to the need for the catechumen to be physically present: "And thaghe þe chylde bote half be bore, / Hed and necke and no more, / Bydde hyre spare neuer þe later / To Crystene hyt" (*Instructions*, 91- 94). While Mirk's concern is that an emergency baptism does not have to wait until the body is fully born, Mirk stresses the need for some part of the infant catechumen, preferably the head, to be in physical contact with the sacramental water.[6] The necessary presence of the body and of water

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specific terminology at this time.

[5] As a performance that has an effect in the act of speaking, baptism can be defined as an illocutionary act. In particular, baptism meets J. L. Austin's definition of an 'exercitive' verb: that is "a decision that something is to be so, as distinct from a judgment that it is so." J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 155. Austin notes both 'excommunicate' and 'name' in his list of exercitives, both acts related to baptism. Because I choose to consider baptism as an illocutionary act, I will borrow often from Austin's terminology. 'Felicitous' refers to a speech act that is successful and 'infelicitous' describes acts that, for whatever reason, fail to create the effect of the words.

[6] Mirk does not mention any sort of preparation of baptismal water beforehand, implying that, in an emergency, any clean water would suffice for baptism. Medieval liturgy indicates that baptismal water was routinely changed and blessed, as was the salt, which was also part of the more protracted baptismal ceremony that would be performed by an ordained priest in the church. Dudley, "Sacramental Liturgies," 201. Mirk does point out that once a vessel of water has been used for a baptism, the water should either be thrown into a fire or emptied into the church font and the vessel burned. By implication, it may be assumed that the ceremony itself can serve to sanctify the water in times of necessity. For my purposes, I consider the water of baptism to be a part of the ceremonial rite, like the

reveals that baptism, like other sacraments, combined the physical and the spiritual. Mirk has little to say about the catechumen because, save for notable exceptions, baptisms performed in England from at least the time of the Conquest until the Reformation involved infants who were passive participants in the ritual.

Mirk places greater emphasis on the second element of baptism, the administrator, because the administrator must have both knowledge and understanding in order to perform an effective baptism. The reference to 'wymmenes lore' indicates that Mirk's advice is aimed, not for priests, but for lay persons who may be called upon to perform emergency baptisms, particularly midwives (*Instructions*, 127). Mirk is reiterating church tradition when he explains that baptism could, under certain circumstances, be performed by anyone regardless of ordination or gender. Such liberality may seem at odds with modern images of the medieval church, which is often assumed to have insisted upon its exclusive ability to determine the salvation of its flock. However, because baptism was essential for salvation and because infant mortality was frequent, it could be administered by anyone. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274, a Dominican priest and hugely influential scholastic theologian), for example, goes to great length to defend the universal ability to administer baptism. He declares that church deacons, laymen, women, and even the unbaptized can all perform baptism if it is necessary.[7] That baptism was in the hands of lay people and ecclesiastics alike evidently concerned Mirk. An uneducated administrator might baptize incorrectly and thus threaten a catechumen's salvation. Robert Mannyng, in *Handlyng Synne*, an early fourteenth-century manual written to help its audience

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words spoken, and not as a separate element because the baptismal narratives analyzed in my work assume the two occur simultaneously.

[7] *Summa Theologicae* 3a, 67, 1-8.

understand orthodox religious behavior, offers a story in which a midwife baptized a dying infant, saying "God and seynt Ione [John] / Crysten þe chylde, boþe flesshe and bone."[8] Mannyng points out that the midwife was later condemned by a priest for keeping the child from salvation since she did not recite the proper baptismal formula. Mirk directs much of his work at the potential administrators of baptism in the hopes of eliminating such errors. Mirk further notes that the administrator must also want to baptize: "But ȝef hyt were hys fulle entent / to ȝeue þe chylde þat sacrament, / Þenne mote hyt [the baptism] stond wyþoute nay [trouble]" (*Instructions*, 592-94). Though the administrator could be anyone, that individual must intend to perform a baptism in order for the sacrament to be said to have happened. The ritual itself is not enough to make baptism felicitous, for the will of the administrator is also responsible. Since intent is so important, the administrator is charged with great power. Mirk appears somewhat concerned about the administrator's role, and seeks to ensure that any possible administrator is ready to perform the ceremony properly.

Because so much depends upon the knowledge and will of the administrator, Mirk takes the greatest pains to describe the words of the actual baptismal ritual, the third element of baptism. At first Mirk notes the physical actions that are part of the ritual, and it seems no accident that the casting on of water is mentioned when Mirk is also describing the need for the catechumen's physical presence: "And teche the mydewyf neuer the latere, / That heo haue redy clene watere, / Thenne bydde hyre spare for no schame, / To folowe the chylde there at hame, / And thaghe þe chylde bote half be bore, /... / Bydde hyre spare neuer þe later / To Crystene hyt and caste on water" (*Instructions*, 87-91, 93, 94). The final instruction here, to "caste on water,"

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[8] Robert Mannyng of Brunne, *Handlyng Synne*, ed. Idelle Sullens (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1983), 240.

is the physical act of baptizing and the connection between the physical presence of the catechumen and the physical act stresses how baptism is enacted in the material world. But Mirk offers little explanation or description of the act, confident that most already understand the actions that constitute baptism. He is far more concerned with the speech act that makes casting water a spiritual as well as physical event. When describing baptism again, later in *Instructions*, Mirk further explicates the vocalization of the sacrament: "But ȝef cas falle thus, / Þat he þe words sayde a-mys, / In nomine filii & patris & spiritus sancti. Amen. / Or any oþer wey but þey set hem on rowe,... / Ȝef hyt be oþer weyes i-went, / Alle þe serues yes clene i-schent [ruined]" (*Instructions*, 596-99, 602-03). Word order is vital here. Unlike word order, language appears to be unimportant for a successful baptism. Mirk offers both the Latin and the English formula and, as noted above, three different terms for baptism. Even mispronunciations do not mar the ritual, provided the first syllable of each Latin word is correct (*Instructions*, 569- 79). The detailed instructions draw the line between what determines a felicitous and infelicitous sacrament. Mirk makes a careful division so the administrator understands where salvation lies within his or her performance. Mirk's insistence on the proper words reminds his audiences, both parish priests and the congregations to whom those priests will be preaching, of the seriousness of a performance that enacts a spiritual effect.

Mirk barely mentions the fourth element of baptism, the sacrament's spiritual effect, in *Instructions* – though he discusses it in his other work, the *Festial*, to be discussed in Chapter 5 – noting only the most simplistic understanding of baptism's effects. While the presence of the catechumen, the presence of an administrator, and the proper performance of the ritual are all within the realm of human control, the transforming presence of God is not. In listing the sacraments, Mirk states that baptism "clanseþ synne" (*Instructions*, 528). Other than this single

reference to the fact that baptism cleanses the sin of the catechumen, Mirk does not explain the spiritual effect of baptism in this work, nor does he delve into the theological debates that surrounded God's role in baptism. For example, Thomas Aquinas described a close connection between the ritual performance and God's grace. Grace took away sin and applied a character to the baptized that made him or her more apt to Christian worship and behavior.[9] In contrast, Peter Olivi (1248-1298, a conservative Franciscan friar whow work was controversial during his time in Paris and after his death) theorized that baptism did not so much impose a character on the catechumen as put the baptized in a relationship with God.[10] Later, John Wyclif (1328-1384, an Oxford educated theologians whose writings inspired a heretical sect) divorced the ritual of baptism from its spiritual effects. For Wyclif, grace and sacramental performance were not necessarily related.[11] However, Wyclif's extreme views were considered heretical. Mirk avoids any controversy by mentioning only the most clear and most commonly accepted spiritual effect of baptism: the removal of sin. In orthodoxy, baptism was linked to a spiritual effect that was granted by divine power, an element of baptism that was crucial to a successful performance of the ritual.

Mirk's *Instructions* serves to illuminate for a modern audience those elements of baptism to which I will return several times throughout this work: the catechumen, the administrator, the

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[9] Aquinas discusses the general effect of the sacraments and the character they impress upon the recipient in *Summa Theologicae,* 3a, 63, 1-6. He discusses baptismal effects more specifically in Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae* 3a, 69, 3-5.

[10] On Olivi's baptismal theology, see David Burr, "Olivi and Baptismal Grace," *Fransiskanische Studien* 57 (1975): 1-24.

[11] For Wyclif's views on the sacraments of baptism, see Stephen Penn, "Wyclif and the Sacraments," *A Companion to John Wyclif*, ed. Ian Christopher Levi (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 241-91 and Anne Hudson, *Premature Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 290-94.

ritual, and the spiritual effect. Noting these basic elements and determining which are of primary

focus in any given text helps make analysis and comparison easier. For instance, in *Instructions*

Mirk focuses specifically on the ritual a move that suggests that baptism, and by extension

salvation and Christian identity, is generated through participation in the orthodox church.

Regardless of who is actually administrating the baptism, the power of the sacrament originates

in the specific church-prescribed ritual. Yet, baptism allows for more active participation within

the church than might otherwise be assumed. Church members have their identity only within

the church, but are also able, according to Mirk, to perpetuate that community through

participation in the sacraments, particularly baptism, which they could perform in times of

emergency. As a result the audience can identify themselves as part of an active, self-

perpetuating community that is centered and defined by its adherence to an orthodox

understanding of the sacraments. Mirk's work in the vernacular with its emphasis on the ritual

creates a particular image of the Christian community. The various texts to be analyzed in this

study emphasize different elements of the sacrament of baptism, and as a result, baptism is put to

different uses as a symbol for the creation of a communal or individual sense of Christian

identity.

In *Instructions for Parish Priests*, Mirk places a great deal of emphasis on baptism,

spending more time on that sacrament than any other, except confession. Mirk's work gives

parish priests the information necessary to ensure their congregations understand what

determines Christian identification. The first step to affirm a community's continued presence

within Christendom is to make sure its members are baptized. But even as Mirk's work serves as

an introduction to the basic elements of baptism, it also offers a tantalizing glimpse at how

complex baptismal texts can be. Mirk's focus on one particular element of baptism, the words of

the ritual, becomes crucial when one considers he was writing at the same time as John Wyclif. Wyclif's argument that questioned the value of the sacraments for salvation stands in stark contrast to Mirk's attempt to validate baptism by clearly delineating what is necessary for it to be effective. In a cultural climate in which ecclesiastical language was under scrutiny, Mirk at once seeks to assure his audience of the spiritual effectiveness of baptism and of the vernacular to enact it while also holding to the necessary, church-prescribed formula. Though Mirk's baptism may appear to reflect a diachronic consistency, it is a product of its time, fixed in the cultural milieu of fourteenth-century England. Mirk's work, like the other texts to be analyzed in this study, presents baptism as a trope through which religious and social debates could be considered and through which arguments could be justified. Baptism is the ubiquitous sacrament: often present in medieval texts but often ignored by modern critics. But by focusing on baptism, the modern critic may uncover how those living in the medieval period understood their own identities in relation to baptism and to the ever-changing social, religious, and cultural boundaries that baptism both informed and transcended.

Baptism: The Door to Christian Identification

As noted above, Mirk is concerned that an administrator gets the sacramental performance just right because baptism was essential to salvation. Since baptism was considered necessary for an individual to be saved, it also served as a sign of Christianity for the individual and the community at large. Put another way, Christian identification began with the sacrament of baptism. According the Statute of Salisbury I (1217), "Since baptism is the door to all of the sacraments and the first board after the shipwreck, it is necessary that the words of the Lord, 'Unless one is born again by water and the holy spirit he will not enter into the kingdom of God,'

should be well known. Neither age nor sex is excluded from this generality."[12] Ideally, baptism

and its necessity were to be made public knowledge. The ritual was essential for participation in

the Christian community and distinguished those who could enter God's kingdom from those

who could not. But baptism was also a door, giving non-Christians access to Christianity.

Baptism thus served as a rite of passage, a ritualized means for changing group identity.[13]

Several decades later, Thomas Aquinas defined the use of baptism in his *Summa Theologicae*:

"Baptism is given that a person may be reborn, incorporated into Christ, being made his

member... Therefore, it is clear that all are obliged to baptism and without it no one can be

saved."[14] Aquinas notes the essential nature of baptism, but he also notes the communal nature

of the ritual. To be baptized was to be part of the body of Christ, to be part of a distinct

community. The rite served as both a sign of difference and a means of overcoming difference

to become part of the community. Baptism's unique function placed it at the very foundation of

Christian identity.

Before proceeding, a brief explanation of my terminology is necessary. By identity, I

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[12] "Cum baptismus ianua sit omnium sacramentorum et prima tabula post naufragium, quam sit necessarium patet ex verbis domini dicentis: Nisi quis renatus fuerit ex aqua et spiritu sancto non intrabit in regnum dei. Ab hac generalitate nec etas nec sexus excluditur." "Synodal statues of Bishop Richard Poore for the diocese of Salisbury with additions 1219 x 1228, and as reissued for the diocese of Durham 1228 x 1236," *Councils & Synods with Other Documents Relating to the English Church*, vol. II: Part 1, ed. F. M. Powicke and C. R. Cheney (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 67.

[13] Arnold Van Gennep theorized the concept of the rite of passage in his book, *The Rites of Passage*, in which he "tried to assemble... all the ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation or another or from one cosmic or social world to another." Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (1960; repr., London: Routledge Library Editions, 2004), 10. Miri Rubin provides an excellent analysis of Van Gennep's work along with other work done on rites of passage along with an explanation of how such work can benefit medieval studies in "Introduction: Rites of Passage," *Rites of Passage: Cultures of Transition in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Nicola F. McDonald and W. M. Ormrod (York: York Medieval Press, 2004), 1-12.

[14] "Ad hoc autem datur baptismus ut aliquis, per ipsum regeneratus, incorporetur Christo, factus membrum ipsius.... Unde manifestum est quod omnes ad baptismum tenentur; et sine eo non potest esse salus hominibus." *Summa Theologicae*, 3a, 68, 1.

mean the way in which an individual presented him or herself as a participant in a variety of

particular groupings (religions, estates, professions, nationalities, genders, etc) and how that

individual performed or demonstrated his or her belonging to those groups. Thus, an individual

might have understood himself as a male, English Christian noble. Baptism is the first

performance of Christian identity even as it was also a sign of corporate Christian identity. I use

corporate identity, specifically, to refer to the general understanding of the behaviors and beliefs

that are performed by the collected individuals of various groups. In these definitions, I am

building on Wout J. van Bekkum and Paul M. Cobb's work on understanding religious identity:

> For our present purposes, we are interested in identity generally speaking as the
> way in which individuals experience themselves. Since our scholarly task is
> dependent upon outward manifestations of this identity (as reported in texts), we
> are interested in particular in expressions of identity: in that group of practices
> (subtle or not) that individuals use to recognize ('identify') one another.
> Medieval communal identity, then, is the way in which individuals experienced
> their membership in a religious group and our common focus has thus been upon
> what medieval people do to make their membership recognizable to others.[15]

The danger with Bekkum and Cobb's definition is that it appears to determine religious

communal identity *qua* religious communal identity. Instead, religious identity, which

encompassed all other forms of identity, should be understood as determining and determined by

other modes of identifying performance. Various modes of behavior could be seen to enact

religious identity depending upon other groups in which the individual existed. However, certain

behaviors and beliefs were necessary for any individual to participate in Christendom. Yet, the

exact behaviors, bodies, and social or cultural performances that could be seen to enact or deny

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[15] Wout J. van Bekkum and Paul M. Cobb, "Introduction: Strategies of Medieval Communal Identity," *Strategies of Medieval Communal Identity: Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Wout J. van Bekkum and Paul M. Cobb (Paris: Peeters, 2004), 3-4. My understanding of medieval corporate identity was also influenced by Richard C. Trexler, Introduction to *Persons in Groups: Social Behavior as Identity Formation in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, ed. Richard C. Trexler (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1985), 3-16, and by Peter Marsh, "Identity: An Ethnogenic Perspective," *Persons in Groups*, 17-30.

Christian identity were subject to interpretation by both the individual and corporate society.

The Christian faith was founded upon a missionary impulse, the desire to incorporate all into the body of Christ, but the exact nature of the community formed when diverse individuals are incorporated into the church was left open to interpretation. According to Matthew's Gospel, baptism was meant to be bestowed upon all people.[16] In order to fulfill Christ's commands, entry into the community of Christendom appeared to be open to all people. The stories from the Acts of the Apostles describe various individuals being baptized after learning of the gospel despite their foreign nature and behaviors.[17] However, the historical reality of the medieval period shows adoption of a Christian identity was often quite difficult. During the Middle Ages, religious identity was more than a matter of chosen belief but was also confused with cultural, ethnic, and even physical modes of identification. Performing Christian identity required adherence to other modes of identification beyond religious performance. The troubled position of actual Jewish converts to Christianity illustrates how difficult it was for medieval Christians to understand and accept a baptized catechumen from a foreign culture. [18] Robert Stacey notes that

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[16] After his resurrection, Jesus tells his disciples to "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Matthew 28: 19- 20 (The Confraternity Edition of the New Testament).

[17] Acts 2: 1-41 features the story of Pentecost, which states that 3,000 men of presumably different nationalities were baptized after hearing a sermon from Peter. Acts 8: 27-39 narrates the baptism of an Ethiopian eunuch after Phillip explains to him the prophecies of Isaiah. In Acts 10: 1-48 Peter is permitted by God to eat unclean animals so that he might preach in the house of a Roman solider who is subsequently baptized along with his family. In each case baptism is quickly bestowed upon individuals, many from outside the Jewish community, who desire to enter the Christian faith.

[18] For an explanation of the difficulties that faced Jewish converts, see Reva Berman Brown and Sean McCartney, "Living in Limbo: The Experience of Jewish Converts in Medieval England," *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, ed. Guyda Armstrong and Ian N. Wood (Belgium: Brepolis Publishers, 2000), 169-191. See also Benjamin Ravid, "The Forced Baptism of Jews in Christian Europe: An Introductory Overview," *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, 157- 167 and Steven F. Kruger, "Conversion and Medieval Sexual, Religious, and Racial Categories," *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 158-179.

"by the middle of the thirteenth century in England, there was clearly an irreducible element to Jewish identity in the eyes of many Christians, which no amount of baptismal water could entirely eradicate."[19] When an individual not originally part of the surrounding Christian community became Christian through baptism, that individual still retained some quality of alterity. However, the idealized role of baptism, that it could include the catechumen with all his or her differences, persisted in text if not in reality. Jonathan M. Elukin cites the correspondence from the 1170s between Pope Alexander III and the bishop of Trounai concerning a Jewish convert. Alexander defends the convert and urges the Bishop to accept him as a Christian. Elukin emphasizes "that the letter [from the Pope to the bishop] does not urge the chapter to ignore [the convert's] Jewish ancestry. Rather, the Pope tries to show that his Jewishness was not a disability."[20] The Pope's letter advocated that the corporate Christian identity could include different heritages, suggesting that the Christian community could expand to include the convert. Though baptism was understood to be linked to Christian identification, what such identification might require was uncertain and a source of cultural tension.

Baptism was synonymous with Christian communal identity because it was performed on all Christians. Thus, baptism was a universal performance that functioned as a *sine qua non* of Christian identity. Baptism was a mark of difference, a boundary between the Christian and the non-Christian, and it could therefore serve as a symbol of Christian identity. However, baptism was also a means of crossing that boundary, of becoming Christian and performing that particular identity, though this process was far from perfect. Baptism's appearance in the

[19] Robert C. Stacey "The Conversion of Jews to Christianity in Thirteenth Century England," Speculum 67 no. 2 (April 1992): 278.

[20] Jonathan M. Elukin, "From Jew to Christian? Conversion and Immutability in Medieval Europe," *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. James Muldoon (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 177.

medieval texts to be discussed offers a chance for the modern critic to explore how individual

identity and the individual's other group identities related to Christian identification.

Baptism as Symbol

What does baptism's theoretical place in the formation of Christian identity have to do

with a community like the one that existed in late medieval England? After the expulsion of the

Jews in 1291, baptisms were performed on children without controversy or comment. The

community was uniform in its Christian identification. Further, unlike the Eucharist, a

controversial sacrament, baptism was not something individuals experienced repeatedly; it was

not a frequent reminder of Christian identity. However, baptism was still part of what Miri

Rubin refers to as the language of religion, a system of signs and symbols that made belief

performable and intelligible to others. Rubin notes that this language "is not only a grid for

communication; around it are structured notions of self and identity. The salient categories of

identity, gender, and community can be observed in their use of the Eucharist."[21] Though

Rubin's focus is on the Eucharist, much the same could be said about baptism as well. Though

gender roles are less obviously in play in the ritual of baptism than in the Eucharist, baptism

serves to identify both the individual and the group to which that individual belongs. Further,

because baptism was comparatively uncontroversial and foundational, it could function as an

easily recognizable symbol of Christian identity, justifying certain performances as constituting

Christian identification. While actual baptisms may or may not have affected medieval

understanding of identity, the ideas surrounding baptism – what happened to the catechumen

during the ritual, the way in which the ritual was enacted by administrators, and particularly how

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[21] Miri Rubin, "The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities," *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays in English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 44.

the catechumen became situated within Christendom after the ritual – lend themselves to a contemplation of what it means to perform particular identities. Baptism allowed medieval writers to explore what identities and modes of identification could be legitimately Christian and acceptable within Christian culture.

Baptism functions as a sign for Christian identity in the language of religion. As such, it is hardly surprising that the exact meaning of baptism, like that of all cultural symbols, was impossible to reduce to a singular interpretation. In her analysis of the Eucharist as a symbol, Rubin explains how the social nature of language creates diverse meanings:

> But I will show that these powerful institutional privileges [of the church] could determine and fix only some of [the Eucharist's] meaning. Dissent, powerlessness, eccentricity, adherence to and rejection of normative values, the variety of personal and collective positions inhabited in societies, must all find an expression in the language. Once said, they exist, and a historian must try to tease out such utterances, to unravel the scopes of meaning, the range of experience, the vast field of action which a single symbol could ground and sustain.[22]

What Rubin offers as a goal for the historian, to recuperate the diverse uses and meanings of a symbol, is equally applicable to the literary critic focused on medieval texts. This work aspires to explore and uncover some of the uses to which baptism might have been put. In building on Rubin's methodology, I will examine the historical and theological contexts of baptismal narratives, comparing the vernacular depiction of baptism with sacramental theories and societal concerns. As Rubin did in her exploration of the Eucharist, I will examine baptism as a diachronic phenomenon that changes over the course of history. Those changes also allow baptism to be understood as a synchronic phenomenon of particular importance for singular

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[22] Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 11.

historic and cultural moments.[23]

   In order to uncover the symbolic use of baptism as it was applied and utilized by writers

and translators, this study will focus on narrative texts but will also focus on contextual academic

materials over the course of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The long fourteenth

century is a very fruitful historical period for a study of textual baptisms in medieval England.

The interest in baptism that marks the beginning of my study has its origins as far back as the

Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which made annual communion and confession mandatory.

After the council, the sacraments had become a matter of concern for lay people as well as

theologians. [24] As a result, several synodal statutes, including the Statutes of Salisbury I, quoted

above, encouraged parish priests to educate layman about the importance of baptism along with

the other sacraments.[25] In the last decades of the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas and the

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[23] Rubin's study "unfolds[s] along two axes, a synchronic one which keeps in view the system of symbolic meanings surrounding the Eucharist, and a diachronic one, which delineates some aspects of change over time, the outcome of the transformation of language as it evolves and interacts with events, needs and experiences." Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 11. I am indebted to Rubin's work on the Eucharist for the notion of diachronic and synchronic understandings of sacramental representation, and for the means to understanding how a single sacrament may be analyzed as a cultural artifact. I have also used Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993) as a model for my work. Though Beckwith is less focused on a specific sacrament and more focused on a particular cultural image, her work does explore the relationship between the image and diverse models of corporate identity. I am also indebted to David Aers, *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004). Aers develops the multiple uses of the Eucharist as it appears in literary texts and the way in which popular vernacular texts sustain and develop the ways in which religious symbols can be used.

[24] For the text of the constitutions of the Fourth Lateran Council, see "Fourth Lateran Council – 1215," *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* vol. 1, ed. Norman P. Tanner and trans. Thomas Murphy (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 227- 67. For the effects of the council on the religious culture of medieval Europe, see Miri Rubin, "Sacramental Life," *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 4: Christianity in Western Europe c. 1100- c. 1500*, ed. Miri Rubin and Walter Simons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 219- 37.

[25] The Council of Oxford (1222), The Statutes of Exeter I (1225 x 1237), and the Statutes of Worcester III (1240) admonish priests to ensure that lay people understand the importance of baptism. Texts for these statutes can be found in *Councils & Synods with Other Documents Relating to the English Church*, vol. II: Part 1, 100-25, 227-37, 294-325, respectively.

other scholastics developed a stable system of the sacraments that was the fulfillment of a long process of theological debate.[26] However, by 1312, Pope Clement V found it necessary to confirm the power of baptism against the theology of Peter Olivi, stating, "All are faithfully to profess that there is one baptism which regenerates all those baptized in Christ, just as there is one God and one faith. We believe that when baptism is administered in water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, it is a perfect means of salvation for both adults and children."[27] Olivi had advocated that baptism did not actually cause any change in the catechumen and that salvation was a product of the relationship between God and the catechumen that was developed through baptism but was not a product of baptism itself.[28] While concern over such minutia may seem over-developed to a modern audience, distinctions like that made by Olivi with regard to the effects of baptism were debated and considered quite important. The decree of 1312, which recognized that baptism both cleansed original sin and conferred God's grace on the catechumen, did more than confirm the orthodoxy of infant baptism against Olivi's teachings. The decree also called attention to baptism as a unifying feature of Christendom, a standard that could define the Christian idea of self. With such attention focused on baptism, the sacrament unsurprisingly appears as a crucial element within several Middle English narratives of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

Less than one hundred years after Pope Clement V's decree, John Wyclif's writings

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[26] Colish, *Peter Lombard*, 516- 32. Colish provides a background on the development of sacramental theology, focusing on the enormously influential work of Peter Lombard.

[27]"Ad hoc baptisma unicum baptizatos omnes in Christo regenerans est, sicut unus Deus ac fides unica, ab omniubus fideliter confitendum, quod celebratum in aqua in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus sancti, drecimus esse tam adultis quam parvulis communiter perfectum reemdium ad salute." "Council of Vienne – 1311-1312," *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 361.

[28] Burr, "Olivi and Baptismal Grace," 7-12.

challenged the unity of Christendom, while monumental events such as the Western Schism and

the troubles with Richard II rocked English society and affected the ways in which baptism was

utilized to construct identity in vernacular texts. At the beginning of the fourteenth century,

Duns Scotus (1266-1308, a prominent theologian in Oxford and Paris who advocated rationality

as part of theology) developed ideas similar to that of Olivi. He also believed that baptism

formed a relationship with God, rather than imposed a transformative character.[29] He was

followed by William of Ockham (1288-1348, a Franciscan friar from England who theorized

about the ultimate power of God to determine reality). Ockham believed that the grace given in

baptism had no effect upon the character or habits of the catechumen.[30] John Wyclif limits the

possible effects of the sacrament still further by dividing the performed sacrament from the

effects that God alone can give or retain independently of any human ritual.[31] Though these

philosophers rarely focused exclusively on baptism in their writing, the continued use of this

sacrament as a means of exploring the nature of sacramental theology and the nature of the

human will suggests a continued interest in baptism and its effects through the fourteenth

century. By the fifteenth century, the shifts in orthodox religion imposed by Bishop Arundel and

the rise of Henry IV would radically change the nature of religious language and its usage. Even

as the interest in baptism of the late thirteenth century forms a starting point for this study, so the

end of the fourteenth century, marked by tumultuous changes that restructure English religious

and secular cultures, will serve as an end point.

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[29] Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*, 147-48.

[30] William of Ockham, *De Connexione Virtutum*, ed. and trans. Rega Wood in Rega Wood, *Ockham on the Virtues* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1997), 114-19.

[31] Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 291.

Moreover, in my work to analyze baptism as a symbol of identity, I have focused on baptism not as an actual ritual performed on individuals but as a literary trope. In his exploration of the speech act, J. L. Austin says that if one were to make an actual performative, a vocalization that does something, one "must not be joking... or writing a poem."[32] Austin removes poetry and all other forms of non-real expression from his discussion of performative language. One could make a similar argument about the sacraments: that they are not real if they appear in a poetic context. However, in analyzing Austin, Jacques Derrida asks "For, ultimately, isn't it true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, 'non-serious,' *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality – or rather, a general iterability – without which there would not even be a 'successful' performative?"[33] Derrida answers with a definitive 'perhaps,' but in asking, claims that speech acts, along with rituals and other linguistically constructed events, rely in part on their non-serious poetic representations to be understood. The literary representations of speech acts and rituals inform the culture in ways that the act as it actually exists cannot. Similarly, Gabrielle M. Spiegel argues in her attempts to uncover the relationship between texts categorized as literary and texts categorized as historical that "What literature offers is an index of socially construable meaning rather than an image of reality; it is to the construction of social meaning, rather than the transmission of messages about the world, that the exercise of literature is directed."[34] Because literature is free from the constraints of always representing reality, it is free to create meaning

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[32] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 9.

[33] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, *Glyph* 1 (1977): 191. Italics are original to Derrida.

[34] Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 5.

and functions as a space in which ideas can be explored and determined. As Derrida implies, the 'non-serious' can determine meaning.

In the case of medieval baptism, I am not interested in reconstructing the nature of actual medieval ritual performances but rather in analyzing textual representations of baptism to uncover ideas of identification that are bound up in its textual appearances. Textual baptisms brought baptism outside of its normal context of infant initiation and explored its meaning as a rite that affected adults as well as infants. Because of a focus on what baptism means rather than on the ritual as performed, it has been necessary to refer to the Latin academic works of Thomas Aquinas and John Wyclif among others. Though these texts are often designed for the university setting, their implications extend beyond the boundaries of academia. However, in order to recover the possible meanings of baptism as a sign within the medieval language of religion, I have focused my study on Middle English texts that feature baptism as a key narrative moment. By relying primarily on vernacular texts, I hope to uncover the potential meanings baptism might have had to society at large, rather than those meanings bound to the rigors of medieval academia. However, examining Latinate theology in conjunction with vernacular texts reveals the influences academic works have on more popular narratives. Moreover, I have selected narratives that are both overtly religious and overtly secular, namely examples of hagiography and romance. While there is certainly a great deal of overlap between the two genres, their significant differences help show the diversity of meanings to which baptism could be put. However, the consistent exploration of what constituted the proper mode of Christian identification in many of the texts analyzed suggests some shared cultural assumptions about the nature of the Christian community. In the Middle English texts to be analyzed, baptism represents more than a ritual to mark catechumens as Christians, it becomes a symbol of

Christian identity, a symbol that allows different ideas about Christian identification to be explored, challenged, or justified.

My first chapter, "After the Font: Baptism as Reinterpretation in the *South English Legendary*," takes as its topic a popular hagiographic collection dating to the late thirteenth century. The *South English Legendary* presents an idea of how hagiographic works could use baptism to symbolize identification within orthodoxy. In this specific case, baptism in the *South English Legendary* diversifies what signs can signify Christian identity. Looking through several saints' lives, I describe a pattern of baptisms that allow a wide variety of individuals – including a giant, a Saracen princess, and pagan soldiers, among others – access to Christianity. I read these narratives alongside the works of concurrent scholastic theologians, such as Roger Bacon, and the modern body theory of Elizabeth Grosz in an effort to explain how the body, initiated into Christendom through baptism, relates to spiritual existence. I conclude that baptism as it appears in the text allows a variety of diverse bodies, each active in the world, to serve as signs of the virtuous, Christian life.

Shifting genres from hagiography to romance, my next chapter, "Christening the Worthy: How the Romances of the Auchinleck Manuscript Respond to Baptism," claims that those lay texts of the early fourteenth century use baptism to link Christendom and the notion of humanity. In this chapter I analyze *The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, *The King of Tars*, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, *Roland and Vernagu*, and *Otuel*, romances from the Auchinleck manuscript (more formally known as Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates 19.2.1) that prominently feature baptism. The Auchinleck preserves the earliest and sometimes only Middle English versions of these romances and thus provides early examples of how baptism could function to

construct identity in overtly secular works.[35] Further, the examples of literary baptisms in romances written at approximately the same time as the *South English Legendary* reveal how a difference in genre can change the use of a sacramental symbol. As in the *South English Legendary*, the catechumen is the focus of the baptismal moments in the narratives. However, the spiritual effect of baptism is also of great importance, as the texts depict baptism as a means of ensuring Christian solidarity by aligning the catechumen with pre-existing ethnic notions of Christian identity. In reading these texts, I juxtapose a concern with national loyalty found in various concurrent chronicles with the theological work of Thomas Aquinas that suggests baptism transforms the character of the catechumen. The result reveals baptismal narratives that seek to justify chivalric Christian authority by defining and concretizing boundaries between different groups and creating a pure Christian identity.

My third chapter, "Catechumens on the Road: Baptism in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*," maintains that Chaucer used baptism to convince his audience of Christian unity in a time of increasing schism and heterodox thought. Chaucer's work opens up a new perspective on the use of baptism as a symbol for corporate Christian identity by using baptism as a means of reforming medieval society. I read the concepts of baptism as presented by Chaucer's narrators alongside chronicle accounts of concurrent events, and both Wycliffite and anti-Wycliffite texts. Through the *Man of Law's Tale*, the *Second Nun's Tale*, and the *Parson's Tale*, Chaucer develops the idea that baptism's diachronic presence binds Christians together into a community that transcends synchronic differences. In addition, Chaucer uses the presence of the rite and its effects to argue for an increased tolerance of alterity within Christendom.

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[35] For information on the dating of each romance and their subsequent appearances, if any, see *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English: 1050- 1500*, vol. 1, *Romances*, ed. J., Burke Severs (New Haven: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967).

Chapter four, "Baptized into Brotherhood: Baptism and Romance at the end of the Fourteenth Century," returns to the romance genre to analyze the changes between the Auchinleck texts and the romance narratives of the late fourteenth century. Reading *The Sowdon of Babylon*, *Sir Ferumbras,* and *Sir Gowther*, I argue that these texts reveal the attention paid by authors and translators of imaginative literature to the shifting notions of social identity prevalent at the end of the tumultuous fourteenth century. The texts' similarities to the romances discussed in chapter two make it easier to compare the use of baptism across individual narratives and to better reveal the distinctiveness of baptism's symbolic function in these later medieval romances. Surprisingly, these texts depict baptism as a means of understanding a non-conservative, egalitarian society by suggesting how the individual can construct his or her own baptismal identity. Baptism within the texts can be considered a means of identification that had little to do with coercive hierarchical or hereditary structures.

Finally, my fifth chapter, "Baptismal Equality: Hagiographic References to Baptism at the end of the Fourteenth Century," argues that overtly religious texts from the late fourteenth century were, like Chaucer's work, as concerned with social identities as with religious forms of identity. I read the texts in conjunction with reactions to the Uprising of 1381 and the multiple ideas of social construction given voice as a result of the revolt. The three texts I examine, John Mirk's *Festial*, John Gower's adaptation of the conversion of the Emperor Constantine from the second book of his *Confessio Amantis*, and the alliterative *Saint Erkenwald*, each use baptism very differently. Mirk's *Festial*, a very popular text that represents a wholly orthodox mode of religious thought, focuses on the spiritual effects of baptism and suggests that those effects support a traditional notion of social hierarchy. Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, like the *Canterbury Tales*, troubles generic distinctions and reveals the complex relationship between the religious

and individual on the one hand and the communal and political on the other. Gower offers a baptism that comes to symbolize an egalitarian notion of pity and justice. However, Gower is careful to control such baptismal symbolism for fear that it might destabilize the same social hierarchy Mirk defends. *St. Erkenwald*, though a hagiographic text, provides a glimpse at the possible alternatives to the strict orthodoxy demonstrated by Mirk's *Festial*. *St. Erkenwald* takes a far more liberal stance than either Gower or Mirk in its depiction of a miraculous baptism that allows an ideal of egalitarian social justice to intersect with God's justice, changing what it means to be a part of a just Christian society. The multiplicity of baptismal functions in these texts reflects the multiplicity of identifications available to the individual at the end of the fourteenth century, revealing the diversified attitudes that could be expressed through religious narratives.

Taken together, the analyzed texts suggest two extremes of incorporation into Christian identity, what I refer to as inclusive and exclusive baptism. Though my terminology suggests a sharp binary, the two understandings of baptism should be understood as two extremes, between which any particular depiction of baptism might fall. Exclusive baptism requires that the catechumen enact other modes of identification in order to be considered part of the Christian community, usually forcing the catechumen to change to fit preconceived understandings of what constituted a Christian identity. Inclusive baptism, on the other hand, has the modes of identification performed by the catechumen become aspects of the over-arching Christian communal identity, effectively expanding what behaviors a Christian identity could include. As I hope to show in the various texts analyzed in this study, some textual baptisms retain the idealized function to include diverse modes of identification into Christendom even as other texts maintain an exclusive interpretation of the rite.

Throughout the fourteenth century, baptism was utilized to support multiple means of establishing and maintaining individual and corporate notions of identity. The literary use of baptism as a symbol of identity supports Rubin's claim that the religious language system was open and indeterminate. In fact, baptism's unavoidable presence within Christian thought seems to have helped perpetuate such indeterminacy because baptism allowed authors and translators to justify diverse notions of what constituted Christian identity. As baptism was used to incorporate textual catechumens into Christendom, texts set forth diverse arguments about the nature of Christian identity. As a symbol for Christian identity, baptism could justify including or excluding alternative modes of identification within the Christian community, a fact that remained constant even as different writers deployed the symbol to respond to specific cultural and generic concerns and anxieties.

Chapter I

After the Font:

Baptism as Re-interpretation in the *South English Legendary*

The *Legenda aurea*, the extensive hagiographic compendium written by Jacobus de

Voragine in the middle of the thirteenth century, poses a rhetorical question for the reader before

describing the conversion of St. Paul: "Why is Paul's conversion celebrated, while that of other

saints is not?"[1] It is a fair question to which Jacobus offers three reasons: that Paul's conversion

was miraculous, that it caused great joy for the church, and that it revealed the extremes of God's

forgiving grace. While Jacobus focuses on Paul's conversion and its spiritual repercussions in

answering his question, another nearly concurrent hagiographic compendium was being

compiled in England which offered a very different focus for the narrative of Paul's conversion.

The *South English Legendary* (*SEL*), a collection of saints' lives written in the vernacular in the

1270s or 1280s and periodically rewritten after that, focuses on Paul's conversion but is as

interested in the events that take place after Paul decides to become Christian, particularly in

Paul's baptism, as in the miraculous conversion.[2] The *SEL*'s difference in focus in the story of

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[1] Jacobus de Voragine, "The Conversion of Saint Paul, Apostle," *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 119.

[2] Much of what is known about the textual tradition of the *SEL* is the result of Manfred Görlach's extensive research. His work led him to surmise that the core collection of what is today the *SEL* was completed in the years following 1270. This original collection, which Görlach christened the 'Z' collection, was produced in the Worcester region. The text renders dozens of saints' lives into Middle English verse consisting of rough, rhyming couplets. The original sources for these lives remain uncertain, though Görlach suggests a Latin *Legenda* and breviaries from the Sarum Liturgy as sources and influences. According to Görlach, the *Legenda aurea*, produced in Italy between 1250 and 1260 but not found in England until the last quarter of the thirteenth century, did not serve as a direct source for the earliest versions of the *SEL* but did influence the production of later versions. Manfred Görlach, *The Textual Tradition of the "South English Legendary"* (Yorkshire: Scholar Press Ltd. for Leeds Texts and Monographs, 1974), 6-40. While the *Legenda aurea* is not a direct source of the *SEL*, a modern critic can use it as a point of comparison to understand alternative emphases and options that might have been available to a collector of

St. Paul allows an audience to approach the narrative in a way radically different from either Jacobus or the Biblical original, and the *SEL* appears to answer Jacobus's rhetorical question differently than Jacobus would expect. Paul's conversion in the *SEL* celebrates the power of the sacrament of baptism and the necessity of materiality as a part of Christian identification and salvation.

In rewriting the story of Paul and the stories of other saints, the *SEL*-poet often makes baptism the center of the conversion narratives, reinforcing the belief that the sacraments are a necessary part of Christian salvation. The *SEL* emphasizes the material dimension of baptism, adapting conversion narratives so that baptism, as opposed to the inner conversion, becomes the means of representing spiritual transformation. While resolving the question of the importance of baptism, the changes made to the conversion narratives raise more questions than they answer: How can the spiritual effect of baptism be understood? What is the relationship between the material event of baptism and its spiritual effect? What is the value of materiality with regard to the spiritual identity of the individual? The *SEL* does not respond to all of these questions, but baptism in the *SEL* does signify the importance of materiality, both in baptism's presence as a sacrament and in its ability to include the catechumen into Christianity. By emphasizing baptism when it appears in the narratives, the *SEL* offers the rite as a means of incorporating all aspects of life, even somatic existence and secular activities, into Christian identification, a move that reflects in narrative form Thomistic and Aristotelian attitudes toward materiality.

Taming the Wild through Bathing the Body:

The Centrality of the Baptism in *The Conversion of St. Paul*

In order to understand how the *SEL*'s depiction of baptism manages to make earthly

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saints' lives at the end of the thirteenth century.

things part of a Christian identity, one must return to the conversion of St. Paul and understand

that baptism's centrality presents materiality as spiritually valuable.   As noted above, the *SEL*'s

depiction of the conversion of St. Paul is distinctly different from Jacobus's *Legenda aurea*, and

it is also different from the original narrative as it appears in chapters 9, 22, and 26 of the Acts of

the Apostles. [3] For Jacobus, the important material appears in the first half of the narrative: Saul

is a sinner, hears the voice of the risen Christ while traveling, is struck blind, and converts.

Jacobus offers little in the way of narrative and instead explores these events as they reflect the

inner conversion of the one-time persecutor of the church, emphasizing God's miraculous grace

and power. The Biblical narrative, like the *SEL*, continues beyond the miraculous vision and

explains how Paul came to Damascus, was healed, baptized, and began preaching the Gospel.

Both the Bible and the *SEL* explore Paul's earthly life as it was transformed. However, the *SEL*

version deviates from both the Biblical narrative and the example of the *Legenda aurea* by

emphasizing the performance of the sacrament and the baptized body. In so doing, the text

builds on concurrent academic attitudes toward the created world and posits the notion that

somatic existence is instrumental in the creation of a spiritual identity.

In the *SEL*, Saul desires to be baptized after meeting Christ and being blinded, an

addition not found in either the Biblical narrative or the *Legenda aurea*, and his desire suggests

that his inner conversion is not enough to make him a Christian. Instead, the sacramental

performance becomes the privileged moment of taking on a Christian identity. While the *SEL*

does not omit the miraculous moment during which Paul is struck blind, the evocative

description and narrative focus on Paul's baptism reveal the sacrament's importance in the *SEL*.

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[3] The actual events of Paul's conversion are described in chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles. Paul recounts his
experience while preaching in chapters 22 and 26.

After Saul is struck blind, God calls a certain Christian, Ananias, to seek Saul out as in the

Biblical version. Though the Biblical account has God calling Ananias to lay his hands on Saul,

the *SEL* has God tell Ananias to baptize Saul.[4] Saul's reaction to Ananias reveals the

importance of baptism in the *SEL*:

> He [Ananias] cam to Saule and seide him so : þat ore loured him þudere send
> Þat he scholde cristine beo. : Saul was þo wel bliþe,
> And er þane he i-baptized was : ech ȝwyle him þouȝte fiue.
> Þo he i-baptized was : Powel was is name.
> Wel auȝten men herien þane god : þat of þe wilde makez þe tame!
> A-non so he I-baptized was : þare feol out of eiþer eiȝe
> Fuylþe ase þei it were slym : þat alle þe men it seiȝe.
>
> <div align="right">(Paul, 46- 52)</div>
>
> [Ananias came to Saul and said to him that our Lord had sent him there so that he
> should become a Christian. Saul was very glad then, and each moment seemed to
> him to be five until he was baptized. When he was baptized, Paul was his name.
> It is good for men to praise the God who makes the wild tame! As soon as he was
> baptized filth fell out of either eye, as if it was slime, and all the people saw it.]

The common trope of suggesting that time has slowed down for Saul as he awaits baptism

highlights the importance of the rite, as it reinforces the idea that Paul longs specifically for

baptism, as opposed to any other sign from God or for the return of his sight. Further, the

moment of baptism is carefully fixed within the text, as the verb, 'i-baptized,' is repeated three

times, once before the rite, once to indicate the actual moment, and once after the baptism has

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[4] "Ȝif him cristindeom in mine name and he it wole onder-fonge." [Give him baptism in my name and he will undergo it.] "The Conversion of St. Paul," *The Early South English Legendary or Lives of Saints*, ed. Carl Horstmann, EETS OS 87 (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1887), 190 (*Paul*, 36). All quotations from the *South English Legendary* will be from this edition and cited with abbreviated narrative title and line numbers in parentheses. The current study will focus upon the earliest manuscript of the *SEL*, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108, which was probably completed between 1280 and 1290 in Gloucester. I have chosen MS Laud Misc. 108, originally edited by Carl Horstmann, as my primary text for the *SEL* despite Görlach's suggestion that it was not part of the progression from the 'Z' collection to the earliest complete texts, MS Harley 2277 and Corpus Christi MS 145, which are the basis of the better known 1956 edition of the *SEL*, edited by Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna Mill. The early date of MS Laud Misc. 108 better serves the goal of comparison between this, the earliest English hagiographic collection, and later texts, both romance and hagiography, which depict the sacrament of baptism.

been completed. The repetition draws attention to baptism itself and the impact it has upon the

catechumen. The poet also addresses Paul's changing name at this moment, modifying the

original Biblical narrative but conforming to medieval practice in which baptism was often the

first use of an infant's name.[5] In conflating the name change with the moment of baptism, the

poet has further emphasized the dramatic nature of the material rite. By focusing on the moment

of baptism as a moment of fulfilled desire and forming that moment so precisely in the text, the

poet focuses the narrative on baptism, making it the outward sign that communicates Saul's

change of identity while still emphasizing the necessary nature of the church ordained rite.

The poet further focuses on Saul's baptism by re-structuring the order of events. In the

Biblical narrative, Ananias, by the laying on of hands, bestows the Holy Spirit upon Saul, which

results in the restoration of his sight: "So Ananias departed and entered the house, and laying his

hands upon him, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord has sent me - Jesus, who appeared to thee on

thy journey – that thou mayest recover thy sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And

straightway there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he covered his sight, and arose,

and was baptized."[6] The Biblical account implies that the reception of the Holy Spirit is enough

to heal Saul. The *SEL*, on the other hand, conflates the two distinct acts: baptism and Ananias'

laying on of hands. The conflation simplifies the narrative but also makes baptism the act which

bestows God's blessing. Further, Paul's eyes are not afflicted by scale-like coverings as in Acts

but with slimy filth. The spiritual cleansing associated with baptism takes on a physical

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[5] The story of Paul's conversion as told in the three narratives in *Acts* does not mention his change of name. Rather, *Acts* 13: 9 mentions that Saul is also known as Paul. Previous to this verse, the individual had been exclusively called Saul and after this verse he is referred to as Paul. The audience must infer that his name change corresponded with his conversion.

[6] Acts of the Apostles 9: 17-18 (The Confraternity Edition of the New Testament). There is no mention of Paul's preaching converting anyone until Acts of the Apostles 9:31.

representation in the cleansing of Paul's eyes. The scales of the Biblical text are mysterious and

are perhaps more symbolic of Saul's spiritual blindness than anything else. The corporeal filth

falling from Paul's eyes in the *SEL*, on the other hand, is compared to slime, a Middle English

word used to denote mud or mucus. Unlike the mysterious scales, *filth* can imply both physical

and spiritual corruption.[7] The cleansing of filth recalls baptism's spiritual cleansing but also

maintains the focus on the material events. The focus on baptism and the language used to

describe the event stress the importance of the physical sacrament as a means of accessing

interior conversion. The *SEL* communicates the spiritual content of the story of Saul's

conversion through those moments in which physical things, like baptism or filth, manifest

spiritual meaning.

Even as the material sacrament of baptism serves as the physical manifestation of Saul's

conversion, Paul's converted body also serves as a physical sign of God's power. After baptism,

Paul's body becomes a problematic object in need of careful interpretation. The body is a sign of

Paul's previous identity that remains even after his radically transformative baptism. While it is

Paul who recovers his sight, the text is as much concerned with others seeing Paul as it is with

Paul seeing others. "Ech man wondred þat him i-saiȝ : þo he prechour bi-cam, / And seiden: 'nis

þis þilke man : þat weorrede alle þeo / In þe londe of Ierusalem : þat he miȝte oȝwere cristine

men I-seo?' / Manie Men he tornede to cristinedom : and manie him þouȝten quelle / And bi-

speken hov heo miȝten do : for he bi-gan a-ȝein heom telle" (*Paul*, 60- 4). [Each man wondered

who saw him when he became a preacher and said, "Isn't this that same man who made war

against all the people in the land of Jerusalem wherever he could find Christian men?" He

converted many men to Christianity and many thought to kill him and discussed what they might

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[7] *MED*, s.v. 'filth,' definitions 1(a) and 3(a) and (b).

do because he spoke against them.] The *SEL* is very similar to the Biblical text: "And straightway in the synagogues he began to preach that Jesus is the Son of God. And all who heard were amazed and said, "Is not this he who used to make havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name, and who has come here for the purpose of taking them in bonds to the chief priests?"[8] In the original narrative, the onlookers are described as being shocked by what they hear: Saul preaching Christ's message. The onlookers in the *SEL* are shocked by what they see: Saul's body, the same person that was earlier described in the text as "much and strong," [big and strong] is now espousing Christianity (*Paul*, 3). Paul's general physical appearance remains constant while his inner being changes radically: there is no indication that he is anything but 'much and strong' after his baptism. Moreover, the physical effect of baptism, the cleansing of the filth from Saul's eyes, does not change the body's appearance. In fact, it makes the body even more recognizable as the same body that persecuted the Christians since blindness would mark the body as different but restored sight restores the body to its previous state. Seeing the body reminds the crowd that Saul is continuous with Paul and causes the crowd to wonder. Paul's transformation can only be understood as wonderful because Paul is still recognizable as Saul. The wonder expressed by the on-lookers is a reaction to God's transformative power, and that wonder produces further conversions. The body, which links Paul to Saul, also serves to propagate the Christian faith. The ability to recognize the body helps the onlookers comprehend the transformation of the soul.

Conversion, baptism, and physicality are linked in the *SEL*'s depiction of Paul. The body and baptism serve to fix God's miraculous power as much in the dimension of the visible and earthly as the internal or spiritual. The *SEL* offers a relatively positive understanding of the body

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[8] Acts of the Apostles 9: 20-21 (The Confraternity Edition of the New Testament).

and the material world. Such an understanding would not necessarily have been automatic in

English culture during the thirteenth century. By the thirteenth century the Cathar heresy, which

developed in France in the twelfth century, had been roundly condemned. The Cathars had

stipulated that the physical world and the body were the products of an evil God that kept the

pure soul from being with the good God.   Despite the condemnation of such theology, the

presence of the Cathars suggests that Western European Christian culture did harbor some

drastically negative views of physicality through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[9] Though

the church never supported the strict dualism of the Cathars, the concept of soft dualism, that the

world was not inherently evil but simply less important or distracting, can be found in the

epistles of St. Paul, which influenced theology throughout church history. The idea that the

physical world was inferior to the spiritual one fit well with Platonic thought which further

helped structure accepted theology. St. Augustine's account of baptism, for example, implies

that physical things are unimportant compared to the inner mind and God's relationship to that

mind.[10] Other examples of soft dualism appear in Middle English texts, particularly those

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[9] For a basic introduction to the Cathar Heresy as it relates to notions of the body, see: Caroline Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), especially 214-220. See also Peter Biller, "Cathars and the Material World," *God's Bounty? The Churches and the Natural World*, ed. Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (Woodbridge: Ecclesiastical History Society, 2010), 89-110 and Bernard Hamilton, "The Cathars and Christian Perfection," *The Medieval Church: Universities, Heresy, and the Religious Life*, ed. Peter Biller and Barrie Dobson (Woodbridge: Ecclesiastical History Society, 1999), 5-24.

[10] Phillip Cary stresses that Augustine's account of baptism and conversion depicts an internal development of which the sacrament is a necessary sign that has little to do with the spiritual transformation of the catechumen. Phillip Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Similarly, Karl Morrison stresses Augustine's interiority in his reading of Augustine's *Confessions.* Karl Morrison*, Conversion and Text* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992). However, Augustine's philosophy is far more complex than my simple overview might indicate. While many of his works involving his own conversion privilege the interior mind and spirit above the physical world and its value, Augustine's later works indicate a greater interest in the created world. Stanley Rosenberg notes that Augustine's later works "offered a natural world that is contingent, rational, capable of being understood, and worthy of one's attention." Stanley P. Rosenberg, "Forming the *Saeculum*: The Desacralization of Nature and the Ability to

addressed to women seeking a more spiritual life. For example, *Sawles Warde* and *Hali Meiðhad*, devotional texts from the early years of the thirteenth century, suggest the danger of the physical world.[11] Both texts point to the need to keep physicality in check in order to maintain a religious life. Another example, from a Middle English lyric dated by Carleton Brown to the early fourteenth century, has a mother sing a lullaby to her child warning "Ne tristou to þis world, it is þi ful vo [foe]."[12] The lyric goes on to blame the sin of Adam for the world's current corruption, suggesting that contempt for the world could be a popular as well as theological sentiment. However, such attitudes were not universal. The material world and the body were subject to multiple interpretations during the thirteenth century.

As Aristotelian thought came to be accepted in Western academia, the thirteenth century saw a distinct shift in how the created world was interpreted, a shift that is reflected in the *SEL*'s depiction of materiality of the sacraments and the body. Aristotelian concepts of the world, in which material nature, including the body, and spiritual existence cannot be summarily separated, challenged the previously popular Platonic notion that the body and the created world would drag down and corrupt the spiritual essence of man. Such concepts were embraced by theologians in the Universities of Oxford and Paris, particularly by many Franciscan and

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Understand It in Augustine's *Literal Commentary on Genesis*," *God's Bounty? The Churches and the Natural World*, ed. Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (Woodbridge: Ecclesiastical History Society, 2010), 13. Such a reading is very much in keeping with the approach of Roger Bacon or Albert the Great. However, Rosenberg's reading does imply that the natural, physical world is somehow separate and uninvolved with the realm of the spirit in Augustinian theology, an idea that does not follow a literal understanding of the sacraments, particularly Eucharist and baptism.

[11] Of the two, *Hali Meiðhad* is the more extreme. However, because *Hali Meiðhad* as a call to women to maintain their virginity, this is not surprising.   Both texts and information about their audiences can be found in *Medieval English Prose for Women: the "Katherine group' and Ancrene wisse*, ed. and trans. Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[12] "Lollai litel child whi wepistow so sore?" *Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Carleton Brown, 2nd ed. revised by G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952; corr. repr. 1957), 36.

Dominican friars. [13] For example, at the beginning of his *Opus Majus*, Franciscan Friar Roger

Bacon (1214-1294) writes of philosophical understanding: "for the end of speculative philosophy

is the knowledge of the Creator through the creatures."[14] He then goes on through several books

on philosophy, mathematics, experimental science, and other subjects to link all his various

worldly studies to theology. The Aristotelian notion that creation could reveal rather than

obscure the spiritual extended to the physical body as well. David D'Avray notes that

Franciscan theology emphasized "the intimate connection between body and soul in man."[15]

Caroline Bynum sums up the changes in attitudes toward the body in her discussion of the

female body and religion: "the theological writers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries came

to treat the relationship between body and soul as much tighter and more integral than it had

earlier been understood to be."[16] Because of the dissemination of Franciscan and Dominican

scholastic ideas, educational and entertaining texts, like the *SEL*, could conceivably depict the

natural world and the body as positive, informing spiritual understanding rather than limiting it.

In the case of the *SEL*'s version of St. Paul's Conversion, the 'tighter and more integral'

relationship between body and soul is communicated by the importance of the physical rite of

baptism, which brings together a physical performance with a spiritual event. That materiality

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[13] For further analysis of Aristotle's impact on the scholastics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see: Richard E. Rubenstein, *Aristotle's Children* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2003) and Henrik Lagerlund, "Introduction: The Mind/Body Problem and Late Medieval Conceptions of the Soul," *Forming the Mind: Essays on the Internal Sense and Mind/Body Problem from Avicenna to the Medical Enlightenment*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 1-16.

[14] Roger Bacon, *The Opus Majus of Roger Bacon*, trans. Robert Belle Burke (New York: Russel & Russel Inc., 1962), 49.

[15] David L. D'Avray, "Some Franciscan Ideas About the Body," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, 84 no. 3-4, (Dec. 1991): 344

[16] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 222.

and spirituality are combined in the sacraments in the *SEL* can be related to the discussion of

Thomas Aquinas, a theologian influenced by Aristotelian ideas, on the subject of the sacraments

in his *Summa Theologicae*.

In theorizing on the nature of the sacraments, Aquinas suggests that the sacraments can

be understood to be instrumental causes of grace, a fact that blends the physical and spiritual

nature of the rites. Aquinas stresses the importance of the physical nature of baptism even as he

suggests the somatic/spiritual nature of humankind:

> They [the sacraments] touch the body and so produce upon it the sort of effects
> which are connatural to them as physical entities. But in the very act of doing so,
> they also operate as instruments, producing effects upon the soul in the power of
> God. For instance the water of baptism, by the very fact of washing the body of
> its own connatural power, washes the soul too in virtue of being an instrument of
> the divine power. For soul and body together constitute a unity.[17]

Aquinas chooses baptism as his example of how the physical act of the sacrament is different,

yet linked to its instrumental function.[18] According to Aquinas, the physical acts of the

sacraments do something according to material nature. In the case of baptism, water washes the

catechumen's body. However, when performed as a sacrament, those physical actions also

function as an instrument of God's grace. The physical act becomes the means by which God

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[17] "Et similiter sacramenta corporalia per propriam operationem quam exercent circa corpus, quod tangunt, efficiunt operationem instrumentalem ex virtutis divina circa animam: sicut aqua baptismi, abluendo corpus secundum propriam virtutem, abluit animam inquantum est instrumentum virtutis divinae: nam ex anima et corpore unum fit." *Summa Theologicae* 3a, 62, 1.

[18] Aquinas theorizes the instrumental nature of the physical act in the process by which God gives grace in the sacraments in contrast with Bonaventure (1221-1274), the Italian Minister General of the Friars Minor. According to Spinks, Bonaventure saw the physical nature of the sacrament as representational, a sign of the grace of the sacraments. See Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*, 143-45. Aquinas too stresses the signifying feature of the physical sacrament but suggests that the sign also has a causal function. Aquinas writes: "Yet we have it on the authority of many of the saints that the sacraments of the New Law not merely signify but actually cause grace." [cum tamen ex multis Sanctorum auctoritatibus habeatur quod sacramenta novae legis non solum significant, sed causant gratiam.] *Summa Theologicae* 3a, 62, 1.

performs a spiritual act, linking the two perfectly, even as the body and the soul are united. In baptism, the spiritual and physical actions are clearly related, making it the best example of the material/spiritual union among the sacraments. When focusing specifically on baptism Aquinas notes the appropriateness of water as the instrument of this sacrament. Among other examples, Aquinas notes that "Because of its moistness, water cleanses, and thus appropriately symbolizes and causes the cleansing of sins."[19] Though the action of baptism is a sign of God's spiritual effect, the specifics of the action and the materials involved become the instrumental means of achieving the spiritual effect. The exact relationship between Aquinas's work and the *SEL* is impossible to determine; however, the ways in which baptism and the body appear in the *SEL* suggest a Thomistic appreciation of the material nature of the sacraments to instrumentally show spiritual matters. Even as Aquinas elevates the physical act of baptism from a sign to an instrument that reflects the spiritual event, the *SEL*-poet emphasizes the ritual of baptism and suggests the importance of the material in spiritual matters.

The *SEL*-poet's revision of the story of St. Paul brings baptism to the center, an act that invites comparison between the use material matters in the narrative and concurrent theories of the relationship between the spiritual and material. Because the physical act of baptism is privileged as being as important if not more important that Paul's inner spiritual state, the text appears to support the idea that the material world and the institutionalized performance of the sacraments are vital to the identification of a Christian individual. When Saul desires baptism, the text suggests that his Christian identity is dependent upon certain performances, not on any inner belief or change. Further, the emphasis on the physical sacrament is not the only reference

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[19] "Quae sua humiditate lavat: ex quo conveniens est ad significandum et causandum ablutionem peccatorum." *Summa Theologicae* 3a, 66, 3.

to the use of materiality to explore and explain spiritual matters. Paul's baptized body also becomes a means by which the wonders of conversion can be communicated to others as the sight of that body causes people to recognize God's power. The *SEL* is almost certainly not a direct product of the clerks working with neo-Aristotelian thought in the universities of the thirteenth century; however, the text embraces the physical world in a way only possible after the introduction of Aristotle into the culture of thirteenth-century England. Thomistic principles of instrumentality give the material spiritual vitality in much the same way as Paul's baptism becomes the specific means of making him Christian and cleansing him of both spiritual and physical filth. Beyond the story of Paul's conversion, studying the use of baptism in the *SEL* reveals that the text continues to develop the relationship between the material and the spiritual. In the *SEL*, baptism makes it possible for individuals to relate earthly matters and physicality to spirituality and divine matters.

A Big Body to Baptize: Physicality and the Sacrament in the *Life of St. Christopher*

While the story of the conversion of Paul in the *SEL* confirms the sacramental nature of baptism first and only secondarily addresses issues of the body, the *SEL*'s depiction of St. Christopher brings somatic issues to the forefront of the text through the body of a monstrous giant. The *SEL*'s *Life of St. Christopher* is a carefully condensed version of a long-standing *vita* with various versions recorded in Anglo-Saxon, Old Irish, and many continental languages.[20] What makes earlier versions of the legend particularly interesting is that Christopher belongs to the race of cynocephali, the dog-headed people of the east. While later versions of St.

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[20] For an overview and analysis of the Anglo-Saxon and other earlier versions, see Joyce Tally Lionarons, "From Monster to Martyr: The Old English Legend of Saint Christopher," *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, ed. Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002), 167-82.

Christopher's narrative, including the *SEL*, downplay Christopher's otherness and do not

mention anything unusual about his head, in all versions he is a giant of monstrous height and

fearsome appearance. Yet, far from being a monstrous distraction or weakness, Christopher's

giant body is an essential key to the saint's salvation. The *SEL* poet, in relating physicality with

spirituality through baptism, uses the Christopher legend to explore the possibility of sacred

meaning in the monstrous body. In the resulting text, the giant body, once baptized, becomes in

itself a source of salvation and a physical metaphor for Christ.

In the *SEL*, St. Christopher is more than a tall man; he accurately fits the common

understanding of a monstrous giant and seems to suffer from all the spiritual degeneration that

goes along with being such a creature. The narrative begins with a description of Christopher's

extreme size and fearsomeness:

> In non stude bi is daie : nas so gret a man:
> Foure-and-twenti fet he was long : and þicke and brod i-nouȝ:
> A scwuch bote he wer strong : me þichez it wer wouȝ!
> Al a contreie þare he were : for him wolde fleo.
> Þare-fore him þouȝte þat noman : aȝen him scholde beo:
> He seide, he nolde with no man bi-leue : bote with on þat were
> Hext louerd ouer alle men : and onder non oþur nere.
> <div align="right">(Christopher, 2-8)</div>
>
> [Nowhere in his day was there so great a man: He was twenty-four feet tall and
> very thick and broad. It seems to me that it would be a shame if he were not
> strong! All the countryside where he was would flee from him. Since he thought
> that no man would be against him, he said that he would not serve any except the
> highest lord over all other men and under none.]

Not only is Christopher overly large, he is also terrifying and the terror he causes bars him from

normal human interaction. Christopher seeks out a social superior who is above all men because

only such a ruler would be worthy of Christopher's monstrous physicality. He travels first to a

great king and then to Satan in the wilderness. Both king and devil ask versions of the same

question: the king is said to ask "ʒhat he were," (*Christopher*, 12) and Satan, more directly, flat out asks "ʒhat art þou?" (*Christopher*, 38). Such curiosity indicates that Christopher is not immediately recognizable as a human being. Though Christopher has a man's shape, his body marks him as something outside the realm of the human.

The giant's body, like Christopher's, functioned as a complex and often paradoxical symbol for a thirteenth- and fourteenth-century audience. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains: "In England of the Middle Ages he [the giant] signifies those dangerous excesses of the flesh that the process of masculine embodiment produces in order to forbid; he functions at the same time to celebrate the pleasures of the body, to indulge in wine and food and sex."[21] The giant, by the very nature of his overly large body, is bound to concepts of excess, and excess is at once celebratory and frightening. Even those indulgences Cohen notes as celebratory – drunkenness, gluttony, and sexual pleasure – all have violent possibilities that that threaten peaceful society. Moreover, both the giant's positive and negative associations are strictly earthbound matters, delights of the body not the soul. However, the giant also stands in the liminal space occupied by most monsters. Cohen notes that the giant, like the dog-headed cynocephali and other monsters, stands at a threshold, beyond which is "immortality, the gift of an identity that is unending and immutable, the reward of heaven itself."[22] The initial depiction of Christopher is a threatening non-human giant, but the narrative depicts Christopher's transformation through baptism by first acknowledging that physicality is a sign of divine goodness. By the end of the story, Christopher's remarkable body, like Christ's, serves as instruments through which God

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[21] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xiii.

[22] Ipid., 120.

can communicate his power on earth, in a way similar to Aquinas's understanding of the material

aspects of the sacraments. However, before Christopher's body can take on such spiritual

qualities, it first must be understood differently through baptism.

Christopher's first contact with Christianity places the giant body in a sacred context by

counter-intuitively focusing on physicality and not interior spirituality. After leaving the king

and the devil, Christopher hopes to serve Christ. He searches until he finds a Christian hermit.

The hermit greets Christopher by explaining who Christ is: "'Leue broþer,' seide þe heremite,

'he is þi louerd : for to manne he þe wrouȝte, / And with is owene flechs and is blod : wel deore

he þe a-bouȝte" (*Christopher*, 65- 6). ["Beloved Brother," said the hermit, "he (Christ) is your

lord, for he made you a man, and with his own flesh and blood bought you very dearly."] Unlike

the *Legenda aurea*, which only describes the initial exchange between Christopher and the

hermit, the *SEL* narrative provides the hermit his brief greeting that stresses both Christ's and

Christopher's bodies. The hermit posits that Christ, as creator, is the initial source of physicality

and that Christ's own body, His flesh and blood, is the ultimate source of salvation. Further, the

hermit, in direct contrast with the king or the devil, does not question Christopher's humanity.

On the contrary, he addresses Christopher as 'dear brother," which suggests a commonality

between the hermit and the giant.

Though the body does take on spiritual ramifications, at first Christopher's gigantism

seems a detriment to his conversion, drawing him away from spiritual matters. In his early

conversation with the Giant, the hermit hopes to teach Christopher proper Christian behavior:

"'Þou most sum-ȝwat soffir for him : and festen eche Friday.' / 'Ine faste neuere,' said Cristofre :

'ne, certes, ȝeot Ine may.' / 'Þou most,' seide þe heremite, 'to churche gon : and þine beden

bidde also.'/ 'I-not,' seide Cristofre, 'ȝwat it is : ne i-ne can hit nouȝt do'" (*Christopher*, 67- 70).

["You must suffer for him a bit and fast each Friday." "I do not ever fast,' said Christopher,

"nor, certainly, can I." "You must," said the hermit, "go to church and pray your prayers also."

"I do not," said Christopher, "know what that is, nor can I do it."] Christopher is unable or

unwilling to either fast or pray. Such inabilities are hardly surprising considering the common

depiction of a giant's mental capacity and his appetite. But the combination of too much

emphasis on eating, a physical and animalistic act, and too little on prayer, a spiritual and human

act, would seem enough to deny the catechumen access to God. In Christopher's case, however,

there is an alternative that allows him to enact Christian behavior specific to his monstrous body.

The hermit offers a Christian service that Christopher can fulfill:

> '... þou art strong : and here is a water biside
> Þat no man may þare ouer come : bote he þe herre ride:
> Þou most in lesnesse of þine sunnes : habbe þine woneȝingue þere
> and ȝwan ani man to þe neode hath : þare-ouer þou most him bere,
> In forȝiuenesse of þine misdeeds.' : he grauntede þat a-non.
> Þe heremite ȝaf him critine-dom : and het him þudere gon.
> ...
> ...þare ne cam so heui non
> Þat Cristofre ouer þe deope watere : ne bar heom ouer ech-on.
> (*Christopher*, 74-6, 81- 82)
> ["You are strong and nearby there is a body of water that no man can cross over
> unless he rides the higher. You must, for the diminishment of your sins, have
> your dwelling there and when any man has need of you, you must bear him over
> in penance for your sins." He [Christopher] granted that immediately. The
> Hermit gave him baptism and commanded him to go thither.... There came none
> so heavy that Christopher could not bear them, each one, over the deep water.]

Though baptism is supposed to achieve perfect forgiveness of sins, Christopher undergoes a sort

of perpetual baptism: entering the stream whenever someone has the need to cross. Such action

fulfills the promise of forgiveness associated with baptism. The new occupation, possible only

because of Christopher's unique body, becomes conflated with baptism in appearance and in

effect. His repeated physical actions will continually wash away his sins. Instead of causing

difficulties, the penance makes Christopher's monstrosity an instrument through which

Christopher can receive grace. The monstrous body is made an instrument through baptism and

baptismal images. More clearly than in Paul's case, Christopher's body is a means of impressing

spiritual matters upon him through baptism. The baptized body bridges the space between his

own understanding and spiritual truth.

Christopher's baptism sets up the physical dimensions of spiritual matters, but physicality

becomes even more essential when Christopher meets the Christ Child. Some time after

Christopher has been established as a ferryman, a young child requests to be carried across.

When Christopher brings the child across the river he nearly drowns under the child's ever

increasing weight. The baptismal imagery is obvious and reinforces the common medieval

English form of baptism, which involved full immersion to symbolize death and rebirth. Christ's

physical weight, however, makes this baptismal moment more than a reinforcement of

Christopher's christening earlier. Instead, it is a point at which Christ and the giant become

related. When Christopher finally sets the Christ Child down his first words, in a delightful

reversal are: "Ʒwat art þou, þat art so luyte : and so heui bi-come, / So heui þat ich was ope þe

poyinte : to habbe a-drient i-lome? / Þei al þe world hadde ope me i-leie : me þinchez so heui it

nere" (*Christopher*, 101- 3). [What are you, who are so little and have become so heavy, so

heavy that I was at the point of being drowned? It seemed heavier to me than if the whole world

had been laid on me.] Christopher asks the same kind of question that was put to the giant by the

king and the devil.[23] The *SEL*-poet not only adds an element of humor to the situation with the

question but also uses it to imply that the child is not human, or is at least strange enough or

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[23] It may be telling that Christopher's question to the Christ Child does not appear in the *Legenda aurea*, a detail that reinforces the notion that the *SEL*-poet has a particular interest in the idea that Christopher's monstrosity is a way to understand Christ's power.

monstrous enough to make certain recognition impossible. Here, Christ is recognized as potentially monstrous, for he, like the giant, is monstrous in his power.

Even as the Christ Child resembles Christopher through their somewhat unusual natures, they are also linked specifically by their excessive physicality. In response to Christopher's question, the Christ-child does not directly say what he is but instead offers an explanation of his weight: "'No wonder, Crisofre,' said þat child : 'Þei ic heuiore were / Þanne al þe world, for ich [am] more- : and no wonder it nis / For ich made al þe world of nouȝt : and al oþer þing þat is" (*Christopher*, 104-06). [It is no wonder if I was heavier than the entire world, for I am more than that because I made the entire world and everything that exists from nothing.] As the hermit had done earlier, Christ emphasizes his role as creator, a role that allows Christ to encompass all forms of physical, bodily existence. While one might assume that Christ's role as creator might place him outside physical reality, he is instead overly embodied, made more physically heavy. In his physicality, Christ is linked to the giant to whom he speaks. Both are overly physical, but that is not a sign that they are cut off from spiritual truth. Rather, like Christopher's physical activity of ferrying men across the river, it is a sign of God's extraordinary power. Further, the juxtaposition of the small body and great weight are a source of wonder in Christopher even as the Christ Child repeats that it is 'no wonder'. Despite the fact that the Christ Child is clearly more than human, he denies that neither he, his weight, nor, we might add, Christopher, is outside the natural order of things. Instead, Christ the monstrous is part of the world and his physical presence brings salvation, as Christopher's physicality does in the latter half of the narrative

Throughout the rest of Christopher's life, the giant serves as a Christ-like example, his terror-inducing physical nature substituting for Christ's own divine power. When Christopher

leaves the river, he sets out to comfort those facing martyrdom, inciting a negative reaction among those in power. When a justice finds Christopher supporting his fellow Christians, he reacts violently: "Þe Iustise sturte forth a-non : and smot him vnder þe Ere; /... / 'Site þou wel stille,' Chrstifre seide, : 'and ne smijt þou me non-more! / 'For ʒif ich a cristine man nere : Ich me wolde a-wreke a-non.'" (*Christopher*, 116, 118-119). [The justice started forth quickly and struck him under the ear... "Sit very still," said Christopher, "and smite me no more! If I were not a Christian man, I would avenge myself quickly."] Christopher confesses that his Christianity restrains him from meeting violence with violence. However, by vocalizing the possibility for vengeance, Christopher acknowledges the threat of his physical being, a threat that Christianity has placed under control. Similarly, while in prison, a king tempts Christopher with two women. While the *SEL* does not fully explore the contact between Christopher and the prostitutes, the *Legenda aurea* notes the control the giant has over his potentially lustful nature. In both cases the narrative changes the apparent meaning of the giant body so that the excessive violence or appetites of that body no longer define it. Instead, the ability to control that violence requires a reinterpretation of the giant's body. Christopher has left behind his body's older signification: his body now reflects the power of the Christian faith.

While the *Legenda aurea* stresses Christopher's change of identity in offering a pre- and post-baptismal name and his control of his appetites in his contact with the two prostitutes, the *SEL* stresses that Christopher's physical presence, like Christ's own, can produce salvation. When the wicked heathen king dispatches guards to arrest Christopher for disobeying the judge, the threat of his monstrous appearance is enough to send one hundred men back to the king empty-handed. The second hundred men react almost the same way: "Wel I-armede heo wenden

forth : and a-non so huy Cristofre i-seie / huy stoden and ne dorsten gon him nere : oþur vnneþe

be-holden him with eiȝe" (*Christopher*, 143- 44). [Well armed they went forth and as soon as

they saw Christopher, they stood still and dared not go near him or even behold him with their

eyes.] The terror created by Christopher's appearance suggests the physical body's possible

violence. But Christopher meekly subjects himself to being bound as the king commanded.

Such an example quickly converts the soldiers, even as the visual perception of Paul combined

with his unusual behavior was linked to conversion in the earlier narrative. Similarly, when the

women come to seduce Christopher they are stopped by his face, which "wel briȝtore shine :

þane þe sonne oþur þe Mone" (*Christopher*, 171). [shone much more brightly than either the

sun or moon.] The women, upon seeing Christopher's face, immediately ask to become

Christians. Christopher's appearance produces such transformations because Christopher is a

liminal body, at once monstrous and heavenly. Christopher's shining face associates him with

direct contact with God.[24] In both cases, that of the soldiers and the women meeting the saint,

the text is focused upon the impact of Christopher's body and his physical presence provides the

drama of the scene. In the former, Christopher is monstrous, while in the latter he is angelic, but

in either case the body functions as the means by which the viewer understands spiritual matters:

the extreme materiality of the giant becomes an instrument of spiritual enlightenment. After his

contact with Christ, Christopher's body, more clearly than Paul's, is a means of seeing spiritual

truth, an intrinsic element in the salvation of others.

The text concludes with a final miracle and conversion, reinforcing the importance of

Christopher's physical body right to the end. The king attempts to kill Christopher several times

and during one attempt the king is blinded. Christopher tells the king that the next day God will

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[24] After speaking with God, Moses exhibits a similarly shining face that terrifies the Israelites in Exodus 34: 30.

allow the saint to be martyred and the king is to smear his eyes with Christopher's blood in order

to receive his sight. The king does all that Christopher instructed him and receives his sight. He

then converts and makes his kingdom Christian (*Christopher*, 211- 20). Christopher's final,

posthumous miracle, like most posthumous miracles, is dependent upon his physicality. Here,

Christopher's blood precipitates another baptismal moment that recalls Paul's baptism: the

anointing of the king's eyes with cleansing blood.

The *SEL*, in the final miracle and throughout its rendition of the St. Christopher legend,

has privileged Christopher's giant body as a source and symbol of salvation, going so far as to

make it a sign of Christ's own power and physical presence. Cohen notes that the giant body

defies definition and, in so doing, uses physicality to point to immortality. Scholastic theology,

building on Aristotle, similarly noted the ability for material things to lead to spiritual

understanding. Similarly, the *SEL* presents a narrative quite different than the concurrent

Legenda aurea. In the *SEL*, Christopher's baptized body becomes conflated with Christ's.

Taken together, both the giant and the monstrous Christ fulfill the destabilizing and uplifting

functions Cohen describes. The bodies of both Christ and Christopher break down the

boundaries between God and man and allow God's grace to come into contact with others. The

fantastic use of the monstrous body and its connection to Christ is only possible through baptism,

which, as a means of sanctification, allows for radically new, spiritual interpretations both of the

body and of worldly action.

Baptizing Behavior: Sanctifying Human Endeavors in the *South English Legendary*

The *SEL*-poet reveals concern not just for the sanctification of the body, as shown in the

lives of Saints Paul and Christopher, but also appears to reconcile worldly living with spiritual

existence through baptism. In other words, the *SEL* offers an image of the Christian life in which

all aspects of earthly life are brought into a Christian understanding. Baptism is the tool used to

achieve such incorporation. The *SEL*, according to Anne Thompson, offers a similar argument

in regard to the interplay between common life and sanctity. Thompson sees in the text an

"active willingness... to negotiate the *double claims* of immanence and transcendence [that] gives

it a unique interest and value. The *SEL* seeks to affirm the existence of the eternal within, as

well as outside, the boundaries of earthly life."[25] Building on Thompson's argument, baptism

functions as a means by which earthly and somatic existence can become transcendent in the

SEL. *The Life of St. Martin*, *The Conception of Thomas Becket*, and *The Life of St. Eustace* all

feature baptisms that reinterpret the role human action and motivation play in divine matters. In

the *SEL*, chivalric life, in the case of St. Martin, and romantic love, in the case of Becket's

mother, are not identities or actions that need to be put away upon entering the Christian faith.

Rather, knighthood and romantic love are re-interpreted through baptism and gain new, religious

meanings. In *The Life of St. Eustace*, human, worldly action in general becomes sanctified in

baptism and becomes an integral part of an individual's salvation. In keeping with earlier

hagiographic works and in stark contrast to Jacobus's hagiographic adaptations in the *Legenda*

aurea, the *SEL* depicts all aspects of human endeavor as potentially part of a life of Christian

faith, provided that those earthly aspects have been re-interpreted through baptism.

  While *The Life of St. Christopher* addresses the problem of incorporating the monster into

the body of the church, *The Life of St. Martin* addresses the problem of the monster's traditional

opponent: the knight. Martin's pre-conversion chivalric identity, which is bound to a pagan

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[25] Anne B. Thompson, *Everyday Saints and the Art of Narrative in the "South English Legendary"*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 18.

emperor and maintains itself through violence and a social network that excludes devotion to the

Christian God, appears to be incompatible with Christian life. However, the *SEL*-poet presents

the narrative so that Martin's knighthood, an earthly form of identity, persists as metaphor after

his baptism and conversion, allowing knighthood to continue to function as an intrinsic part of

Martin's spiritual identity.

As in the conversion of St. Paul, the *SEL* version of St. Martin's life features adaptations

that emphasize the sacrament of baptism as the means by which the individual truly becomes

Christian.   In both the *SEL* and the *Legenda aurea*, St. Martin begins his narrative as a Roman

knight in military service to a heathen emperor. Martin encounters Christ after sharing his cloak

with a beggar but waits to be baptized. When he finally does get baptized, his full conversion

initially appears to dissolve the social structures that allow for chivalric performance and

potentially emasculates the saint. The *SEL* follows the *Legenda aurea* in establishing that Martin

must wait until he is eighteen to be baptized and then must serve several more years in the army

before being free to pursue his divine calling. The *Legenda aurea* takes care to describe the

situation under which Martin finally leaves the Roman army. Martin completes his term of

service and refuses to stay on and take additional money. The emperor attributes Martin's

decision to cowardice. In defiance of the emperor's accusation, Martin agrees to meet the

opposing army alone during the coming battle. However, the following day finds representatives

of the enemy ready to negotiate surrender. Jacobus attributes Martin's decision to his bravery

and sanctity and attributes the enemy's surrender to divine providence. In the *SEL* the same

situation is described differently. The differences privilege baptism and explore the relationship

between Martin's knighthood before and after conversion.

As in many cases, the *SEL*-poet condenses plot and increases the action when describing

Martin's departure from the army, but the revisions also reinforce the continuity and

transformation of Martin's secular identity. The *SEL* moves quickly from Martin's first

encounter with Christ into a description of the saint's emotions while he waits for baptism:

> Eiʒhtetene ʒer he was old : þo he i-cristned was;
> Þat he hadde so longue a-bide : ofte he seide alas.
> Ake al þe to ʒer þare-afturward : in-to batailes he wende
> For is fader wide a-boute : ase þe Aumperor him sende.
> Hit be-fel of a gret bataile : þat þe Aumperor hadde i-nome,
> He het alle is knyʒhtes in is lond : þat huy scholden to him come;
> He het Martyn with heom wende : and Armure with him take.
> 'Certes, sire," Martine seide, "þine Armes ich habbe for-sake,
> Ich am Iesu cristes knyʒht : and so ich habbe i-beo longue,
> And none oþure Armes bote his : i-nelle vnderfongue.'
>
> (*Martin*, 25- 34)

[He was eighteen years old when he was baptized; he often said alas because he
had waited that long. But all the two years afterward he went into battle as the
Emperor sent him for the sake of his father. It happened during a great battle that
the Emperor had entered into, he commanded all his knights in his land to come to
him; he commanded Martin to go with them and to take up his armor. "Certainly,
sire," Martin said, "I have forsaken your arms. I am Jesus Christ's knight and so I
have been for a long time and I will take up no other arms but his."]

By moving quickly from Martin's baptism to the battle, the *SEL* author conflates Martin's

baptism with his departure from the army. Further, Martin's baptism is followed not by a

thwarted attempt to retreat from the world but by a conflict with orders from his earthly superior.

On the one hand the direct conflict between Martin and the emperor serves to make the narrative

more dramatic, a trend that continues throughout the *SEL*. On the other hand, the close

connection between baptism and conflict serves to link baptism to Martin's ability to break with

earthly societal structures. While the break is undeniable, Martin still retains the language of his

previously held position. He is still a knight. Martin retains his chivalric identity, if only

metaphorically, applying the term to his relationship with Christ. While the *Legenda aurea* has

Martin declare himself a "solider of Christ," the *SEL* goes on to suggest that being a knight of Christ brings with it arms and power. Baptism and conversion do not appear to have stripped Martin of his earthly identity as knight, but have rather made that identity a part of Martin's religious self. Of course, part of the problem is the arms Martin now bears. He has forsaken literal weapons and must now make do with spiritual ones. Martin's move toward a spiritual existence threatens his outward performance of identity because spiritual knighthood has no material markers.

Just before the battle, the *SEL* deviates drastically from Jacobus's version in order to give Martin a physical victory and make material the spiritual identity of Christian knight. Instead of the rather anti-climactic moment when the enemy surrenders via envoys, the *SEL* has Martin actually step out onto the battlefield where he is miraculously protected by God's might. "Seint Martin wende anon / Vnarmed with is swerd a-drawe : among alle is fon. / Þo he a-mong hem was i-come : þare nas of hem nouȝt on / Þat miȝte ani more hebbe up is hond : þane it were a ston; / huy ȝulden him þe maistrie a-non : bot þat he let hem a-liwue" (*Martin*, 41- 45). [Saint Martin went quickly, unarmed with his sword sheathed, among all his foes. When he came among them, there was not one of them who could lift up his hand any more than if it were a stone. They yielded him the mastery quickly, provided he let them live.] The presence of Martin's sword, though still sheathed, his bravery at actually entering into the field of battle, and the miraculous victory granted him, are all in keeping with the image of a martial hero. His actions make literal the previously metaphoric notion of serving as Christ's knight. Though no arms are visible, the fact that the enemy cannot harm him is a visible and understandable fact that makes real the 'arms of Christ' Martin had previously mentioned. The text adapts the original narrative to add to the drama but the result also makes material and observable the otherwise

ambiguous conception of spiritual knighthood.

Though the emperor doubts Martin's knighthood and calls into question Martin's bravery and his sense of camaraderie with his earthly companions, Martin himself remains confident that his chivalric identity is still present after baptism. When Martin announces his decision to leave the army, the emperor responds, "'Ei, couward,' seide þe Aumperour : 'nouþe þou sparest for fere / For-to fiȝhte with þine felawes : ase þi riȝte were?'"(*Martin*, 35- 6). ["Coward," said the emperor, "now would you out of fear spare yourself from fighting with your fellows as you rightly should?"] When the emperor accuses Martin of cowardice, he points out that Martin is abandoning his "felawes," an ignoble action. Conversion and baptism threaten to disturb the relations that define chivalric identity: that between Martin and his fellow soldiers and between Martin and the emperor. However, Martin's continued performance of valor, assuring his chivalry, also helps him maintain his social position among his comrades. Martin's initial reaction appears to distance himself from those who were once his comrades as he will go "al one bi-fore al þi folk : naked to þe bataile" (*Martin*, 39). [before your folk [the emperor's men], naked and alone, into the battle.] Martin refers to those who were once his fellows as the emperor's folk. However, when Martin has miraculously conquered, the author re-integrates the saint into the company of his fellow soldiers: "Seint Martin clepede is felawes : and het hem hom wel bliue" (*Martin*, 46). [Saint Martin called his fellows and told them then to be quite happy.] Instead of the emperor's 'folk,' Martin's fellow soldiers are once again 'his felawes' and have not been abandoned, as the emperor assumed, but saved from the bloodshed of battle. Though Martin has converted and left his military life behind, the sense of identity granted by chivalric standing persists through baptism. It is not erased but changed, made metaphoric but also still visible and connected to earthly deeds that have both physical and spiritual effects.

The *miles Christi* (soldier of Christ) is a traditional Christian metaphor often used in reference to St. Martin in order to suggest his warrior-like devotion to forwarding Christ's cause, but in the *SEL*, the image of a Christian soldier is employed also to bridge the gap between societal and religious means of producing identity. The *SEL*-poet takes care to show that Christian chivalry is not given to Martin at the moment of his conversion. Rather it is a feature of Martin's previous life that is integrated into his Christian life through baptism. Like the body, knightly identity can be perceived as problematic for a Christian. However, in the theology of the *SEL*, both knighthood and the body, if properly interpreted and understood, could be an integral part of religious identity. Martin's baptism works to transform rather than erase the identity of the catechumen.

Since the *SEL* has depicted the salvation of the giant and the knight, it seems fitting that another romance figure, the loving foreign princess, should also be incorporated into Christian society through baptism. As the poet used the story of St. Martin to integrate knighthood into Christianity, so too does the poet utilize the fantastic, romance-like narrative of Thomas Becket's mother to reveal how foreignness and romantic love, when purified through baptism, can also be aspects of spiritual life. When the compiler of the early *SEL* set out to present a narrative of Thomas Becket, he chose a romantic origin story that depicts Becket's father as a crusader and his mother as a beautiful Saracen princess. In this version the saint's father, Gilbert Becket, is imprisoned by a Saracen king while fighting in the Holy Land. The king's daughter falls in love with him, but Gilbert, fearing that he will be put to death, escapes and flees to London. The princess follows him to London. Once there she agrees to be baptized as long as Gilbert agrees to marry her. When she is christened she changes her name to Alexandria. The narrative is obviously fictional and is similar to numerous romances featuring Saracen princesses converting

for the love of Christian knights.[26] Rather than dismissing or demonizing either the Saracen

other or the secular desire for earthly love, both found here in the form of a Saracen princess

seeking her beloved, the *SEL* reconciles human, earthly desire with the Christian life even as it

depicts divine grace as available to diverse individuals by baptizing the princess.

Alexandria's foreign origin is never elided in her narrative, but instead is augmented to

reveal the depth of her love and God's grace to her. Alterity here is symbolized by Alexandria's

inability to speak any European language. Beyond noting her beauty, the poet offers no physical

description of her, leaving the text unclear as to whether she, like the subject of the Song of

Songs, is black and beautiful or, like the Saracen princesses of many Old French *chansons de

geste*, is pearly white despite her apparent ethnicity.[27] Regardless, upon reaching London her

distinctiveness becomes clear:

> And þo heo was þudere icome : þare ne knev heo no man,
> Ne heo ne couþe speke ne hire bi-seo : bot ase a best þat a-strayed were.
> Þare-fore on hire gapede alday : swyþe muche fol[c] þere,
> Boþe Men and women : and children suiþe fale-
> For hire continuance was wonderful : and hire speche no Man ne couþe þare.
> <div align="right">(Thomas Becket's Birth, 64- 68)</div>
> [And when she came there she knew no one, nor could she speak or understand
> any better than a beast that had strayed. Therefore, a great crowd, both men and
> woman and very many children, came to gape at her for her perseverance was
> wonderful and no man there understood her speech.]

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[26] The trope of the Saracen princess converting for the love of an European knight is represented in Middle English romances in *The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun* (to be discussing in Chapter 2 of this work) and the Middle English texts based off of the *Fierumbras* romance (to be discussing in Chapter 4 of this work). Jacqueline de Weever notes seventeen examples of the trope among the Old French *chansons de geste*. Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba's Daughters* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1998), xvii.

[27] De Weever notes of the Old French *chansons de geste* that "the Saracen princess who marries the Christian prince must... resemble him as much as possible." De Weever, *Sheba's Daughters*, xx. De Weever's work presents an analysis of the difficulties that occur when the Saracen princess, a member of an ethnic group described as black and monstrous, is described as having a pale complexion and adhering to the medieval standard notion of European attractiveness.

While her appearance causes amazement, it is the fact that her speech is unrecognizable that allows the poet to compare her voicelessness to that of a beast. Her speechlessness has effectively made her an animal, a recipient of the gaze of the crowd with no agency to help herself. However, the poet's effect is not, ultimately, to completely objectify Becket's mother but rather to create pathos by noting the dehumanizing effect of stripping away language. The image of Alexandria as a pathetic, not-quite-human creature offers a condescending vantage point. But such a vantage point is not ultimately tenable. The legend earlier made it clear that Alexandria has the ability to make herself understood in her home nation; it is her translation from there to England that dehumanizes her. Identity and humanity become predicated on location and community within the text. The text provides a sympathetic connection to the crowd, familiar English men and women, and to Alexandria, who suffers because she cannot be understood. An English audience hearing or reading the legend may at once share in the voyeuristic actions of the crowd, making a woman bestial, and recognize the subject as deserving sympathy and support because of, not despite, her foreignness. Alexandria's eventual baptism challenges what constitutes Englishness by troubling identity markers like language and nationality that are often assumed to be stable. The text, because it has followed the Saracen other, explores how fragile identity can be and offers baptism as a means to stabilize it and make individuals acceptable and praiseworthy regardless of foreign origin.

Though still at issue, Alexandria's foreignness is not as crucial during the baptismal moment as her romantic love for Gilbert Becket. Her initial contact with Gilbert suggests her potential interest in Christianity: "to Gillebert heo eode prueliche : and echste him ȝwat he hiȝte / And of ȝwat bi-leue he were : and of ȝwyche londe, / And ȝif he wolde for is louerdes loue : þene deth a-fonge" (*Thomas Becket's Birth*, 30- 32). [She went privately to Gilbert and asked him

what he was called and of what faith he was and from what land and whether he was willing, for

his Lord's love, to accept death.] The combination of her queries reveals her interest in Gilbert

and his personal commitment to his faith. However, as the narrative progresses she fixes upon

Gilbert's name and his city, his individual characteristics and the only clues she has with which

to find him. Her determination to reach London has very little to do with matters of the soul or a

desire to follow Gilbert's religion. Despite her secular desires, she is still a recipient of God's

grace as both the narrator and the bishops gathered in London attest. Along the road across

Europe the audience is informed of God's role as guide: "Ne heo ne couþe nanne wei : bote god

was hire lodes-man. / Þoruӡ godes grace eo was i-lad..." (*Thomas Becket's Birth*, 54- 55).   [Nor

did she know any of the roads, but God was her navigator. Through God's grace she led was....]

And the bishops confirm God's grace and suggest a possible reason for that gift: "ӡif god hathþ i-

porueid so / Þat heo for gilberdes loue : christinedom wole onder-fo, / And gilberd hire wolde

weddi : sum blede of hire schal come / Þat schal holie churche hold to riӡte : and serui godes

sone" (*Thomas Becket's Birth*, 115- 20). [If God has thus provided that she will undergo baptism

for Gilbert's love and that Gilbert will marry her, some offspring shall come from her that shall

hold the holy church to righteousness and serve God's Son.] On the one hand, Alexandria

appears as a puppet, needed only for her physical ability to reproduce and directed to her final

destination so she may produce a saint. The bishops apparently recognize only her ability to

produce *bled* [offspring] as an asset for the church. The text presents a far more complex case

than a simple reading might suggest. *Bled*, when referring to humans rather than vegetation,

carries a particularly religious significance and is used especially to refer to Christ.[28]

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[28] *MED*, s.v. 'bled,' definition (b).

Alexandria's fertility, like Mary's, is a means for God's saving grace to come into the world, and her feminine body cannot be denied or dismissed without also rejecting salvation. Further, God's role as navigator suggests guidance, not domination. It is a relatively gentle metaphor, describing collaboration as much as control. Despite her apparent lack of spirituality in deciding to receive baptism, the divine end of her story makes holy and right the very earth-bound motives and actions that lead to Becket's birth.

Unlike Paul or Martin, Alexandria is not driven by a desire for baptism; she desires an earthly reward that can only be achieved through baptism, but her desire does not undermine the spiritual effect of baptism. That she is willing to accept baptism only under certain conditions affirms Alexandria's continued autonomy even as her baptism and marriage threaten to erase or at least elide her religious and national identity. As in the case of St. Christopher, Becket's mother's somewhat less than spiritual desire does not actually impair the spiritual ramifications of baptism.[29] The baptism itself is conditional upon Becket's mother receiving what she wants because without Gilbert, Christianity is not a consideration:

> Þo heo cam before þe bischopes : heo axeden hire wel sone
> Ʒif heo wolde i-cristned beo : ase lawe was for-to done.
> Heo answered In hire langage : wel sone heom a-ʒen:
> Ʒif gilbert wolde hire weddi : i-cristned heo wolde ben
> And boe he hire weddi wolde : heo nolde crisinedom a-fongue,
> Heo seide heo wolde rater tuyrne aʒen : In-to hire owene londe.
> <div align="right">(Thomas Becket's Birth, 129-34)</div>
> [When she came before the bishops, they asked her quickly if she wished to be baptized as the law demanded. She quickly answered them in her own language that if Gilbert would marry her, she would be baptized and if he would not, she would forgo baptism. She said she would rather turn around and go back to her own land.]

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[29] The comparison between Alexandria and Christopher illuminates other aspects the two characters share. As woman and giant, both are objects of the gaze of others and both are believed to be determined by their physicality. Within the *SEL*, neither transcends their given identities but both move within them, re-interpreting and challenging pre-determined assumptions about their bodies and minds.

Despite her willingness to dispense with baptism if her own desires are not fulfilled, her words

are neither condemned nor even commented upon by author or participants. However, the text

continues to restate the fact that Alexandria's baptism is conditional on certain other events, both

here and earlier. The emphasis makes clear that both parties, Gilbert and Alexandria, are making

a conscious choice. Indeed, "ȝif" (130, 132) opens the door for possible alternative narratives.

Alexandria even supplies her own: she could leave and go back to her country. By offering an

alternative narrative, Alexandria reveals her own agency in the story as it exists. Her voice at the

pivotal moment of baptism confirms her participation, not manipulation, in the drama at hand

and that she is baptized because of her earthly motivations, not in spite of them.

Alexandria's baptism does not result in such a dramatic transformation as to dissolve her

identity but rather allows her to maintain her otherness and concern for earthly life while living

as an exemplary Christian woman. After Gilbert and Alexandria marry, Gilbert feels called to go

crusading again. Before Gilbert leaves her, Alexandria asks that he leave his manservant behind,

the only other person in England beside Gilbert who knows her language. Her alterity persists: it

has not been erased through marriage and baptism. Even her chosen baptismal name,

"Alexandria," with its links to the east and to classical history, suggests that the translation from

Saracen to Christian, from east to west, is not as radically transformative as it might be. Her

alterity, like Christopher's distinctive body and Martin's knighthood, persists after baptism and

becomes evidence of the remarkable power in baptism to accept that which is other. The text

calls attention to the potential ability of the church, through baptism, to accept and even celebrate

a figure who continues to exist as a non-European after incorporation into the church. At the

beginning of the narrative, the text emphasizes that Thomas's conception is an English story

despite the presence of a Saracen mother figure and a crusading father who leaves the country. These elements are incorporated into an English identity even as Becket's mother is incorporated into the church and romance desires are incorporated into hagiography.

Alexandria's decision serves to reinforce her position as an active subject engaged in her world, and the text leaves open the possibility of divine acceptance of her earthly desires without denying the primacy of the baptismal ceremony. In the text, human actions and values are considered part of God's plan. Human desires affect divine action, making the interaction between human and divine far more complex than the image of a helpless catechumen passively receiving God's grace might suggest. Nor is Alexandria's human desire for love and marriage through baptism the only incident of interaction between human and divine. Human action and divine grace function together to land her safely in London: "heo cam with pilegrimes : ase ich me onder-stonde, / Ouer þe se sauf and wel þoruȝ grace : þat heo hadde / Of Iesu crist, and socur of men : þat hire ouer ladden" (*Thomas Becket's Birth*, 58-60). [She came with pilgrims, as I understand it, over the sea safe and sound through God's grace, which she had from Jesus Christ and the help of men that led her there.] In the *SEL*, God's work is not only achieved through miraculous intervention but also through very normal, human action, the 'socur of men.' Alexandria's baptism shows the church accepting human action and motivation. Ultimately, the narrative confirms that, through baptism, human desires may be re-interpreted as part of a divine plan.

While St. Martin's and Alexandria's baptisms focus on specific aspects of earthly life, chivalric identity, cultural alterity, and romantic love, *The Life of St. Eustace* considers the effect of the individual's earthly will on that individual's spiritual salvation more generally. Eustace must take responsibility for his own salvation immediately after baptism, as his earthly actions

and decisions have spiritual consequences. The narrative begins with a Roman nobleman, Placidus, hunting in the forest. He meets a stag and gives chase. When he catches up the stag miraculously speaks with Christ's voice, telling Placidus to convert. He agrees, has himself and his family baptized, and changes his name to Eustace. He returns to the woods and meets the stag again. He is told that he must accept terrible difficulties in his life if he is to remain a Christian. He agrees to endure so that he might receive salvation. Immediately following, he loses his home and wealth. His family is taken by various circumstances, and he becomes poor and enters military service. After helping the current emperor he is reunited with his family. But shortly after, a new pagan emperor takes power and the whole family is martyred. Set between the two meetings with the Christ-stag, baptism functions as a fulcrum, a transitional period between Eustace's initial contact with Christ and his final decision to adhere to Christ's example. The position of baptism and the argument of the Christ-stag suggest that once consecrated through baptism, Eustace's will and actions determine his salvation.

The *SEL* poet changes the choice the Christ-stag offers Eustace and, in so doing, makes Eustace responsible for his own salvation during his life. In the early Latin *Vita* and the *Legenda aurea* version of the St. Eustace legend, Eustace is offered a choice after baptism: the choice between suffering now or at the end of his life – the same choice offered Sir Isumbras, in the Middle English romance of the same name which is based on the life of St. Eustace. The choice offered the *SEL* Eustace is very different. The Christ-stag asks: "Ȝif þou wolt þolie and aȝien him [the devil] fiȝte : of is wille he schal faille. /… / Seie me ȝif þou it þolie wolt and faste a-ȝein him stoned!" (*Eustace*, 46, 48). [If you will struggle and fight against the devil he will fail in his desire...Tell me if you want to struggle and stand fast against him.] The choice is not to suffer now or later but to suffer and win salvation or try to avoid suffering and potentially be

thrown into hell. While a discussion of the choice offered Eustace is not included in Görlach's

list of substantial differences, Anne Thompson notes that only in the *SEL* does Eustace's choice

concern and define his relationship with Christ.[30] Thompson argues that the text points more to

"Eustace's *power* of choice as a newly converted Christian, and less to the particular

consequences of that choice."[31] Thompson concludes: "The *SEL* Eustace does not conform to

the usual tendency of saints' lives to direct their audience away from the world and towards a

transcendental reality…. Instead, it bears witness to a religious impulse which is grounded in an

understanding of the value of human relationships and earthly life."[32] Building on Thompson's

argument, I argue that baptism serves as the moment in which human will and earthly actions

become valuable in terms of spiritual salvation.

At their first meeting, the Christ-stag claims responsibility for bringing Eustace to the

faith, suggesting that humans cannot achieve salvation of their own will. When Christ first

speaks, he makes clear that Eustace needs Christ: "I-cham god þat þou ne knowest nouȝt : ichulle

schewi me to þe. / þine almesse-dedes þat þou hast i-do : a-mountede me bi-fore; / Þat þou ne

canst nouȝt, i-chulle þe teche : þat þi soule ne beo for-lore" (*Eustace*, 22- 24). [I am the God that

you do not know; I shall show myself to you. The good deeds you have done have mounted

before me; what you do not know, I will teach you so that your soul is not lost.] Christ has taken

responsibility for Eustace's soul, knowing that Eustace cannot understand his own situation

without help, though the text already implies that Eustace's earthly deeds affect his spiritual

well-being, as his good deeds are part of Christ's reasons for seeking him out. Christ is the

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[30] Görlach, *The Textual Tradition of the "South English Legendary*, 201.

[31] Thompson, *Everyday Saints*, 111.

[32] Ipid., 112.

active subject who makes the initial contact; however, that situation does not last through baptism.

The *SEL*'s language at the moment of Eustace's baptism stresses the agency of the catechumen's will in accepting the sacrament. Compared to the *Legenda aurea*, the *SEL*'s account of Eustace's baptism is slightly truncated. Jacobus grants names to Eustace's wife and children. He describes their rush to be baptized in the middle of the night, and he notes which bishop is performing the baptism. The *SEL* is quite vague on such details: "Huy [Eustace and his wife] nomen heore twey sones with heom : and to a bischop huy wende / And lieten heom cristni alle foure : heore lif for-to amende; / þis knyȝth liet is name tuyrne : and liet him cleopie Eustas" (*Eustace*, 35- 37). [They took their two sons with them and went to the bishop and all four of them had themselves baptized, to amend their lives. This knight had his name changed and had himself called Eustace.] While the brief three lines may be taken as evidence that the text deemphasizes the baptismal sacrament, the language of the text is interestingly repetitive.[33] Of particular importance is the repetition of the verb *leten*. Here the verb could mean either 'to cause' or 'to permit.'[34] In either case the text implies that Eustace is in control of the situation despite the role of the administrator. As in the case of Alexandria, Eustace makes the decision to be baptized as a subject, not an object. The *Legenda aurea*, by way of contrast, makes the bishop the active participant, drawing attention to the apparent shifts in emphasis that appear in the *SEL*: "He (the bishop of Rome) baptized them with great joy, giving Placidus the name

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[33] As in the case of St. Paul, the change of name is stressed as an intrinsic part of the baptismal covenant. Unlike Paul, there is no radical change of identity to accompany the name change. However, Eustace's initial reaction to his tribulations is to change his identity and position in society suggesting that his name change could be part of a larger shift in his notion of identity.

[34] *MED*, s.v. 'leten,' definitions 7(b) and 8(b).

Eustace."[35] Eustace here is passive, a stark contrast to his role in the *SEL*. Similarly, when

Christ appears to Eustace's wife in a dream she reports in the *Legenda aurea* that "he said to me:

'Tomorrow you and your husband and you sons will come to me!'"[36] Here, Christ's language

suggests that the baptism is a predetermined event. The *SEL*, truncating Eustace's wife's speech,

has her explain that, as Christ told Eustace to be baptized "riʒht so he gan me rede" (*Eustace*,

34). [Just so he counseled me.] *Reden* offers some complication to the direct statement of the

Legenda aurea, as *reden* may suggest either a decree on the part of Christ or merely advice.[37]

The ambiguous language opens up the text to various interpretations: Christ may be announcing

a pre-destined event or giving helpful guidance. In keeping with the other differences between

the *SEL* and the *Legenda aurea*, it seems probable that Christ's call should be understood as

something less than an overwhelming demand but as something that requires human will to

fulfill. Though Christ has taken an active role in the conversions, the text suggests that Eustace,

in accepting baptism, is responsible for making his own choice.

Despite its very brief mention in the text, baptism explains the very different implications

of the first and second dialogues between Eustace and the stag. The first suggested Christ's

actions were important while the second reveals a shift in responsibility between Christ and the

baptized. While Thompson's interpretation is nearly comprehensive, it does not note that the

responsibility concerning Eustace's salvation is passed back and forth until it is found to be

conditional upon the actions of both parties:

'Louerd,' seide þis guode kniʒht : 'ʒif me studefast-hede,

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[35] Jacobus, "The Conversion of St. Paul," *The Golden Legend*, 267.

[36] Ipid., 267.

[37] *MED*, s.v. 'redden,' definitions 8(a), (b), and (c).

Þat ich mouwe is fondingue þole : ase þou me wolt wisse and rede.'
'Ope þi-sulue it is ȝif þou wolt beo : studefast,' ore louerd seide;
'Ake ȝif þou wolt so, ichulle in þi care : boþe witie þe and lede.'

<div align="right">(Eustace, 49- 52)</div>

["Lord," said this good knight, "give me steadfastness so that I may withstand this suffering, as you counsel and advise me to do." "It is up to you if you want to be steadfast," our Lord said, "and if you want to be so, I will, for your benefit, both protect and accompany you."]

As at Alexandria's baptism, the conjunction *ȝif* appears twice, stressing the possibility that Eustace's salvation is not predestined. But here, the condition at issue is the future behavior of the catechumen. Eustace asks for the tools needed to persist as a Christian, making his success dependent upon Christ's gift of steadfastness. Christ turns the question around and argues that Eustace is the one responsible for his own behavior. Eustace's actions before baptism attracted Christ's interest and gave him access to baptism. But after baptism, Eustace is called to continue his active participation in Christian life. After baptism, Christ's help and support are dependent upon Eustace's earthly behavior. The firmness of Eustace's faith is not something God will control or dictate. However he will provide protection and guidance, the two blessings he bestowed on Alexandria, if Eustace continues in the Christian faith. Now that Eustace is baptized, his individual will, as Thompson noted, is the major determining factor in his salvation.

Within the *SEL*, aspects of secular life, like the body, can be integrated into sacred existence. Knighthood, romantic love, earthly will, and actions in general are capable of being as much spiritual as they are material. The sacrament of baptism functions as a means of achieving the sanctification of the earthly. Through this rite, which combines spiritual transformation with material action as described by Aquinas, earthly materials take on divine significance. Though St. Martin's knighthood becomes more symbolic than literal, Martin retains his identity as a heroic, chivalric man, except that his positive attributes are now symbolic

of his Christianity. Similarly, Alexandria retains her alterity, but through baptism, her alterity

becomes a sign of God's grace even as her romantic desire forwards the work of the Church.

The example of St. Eustace is more general. There, what an individual decides and wills after

baptism affects his or her relationship with Christ, and human behavior after baptism is part of

spiritual life. Despite the fact that secular life may seem antithetical to spiritual growth, the

sacramental focus in the *SEL* allows secular life to become part of religious life.   Baptism makes

earthly matters potentially divine.

In the lives of Saint Martin, Thomas Becket's Mother, and Saint Eustace, the active lives

of diverse individuals come to have spiritual meaning and effect through baptism: a feature that

sets the *SEL* in contrast with another contemporary hagiographic collection, the *Legenda aurea*.

Sherry Reames, building on the work of André Vauchez, describes the situation of hagiography

before 1270: "the faithful had been permitted, even encouraged, to venerate recent saints who

were recognizably like themselves and whose example they might reasonably hope to

emulate."[38]   In contrast, the *Legenda aurea* exhibits what Reames describes as "a devaluation of

the active life in favor of the private, contemplative virtues."[39] Jacobus's choice to adapt various

saints' lives in a way that emphasizes and elevates certain virtues while diminishing others

proves that the *SEL*'s use of baptism was not inevitable. Rather, the *SEL* appears to present

narratives that encourage veneration of saints who are active participants in the world. Further,

the narratives apply the Scholastic notion that material matters held spiritual value to the lives of

the various saints. When baptism is involved actions and decisions, even when not clearly

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[38] Sherry Reames, *The "Legenda aurea": A Reexamination of Its Paradoxical History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 198.

[39] Ibid., 199.

spiritually motivated, have beneficial spiritual effects. Though the saints described above, a church father, a giant, a Saracen princess, and two knights, were not necessarily designed to be emulated, the use of the baptism allows Christian identity to encompass their diversity, stressing the active life in the world as religiously viable.

Baptizing Martyrs: The Conflict between Baptism and Martyrdom in *The 11,000 Virgins*

The notion, embodied in the saints' lives described above, that earthly matters could be somehow made divine was not always easily reconciled with Christian tradition, and the *SEL* retains narratives that accept the sharp division between earthly and spiritual life. The saints' lives that the *SEL* poet drew from often depict baptism as the means of removing the catechumen from the world, separating divine salvation from mundane existence. Baptism as a removal from earthly life is found particularly in the lives that follow the basic virgin-martyr plot. Karen Winstead notes the popularity and widespread appeal of the virgin-martyr legends and analyzes a variety of Middle English texts, including the *SEL*. She sums up her interpretation when looking at Chaucer's life of St. Cecilia: "Like the virgin-martyr legends of the *South English Legendary*, the *North English Legendary*, and the *Legenda aurea*, it [The Life of St. Cecilia] celebrates an ideal of sainthood based on the saint's unconditional rejection of the world and her aggressiveness in challenging those around her to discard their human modes of perception."[40]

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[40] Karen Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 83. Bynum also notes the division the virgin-martyr legend creates between feminine and masculine modes of spiritual behavior. Her analysis of the *Legenda aurea* argues: "This pattern [in hagiography] suggests that women's lives can be complete only when death has assured perpetual virginity. In contrast, male lives are complete when virtue is won, evil defeated or restitution made." Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 204. Bynum's argument suggests that while men may enact spirituality through earthly actions, women must choose spiritual sanctity over earthly concerns and sanctity is only satisfied through ultimate removal from the world. Thompson argues that the *SEL*-poet has a much different perception of the role of female sanctity. In the *SEL*, females can enact sanctity through marriage, earthly deeds, and through martyrdom according to Thompson. Thompson, *Everyday Saints*, particularly Chapter 6, "Escaping the Virgin-martyr Plot."

The virgin-martyr narratives work to remove the saint from the fragility of her earthly body to preserve the saint untouched through life and into heaven. In so doing, they present a religious view at odds with that found in other baptismal narratives in the *SEL*. In attempting to retell an exemplary virgin-martyr story, *The 11,000 Virgins*, the *SEL*-poet bends to the demands of the virgin-martyr plot and emphasizes the religious value of leaving earthly matters and embracing death. However, the poet also changes the source material enough to suggest a continued interest in a more liberal reading of sanctity. As Marcelle Thiébaux argues, "the *SEL* simplifies the Ursula legend, removing supernumerary and parochial characters and rendering it fresh and intimate, homely in its exclamations and its vocabulary of love, but preserving the quaintly foreign flavor of continental origins."[41] The depiction of Ursula as intimate and homely is fitting with the positive depiction of earthly life seen in other lives throughout the collection. However, baptism does not fully sanctify those mundane qualities of the text. Instead, baptism offers a means of escaping the world and achieving a spiritual salvation. That baptism in the Ursula legend divides the spiritual from the earthly reveals the multiple ways in which baptism could be used within a single collection. Baptism, even though it allows for a positive understanding of the body in the narrative, functions as a dividing boundary between the spiritual and the earthly in *The 11,000 Virgins* in contrast with the previously analyzes narratives.

The *SEL* version of *The 11,000 Virgins* runs parallel with the same story in the *Legenda aurea*, conforming to the virgin-martyr plot and that plot's division between earthly and spiritual life. The match between heathen and Christian functions as the catalyst for the action. An English prince seeks the hand of a British princess, Ursula, at a time when the Anglo-Saxons

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[41] Marcelle Thiébaux, "'Dameisele' Ursula: Traditions of Hagiography and History in the *South English Legendary* and Laȝamon's *Brut*," *The "South English Legendary": A Critical Assessment*, ed. Klaus P. Jankofsky (Tübingen: Francke, 1992), 48.

were still pagan. While her father initially refuses the offer, he is distressed by the prince's father's threat of war should he not comply. An angel appears to Ursula explaining the whole problem, and gives her a solution. She tells her father that she will marry the prince provided he is baptized. She then asks her father for three more years in which she may enjoy her virginity, for ten handmaidens to attend her, and for an additional one thousand maidens to attend her and each of her maidens. The Anglo-Saxon prince and his father agree to these terms and the appropriate number of maidens is provided. Ursula also requests a boat in which the maidens may relax and enjoy themselves as they sail along the shore. The boat is eventually driven off course and the maidens find themselves exploring many sites on the continent, eventually finding their way to Rome. There the pope decides to leave his duties and join them. After leaving Rome, they return to England to find the prince has been waiting for his bride with a holy and pure love. On the instruction of an angel, he has his mother and younger sister baptized, and the three of them join the virgins on the boat. The boat eventually comes to Cologne. There they are all martyred by barbarian princes, and their relics are entombed in an abbey near the city. The narrative concludes with a posthumous miracle. The *SEL* version of the narrative, as one might expect, adds a dramatic dimension that the *Legenda aurea* lacks, but the general image of baptism remains consistent in both versions: baptism is necessary in order to move away from earthly concerns and toward a spiritual reality separate from materiality.

There are several examples of baptism in *The 11,000 Virgins* in which the rite separates the catechumen from the world by conflating conversion and baptism with death. In the case of the prince's mother and sister, Florentine, baptism is almost immediately followed by martyrdom, and the quick move from one to the other is a cause for celebration. Disturbingly to a modern audience, Ursula expresses great delight at meeting the recently baptized Florentine:

"Mest Ioye heo made with is ȝongue soster : þat hiet Florentyne, / þat heo, clene Myade, scholde

: soffrie deþes pine" (*11,000 Virgins*, 120- 21). [She made great joy with his young sister, who

was named Florentine, because she, a clean maiden, would suffer death's pain.] Ursula rejoices

at the young woman's death because death is means of escaping the world and its vagaries that

could strip the maiden of her virginity. Baptism becomes an initial step towards death, towards

removing the baptized from the world. While the catechumen is ushered toward death in

baptism, even the minister of the rite is ready for death once the baptism is accomplished. The

English bishop, Clement, also joins the holy company after baptizing Florentine and her mother,

an act which suggests that his work on earth is accomplished. Martyrdom, the ultimate removal

from the world, is the primary good here and all actions drive the characters toward death.

Baptism allows those baptized to re-interpret death as a gateway to salvation, an interpretation

that stands in direct conflict with the use of baptism in other *SEL* narratives, in which baptism

serves to give earthly matters spiritual relevance.

   While the *SEL* poet did not change the plot overmuch in the adaptation of the legend of

the 11,000 virgins, several of its changes increase the importance of earthly, human connection

as the means by which others are converted to a holier life. In particular, Ursula herself appears

as a much more central figure in the *SEL*. The *Legenda aurea* refuses to single out any particular

member of the party of virgins, even their originator, and the text soon loses track of Ursula amid

the crowd of devotees that join the 11,000 maidens. In particular, a Queen Gerasina

overshadows Ursula as teacher and leader of the party. Moreover, when the party is joined by

bishops and other holy men, including Pope Cyriac, even the queen is lost amidst the crowd.

The *SEL*, by contrast, constantly comes back to Ursula. She is the one with access to God

through dreams and angelic visitations, and her actions show how crucial human connection is to

the conversion process. The other 10,999 maidens convert because of their love for her: "Sone

heo bigan in prueite : telle heom of cristinedom; / þat for hire loue and for hire prechingue : alle

cristine huy were" (*11,000 Virgins*, 58- 59). [Quickly, she began to tell them about baptism

privately and because of her love and her preaching they were all made Christians.] Ursula's love

and preaching are earthly activities that bring the other maidens to Christianity. Ursula, though

certainly on her way toward martyrdom, is still enough part of the world to act as guide, enticing

those around her, princes and popes, toward a more religious way of life.

As in Alexandria's conversion, the romance between Ursula and the prince is validated

by baptism and accepted as a spiritual good, though Ursula and the prince remain celibate. The

SEL-poet appropriates romance language in order to express how the connections between

individuals aid in the spiritual development of the catechumens. As should be expected from the

usual direction of the changes made in the *SEL*, the scene in which Ursula and her prince are

reunited is a rather emotional one. The language used to describe their meeting is not that of a

catechumen meeting a spiritual parent but of two lovers reunited. The *SEL*-poet refers to Ursula

as the prince's "lefman," his 'beloved,' borrowing the language of courtly love to describe their

relationship (*11,000 Virgins*, 117 and 125). The prince's devotion is focused on Ursula, as is

customary for any courtly lover despite the fact that their relationship remains celibate. While

much of the poem stresses the holiness that is a result of movement away from the world, and the

choice to remain celibate in marriage reinforces that emphasis, the reunion of the lovers uses

language that suggests the spiritual usefulness of earthly attachments or connections. In the case

of Ursula and her prince, the final form of redemption combines conversion with martyrdom.

The joy of martyrdom justifies the presence of romance images and languages for the *SEL*-poet.

While not as free to embrace worldly concerns as narratives focusing on mothers or knights, the

virgin-martyr narratives are still manipulated by the *SEL* poet to suggest the value of earthly

relationships and emotions.

Though the *SEL* virgin-martyr plot of *The 11,000 Virgins* offers brief moments that

emphasize the spiritual dimension of the earthly and material, the overarching narrative holds the

text to the idea that the mundane world must be shunned for the sake of salvation. The text

offers a soft dualism between the material and spiritual that is out of place among the other

baptismal narratives of the *SEL*. Here, baptism is symbolic of a division between earthly and

spiritual identities and allows the later to be embraced at the expense of the former. Yet, there

are enough changes to suggest that baptism can incorporate earthly lives and concerns into

Christian life, in keeping with the other uses of baptism found in the *SEL*. It appears as though

the poet were attempting, but not quite succeeding, to recast the virgin-martyr legend to fit the

more Aristotelian attitude of unity found in the other legends of the collection. The over-arching

message of the virgin-martyr narrative – that Christianity and baptism separate the catechumen

from earthly concerns – remains despite the changes. The presence of *The 11,000 Virgins* in the

collection serves to remind a modern audience of the diversity of types of Christian identification

available in England in the thirteenth century.

Conclusion

In 1270 and again in 1277, at the time when the *SEL* was probably being produced,

Stephen Tempier, the bishop of Paris, declared to the University of Paris that 219 philosophical

and theological teachings were to be banned.[42]   The list of teachings that were condemned is

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[42] The list of Tempier's condemnations is long and complicated. The notion of the unity of soul and body was challenged but the exact nature For a summary of the debates involved and the possible motivations surrounding the condemnations, see John F. Wippel, "The condemnation of 1270 and 1277 at Paris," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 no. 2 (Fall 1977): 169-201. See also Rubenstein, *Aristotle's Children*, 228-38 and Bynum,

long and complex: it deals with the nature of God, the exact form of the intellect and its

relationship with material substances. John F. Wippel summarizes the condemnation of 1277 as

"a defensive measure, taken by the Bishop [Tempier] and his theologians, against what they

regarded as unjustified and unorthodox incursion by members of the Arts Faculty into areas

related to faith. These incursions had resulted, they were convinced, form an unduly enthusiastic

and uncritical acceptance of non-Christian philosophy."[43] While the actual effect of the bishop's

proscriptions is debatable, the very fact that hundreds of teachings were deemed heretical reveals

the struggle over the proper interpretation of the created world, the nature of the soul,

experimental observation, and the relationship between philosophy and theology. In the *SEL*, the

use of baptism suggests an inclusive attitude toward materiality and, by extension, the

philosophies that argue for the value of materiality. This is not to say that the *SEL* was a

response to Tempier's condemnations or a direct product of scholastic thought. Rather, the

attitudes toward materiality generated by Aristotelian teaching, Aquinas's notion of material

instrumentality in the sacraments, and the clergy's desire to connect to the lay people allow for a

milieu in which an attempt to incorporate the secular and the sacred could be made. The *SEL*

also appeared at a time when the validity of such ideas was being challenged, making it a far

more controversial text than one might first assume. Even as scholastics debated whether to

integrate traditional Christian belief with Aristotelian philosophy, the *SEL* offers a means of

understanding how materiality and secular life might have spiritual value in the vernacular. In

order to express such an understanding, baptism becomes the site at which materiality and

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Resurrection of the Body, especially Chapter Six: "Resurrection, Hylomorphism, and *Abundantia*: Scholastic Debates in the Thirteenth Century," 271-78.

[43] Wippel, "The condemnation of 1270 and 1277 at Paris," 195.

sanctity become mixed. The rite offers a means to reinterpret secular identities, somatic and societal, as pertaining to the sacred identities of the saints.

In the *SEL*, baptism is used as an inclusive rite, expanding what can constitute Christian identity and serving as a means to make the secular and material valuable in that identity. Like many religious texts produced after the Fourth Lateran Council, the *SEL* was probably written as a tool to educate the laity, to ensure that all Christians understood their faith and their responsibilities as members of the Church. However, the *SEL* offers a slightly different religious sentiment than could be found in the Latin *Legenda aurea*. Within the text, baptism allows characters to link the material with the spiritual. It is the means by which the catechumen comes to associate earthly pre-conversion aspects of life with a Christian identity. The lives that feature baptism often show a secular body, no matter how monstrous, or way of life, no matter how worldly, gaining religious importance. Such a message appears suitable for a lay audience, who could understand their own secular identities as in keeping with their identification as Christians. The trope of baptism in the *SEL* is inclusive as it adapts Christian identification to the catechumen. Though even the most inclusive concept of baptism requires a transformation of the catechumen, the *SEL* depicts baptism as a process by which that transformation includes and even celebrates the material and secular.

Like the hagiographic material of the *SEL*, the romances of the late thirteenth century also took advantage of baptism as a literary trope. In both, baptism is used to examine distinctions between individuals and social and ethnic groups. However, while the *SEL* saints' lives suggest baptism as a unifying rite, integrating multiple people and many modes of existence into Christianity, the romances of the late thirteenth century present baptism as a means of excluding other political and religious groups and identities.

Chapter II

Christening the Worthy:

How the Romances of the Auchinleck Manuscript Respond to Baptism

To describe the difference between the treatments of baptism in the hagiographies of the *South English Legendary* and baptism's treatment in vernacular romances, I begin with the element of comedy. In the Anglo-Norman romance *Boeve de Haumtone* (*Boeve*), which was probably written in the late twelfth century, a Saracen giant, the Escopart, has come to serve the titular hero and has agreed to accept baptism.[1]   A bishop prepares an extra-large font to accommodate the giant, but this sacrament does not go as planned:

> The Escopart jumped in, feet together, so that he fell to the bottom, and in the font he was named Gui. The water was cold so that it chilled him. The Escopart began to yell and upbraid the bishop vigorously. 'What is this?' he said. 'Base, wicked shepherd, do you want to drown me in this water? Let me go; I've had enough of being a Christian.' Then he jumped out, not eager to stay. Whoever could see him jumping about, naked, would think…he was a hungry devil.[2]

The physical sensation of being immersed in water provokes a drastic response from the giant whose jumping about and crude language are quite comedic. The simple giant does not seem to understand the spiritual ramifications of his baptism and fears the extreme repercussion of drowning. Unlike the more dignified baptisms of the converts in the *South English Legendary*, the giant's baptismal moment is a farce, designed to entertain. The audience of the romance is invited to laugh at the foolish giant who fails to acknowledge the sacredness of his situation. Yet, in a romance that makes several references to baptism, there is more at stake in this

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[1] Jeffery Jerome Cohen makes much of the comedic relationship between the giant side-kick and the romance hero. For Cohen's analysis, see Cohen, *Of Giants*, 178-83.

[2] *Boeve de Haumtone and Gui de Warewic: Two Anglo-Norman Romances*, trans. Judith Weiss (Tempe, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 62. In the Anglo-Norman, the word "Escopart" refers at times to the giant's race while at other times it appears to be an individual name.

baptismal moment than laughter. While the baptism as it appears in *Boeve* is funny, the Middle

English translation of the Anglo-Norman work, entitled the *Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun*

(*Sir Beues*), takes pains to adapt the situation to fit a concept of baptism quite different from that

of the *South English Legendary*.

    While still playing the scene for comedy, the Middle English *Sir Beues* presents a much

different version of the scene, effectively changing how baptism appears in the text. In

particular, the changes made to the giant's baptism reveal that the translator of the romance was

concerned about the introduction of the foreign into Sir Bevis's community through baptism. As

in the Anglo-Norman version, Bevis invites the giant, here named Ascopart, to be baptized but:

"Whan þe beschop him scholde in [the font] schoue, / A [Ascopart] lep anon vpon þe benche /

And seide: 'Prest, wiltow me drenche? / Þe deuel ʒeue þe helle pine, / Icham to meche te be

cristine!'"[3] [When the bishop would push him in, he leapt immediately upon the bench and said,

"Priest, will you drown me? The devil give you hell's pain, I am too big to be baptized!"] Just

as in the Anglo-Norman *Boeve*, Ascopart's reaction to baptism is comedic: the giant displaces

the spiritual benefit of immersion with ridiculously extreme physical consequences. But the

Middle English translator has omitted any reference to Ascopart actually being baptized. In

Boeve, the giant is christened and re-named for Bevis's own father. The Anglo-Norman baptism,

for all its comedy, is a fully developed sacrament through which Ascopart is integrated into

Christendom at large and into Bevis's family, in particular. In the Middle English *Sir Beues*, on

the other hand, Ascopart's swift evasion of the bishop makes certain that he never enters the

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[3] *The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun,* ed. Eugen Kölbing, EETS ES 46, 48, 65 (London: Trübner & Co., 1885-1886, 1894), 94 (*Sir Beues*, 2592-96). Kölbing offers several manuscript editions of *Sir Beues*. I have chosen to work exclusively with the Auchinleck MS version to better explore the depiction of baptism through the evidence of a single manuscript. All quotations from *Sir Beues* will be from this edition unless otherwise noted. Citations will be given with abbreviated title and line numbers in parentheses.

water and receives no new name. Moreover, while the Anglo-Norman text makes mention of

both Ascopart's baptism and his christened name at several points later in the text, the Middle

English text has excised any mention of Ascopart's baptism after this moment. The translator

did not simply reduce the number of lines used to depict the baptism episode, but also made a

decision to eliminate the giant's baptism, and, as evidenced by the multiple changes necessary, it

was a deliberate choice. Removing Ascopart's baptism from the text is, I argue, directly related

to the fact that the giant later betrays Sir Bevis, kidnapping the hero's wife and returning to the

Saracen king, Yvor, who sent the giant out to kill Bevis in the first place. Melissa Furrow

recently examined Ascopart's betrayal in both the Anglo-Norman *Boeve* and the various texts of

the Middle English *Sir Beues*. She notes, "Escopart's betrayal of Boeve is a shocking dissonance

in the source text, the Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Haumtone*, and the Middle English versions use

several strategies to try to cope with that dissonance."[4] Ascopart's later role as traitor to Bevis,

and by extension to Christendom, undermines the supposed role of baptism, to make an

individual a member of the Christian community. The changes made by the English translator

reveal a much more drastic deviation from the baptismal depiction of the *South English

Legendary* than the introduction of comedy: within the narrative, baptism is granted only to loyal

members of Christendom, serving as a clear demarcation of differences between the Christians

and the uncontrollable, untrustworthy heathens.

 Sir Beues is not alone among romances in its use of baptism as a literary trope. *Sir Beues*

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[4] Melissa Furrow, "Ascopard's Betrayal: A Narrative Problem," *Sir Bevis of Hampton in Literary Tradition*, ed.
Jennifer Fellows and Ivana Djordjevic (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 145. Furrow argues that "Rather than
making Ascopard worse by having him refuse baptism, the effect of the refusal in the Middle English versions is to
diminish his guilt." Furrow, "Ascopard's Betrayal," 151. Furrow examines the text by focusing on the giant. My
own analysis of the moment sees the removal of baptism from the text as serving to not only make the giant less
treacherous but also to preserve a particular notion of the power of the sacrament. Such readings are not
incompatible but do suggest that the translator could have had several motivations in revising the baptismal moment.

appears in the Auchinleck manuscript, a collection of vernacular texts that originated in or around London in the 1330s and includes vernacular saints' legends, prayers, a metrical chronicle, and eighteen romances.[5] In analyzing the many romances found in the Auchinleck manuscript, including those that were translated from French or Anglo-Norman, within the larger framework of discussing the development of national identity through language in the early fourteenth century, Thorlac Turville-Petre argues that "the use of English does not simply answer a social need but is an expression of the very character of the manuscript, of its passion for England and its pride in being English. Its Englishness is much more than a matter of language."[6] The Auchinleck manuscript, written as a particularly English text, was compiled at a point in history during which concerns about loyalty to king and country intersected with debates over the effects of baptism. Even as betrayal was an overt concern in and around London, John Duns (1256-1308), a Franciscan theologian working in Paris, built upon Aquinas's theories of baptism, arguing that baptism had an effect upon the catechumen so that he or she might adhere more closely to Christ's example. Baptism as it appears in the Auchinleck romances of *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, *The King of Tars*, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, *Roland and Vernagu*, and *Otuel* is a tool by which the various characters within the text can be distinguished and denoted as hero or villain and, by extension, as human or non-human. *Sir Beues* presents an integration of the non-Christian that can only occur when the catechumen is controllable. Such a depiction limits baptismal initiation to those moments when the non-Christian can be safely governed by

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[5] Information concerning the Auchinleck Manuscript derived from Derek Pearsall and I. C. Cunningham, Introduction to *The Auchinleck Manuscript: National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS. 19.2.1* (London: Scholar Press, 1977), i-xxiv.

[6] Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290- 1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 138.

Christendom. *Tars* and *Arthour* justify the link between baptism and domination by suggesting

that only through baptism can someone born outside of Christendom become human. Finally,

the Matter of Charlemagne romances, as represented by *Roland and Vernagu* and *Otuel*, justify

violence against non-believers despite their similarities to their Christian counterparts by

showing that the human will is incapable of embracing baptism and the change of religious

identity inherent in that sacrament. The romances, when read together, show a pattern in which

baptism is controlled, either by the poet or by the characters within the narrative, making baptism

exclusive. Within these romances, catechumens must submit to either adopting pre-existing

Christian-European modes of identification or they must submit to Christian authority. In this

way, the baptisms of these Auchinleck romances serve to defend the notion that chivalric,

European Christianity is the highest form of authority and justify the violence perpetuated upon

others who might refuse such authority.

Bevis as Baptist:

Christenings Offered and Withheld in the *Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun*

Several of the baptismal moments within *The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun* have

been emended by the English translator in the course of creating the Middle English text,

suggesting a concern for the way in which this sacrament appeared within the narrative. In the

early fourteenth century, the time when *Sir Beues* was being translated, English identity was of

the utmost importance in the wake of the Scottish and Welsh wars and at the onset of the

Hundred Years War.[7] The fear of betrayal, of the fact that certain forms of identification were

fluid and untrustworthy, is a common refrain in late thirteenth century chronicles in England. In

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[7] For manuscript information and date of composition see Charles W. Dunn, "Romances Derived from English Legends," *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English: 1050- 1500*, vol. 1, *Romances*, 25-27.

a culture where the stability of identity was threatened by notions of betrayal, baptism appears in this text as a sign of maintaining that stability. Baptism serves as a perfect sign of Christian identity and loyalty. It is an infallible indication that the catechumen is trustworthy within the narrative. However, baptism only remains a perfect symbol because it appears exclusively at those moments in the text when Bevis and the Christian culture he represents are firmly in control of the catechumen. Thus, baptism becomes a sign of subjugation that determines a catechumen's identity as one belonging to and loyal to Christendom and the Christian hero.

The story of Bevis of Hampton is one of identification. Bevis is a baptized child enslaved by his wicked Scottish mother and sold to a Saracen court. After many adventures, in which he wins the daughter of the Saracen king who bought him, is hunted by another Saracen king, and gets the giant, Ascopart as his servant, Bevis finally wins his ancestral land. His children grow up to rule two different territories: one that is historically Christian, Bevis's original home in England, the other, a newly minted part of Christendom, the kingdom of Bevis's father-in-law. The text, concerned as it is with the identity of a Christian abroad in heathen lands, contains four different baptismal moments. In the first, Ascopart is almost baptized at the same time that Bevis's Saracen princess, Josian, is christened.[8] Bevis's children are baptized after their mother is forced to abandon them. Later Bevis and his adult children force a previously Saracen nation to convert. Finally, Bevis offers baptism to the recurring Saracen antagonist, King Yvor, after Bevis has defeated him in single combat. The means of identification are carefully controlled throughout the narrative, ensuring that baptism appears

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[8] Josian joins the *South English Legendary*'s Alexandria from the life of Thomas Becket as discussed in Chapter 1, and Princess Floripas from *The Sowdon of Babylone*, to be discussed in the fourth chapter of this work, as an example of the trope of the converting Saracen princess. Jacqueline de Weever explores the motif of the Saracen princess in Old French *chansons de gest* and counts over a dozen examples of converting princesses. De Weever, *Sheba's Daughters*, xvii.

only in those moments when allegiance to Christendom is certain.

Unlike the botched baptism of Ascopart described earlier, *Sir Beues* does contain depictions of effective baptisms, but the christened characters are always controllable figures who can be easily identified with the hero. The most obvious examples of baptized characters identifiable with Sir Bevis are his two sons, Guy and Miles. Bevis, being a martial figure, does not stop in his quest to rescue Josian when he finds his sons abandoned, but he is careful to have them baptized (3732-52). The baptism of infants into the father's family is hardly surprising, nor is the fact that baptism links the catechumens to Bevis's family through the application of names that perpetuate the memory of important family members. Guy is named for Bevis's father and Miles for Bevis's only constant friend and supporter in England. Such catechumens are already part of the Christian community and baptism only strengthens their link to their father and the chivalric Christian culture he embodies. There is no challenge to baptism's role as a sign of inclusion when it is applied to characters who are already identified with Christendom. Their mother, of course, is a slightly more challenging figure.

Initially, Josian appears as a foreign heathen, worthy of Bevis's love because of her beauty and because of her autonomy, a far more exotic and interesting quality. Josian enters the narrative as a Saracen princess but eventually converts and is baptized. As with the converting Saracen princesses of the Old French *chansons de geste*, Josian adheres to the standards of Western European beauty: "so faire ʒhe was & briʒt of mod, / Ase snow vpon þe rede blod" (*Sir Beues*, 521-22). [So fair she was, and bright of temperament, as snow upon red blood.][9] Though

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[9] Jacqueline de Weever, in her analysis of the Saracen princess trope in the Old French *chansons de geste*, argues that "By insisting that all heroines be blond, white, and rose, including Saracen women, language lends itself to the erasure of identity in the portrait of the Saracen woman." De Weever, *Sheba's Daughters*, xxii. Describing Josian as white is the first step in assuring that she is capable of undergoing baptism and being accepted into Christendom.

her description limits her difference from the English hero, her foreign nature is confirmed at various points in the text: she swears using the names of Saracen gods (*Sir Beues*, 1118, 1124), and she uses the medicinal knowledge gained in Saracen lands to her benefit even after her baptism (*Sir Beues*, 3671-88). Further, her existence as an autonomous subject within the narrative is confirmed by her independent thought and action. When she is married against her will to a Saracen king, she preserves her own chastity by killing him (*Sir Beues*, 3214-24). At one point she even grapples with a lion in an effort to protect Bevis (*Sir Beues*, 2408-12). The text depicts Josian as a complete character and her foreignness as a positive attribute. That a foreign princess is allowed to have an independent identity both before and after her baptism suggests an inclusive baptism that accommodates different gender roles and foreign learning in the figure of the christened Saracen princess.

Josian's role as a Saracen princess appears to reflect a tolerant understanding of conversion, in which the independence and foreignness of the character are not erased but included in her newly formed Christian identity. However, the actual baptismal moment limits Josian's position as subject and suggests the need to dominate the catechumen in order to include him or her in Christendom. After Bevis and Josian experience many adventures, both together and apart, and after Ascopart has joined them, they make their way to Bevis's uncle, a bishop, who will be called upon to baptize the princess and the giant. The bishop asks after Josian's identity. Bevis responds: "Sire, of heþenesse a queen, / And ȝhe wile, for me sake, / Cristendome at þe take" (*Sir Beues*, 2582-84). [Sir, she is a queen of Heathendom, and will accept baptism from you for my sake.] Bevis emphasizes the societal position Josian holds and suggests that her conversion is not a spiritual choice but one motivated by romantic attraction.

The description erases alterity, ensuring that Christian identification goes hand in hand with a European body.

Bevis's words contrast in tone with the introduction he offers at the parallel moment in the

Anglo-Norman, *Boeve*: "'My lord,' said Boeve, 'she loved me, and I her, to tell the truth. I was

seven years in prison for love of her, and so she now wants to be baptized, since she has

renounced Mahomet.'"[10] Unlike the Middle English text, *Boeve* stresses the hero's romantic

attachment. Further, that romantic relationship is not immediately linked to Josian's decision to

accept Christianity. Instead, the text emphasizes Josian's independent will in converting. The

English translator had the ability to mirror the Anglo-Norman and focus on the romantic

relationship between knight and damsel but instead emphasized Josian's elevated status, a status

that will reflect well on Bevis as a knight who has won a queen. Similarly, Josian's will to

convert is dependent upon Bevis's presence. Such a situation certainly recalls the baptism of

Becket's mother, Alexandria, who is baptized in order to marry Gilbert Becket in the *South*

English Legendary. However, Alexandria had a vocal role in her own baptism, while Josian

remains silent. Instead, Bevis's words subtly highlight his own role in winning a woman of high

rank and using his own attractiveness to make a convert. While subtle, the English translator's

changes to the text emphasize not Josian's spiritual change and individual worth to the hero but

rather her dependence upon the hero and her worth as a status symbol within his culture.[11]

Josian's initial decision to convert appears in a moment of submission to Bevis, further

linking her spiritual decisions to the text's implication that alterity can only be made acceptable

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[10] *Boeve de Haumtone*, 61.

[11] Such changes are not overly surprising considering Susan Crane's analysis of the changes made to Anglo-Norman romances by English translators. See Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). It is important to note here that baptism becomes a tool to heighten the prowess of the individual knight. The focus is on Bevis's social position, not on the emotions or positions of the other characters. Moreover, in this instance, knighthood is not the only institution elevated. Here Christendom in the form of Bevis appears as a controlling figure, able to win over and dictate the actions of a queen.

when under the authority of European Christian culture. When Josian first declares her love for Bevis, he initially refuses to return her feelings. In anger she calls Bevis a "cherl," and Bevis takes extreme exception to such an insult to his social position (*Sir Beues*, 1117). Upon hearing of Bevis's generosity to one of her servants, she realizes he is a true gentleman and seeks him out. She again declares her love and humbles herself before the knight: "'Men saiþ,' ȝhe seide, 'in olde riote, / Þat wimmannes bolt is sone schote: / For-ȝem me, þat ichaue misede, / Anch ich wile riȝt now to mede / Min false godes al for-sake / And cristendom for þe loue take!'" (*Sir Beues*, 1191-96). ["Men say," she said, "in an old proverb, that a woman's bolt is soon shot. Forgive me for what I said amiss, and, as a reward, I will forsake all my false gods and take Christianity for your sake!"] Though most of this passage mirrors the Anglo-Norman, the proverb concerning a "woman's bolt" is original to the Middle English. By juxtaposing a misogynist proverb, which implies that women are not terribly good as controlling themselves, with Josian's declaration of love and conversion, the Middle English narrative effectively humbles Josian before the Christian Bevis. Her renunciation of faith becomes synonymous with deference. In this case, to convert is to humble oneself before the Christian authority figure, to admit one's own inferiority, here gendered, to the masculine figure of authority.

At other points in the text, Josian's desire to act as an independent subject is revealed to work against Christian chivalric society, reinforcing the notion that the foreigner in Christendom's midst must be controlled. When Josian is behaving heroically in holding back a lion that seeks to attack Bevis, the hero upbraids her: "Dame, forsoth, y-wys, / I myȝt ȝelp of lytel prys, / There y had a lyon quelde, / Þe while a woman a nother helde! / Thow shalt neuer vmbraide me, / When þou comest hoom to my contre: / But þou let hem goo both twoo, / Haue good day, fro þe y goo!" (*Sir Beues*, 2413-20). [Madame, truly, for certain, I might boast of little

praise if I had killed a lion while a woman held another! You must never insult me when you

come home to my country. Unless you let them both go, I will leave you. Good Day!]

Although the exchange is certainly comedic, Bevis' frustration reveals that Josian does not

understand chivalry's demands. Her own heroic action exists to the detriment of Bevis' and thus

cannot be tolerated. Bevis references his reputation in his home country, suggesting that his

return with a foreign wife could be problematic if she asserts her own subjectivity in England.

Rather, to assert his own position and the proper societal structure at home, he must maintain

dominance in her presence and shut down her own ability to take independent action.

Even as Bevis must control Josian's foreign impulse to self-actualization, he must also

beware of her desire to be inclusive, as her fallible sympathy introduces the traitor, Ascopart,

into Bevis' company. When Ascopart falls while fighting Bevis, it is Josian who seeks to

reconcile the two by having Ascopart serve the knight:

> 'Sire,' ʒhe seide, 'so god þe saue,
> Let him [Ascopart] liuen & ben our knaue!'
> 'Dame, a wile vs be-trai!'
> 'Sire, ich wil ben is bourʒ, nai!'
> Þar a dede Beues omage
> And be-com is owene page.
>
> (*Sir Beues*, 2544-50)
>
> ["Sire," she said, "As God may save you, let him live and be our servant."
> "Dame, he will betray us." "No sir, I will stand surety for him." There he did
> homage to Bevis and became his own page.]

To defend the giant, the heroine offers to be the giant's *bourʒ*, a term which may refer to either

one who takes responsibility to ensure another abides by the law or to an individual's sponsor at

baptism.[12] Though the use of the term does no directly suggest that Josian will be standing as

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[12] *MED*, s.v. 'bourgh,' definitions 2a (a) and 2b (b). Both uses were available in the early fourteenth century. This particular example from *Sir Beues* is used by the *MED* to illustrate a third meaning, 2b (a): a bourgh as one who stands responsible for ensuring another's behavior is acceptable.

Ascopart's sponsor in baptism, the varied meanings of the word allow Josian to invoke both legal

and baptismal language in an effort to make Bevis recognize Ascopart's value. *Bourȝ* here

foreshadows the moment when both she and Ascopart will be brought to the font. Yet Bevis's

argument, that Ascopart will betray them, foreshadows the narrative's actual events. Josian's

desire for reconciliation between the Saracen giant and the hero proves to be as ill-conceived as

her heroic act of holding back the lion. In both cases her independence must be submerged

before the pre-existing chivalric codes of Christendom. Josian's attitude, when read with the

knowledge of Ascopart's later betrayal, shows the danger of inclusive impulses and the rightness

of chivalric Christian behavior that seeks to control the boundaries between Christendom and

alterity. For Josian to be truly Bevis's wife, she must, as she did when she first declared her

intention to convert, humble herself, and, as her baptismal moment makes clear, allow Bevis to

define her will and her role.[13]

Curiously, baptism is absent when Josian's father dies and her previously Saracen

kingdom is converted by Bevis and his son, Guy; however, the desire to control alterity is

consistent as the conversion is marked by death and violence. Bevis frees the kingdom of Emory

from the evil King Yvor's assault, but Josian's father, Hermin, lies dying. The king crowns his

grandson, Guy, and "Sone þar after hit be-com / Þat a daide at þe ende, To heuene mote his saule

wende! / Þanne sire Beues and sire Gii, / Al þe londe of Ermony / Hii made christen wiþ dent of

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[13] Siobhain Bly Calkin offers a much more positive reading of Josian's character: "As Josian goes about becoming a Christian, English countess, she demonstrates... the performative nature of identity, and the ways in which religious affiliations, gender stereotypes, and culturally-specific ideals of womanhood can be enacted by women to achieve their own ends and to obtain entry into specific communities." Siobhain Bly Calkin, *Saracen and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript* (Routledge: New York, 2005), 61-62. While I agree with Calkin's argument, that Josian is a unique figure who engages in many self-actualizing performances as she navigates various identities, the character's general relationship with Christendom is one in which the Christian figures seek to subjugate and control her.

swerd, / ȝong and elde, lewed and lered" (*Sir Beues*, 4014-20). [Soon afterwards, he died at the end. May his soul be allowed to go to heaven! Then Sir Bevis and Sir Guy made all the land of Ermony Christian, young and old, unlettered or learned, with the power of the sword.] Though he is never baptized within the Middle English version of the text, the poet asks for the King's salvation. However, any problems that might occur as a result by including an apparently unbaptized heathen king into Christendom are avoided because the poet asks for the king's salvation only after he is dead and has safely passed on authority to his lawfully baptized grandson. At this point the poet can afford to be magnanimous with salvation since the old king is no longer a part of earthly Christendom. Reading the king's salvation in this way, rather than in a more liberal light that suggests God's mercy can be shown to all righteous individuals, is supported by the brief description of the conversion of the people of Emory. Even as the people are subjected to a Christian king, they are subjected to the new religion through violence. The doubling of authority through legitimate kingship and through violence in the conversion moment suggests the need for domination when converting the heathen to Christianity.

Hermin's kingdom is converted through violence, and violence again precedes a baptismal moment when the evil Saracen king, Yvor, and Bevis meet in single combat. Toward the end of the text, Bevis offers baptism to Yvor after their climactic duel: "Yuor, let be þat cri / And clepe to god and to Mari, / And let þe christen, er þe deie, / Or þow schelt go þe worse weie / And wiþ outen ende dwelle / In þe stronge peine of helle!" (*Sir Beues*, 4225-30). [Yvor, cease your cry, and call on God and Mary, and allow yourself to be christened before you die, or you shall go the worse way and dwell in the grievous pains of Hell without end!] Bevis's call for conversion and baptism appears spiritually motivated; he seeks to save Yvor's soul. But the theological debate between faiths only occurs when Bevis is in a position of strength. Yvor

refuses Bevis's offer and is not baptized, declaring, "Cristene wile ich never ben, / For min is wel the beter lawe" (*Sir Beues*, 4237-38). [I will never be christened, for the better religion is certainly mine.] Yvor decides to hold to his own fate. After his declaration, Bevis kills him and goes on to defeat the Saracen army. Yvor's claim, that he has the better faith, is answered with violence, and the extermination of those who would hold that claim. Yvor, in his determination, will not accept Christianity. He cannot be made to yield his identity, and thus cannot be allowed to exist. As with Ascopart's conversion, baptism is mentioned but the inability to control the catechumen creates a crisis in the text that can only be corrected through violent subjugation.

At last, I return to the giant with whom I began my discussion of *Sir Beues*, the giant who refuses baptism but fails to give an adequate reason as to why he cannot be baptized, forcing an audience to seek alternative reasons for his failure to accept baptism. As noted above, Ascopart agrees to convert and be baptized after Bevis defeats him in combat. In the Anglo-French version of the narrative, Ascopart undergoes a felicitous baptism, but the English translator deliberately emends the narrative so the giant is never actually baptized. In the Middle English text, Ascopart offers his own reasons for being unwilling or unable to undergo baptism when he rails at the bishop who is about to push him into the font: "Prest, wiltow me drenche? / þe deuel ȝeue þe helle pine, / Icham to meche te be cristine!" (*Sir Beues*, 2594-96). [Priest, will you drown me? The devil give you Hell's pain, I am too big to be a Christian!] Ascopart blames the size of his body for his failure to undergo the ritual, that he is 'too big to be a Christian.' At first it may appear that physical difference, a powerful sign of alterity, as cause enough to keep the giant from the font. In the Anglo-Norman version of the text Ascopart's size causes the bishop some discomfort; he refers to Ascopart as a demon, and upon finding out that he serves as

Bevis's page declares: "God forbid he enter my house as long as I'm alive."[14] The bishop's

reaction to Ascopart is understandable considering Ascopart's appearance and the violence with

which he entered Bevis's life.   However, the Middle English erases all such consternation and

the Bishop's initial question is much less adversarial: "Who is þis wiþ þe grete visage?" (*Sir*

Beues, 2585). [Who is this with the huge visage?] The harmless question acknowledges

Ascopart's otherness but does not assume that alterity is anything other than a means of

description.[15] Moreover, Ascopart had earlier confessed that he was considered a dwarf in his

native land (*Sir Beues*, 2521-31). Cohen emphasizes this point: "Giants, Ascopart reveals, are

not an *absolute* category of monstrousness but a *relational* one."[16] Great size does not imply a

difference of kind since size is not an absolute category. After Bevis answers the bishop's

question briefly, he requests that Ascopart be baptized. The Middle English text gives no

indication of reluctance on the bishop's part, suggesting that the Middle English bishop is far

more comfortable with the giant's baptism than his Anglo-Norman counterpart. Similarly, both

texts indicate that it is possible to accommodate Ascopart's giant physique when the bishop

orders a huge font specially prepared for him. The bishop, a member of the institutionalized

church, adapts the ritual paraphernalia to the demands of an alternative physicality.[17] The

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[14] *Boeve de Haumtone*, 61.

[15] Cohen describes the situation of the giant convert in *Aliscans*, an Old French epic. There the chivalric hero meets with the giant, converts and educates him so that the giant is able to accept baptism and even goes on to convert others. Cohen notes that the narrative "imagine[s] that a body's form might signify nothing about that body's inherent meaning; signification is *not* written across the flesh…, a very unmedieval argument." Cohen, *Of Giants*, 170. In similar fashion, the offer to baptize Ascopart suggests that Christendom can read the giant body as an acceptable body rather than a monstrous one.

[16] Cohen, *Of Giants*, 173. Italics are original to Cohen. Cohen goes on to note the similarities between Bevis and Ascopart as both must assert their identities despite changing circumstances revealing such identities to be relative.

[17] One may be reminded of St. Christopher from the *South English Legendary*. The hermit, similarly, adapts to

accommodations made for the giant's size, particularly when, as in *Sir Beues*, there is no violent

reaction to the giant's figure, make Ascopart's excuse, that he is "to meche," less believable.

Ascopart's own reasons for refusing baptism do not appear sufficient for the translator to omit

the actual sacrament. Instead, the Middle English revision of Ascopart's baptism further stresses

the worry that conversion and baptism, unless performed from a position of control, may

endanger Christendom.

While Ascopart's sputtering at the font may offer a slim reason for his incomplete

baptism within the Middle English narrative, Ascopart's role as traitor, which is emphasized in

the Middle English version, could call his baptism, and by extension the sacrament itself, into

question. The Middle English translator's other modifications reinforce the giant's traitorous

role. Upon returning to the Saracen King Yvor after years of serving Bevis, Yvor greets him by

calling him "Treitour" (*Sir Beues*, 3596). Considering the ubiquity of the insult, such a minor

change is not, on its own, telling, but the translator also adds a confrontation between Ascopart

and Josian, not found in *Boeve*, after the giant has kidnapped the princess. She reminds Ascopart

of her earlier kindness: "Ascopard, freli frende, / For bounte, ich ded þe while / And sauede þe

fro perile, / Tho Beues þe wolde han slawe / And i-brouȝt of þe lif dawe, / Ich was þe bourȝ, þe

shost be trewe" (*Sir Beues*, 3652-57). [Ascopart, noble friend, because of the favor I did for you

in the past, when I saved you from peril when Bevis would have slain you and brought you out

of life, I was your guarantee, you should be true.] Josian's brief speech emphasizes the depths of

Ascopart's betrayal. Of particular interest is her recollection that she stood as his *bourȝ*.

Recalling the same legal/baptismal language she used when she convinced Bevis to spare

Ascopart's life, Josian's words also recall the fact that Ascopart did not undergo baptism. He

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Christopher's inability to pray or fast in order to construct a Christian identity for the giant.

exists as a flawed, dangerous figure from the start, unworthy to be included in the Christian community. Had he undergone baptism his actions would have broken religious bonds of loyalty and made the sacrament of baptism appear ineffective. As the narrative stands, Josian exists as a true, subjugated convert as compared to the false giant who did not undergo baptism. The comparison strengthens the notion that baptism is reserved to signify only true and permanent loyalty to Christendom.

Ascopart, as an uncontrollable heathen, is dangerous since his difference persists but is not controlled within the text. Earlier in the text Bevis is sold into slavery and purchased by King Hermin, Josian's Saracen father. The king is so taken with the hero that he asks Bevis to convert to the Saracen faith but Bevis refuses to abandon Christianity. In response to Bevis's refusal "The king him lovede wel the more" (*Sir Beues*, 569). [The king loved him all the more.] Immediately following this exchange is an episode unique to the Middle English version, in which several Saracen knights taunt Bevis when he reveals that he is ignorant of Christian tradition. Bevis challenges them for their insult and kills them all (*Sir Beues*, 583-644). The king's tolerance of difference, in allowing Bevis to remain within his court while adhering to a different religion, is met with violence, even as tolerating the un-baptized giant leads to the kidnapping of Josian. Within the text, difference produces instability. Baptism is not a means of tolerating difference but subjugating to authority that which is different to ensure Christian dominance and communal stability. If uncontrolled alterity leads to instability then baptism must be controlled: as a sign of perfect integration through spiritual transformation it threatens to grant supposedly inappropriate foreigners access to Christendom. At a time in medieval English history when betrayal was a social issue, *Sir Beues* suggests that tolerance of alterity without control leads to instability that must be rectified with violence. The text seeks a fantasy of

certainty, separating those who are true from those who are not, the baptized from those who remain un-christened. It is an unsurprising fantasy considering the historic situation of England at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Similar to the issues addressed in *Beues*, issues of identity, loyalty, and betrayal were also social concerns in England at the turn of the thirteenth century. Contemporary audiences would have been aware of oath-breaking and traitorous actions as they affected England. For instance, in tracing the history of English law with regard to treason and referencing the chancery rolls, J. G. Bellamy notes that David ap Gruffydd's attempt to rebel against English authority was considered a personal betrayal by Edward I (1239-1307, reigned 1272-1307): "David was called the last of a family of traitors: he had forgotten that the king had once received him as an exile, nourished him as an orphan, endowed him with lands and given him high position at court. So annoyed was Edward by this betrayal of his confidence that he determined on an exemplary punishment."[18] The king was apparently incensed by the fact that his attempt to create a personal and political bond across a social boundary was met with betrayal. Further, the wars that afflicted England at the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries made it difficult to determine whom to trust. 1295 was notable for the arrest and execution of one Thomas de Turberville on the charge of treason.[19] Thomas had in his possession letters to the king of France explaining troop locations and probable royal decisions regarding defense of

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[18] J. G. Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 26. Bellamy points to David's trial as the beginning of a trend which associated rebellion with treason against the king himself, a new idea that arose as a direct result of Edward's reign. Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages*, 24.

[19] Thomas de Turberville's traitorous activities are mentioned in several histories, including the Westminster *Flores Historiarum*. Details are derived from Henry Thomas Riley, "Appendix: The treason of Sir Thomas de Turberville," in *Chronicles of the Mayors and Sheriffs of London: 1188- 1274*, trans. Henry Thomas Riley, (London: Trübner and Co, 1863), 293-295.

the nation. He was dragged through the streets of the city and hanged at the Tower of London.

In *Sir Beues*, the dangers of sharing trust with others becomes a major concern as Bevis seeks to

establish his rightful position and develop his own Christian Chivalric identity. Bevis suffers

from trusting that those around him are loyal. *Sir Beues* offers a narrative in which historical

concerns are reflected, in which national concerns may be understood as personal.

Betrayal of oaths also extended to national disputes. Both Scotland and Wales were

thought to be rightfully under English authority. When Edward I conquered Scotland, the

chronicler Peter Langtoft, who was writing during Edward I's reign, used the prophecies of

Merlin to celebrate the apparent unity of the island: "Now are the two waters united in one, / ... /

And one realm made of two different kingdoms / ... / Now are the islanders all joined together, /

And Albany reunited to the royalties / Of which King Edward is proclaimed lord. / Cornwall and

Wales are in his power, / And Ireland the great at his will."[20] The text celebrates a unified island

in which divisions between English, Welsh, and Scottish are subsumed under the authority of a

single king. The poet praises the fact that people who were once separate are now completely

joined together. However, the wars between Wales and England and between Scotland and

England were often fought to a point where the Welsh or the Scots would acquiesce to English

demands and swear oaths of fealty only to attack again a few years later. Turville-Petre notes in

Robert Mannyng's *Chronicle* "the English frustration at the provocative treachery of the Scots,

who constantly renege on their sworn allegiance"[21] The account in the Westminster *Flores*

Historiarum for 1295 describes the Scots breaking "the covenant of peace which they had made

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[20]Peter Langtoft, "The Chronicle of Peter Langtoft of Bridlington for the years 1297to 1307," *English Historical Documents* Vol. III: 1189-1327, ed. Harry Rothwell (London: Eyre & Spottiswodeltd, 1975), 230.

[21] Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, 101.

with their liege lord the king of England" to ally themselves with the French.[22] Attempting to

subjugate and include the Scots under English authority was met with increasing difficulty

because attempts to concretize the Scottish political identity were repeatedly challenged even

after oaths were sworn. Issues of betrayal and treason were evidently concerns in the early

fourteenth century, as individuals and groups tried to navigate national identities. It is

unsurprising that the texts within the Auchinleck manuscript, referred to by Turville-Petre as "a

handbook of the nation," would reflect such concerns.[23] But such concerns are also useful to

explain how the trope of baptism can function as a sign for subjugation and control.

      Animosity between nations is a political issue; however, the language used to refer to

such issues in medieval England was also religious. Thus, religious language including the sign

of baptism could be used to explore social anxieties over betrayal and loyalty. For example, the

Flores Historiarum records a verse epitaph for the traitor Thomas Turberville that states "He

joined himself to Satan's crew, / This happy country to undo."[24] Thomas's actions against

England are understood through a religious lens, as Thomas leaves God's company for Satan

when he decides to betray his country. Similarly, according to Barnaby C. Keeney's readings of

Parliamentary Writs, "Edward II described the Scots as if they were pagans, whose purpose was

to destroy the English Church both materially and spiritually.... The king of France was

sometimes cast in the same role."[25] Despite sharing the same religious beliefs, national identities

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[22] Mathew of Westminster, *The Flowers of History*, vol. II, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), 511.

[23] Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, 112.

[24] Mathew of Westminster, *The Flowers of History*, vol. II, 512.

[25] Barnaby C. Keeney, "Military Service and the Development of Nationalism in England, 1272-1327," *Speculum* 22 (1947): 544-545.

could be equated with religious identities in order to denigrate political opponents. A Latin song from the reign of Edward I shares a similar sentiment:

> Everywhere are preached the fraudulent actions of the faithless men, who molest England by force of arms; the French, Scotch, and Welsh, whose power may the Omnipotent who holds the world repress! May the Governor of the universe whom we address as God, who protected the Hebrew people through many difficulties, give the English victory over their enemies![26]

The French, Scottish, and Welsh all appear as faithless, as enemies of God. Their faithlessness is ambiguous: it could be referring to their inability to hold to their promises or it could imply that they are heathen-like. The ambiguity serves to subtly suggest that the two notions of faithlessness are linked. Moreover, the poet prays that God aid the English as he did the Hebrew people, equating the English with God's chosen people. The conflict between nations is evoked as a conflict between God's chosen people and nations that are composed of God's enemies. It is not overly surprising, considering the religious language used to justify war between nations, that a romance like *Sir Beues*, might use actual non-believers, Saracens, to explore issues of social identification.[27] The text allows social conflict, and the desire for clear indications of disloyalty, to be understood as religious difference, making baptism a key sign to determine group affiliation.

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[26] "Praedicantur undique frauds infidorum, / Qui molestant Angliam viribus armorum; / Franci, Scoti, Wallici, potestatem quorum / Comprimat omnipotens qui continent alta polorum! / Polorum dispositor quem clamamus Deum, / Qui per multa populum protexit Hebraeum, / Anglicus ex hostibus tribuat trophaeum!" "Song on the Scottish Wars," *The Political Songs of England from the reign of John to that of Edward* II, ed. and trans. Thomas Wright (London: Camden Society, 1839), 162-163.

[27] Similarly, Calkin when describing issues such as community definition and integration, argues that "the Auchinleck texts whose Saracens most directly engage these issues of importance in England are romances that do not explicitly mention England, and are often classified as belonging to the Matter of Araby or Matter of the East." Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, 11. Calkin is particularly referring to *The King of Tars* and *Floris and Blauncheflur*, but her point appears applicable to *Sir Beues* as well.

Amid concerns of loyalty and betrayal on the one hand and the use of religious language to denigrate political enemies on the other, the theology of baptism offers the means of understanding baptism as a sign of perfect religious and social loyalty. According to Thomas Aquinas, baptism was the perfect means of incorporating the catechumen into Christ:

> But there is no life if the members are not united to the head from which they receive feeling and motion. Thus it is necessary that a person be incorporated by baptism into Christ as a member of his. But as feeling and motion flow from the natural head to the members, so from the spiritual head, which is Christ, there flow to his members spiritual feeling, which is the knowledge of truth, and spiritual motion, which results from the impulse of grace... It follows then that the baptized are enlightened by Christ in the knowledge of truth, and made fruitful by him in the fruitfulness of good works by the infusion of grace.[28]

Baptism enlightens and unites the baptized into Christ. The imagery of the union between head and limbs suggests that Christ becomes a driving force for the Christian and that the Christian is perfectly incorporated into the Church body. Aquinas further explains the effects of baptism by noting that baptism has no effect on an unwilling or lying catechumen and that baptism does not erase concupiscence from the will. Such nuance is lost when baptism appears in *Sir Beues*. Rather, the general idea that baptism was a perfect sign of Christian integration is retained. Because baptism infuses grace, it becomes a means of making and signifying a catechumen loyal to Christendom and incapable of betrayal. Such interpretations are, of course, fantastical and beyond Aquinas's meaning. In *Sir Beues*, Josian, whose conversion is true and whose loyalty is certain, receives baptism. Ascopart, on the other hand, because he will be a traitor, is not given baptism and remains suspiciously outside the collected Christian identity. *Sir Beues*, presenting

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[28] "Et ideo necesse est quod per baptismum aliquis incorporetur Christo quasi membrum ipsius. Sicut autem a capite naturali derivatur ad membra sensus et motus, ita a capite spirituali, quod est Christus, derivatur ad membra ejus sensus spiritualis, qui consistit in cognitione veritatis, et motus spiritualis, qui est per gratiae instinctum... Et ideo consequens est quod baptizati illuminentur a Christo circa cognitionem veritatis, et fecundentur ab eo fecunditate bonorum operum per gratiae infusionem." *Summa Theologicae* 3a, 69, 5.

a world where religious identification and social association are mixed, depicts a simplified theology in which baptism is a means of determining true loyalty.

Baptism as it functions in *Sir Beues* to alleviate the anxiety over betrayal and treason that extends throughout the narrative and reflects current social concerns in England. Betrayals and nations breaking faith made it desirable to assert a firm, trustworthy idea of English Christian identity. In the world of this romance, baptism appears as a sign that the catechumen is perfectly loyal because that individual has been successfully subjugated to the authority of the Christian hero. Where that sign is absent, violence serves to eradicate potential and actual traitors. Ascopart, whose betrayal reveals him to be outside Bevis's control, has his baptism translated out of the text. The spirited Josian's baptism highlights her dependence upon Bevis, and Yvor's baptism is only offered after he is defeated by the Christian hero. Rather than a freely offered sacrament that could potentially initiate anyone into Christendom, baptism in *Sir Beues* includes only those who are subject to pre-existing chivalric Christian authority. The Middle English translator's additions and revisions to the text repeatedly emphasize the danger of hybridity and the link between baptism and subjugation. Within this particular Auchinleck romance, baptism serves to produce a united and homogeneous Christendom by controlling or excluding alterity.

Making Humans: Baptism in *The King of Tars* and *Of Arthour and Merlin*

As baptism is a means of subjugating alterity in *Sir Beues*, other Auchinleck romances offer justification for such authoritarian behavior by depicting baptism as a marker for human nature. Both *The King of Tars* and *Of Arthour and of Merlin* use baptism as a means of exploring the limits and definitions of the human. *The King of Tars* features two different baptisms that produce physical changes that make the baptized recognizably human to the European characters within the narrative. These baptisms precede the subjugation of an entire

Saracen kingdom by Christians. In *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, Merlin, the son of a human

woman and an incubus, is poised to be a great threat to humanity as a demonic hybrid. However,

his baptism changes him so that he acts in Christendom's best interests, fighting for the English

rather than against them. His monstrous hybridity does not relegate him to the non-human

because he undergoes baptism. Most readings look upon these cases as a textual way of

determining racial or political distinctions.[29] In both cases, however, baptism is not necessarily

focused on racial or ethnic distinctions, even in the case of a sultan whose skin changes from

black to white. Rather, the texts emphasize that baptism elides any type of monstrosity. Being

made a Christian is to be made human, and any hybridity that shares features with the un-

baptized heathen is unthinkable. Evidence of such hybridity must be erased to ensure pure

Christianity persists. Christianity is determined to be exclusively human through baptism, a

determination that justifies violence against others who cannot truly be understood as subjects.

 The King of Tars (*Tars*) explores how baptism negotiates the dividing line between

Christians and the Saracens. The text firmly defines Christians as human while relegating all

others to the monstrosity of formlessness. The narrative begins with a sultan learning of the

beauty of the King of Tars's daughter. He demands the princess's hand in marriage and

threatens war against the King, who yields to the Sultan's demands. The princess is at first

terrified of the union but is comforted in a dream. She pretends to convert to the Saracen faith

and marries the Sultan. A monstrous child in the form a lump of flesh without limbs or face is

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[29] Cohen offers the argument that the interaction between Saracen and human is a racial issue in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 no. 1 (Winter 2001): 113-146. Similar arguments appear in Thomas Hahn, "The Difference the Middle Ages Makes: Color and Race before the Modern World," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 no. 1 (2001): 1-38; Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); and Steven F. Kruger, "Conversion and Medieval Sexual, Religious, and Racial Categories," 158-79.

born to the couple. The Sultan assumes that the mixing of faiths has caused the deformity. He

prays to his gods to grant the child a human appearance. When they fail, the princess has a priest

baptize the child. Miraculously, the child is given a human semblance. In awe, the Sultan agrees

to be baptized. He emerges from the font with white skin, a miraculous transformation that

proves the power of God. He allies himself with his father-in-law, the King of Tars, and together

they declare war on the Saracens, converting many of the surrounding nations to Christianity

through warfare. The idealized crusade narrative, in which marriage and violence play a role in

gaining foreign territories for Christendom, is only possible when the non-Christian is at once

able to convert but also perceived as sub-human.

The first baptism in *Tars*, that of the lump-child, reveals the power of the sacrament as a

re-birth that grants true humanity. The child is born as a monster, a being of flesh but without

form or life. When the Sultan's prayers to the Saracen gods fail to transform the child, Christian

baptism successfully integrates it into the realm of the human by providing it life and

appearance. Immediately upon being baptized the lump "hadde liif & lim & fas, / & crid wiþ

gret deray. / & hadde hide & flesche & fel, / & alle þat euer þerto befell." [30] [had life and limb

and face and cried with great noise. And it had hide and flesh and skin, and all that ever

pertained thereto.] The two lists of features, connected by alliteration and parallel structure,

draw attention to the baptism's physical effects and the humanness of the infant. The child gains

proper form and physical definition through baptism, which actively produces humanity by

structuring and defining the body. The lifeless lump was not definable, but with limbs and a

voice the child is recognizable as a human child. The fact that the child cries recalls the proper

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[30] *The King of Tars edited from the Auchinleck MS, Advocates 19.2.1*, ed. Judith Perryman (Heidelberg: Winter, 1980), 94 (*Tars*, 776-79). All quotations from the *King of Tars* will derive from this edition and will be cited with abbreviated title and line numbers in parentheses.

behavior of a child during an actual birth and suggests that baptism is the true birth of the human

being. Calkin interprets the child's lumpishness to indicate the dissolution of boundaries

between different groups of people, arguing that the transformation asserts "the benefits of

differentiation, and the superiority of Christianity."[31] Calkin sees differentiation of skin as

emblematic of a distinction between ethnic/religious groups. The emphasis on skin serves as a

reminder that the child is now separate from other people: he is a distinct and complete human

being. Baptism allows one to distinguish between those who are formless, incomplete sub-

humans and those who are individual human subjects. Baptism's ability to define religious

groups becomes conflated with defining the limits of not only the body but also the category of

the human.

The lump-child's monstrosity is obvious, but the Sultan is also depicted as sub-human

before his baptism, indicating his physical otherness is a sign that he is not a true human being

either. Though the Sultan appears and acts like a rational figure, his ignorant belief marks him as

sub-human in the context of the romance. In a dream the Christian princess perceives him as a

dog: "& afterward þer com an hounde / Wiþ browes brod & hore /... / Ʒete hir þouʒt, wiþouten

lesing, /... / Þat blac hounde hir was folweing, / Þurth miʒt of Ihesu, heuen king, / Spac to hir in

manhede, / in white cloþes, als a kniʒt" (*Tars*, 440-41, 445, 448-51). [and afterward there came

a hound with brows black and hoary... yet it seemed to her, without lying, that the black hound

that followed her, through the might of Jesus, king of heaven, spoke to her as a man, in white

clothes as a knight.]   The dog in the dream is symbolic of the Sultan, and his transformation

foreshadows his eventual baptism. The dog image is reinforced later by the Christian priest who,

upon hearing the princess's plan to have her child and her husband baptized, gleefully looks

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[31] Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, 121.

forward to making "men of houndes" (*Tars*, 743). Moreover, the lump-child also signifies the

Sultan's sub-human status. The Sultan cannot successfully reproduce a human being, and while

the hybridity of the child is often blamed on the mixed marriage, one could just as easily

hypothesize that the father's lack of true humanity is to blame. According to Jane Gilbert,

medieval understanding of procreation hypothesized that the mother provided substance while

the father provided spirit. Gilbert notes the failure on the part of the Sultan to perform as father:

"It seems that the desire to produce oneself and others as true human beings by adhering to the

tenets of symbolic law is common to all human creatures; but, according to the poem, only dupes

believe that a 'heþen lawe' (*Tars*, 504) can fulfill this symbolic function."[32] While the Sultan's

desire to reproduce may be "common to all human creatures," his inability suggests that his

adherence to a heathen law makes him less than a rational human being capable of reproducing.

Though not as obviously monstrous as his child, the Sultan is bestial enough and foolish enough

to require baptism in order to become truly human.

The Sultan's actual baptismal moment confuses the spiritual and physical nature of the

human by making a physical baptismal transformation the cause as well as the sign of the

catechumen's inner conversion. In baptism, the Sultan's black skin miraculously becomes white:

"His [the Sultan's] hide, þat blac & loþely was, / Al white becom, þurth Godes gras, / & clere

wiþouten blame / & when þe Soudan seye þat siȝt / þan leued he wele on God almiȝt; / His care

went to game" (*Tars*, 925-33). [The Sultan's skin, which was black and ugly, through God's

grace became completely white and beautiful, without blemish. And when the Sultan saw that

sight, then he believed completely in almighty God and his worry turned to delight.] Baptism's

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[32] Jane Gilbert, "Putting the Pulp into Fiction: The Lump-Child and Its Parents in *The King of Tars*," *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England,* ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 2004), 108.

function as a means of cleansing the spirit also is made a physical transformation in the Sultan's

case. The predominant image during the color change is that of cleansing, and *blame*, though

often used to refer to spiritual fault, here refers to fault in physical appearance.[33] The color

change also recalls the princess's dream, in which the black dog is replaced by a man in white

clothes. Erasing somatic difference forces the Sultan to consider fully the act that incorporates

him into another religious community, and makes it easier for him to recognize the rightness of

Christian doctrine. The princess assumes that the Sultan's skin color is the result of his new

belief (*Tars*, 943-45). However, the actual baptismal moment has the color change precede the

inner conversion. Because he is forced to face the physical manifestation of Christian doctrine,

the Sultan realizes his religious error.[34] Further, the combination of baptism, full internal

conversion, and a physical change assure that the Sultan's person does not embody hybridity.

Rather, the miracle at baptism ensures a 'pure' Christian who resembles other members of

Christendom fully.

Because the Sultan resembles the norm of Christendom, his transformation, both physical

and internal, allows him to interact fully with other Christians/human beings and become

integrated into a reproducing family. Gilbert, probably rightly, assumes that the Sultan will

inherit the kingdom of Tars, and based upon that new social relationship between the Sultan and

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[33] *MED*, s.v. 'blame,' definition 2.

[34] The effect of the Sultan's body on his understanding is a reversal of Caroline Bynum's explanation of Aquinas's concept of form and flesh, in which spiritual form impresses itself on physical material to create the body. Here the body is seen to impress the form, and shape it. Bynum notes that by the 1330s "hundreds of years of insistence on bodily resurrection had come to locate in 'soul' much of our commonsense understanding of 'body.' Souls were gendered and ranked, bearing with them the marks of occupation, status, religious vocation, even martyrdom." Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body,* 10. Tradition had established a philosophy that allowed one's bodily situation to impress changes upon one's soul: a situation found here in the case of the Sultan.

the King she argues that the Sultan is incorporated into a form of enduring patrilineage.[35] Gilbert

goes on to note that the Sultan is secure within a Christian lineage: he is part of Christendom and

capable of perpetuating it. However, Gilbert does not stress the importance of baptism, which is

the ritualized performance needed to secure that position. Baptism incorporates the Sultan into

humanity because it imposes upon him a physical and spiritual Christian character, which will

allow him to Christianize his kingdom, Damas, in turn.

The Sultan's emergence as a human precipitates a move to baptize his nation, linking

images of baptism with violent Christianization. After the Sultan's baptism the princess is quick

to turn his conversion into a national movement. She tells him to: "Do christen þi lond, alle &

some, / Boþe eld & ȝing. / & he þat wil be christened nouȝt, / Loke to þe deþ þat he be brouȝt, /

Wiþouten ani duelleing" (*Tars*, 956-60). [Baptize your land, everyone, both old and young. And

anyone who will not be baptized, make sure he is brought to death without any hesitation.] After

the Sultan's baptism, Damas briefly consists of an intolerable mix of Christians and Saracens.

The Princess is advocating a purification of the nation by uniting all people into Christendom.

The narrative unites baptism and violence into a joined means of completely replacing the

alterity of the Saracen nation, and thus any trace of hybrid origins, with one that conforms to

Western Christendom. Beyond the Sultan's new color, which makes him indistinguishable from

Europeans, other images of replacement appear. After purging his court of those who will not be

baptized, the Sultan frees those Christians who have been imprisoned in Damas. Those freed

prisoners who are strong enough are given "armour and stede [horses]" (*Tars*, 1062).   The

resulting effect is that of replacement. The Saracens who remain true to their faith are quickly

done away with, but their disappearance is no detriment to the kingdom because there is a fresh

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[35] Gilbert, "Putting the Pulp into Fiction," 109.

batch of Christians ready to serve the kingdom as mounted warriors. The kingdom of Damas

had previously been a mix of imprisoned Christians and free Saracens. Through baptism, the

hybrid nature of the nation is erased so that a pure and unified Christian state may exist. Of

course, the sudden political and spiritual re-alignment of the nation leads to other Saracen kings

attacking Damas.

The resulting battle is typical romance fare, but the end returns to the trope of baptism

and reinforces the connection between the rite and the Sultan's ability to perpetuate a pure

Christendom. At the end of the battle the Christian army, led by the Sultan and the King of Tars,

soundly defeats their Saracen opponents. The Saracens who flee from the battle after the

Christians gain the upper hand are all drowned in a river.[36] While not particularly telling in

itself, death by drowning picks up sinister baptismal overtones in a work that depicts several

baptisms, particularly when one considers that the remaining two stanzas of the poem focus on

forced conversion:[37]

> Þritti þousende þer were take
> Of Sarraȝins boþe blo & blac,
> & don in his prisoun.
> & he þat wald his lay forsake
> Cristen man he [the Sultan] lete him make
> Wiþ gret devocioun;
> & þai þat wald be cristned nouȝt
> Into a stede þai weren ybrouȝt

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[36] That the Saracens are drowned as a result of a battle in which believers defeat heathens may also seem reminiscent of the drowning of the Egyptian in the Red Sea. However, the crossing of the Red Sea is also associated with baptism (the comparison is made in 1 Corinthians 10: 1). It seems not unreasonable that the image of the Saracens drowned may recall images of both baptism and the Exodus.

[37] This ending appears only in the Auchinleck MS. According to Judith Perryman, the alternative ending, found in the Vernon and Simeon Manuscripts, ends without the final conversion offer and instead summarizes the text, noting how the princess brought help to her people and the Sultan and the princess lived happily until they died and went to receive God's grace. Judith Perryman, Introduction to *The King of Tars*, 9-14.

> A mile wiþouten þe toun,
> & Cristen men, wiþouten wene,
> Striken of her heuedes al bidene...
>
> <div align="right">(*Tars*, 1225-35)</div>
>
> [Thirty thousand blue and black Saracens were taken there and thrown into his prison. And he who would forsake his belief, he [the Sultan] would cause him to be made a Christian man with great devotion; and those who refused to be baptized, they were brought to a particular place a mile outside the town and Christian men, without a doubt, would strike off their heads completely...]

Beheading outside the town is the only alternative to baptism. The fact that a miraculous sign was needed to convert the Sultan is not cited here to suggest the difficulty of such a decision; rather, conversion is a mode of subjugation instead of a means of transforming an individual's belief. Those who do adopt baptism are completely incorporated into Christendom, each becoming a *Cristen man*. The repetition of the phrase almost implies that these same *Cristen men* are those who enact the violence against those who would resist conversion. The text suggests that baptism so completely erases past connections that Christians, even those who were lately Saracens, can perpetuate violence against non-Christians without any sympathy for the former un-graced state of the catechumen. There is no room for hybrids or alterity within Christendom, and so monstrous difference must be replaced by human Christianity in the context of *Tars*.

Baptism is the sign and means of configuring humanity within *Tars*. By rectifying somatic differences understood as monstrous, either the formlessness of the child or the Sultan's dark skin, baptism affirms the authority of Christian belief, even as it erases the difference of the non-believers. The baptism excludes marks of difference, affirming Christian sameness. The human nature granted by baptism ensures Christendom's faith in its own rightness and authority. *Tars* serves as a benchmark of baptismal exclusion.

However, not all texts within the Auchinleck manuscript so perfectly exclude difference through baptism. *Of Arthour and of Merlin* (*Arthour*) posits baptism as a means of eliding difference and establishing humanity in the catechumen and is similar to *Tars* in that respect. But the baptism in *Arthour* also allows the catechumen to retain signs of difference even as the narrative as a whole counter-intuitively damns signs of hybridity. The narrative begins with the end of the reign of King Constance of England and the rise of Vortigern. Vortigern calls upon the heathens from Denmark, referred to as Saracens throughout the text, to affirm his rule.[38] The text then tells the story of Merlin's conception. Apparently, demons sought to beget a child in mockery of Christ's incarnation. They torment a particular family until just one daughter is left alive. Seeking to defend herself, she follows the instructions of a hermit, Blaise. But one night she fails in her prayers, and the demons impregnate her. A certain judge condemns her to death for having sex outside of marriage. Blaise intervenes and the judge has her locked in a tower until the child is born. When Merlin is at last born, black, hairy, hideous and immediately able to speak, Blaise baptizes him. Merlin then defends his mother, explaining the nature of his own birth. Further, to show the judge that mercy should be shown those of questionable birth, Merlin proves that the judge himself was conceived out of wedlock. The story returns to Vortigern, who needs the blood of a child who has no father to build a tower. He finds Merlin, who predicts Vortigern's downfall. Uther arrives, defeats Vortigern and begets Arthur all with Merlin's help. After Uther's death, Arthur becomes king and the rest of the narrative is an endless description of warfare as Arthur attempts to cleanse the land of the heathens Vortigern invited to Britain.

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[38] Thorlac Turville-Petre notes the marvelous change from Saxons to Saracens allows the Auchinleck compiler to suggest a crusading image for Arthur while at the same time reducing the uncomfortable notion that the English of fourteenth century England were themselves partially the product of the Anglo-Saxon invasion. Turville-Petre, *England The Nation*, 125-27. Calkin also notes the power of such a change to create a unified England in the face of historic reality. Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, 174-77.

The text is conflicted in that it seeks to create a myth of purity amid the hybridity of English

origins even as it relies on Merlin, a thoroughly hybrid figure.

Arthour, despite focusing on the hybrid origins of England and several Arthurian heroes,

posits hybridity as monstrosity, something to be feared and hopefully erased. Early in the

narrative, the text describes the mixing of Saxons, consistently referred to as Saracens, with the

Britons under the rule of King Vortigern. Vortigern invites the Saracens into England so that

they might support his royal position. He gives them land and takes their king's heathen

daughter for his wife:

> And [Vortigern] was cursed in al his liue
> For he lete Cristen wedde haþen
> And meynt our blod as flesche and maþen...
> Þer was wel neiȝe al þis lond
> To þe Deuel gon an hond,
> Festes he made gret and fele
> And hadden al warldes wele
> And held no better lawe
> Þan þe hounde wiþ his felawe. [39]

> [and Vortigern was cursed all his life because he allowed Christians to marry
> heathens and mixed our blood as flesh mixes with maggots...and nearly all this
> land had gone into the Devil's hand. He made many great feasts and had the
> entire world's wealth and held no better law than does the hound with his fellow.]

The text condemns, in no uncertain terms, hybrid coupling. Though the origins of the English

nation are tied to notions of hybridity, hybrid origins are argued to be destructive and disgusting

within the text. The comparison of mixing blood to mixing flesh with maggots suggests physical

decay and corruption as well as spiritual degradation. Similarly, the final simile compares a law

that allows such unions with the law of dogs, implying that intermingling cultures and religions

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[39] The Auchinleck version of *Of Arthour and of Merlin, v*ol. I, text, ed. O. D. Macrea-Gibson, EETS OS 268
(London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 7, 9 (*Arthour*, 82-84, 87-92). All quotations from *Arthour* will be derived
from the Auchinleck manuscript in this edition and will be cited with an abbreviated tile and line numbers in
parentheses.

is a sign that these people are sub-human and bestial. Calkin, in her analysis of the latter half of

the romance, argues that most of the action in *Arthour* is devoted to Uther and Arthur seeking to

undo the sin of Vortigern with limited results, and that such actions represent a desire to erase

hybrid origins and establish purity.[40] The action of the rest of the poem derives from the

corruption described in this scene, which demonizes the hybrid nation at large and makes purity

a desirable trait. That the devil is now in control of the land is re-emphasized a few lines later

when the text turns to the story of Merlin's conception, another hybrid origin that produces

monstrosity.

Merlin, son of an incubus and a human, initially represents the same degrading hybridity

that Vortigern has inflicted upon England.[41] The incubus seeks to produce a hybrid child in

mockery of Christ's incarnation so that "Swiche [a child] schuld acomber also fele / So þat oþer

[Christ] had brouȝt to wele" (*Arthour*, 664-74). [such (a child) would harm as many people as

the other (Christ) had brought to salvation.][42] Even as Vortigern's mixing sends the land into

"the devil's hand," so the demons hope their hybrid will corrupt the world. Merlin's birth seems

to confirm their hope as the child is born a monster: "Sche [Merlin's mother] childed a selcouþe

grome / So ich be bok telle can / It hadde fourm after a man / Bot it was blacker / þan anoþer and

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[40] Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, 185.

[41] Calkin notes the proximity between this passage and the Merlin narrative and states that this proximity "links issues of origins to that of hybridity, thereby drawing attention to the ways in which cultures and identities, like Englishness, originate from hybridization." Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, 187. I do not wish to argue with Calkin's point, nor her idea that Saracens as enemies are necessary in *Arthour* to achieve English self-identification. However, I believe she does not stress the paradoxical nature of English hybridity enough, particularly when it is placed next to the narrative of Merlin's baptism.

[42] Even as Merlin's creation is meant to be a parody of Christ's, it also draws attention to the unusual nature of the incarnation. In both cases the mix of human and spiritual essences results in something monstrous. The text's fascination with problematic origins extends even to the nature of the incarnation.

wel rower" (*Arthour*, 978-982). [She (Merlin's mother) gave birth to a fantastic boy, as I read in

the book. It was shaped like a man but it was blacker and much hairier than any man.] Merlin's

skin color and his hairy appearance mark him as bestial or monstrous. In the Lincoln's Inn MS

of the poem the midwife is quick to assume that Merlin is a hellish creature that should be

separated from other men.[43] Like the hybrid marriages under Vortigern, Merlin's own

conception and birth represent a degradation of the human. Hybridity again is depicted as

monstrosity. Yet, Merlin, as a hybrid creature, will be the architect of the Arthurian kingdom, a

lauded figure who originates the first English empire.

Merlin's baptism elides his monstrosity, makes him human, and reverses the process of

decay hybridity implies. Merlin's monstrous form makes no impression upon the hermit, Blaise,

who is present immediately after the birth, ready to baptize the child: "And he [Blaise] it cristned

also sket / He clept it Merlin a Godes name / Þe fende þerof hadde grame / For þai lese þer þe

miȝt / Þat þai wende to haue bi riȝt" (*Arthour*, 985-90). [And he (Blaise) christened it quickly

and he called it Merlin in God's name. As a result of this the fiends raged because there they lost

the strength that they expected to have by right.] The demons' rage indicates their power to

further befoul the world is gone, and the sacrament is the source of the transformation of identity.

Baptism has changed the natural order of events – the demons assumed Merlin's power was

theirs 'by right' – and freed Merlin to incorporate himself into Christendom. In the Lincoln's

Inn version of *Arthour*, baptism is more explicitly described as a new kind of creation. When

Blaise asks to be given the infant he states: "Y schal make him Cristen man, / Wheþir he dyȝe or

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[43] Lincoln's Inn MS version of *Of Arthour and of Merlin, v*ol. I, Text, 74 (lns. 983-90).

lif abyde / Þeo fairer grace him may bytide."[44] [I shall make him a Christian man and so,

whether he live or die, a fairer grace may befall him.]   While *maken* may carry any number of

connotations, the term implies that a Christian man requires a special moment of creation

subsequent to his actual conception.[45] Baptism effectively remakes Merlin. There is no

indication that his physical appearance has altered. However, his spiritual allegiance has shifted.

Through baptism, be becomes a Christian man. Similarly, 'grace' also recalls the grace of God

given to the catechumen in baptism that connects the catechumen to Christ. As Merlin says of

himself later in the Auchinleck text: "He [the demon] wende haue hadde an iuel fode /Ac al

icham turned to gode, /Ac þurth kende of hem y can boþ / Telle of þing þat is ago / Ande al þing

þat is now /... / Of oþer þing þat is to come / Telle y can nouȝt al ac some" (*Arthour*, 1053-62).

[He expected to have had an evil child but I am completely turned to good but through my

kinship to him I can both tell of things that were and all things that are now... and of other things

that are to come, I can tell some but not all.] Though Merlin does not deny his relationship to the

demon, he argues that he has been transformed into something good, no longer monstrous, and

that the powers he has are now turned to useful tasks. Even more so than in *Sir Beues*, baptism

functions in a manner similar to that described by Aquinas: it imposes a Christian character upon

the catechumen. Baptism gives Merlin the impetus to do good works instead of evil.

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[44] Ibid.*,* 76 (lns. 1000-02).

[45] According to the *MED*, 'maken' has no fewer than 20 different shades of meaning. The common sense of 'to make' as 'to create' or 'to manufacture' unites many of the definitions. Of particular interest here is definition 7a, "to bear or bring forth (sth.), produce (crops, fruit, flowers); bear (a child)" and 6a, "to choose (a king, emperor, pope, etc.), appoint (officers, an attorney, etc.); dub (a knight); ordain or appoint (monks)." I would argue that in regard to the notion of making a Christian man, the ambiguity of 'maken' serves to suggest the need for baptism to produce a human being.

Merlin becomes human in baptism, but the text does not acknowledge that baptism is an alternative to the violent expulsion of the Saracens that takes up much of the rest of the poem. Baptism allows Merlin to escape the stigma of filth invoked when the text described Vortigern's marriage without sacrificing his powers of prophecy, which come directly from his mixed parentage. Merlin's newly minted humanity makes possible Arthur's and Uther's violent actions that work to cleanse the nation of the taint of hybridity. Merlin is able to overcome his questionable origins without completely leaving behind what they offer. His baptism appears inclusive, like those of the *South English Legendary*. Yet, Merlin's baptism, an event that peacefully transforms hybridity without completely erasing it, is never applied to the Saracens despite the fact that his hybridity is reminiscent of the condemned mixing of Britons and Saracens under Vortigern. Rather the monstrous Saracens, many of whom are giants, need to be killed off in order for the English nation to exist as its own pure entity, and so they are repeatedly and at excruciating length. Merlin's baptism serves, then, not to suggest the ability to harmonize Christendom with alterity and come to terms with hybrid origins, but rather is a rare chance to sidestep the debate between Christian and heathen. Baptism in *Arthour* can elide monstrous origins, it creates humanity within the catechumen, but it does so to allow the text to construct a myth of purity in direct contrast with the apparent effects of Merlin's baptism.

In both *Tars* and *Arthour*, baptism is the means by which the non-Christian can be made human and society can be made pure. In aligning baptism with humanity, both texts present Christians as human to the exclusion of non-believers, who are, by definition, unbaptized and so, sub-human. As in *Sir Beues*, the belief that baptism incorporates the catechumen into Christianity, imposing grace that allows the catechumen to enact Christian behaviors is taken to an extreme. Within *Tars* and *Arthour*, baptism imposes grace, but that grace creates humanity

where there was inhuman heathenness. Such an extreme is not to be found in Aquinas or any

other theologian. However, in creating a baptism that defines humanness, the texts affirm the

authority of Christendom above any other social or religious group since only Christians can be

considered true humans. Religious righteousness, political authority, humanity, and baptism

become connected in *Tars* and *Arthour*. Such connections serve to dehumanize the enemy and to

justify violence against others not willing to submit to the authority of Christian chivalry.

Roland's Catechism: Baptism in the Matter of Charlemagne

While humanity may be found in baptism in *Tars* and *Arthour*, the romances of the

Auchinleck manuscript pertaining to the Matter of Charlemagne appear to present Christian

knights and their Saracen opponents as nearly identical. Of the communities as they appear in

the *Chanson de Roland*, the Old French heroic poem composed in the last half of the eleventh

century, Sharon Kinoshita writes, "Identical to the Franks in language and custom, the pagans

arguably differ from the Franks in religion *and nothing more*."[46] Despite the centuries, Calkin

analyzes the Saracens of the Auchinleck romances similarly and notes that "the oddest aspect of

this stereotypical figure of otherness [the Saracen knight], who appears in many tales of Saracen-

Christian interaction, is his extremely close resemblance to the Christian knights he fights."[47]

The idea, that Saracen knights and Christian knights resemble one another, is perpetuated in the

romance genre. The similarity, which both Calkin and Kinoshita explore, is dangerous to

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[46] Sharon Kinoshita, "'Pagans are Wrong and Christians are Right': Alterity, Gender, and Nation in the *Chanson de Roland*," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 no. 1 (Winter 2001): 83. Italics are original to Kinoshita. Norman Daniel analyzes the *Chansons de Geste* more broadly and comes to a similar conclusion: that the cultural differences between Christians and Saracens are minimal. He cites their adherences to notions of chivalry and nobility as well as the courtly behaviors exhibited by both groups in the *Chansons.* See Norman Daniel, *Heroes and Saracens: An Interpretation of the "Chansons de Geste"* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), 36-63.

[47] Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, 13.

Christian cultural identity as it threatens to dissolve the distinction between communities. As noted earlier, religious distinction is extremely important, separating human Christians from non-human heathens. Yet belief is mutable, and Christian doctrine ideally encourages conversion. However, Kinoshita argues: "If the possibility of conversion is held open, then any sense of identity which depends on the opposition between self and other is intrinsically unstable."[48] Considering that the self-identification of Christians as human beings against the bestiality of non-believers drives *Arthour* and *Tars*, the danger of proximity between Saracen and Christian and the instability of that divide dictates how conversion and baptism appear in the Auchinleck examples of the Matter of Charlemagne, *Roland and Vernagu* (*Vernagu*) and *Otuel*. Not unlike *Sir Beues*, the texts present a fantasy of assurance. In this case, the texts assure their audiences of the superiority of Christian identity in the face of similarity to other religious and political identities. The text solves the problem of close identification by invoking divine omniscience or omnipotence to control moments when identity might become uncertain. Baptism, in both its presence and its absence, is associated with divine intervention, a fact that helps affirm boundaries between religious and political identities within these romances by asserting that Christian chivalry is the better identity.

Vernagu* and *Otuel* form a single continuous narrative in the Auchinleck manuscript thanks to a unique set of verses that link the action of the first poem with the events of the second. In *Vernagu* Charlemagne is called on to aid the Emperor of Constantinople by invading Spain. The poem offers brief descriptions of several battles as Charlemagne wins town after town. After conquering Spain, Vernagu, a giant who is the Sultan of Babylon, comes to challenge the king. Roland gives battle. Despite a moment in which Vernagu considers the

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[48] Kinoshita, "Pagans are Wrong and Christians are Right," 86.

tenets of Christian faith, the battle ends with Roland killing the giant. The last few verses introduce Otuel as Vernagu's nephew, linking the two romances. *Otuel* begins with the Saracen King Garcie sending Sir Otuel to Charlemagne's court. Otuel claims that, unless Charlemagne converts to the Saracen faith, Garcie will invade and conquer Christendom. Otuel's haughty demeanor enrages Charlemagne's knights and Roland challenges him to a duel. During the duel, the Holy Spirit alights on Otuel and he converts. He joins the peers and proceeds to do battle with the Saracens. The battle ends with the Christians victorious over Garcie's army. Unfortunately, the manuscript is missing several leaves and the extant narrative ends with Garcie being taken to Charlemagne. Both narratives originate in French literature but from different sources. *Vernagu* derives ultimately from the Latin *Chronicle of the Pseudo-Turpin* via another Old French source. The narrative as found in the Auchinleck manuscript is unique to Middle English.[49] *Otuel*, by comparison, was quite popular. The basic narrative appears in three different Middle English versions, though each is quite different from the others suggesting a complex history from the original French *chanson de geste*, *Otinel*, to the Middle English texts.[50] The Auchinleck manuscript presents these two stories as a continuous narrative describing Charlemagne's Christians conquering the Saracen threat to Christendom. Both feature moments of divine intervention that justifies the subsequent actions of the Christian characters, either killing or accepting the Saracens who appear similar to the Christian knights.

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[49] Manuscript information derived from the Sidney J. H. Herrtage, Introduction to *The Taill of Rauf Coilyear with the Fragments of Roland and Vernagu and Otuel*, ed. Sidney J. H. Herrtage. EETS ES 39 (London, Trübner & Co., 1882), vii-xvi.

[50] H. M. Smyser recounts some of the complex relationships between the texts in H. M. Smyser, "Charlemagne Legends," *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English: 1050- 1500,* vol. 1: *Romances*, 88-94. Of the other two versions of *Otinel*, the first, *Otuel and Roland* appears to date to the first half of the fourteenth century despite the fact that manuscript in which it appears, the Fillingham MS., dates to the end of the fifteenth century. The second version, *Duke Roland and Sir Otuel of Spain*, dates to the early part of the fifteenth century.

As in *Sir Beues*, *Vernagu* features a giant who appears to come close to conversion, and the depiction of the giant in *Vernagu* makes the conversion and baptism of the giant Saracen a very real possibility. The battle between Roland and the giant comes to a halt when both combatants are too weary to continue. Vernagu, the giant, sleeps and snores so loudly that Roland is compelled to put a rock under his head for a pillow. Vernagu is touched by this chivalric gesture and inquires after Roland's origin. Roland answers, explaining his relationship to Charlemagne and his belief. What follows is a catechism as Vernagu asks about many tenets of faith. He asks "How miȝt it euer be, / Þat he [God] were on & thre?"[51] [How might it ever be that He (God) would be both one and three?] He tells Roland "hou þat he [Jesus] bicom man, / The lord þat þis world wan, / Þer of no haue y no siȝt" (*Vernagu*, 722-24). [How he (Jesus), the lord that redeemed this world, became a man: of this I have no comprehension]. He also seems confused about the virgin birth: "Hou miȝt he [Jesus] of hir [Mary] be bore, / Þat was a maiden bi fore, / Yno may nouȝt haue in mende" (*Vernagu*, 733-35). [How might he (Jesus) be born of her (Mary), who was a maiden before: I may not understand in my mind.] Roland patiently explains all to him, using clear metaphors to illustrate complicated aspects of Christian theology. At last Vernagu declares himself satisfied: "now ich wot, / Ȝour christen lawe eueri grot, / Now we wil fiȝt. / Weþer lawe better be, / Sone we shul y-se" (*Vernagu*, 785-89). [Now I understand every bit of your Christian faith. Now we will fight. We shall soon see which faith is better.] The questions and responses, reminiscent of traditional Christian catechism, offer the giant enough information to understand Christianity through reason. By the end, Vernagu's understanding is not to be faulted. However, he lacks belief. Despite Roland's patient teaching,

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[51] *Roland and Vernagu* in *The Taill of Rauf Coilyear with the Fragments of Roland and Vernagu and Otuel*, 56 (*Vernagu*, 701-02). All quotations from *Vernagu* will be derived from this edition and will be cited with an abbreviated title and line numbers in parentheses.

Vernagu does not convert. Reason and knowledge are not enough to instigate conversion because they are not enough to convince the giant of Christianity's superiority to the Saracen faith. At this moment in the text, Vernagu determines that only fighting can determine religious truth, and there is no indication in the text that he is wrong.

While Vernagu's desire to determine the truth of faith through violence suggests that conversion through conversation is unlikely, the giant's similarity to a Christian knight requires assurance of Christian separateness and superiority. When Vernagu pronounces himself satisfied with his understanding of Christianity, there is little separating the giant from a Christian identity except God's grace and belief. He knows his doctrine and he understands chivalric behavior. Even his size is not a hindrance within the context of the romance. Vernagu is described as having "tventi men strengþe & fourti fet of lengþe" (*Vernagu*, 474). [the strength of twenty men and [standing] forty feet high]. While this may be monstrous, Charlemagne himself is given a similarly hyperbolic description: "Tventi fete he was o lengþe, / & al so of gret strengþe, / & of stern sight" (*Vernagu*, 431-33). [He was twenty feet tall and also of great strength and stern appearance]. Though Vernagu is twice as tall as Charlemagne, they are both giants. To suggest that Vernagu's gigantism is the source of his intractability would create a very arbitrary line between giants that can be Christian kings and giants that must remain monsters. If Vernagu's gigantism, like Ascopart's, is not a reason to deny him status as a human among Christendom and his chivalry links him to the courtly life shared by Roland and the king, only his belief maintains the difference between Christian and Saracen. The catechistic conversation appears to threaten even that marker of difference. In analyzing the conversation between Roland and the giant as it appears in the *Pseudo-Turpin*, Cohen suggests that "when pagan and Christian subjectivities seem close enough almost to touch, violence erupts to redraw the faltering

self/other boundary, this time in blood."[52] Cohen argues that difference must be maintained

through violence when similarities threaten Christian/Saracen differentiation. The violence in

the Middle English text does help to assert difference but God's presence in that conflict firmly

structures the boundaries threatened by close contact between the Christian and the Saracen.

Violence allows for a continued recognition of difference, but when Roland is faced with

a Saracen so very close to being a comrade, divine intervention makes certain that baptism and

conversion are not possible, justifying the ensuing violence. Vernagu, as Cohen suggests, is very

nearly a Christian. Unlike Ascopart, who has no such catechistic moment, Vernagu understands

Christianity and if he were defeated rather than killed conversion would seem likely. Thus to kill

Vernagu appears very much like killing a potential Christian rather than an inhuman Saracen.

However, violence is needed to ensure that Christian and Saracen remain distinct. In order to

resolves this tension, an angel appears to Roland when he prays for victory. The angel tells

Roland: "herd is þi bone, / Arise rouland & fiȝt, / & sched þe schrewes blod, / For he nas neuer

gode, / Bi lond no bi se: / Þei alle prechours aliue, / To christen wald him schriue, / Gode nold

[h]e neuer be" (*Vernagu*, 807-14). [Your prayer has been heard. Arise, Roland, and fight, and

shed the rogue's blood, for he was never good, neither by land nor by sea. Though all the

preachers alive would shrive him for christening, he would never be good.] The angel assures

Roland that Vernagu is beyond salvation. The divine messenger assures the knight that his

catechism is not to be faulted since priestly attempts to prepare Vernagu for baptism would meet

with similar failure. Here, baptism appears in absence and God's message serves to ensure that

such an absence is not a failure on the part of the faith. It is neither the faith nor Roland's

prowess that is at fault in converting the heathen. Rather, it is the heathen himself who has not

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[52] Cohen, "On Saracen Enjoyment," 122.

been and never will be 'good,' that is at fault, and such a figure can be violently eliminated

without any problems. God's message simultaneously affirms Roland's righteousness in killing

the enemy and the superiority of his faith.

Vernagu's existence outside the potential for salvation promised in baptism colors the

earlier images of baptism present in the romance. Earlier, when Charlemagne is conquering

various Saracen cities of the Iberian peninsula, the narrative emphasizes the miraculous might

God lends Charlemagne's army. When Charlemagne finds it difficult to defeat a particular town,

he prays for aid:

> 'Send me grace þis cite to winne,
> & sle þe sarrazins her inne,
> Þat don oȝain þe riȝt..
> Þo felle þe walles of þe cite,
> / ... /
> & þurch þe miracle þat was þere,
> Ten þousand sarrazins cristned were,
> In þat ich niȝt.
> & þo þat nold nouȝt cristned be,
> He lete hem hong opon a tre,
> Er he þennes pase.
>
> <div align="right">(Vernagu, 200-11)</div>
>
> ["Send me grace to win this city and to slay the Saracens therein who act against
> righteousness." Then the walls of that city fell... and through the miracle that
> happened there, ten thousand Saracens were baptized in the same night. And
> those that would not be baptized, he [Charlemagne] had them hanged from a tree
> before he left that place.]

Here a mass baptism appears as a direct result of God's power: the walls fall and the people

accept Christianity. The text presents a threat to the superiority of Christianity, or at least a

threat to the superiority of Charlemagne's military might that supports Christianity. As in the

case of Vernagu, such a threat appears alongside a baptismal reference and an example of God's

intervention. God's omnipotence supports and affirms the rightness of Charlemagne's prayer. The subsequent division between Saracens who are baptized and those who are killed suggest that accepting baptism is a means of distinguishing individuals who "act against righteousness" from those who are acceptable to the faith. God's presence appears when characters need to be confident in their faith so that they are able to differentiate religious and political identities. Because God is on hand to ensure victory and initiate baptism through miraculous demonstrations, the Christians can remain confident in their ability to subjugate, incorporate, and/or kill Saracens.

Similar to *Vernagu*, which affirms Christian superiority over the Saracen religion through God's presence, *Otuel*, which follows *Vernagu* in the Auchinleck manuscript, demonstrates God's presence as necessary to affirm a change in religious and political identity. Introduced through a brief conclusion in *Vernagu*, Otuel is a Saracen knight, bold and chivalric, who is sent to Charlemagne's court to call the king to convert to the Saracen faith or be destroyed by the Saracen king, Garcie. Otuel's pride and chivalric bearing in the face of Charles and his knights wins their admiration and respect as well as their ire. In an effort to avenge his uncle, Vernagu, Otuel challenges Roland to single combat, a combat that ends with Otuel's conversion and baptism. Even more so than in *Vernagu*, the two combatants appear very similar and again God intervenes to ensure that distinction is possible between the Christians and the Saracens. Here, however, similarity is erased by completely integrating the Saracen into Christian society. God acts to ensure the totality of Otuel's conversion, affirming the value of the Christian chivalric society as distinct from the culture of the Saracens.

By being at once a desirable example of chivalry and refusing to convert to Christianity, Otuel threatens the belief that the Christian chivalric identity is superior. Otuel arrives with a

demand that Charlemagne join the Saracen faith (*Otuel*, 239-46). The demand implies that the

Saracens are as certain of the rightness of their religion as the Christians are of theirs. Moreover,

Otuel's chivalric bearing makes an impression upon Charlemagne, who responds: "it is harm,

iwis, / Þat þou nost what follaut is; / Ʒef þou woldes follaut take, / & þine false godes for sake, /

Iche wolle make the, so mote ich þe, / & þou wille bleue wiþ me, / A riche man in mi lond."[53] [It

is a shame, certainly, that you do not know what baptism is. If you will accept baptism, forsake

your false gods, and stay with me, I promise you I will make you a rich man in my land.]

Charlemagne laments the accident of birth that placed Otuel on the other side of the religious

divide, implying that Otuel is perfectly acceptable except for that defect and offers sizable

reward should Otuel change his identity. That Otuel is able to resist such a tempting offer

suggests that the Saracen identity is complete and whole in itself. Otuel is presented as a

desirable figure whose defiance and bravery are a match for any Christian. As such his identity

threatens the supposed superiority of the Christian knights around him. Indeed, Otuel's haughty

sense of superiority results in two Christian knights attacking him despite Roland and

Charlemagne's commands that he be kept safe. Otuel is met with violence because his attitude

challenges Christian superiority and because his chivalric bearing suggests his attitude may be

justified.

    Otuel is again asked to convert in the midst of the duel between him and Roland, and

again Otuel's certainty of his own faith threatens the notion of Christian superiority, especially

now that his certainty is backed with his own physical prowess. During their duel, Roland and

Otuel are perfectly matched. Each action, striking the other opponent, killing the other's horse,

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[53] *Otuel* in *The Taill of Rauf Coilyear with the Fragments of Roland and Vernagu and Otuel*, Ed. Sidney J. H. Herrtage. EETS ES 39 (London, Trübner & Co., 1882),74 (*Otuel*, 315-21). All quotations from *Otuel* will be derived from this edition and will be cited with the title and line numbers in parentheses.

is matched so neither knight gains the upper hand for long. As a result of their battle Roland

asks for Otuel's conversion and offers Charlemagne's daughter, Belisent, in return. But Otuel

refuses the offer: "Whil mi swerd is in min hond, / Al þi preching is for nouȝt, / Hit ne cam

neuere in my þout, / Me ne stant nouȝt of þe swich awe, / þat þou sschalt make me reneie mi

lawe, / For to wedde belecent; / So nis nouȝt me will iwent" (*Otuel*, 519-26). [While my sword

is in my hand, all your preaching is for nothing. It has never come into my mind. Nor do I stand

in such awe of you, that you shall make me forsake my faith in order to marry Belisent. So there

is nothing that will convert me.] The parallel acts of violence present the two representatives of

the two faiths as evenly matched. Since violence cannot determine the righteousness of one faith

over the other as it did in the case of Vernagu, Roland offers the best Christian society has to

offer: Charlemagne's daughter. Otuel can refuse such a gift for the sake of his own faith, and he

has no awe of Roland. The strength of his faith is so strong that he declares in the face of the

best Christendom has to offer that nothing is sufficient to produce a conversion. Such strength

challenges the notion that Christianity is the superior faith and that Christian chivalry the highest

form of identity.

   At this point, Charlemagne prays for reconciliation between the knights, which is an

appropriate prayer since reconciliation can reaffirm the value of Christendom. As the fight

continues, Charlemagne and the other onlookers begin to worry about Roland's safety: "As þe

king stod in doute, / He spak to his folk about, / … / 'biddeth to god in trinite, / For his grace &

for his miȝtes, / Send seiȝtnesse bi-tweene þo kniȝtes / & ȝive otuwel wille to day, / For to

reneien his lay'" (*Otuel*, 563-64, 568-72). [As the king stood in doubt, he spoke to his people

around him… "Ask God in Trinity for his grace and his power. Send a spirit of reconciliation to

those knights and give Otuel the will today to forsake his belief."] Charles' doubt obviously

suggests his own concern form Roland's safety, but doubting the outcome of a battle between the champion of Christendom and a valiant Saracen opponent suggests graver doubts than concern over a single individual. Hence Charlemagne prays not for Roland's safety but specifically for reconciliation and for God to give Otuel a new attitude. In these prayers, Charlemagne recognizes Otuel's worth and the value of such a one as a Christian. To convert such a knight would be a strong proof of Christianity's worth. Charlemagne turns to God to affirm the rightness of Christian culture, even as Roland prayed for victory so that Christian culture could be affirmed in his earlier fight against Vernagu.

God answers Charlemagne's prayers in such a way as to relieve the tension produced by Otuel's religious certainty and to reaffirm the value of Christendom. Immediately following Charlemagne's prayer, Otuel is touched by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove:

> A whit coluere þer cam fle,
> Þat al þe peple miȝten se,
> On otuweles heued he liȝte,
> Þoru þe uertu of godes miȝte.
> & otuwel, þat douȝti kniȝt,
> Wiþ-drouȝ him anoon riȝt
> From Roulon, & stod al stille,
> To fiȝte more he ne hadde wille,
> & seide, 'Roulon þou smites fol sore,
> Wiþ-drau þin hond & smiȝt na more,
> Ȝef þou wolt holden þat þou me het,
> Þat I sschall wedde þat maiden swet,
> Þe kings douȝter, belesent,
> For soþe, þan is mi wille went,
> Ȝef I sschall wedden þat faire may,
> Ich wille beleuen oppon þi lay
> & alle myne godes forsake,
> & to ȝoure god ich wille tak.'

<div align="right">(Otuel, 577-94)</div>

[A white dove that all the people could see came flying there and landed on Otuel's head though the virtue of God's might. And Otuel, that doughty knight, immediately withdrew himself from Roland and stood completely still. He had no more will to fight and said, "Roland, you strike very painfully. Withdraw your hand and smite no more. If you will hold to that which you promised me: that I should marry that sweet maiden, the king's daughter, Belisent, then is my will truly changed. If I can marry that fair maiden, I will believe in your faith and forsake all my gods and will adhere to your God."]

The white dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, comes down and alights on Otuel's head, a miraculous act in itself. The text does not suggest any causal reaction between the dove landing and Otuel's sudden change of heart; however, the action is clearly a direct answer to Charlemagne's prayer. The dove appears by virtue of God's might, even as the earlier prayer called upon God's grace and might. Further, both the narrator and Otuel mention that Otuel's will has changed, mirroring Charlemagne's specific request. Otuel's subsequent speech reaffirms Roland's own knightly prowess and Belisent's value, as she is still part of the conversion deal Otuel offers. Like the conversion of Thomas Becket's mother, Alexandria, in the *South English Legendary*, the catechumen's decision is conditional: if the catechumen is able to marry the spouse he or she desires, then the conversion will occur. The condition of marrying Belisent suggests that Otuel's own will does play a part in the conversion process. It also reaffirms the notion that the Christian princess is valuable. In making the conversion conditional, Otuel restores to Belisent the value he had dismissed when Roland initially offered her as a reward for conversion. By extension, Christendom as a whole can be understood as valuable again through God's might. God's power affirms the Christian faith in full view of the people watching, an affirmation that is reflected again in Otuel's baptism.

While Otuel's conversion overshadows the brief mention of his baptism, the sacrament

does serve to reinforce the idea that Otuel's conversion affirms the superiority of the Christian

chivalric culture. Otuel's conversion is celebrated as a miracle and then he is baptized alone.

The king commands that the people:

> makeden murþe & meloudie,
> Of alle maner of mesetrausie,
> For þe miracle þat was wrouȝt,
> Þat otuwel hadde iturned his þouȝt.
> On moruen þo þe day was briȝt,
> Þei laden to church þat noble kniȝt,
> Bisschop turpin was bisschop þo,
> He follede him þat day & nammo.
> Þo otuwel hadde follauȝt nome,
> & to þe kingges pees was come,
> Þe king beed him his douȝter a non,
> & feire londes mani on.
>
> (*Otuel*, 631-42)
>
> [made mirth and melody with all manner of musical entertainment for the miracle
> that was done: that Otuel had changed his mind. On the morrow, when the day
> was bright, they led that noble knight to the church. Bishop Turpin, who was
> bishop then, baptized only him that day. When Otuel had received baptism and
> had come into the king's peace, the king immediately offered him his daughter
> and many fair lands.]

At the moment of baptism the idea that God's miraculous power and Otuel's own will are

intermingled appears again. The text states that Otuel had 'turned his thought,' which implies

that Otuel, not God, was responsible for the adoption of the new belief. Similarly, Otuel is the

grammatical subject who 'takes' baptism in line 639. However, Charlemagne explicitly

celebrates a miracle: Otuel's willed change is actually a moment when the divine intervened in

the world. Though the actual mechanics of conversion continue to be ambiguous, Otuel's

baptism does firmly recast the character as part of Christian chivalric society. Otuel's baptism

and his entrance into the king's peace, that is the king's favor, are linked. The baptism and the entrance are nearly parallel actions that allow Otuel to take Belisent and a fixed place in Christian society. Further affirming that Otuel's position within Christendom is secure, Otuel asks to be put into the war against his erstwhile master, King Garcie, even before he is married. Otuel's baptism serves to recall God's work in creating a catechumen even as it also stresses the social and political nature of Christian society. Now that Otuel, a valorous knight who was desirable from the start, is baptized through a miracle, he is firmly bound to Christian society.

Conversion and baptism threaten a chivalric identity dependent upon difference because they allow the heathens to become Christian. Anxiety over such transgressive movements is alleviated in these romances by putting God in the midst of moments when the Saracens threaten to destabilize Christian differentiation and superiority. God appears to open or close the path to baptism, taking much of the responsibility to convert the Saracens away from the Christian knights. God answers prayers in such a way as to allow the Christians to include those worthy of inclusion or kill those not worthy without concern that the superiority of their identity will be threatened by such inclusion. The Auchinleck Charlemagne romances present baptism in such a way as to retain its idealistic function of inclusion while also neutralizing the threat to selfhood this sacrament entails by calling upon a God to function as the ultimate sign of Christian superiority. Because God's involvement is infallible, the texts present a fantasy of certainty not unlike that found in *Sir Beues*. Further, Calkin reads the Saracens in the Auchinleck manuscript who appear to be reflections of their Christian counterparts as fictional ways to deal with the similarities between the English knights and their chivalric peers in France: "Unlike the language of the texts in which they appear... Saracen knights in these texts do not directly assert an "Inglisch" identity but rather explore how such an assertion is made given a relationship of

extensive sameness and minimal difference similar to that between England and France in the early fourteenth century."[54] Baptism in these texts suggests that religious language can be used to alleviate anxiety over similarities. By invoking baptism, the texts suggest that true faith, as opposed to the false faith imputed of the Scots and French, can help determine a social as well as spiritual sense of self. Otuel's baptism and the impossibility of Vernagu's baptism make clear that God's presence will help determine identity and show individuals which mode of identification is superior. Trusting in such divine recognition, the romances defend chivalric Christianity as a superior identity that authorizes violence against others.

Conclusion

The fluidity and multiplicity of identities trouble the romances of the Auchinleck manuscript. Whether it is the multi-nationalism of Bevis's upbringing and household or the condition of Arthurian England or the potential introduction of Saracen figures into Charlemagne's court, alterity produces a concern that stable Christian society will be threatened by betrayal or degradation. Such threats mirror actual historical concerns in England during the wars that marked the period from the end of the thirteenth century into the fourteenth. The romance texts offered a fantasy of certainty at a time when social identification was not necessarily trustworthy. In *Sir Beues,* baptism is held as a sign of sacred trust, offered only in situations where the catechumen is subjugated to chivalric control. In *Arthour* and *Tars* hybrid communities threaten the Christian world but baptismal transformations allow Christians to understand themselves as the only community of true humans. Baptism, as a clear demarcation of humanity, grants Christian communities the right to meet the threat with guiltless violence, since those they fight are not true humans. Further, the Charlemagne romances, *Otuel* and

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[54] Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity*, 60.

Vernagu, invoke God's presence alongside baptismal moments when the authority and superiority of Christianity need to be affirmed. In these romances, baptism becomes a sign of certainty: certainty that those baptized have submitted to Christian political as well as religious control and certainty that chivalric Christians have the authority to assert that control.

Such a fantasy of certainty may derive from the belief that baptism could impose grace that incorporated and changed the catechumen. Thomas Aquinas articulated such a theology and emphasized God's power to change the will of the catechumen. Aquinas adds much to his theology so that his baptism is not a magic marker of Christian loyalty. By avoiding such nuance and focusing on baptism as a perfect sign of integration, these romances are able to depict baptism as a defining sign that divides those incorporated from those who remain safely outside the Christian community. Such sharp division justifies violence done against those who are firmly outside the community. During a time when betrayal and national identity were issues of import, when the notion of an English chivalric identity was distinct from other nationalities, these romances offered a mode of Christian behavior that valorized differentiation and subjugation.

As should be expected, the use of baptism in these romances, as a means of creating stable authoritarian identities, is quite different than the use of baptism elsewhere. The *South English Legendary* used baptism to incorporate physicality and social identity into religious identity. However, the focus on secular power relations that typifies English romance creates a very different reaction to baptism.[55] Where the *South English Legendary* used baptism to enlarge the definition of Christian selfhood, the Auchinleck manuscript reveals a distinct anxiety

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[55] Susan Crane stresses that political overtones mark even the most pious Middle English romances. See Crane, *Insular Romance*, especially Chapter 3: "Religion in Pious Romances."

about that very feature of the sacrament and, as in *Sir Beues*, the opening up of Christendom becomes associated with potential betrayal and fragmentation of the community. Merlin's baptism appears very similar to St. Christopher's and Josian's resembles that of St. Thomas Becket's mother, Alexandria, in that none of those four is easily identified as part of the Christian norm, but they still are incorporated through baptism into Christendom with much of their alterity intact. However, these and other examples taken from the Auchinleck romances reveal a desire on the part of the Christian community to control the figures of difference. Even Merlin, who is beyond such control, serves the Christian English in their attempt to erase the hybridity that has corrupted Arthurian England. The Auchinleck romances depicts baptism as a moment in which the foreign is not incorporated so much as controlled and placed under the authority of the pre-existing Christian community. The inclusive nature of baptism as it appears in the *South English Legendary* is replaced by an exclusive sacrament that must be used to determine and control who and what could be considered part of the Christian community for the good of Christendom.

The Auchinleck romances that feature baptism, by using the sacrament differently than the *South English Legendary*, reveal that baptism was a fluid symbol whose foundational role in Christian identification could be used to support a variety of ideas about what Christian identity encompassed. These two examples of two very different genres offer a glimpse at the range of meanings baptism might have at the turn of the thirteenth century. The Auchinleck examples suggest how baptism could be used to understand larger communal identities, a feature of baptism that appears later in the fourteenth century. In contrast with the writers of the Auchinleck baptismal romances, these later authors, particularly Geoffrey Chaucer, used the social aspect of baptism to call a society to unify and reform rather than to justify exclusion.

Chapter Three

Catechumens on the Road: Baptism in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

By Passus XI, Will, the dreamer of William Langland's poetic and comprehensive

dream vision, *Piers Plowman*, admits he has been living heedless of proper Christian

behavior. Now, as he approaches old age, he begins to worry about how he can be saved

given his sinful life, but he finds comfort in his baptism:

> 'Thanne may alle Cristene come,' quod I, 'and cleyme there [in heaven] entrée
> By the blood that he bought us with and thorugh bapteme after:
> *Qui crediderit et baptizatus fuerit...*
> For though a Cristen man coveited his Cristendom to reneye [forswear],
> Rightfully to reneye no reason it wolde.'[1]

Will reasons that he can still gain heaven since he is a baptized Christian, even if he has

not behaved as such. The only way to lose salvation, Will seems to believe, is to deny

the truth of Christianity, and only a mad man would do that. Salvation can be claimed by

all baptized regardless of earthly behavior since only belief and participation in the

sacrament are necessary. A few lines later, Scripture confirms that God's mercy is great

enough to save Will. But at that moment another voice breaks into the dream:

> 'Ye, baw for bokes!' quod oon was broken out of helle
> Highte Troianus, a trewe knyght, took witnese at a pope
> How he was ded and dampned to dwellen in pyne
> For an uncristene creature...[2]

According to tradition, the Roman emperor Trajan had been saved from hell without benefit of

baptism or belief in Christ through the intercession of Pope Gregory, who had read of the

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[1] William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition sof the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London: Everyman, 1995), 172 (XI. 123-26). The Latin phrase is from the Gospel of Mark 16:16. Schmidt translates the text as "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved..."

[2] Ibid., 173 (XI. 140-43).

emperor's justice. Thus, when the pagan Emperor Trajan breaks into the narrative, Langland introduces a particular difficulty facing theologians and laypeople toward the end of the fourteenth century. By that time, the actual effect and usefulness of baptism had been called into question and Langland uses Trajan to explore what roles baptism and good works should play in the life of a believer who seeks salvation.

Baptism, a part of every Christian's life, was traditionally considered essential for salvation; however, by the middle of the fourteenth century theologians and philosophers were debating the actual effects, if any, of baptism and how, or whether, baptism guaranteed the individual's salvation. Through the fourteenth century baptism had been losing its status as an illocutionary act, a performance that created the event the performance was designed to effect. Instead, baptism was seen more as a sign for an act of will on the part of the catechumen and an act of grace on the part of God.[3] Almost as soon as Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) theorized the actual effect of baptism in his *Summa Theologicae*, Peter Olivi (1248-1298) challenged the concept that baptism in itself produced a change and professed that baptism did not actually bestow transformative grace to the catechumen. As David Burr describes, Olivi "devotes some space to an essentially experiential claim that baptized children simply do not act as if they had any special *habitus* of grace. Baptism seems to give them no obvious bias toward Christian

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[3] Austin distinguishes locutionary acts from illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts. Baptism, understood as a sacramental performance, could be understood as any of the three: a locutionary act that sought to describe reality without actually affecting it; an illocutionary act, a performance that has effect; or a perlocutionary act in which an effect is caused by the performance, rather than being intimately one with the performance as in an illocutionary act. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 94-132. I also relied on Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16-18, for my understanding of illocutionary and perlocutionary performances. Understanding baptism as an illocutionary act implies that human action can determine God's bestowal of grace, a concept that many found difficult to believe, including Duns Scotus who sought to understand the sacraments as performances that were signs rather than causes of the spiritual event. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*, 147.

morality or even toward the Christian faith itself."[4] Despite a strong orthodox backlash against

Olivi that found expression in the decrees of the Council of Vienne (1312), many of Olivi's ideas

concerning baptism were reiterated in William of Ockham's (1288-1348) work. William of

Ockham considered the state of unbaptized children raised by Christians and baptized children

raised by pagans in his exploration of how humankind could be virtuous. He notes that baptism

does not actually affect behavior. A man of violent habit being baptized "feels himself as much

prone to vicious acts after baptism as before; therefore the habit, which equally inclines him

before and after, remains."[5] While not overtly heretical, Ockham's ideas subtly challenged

Thomistic ways of understanding the sacrament. In the latter half of the fourteenth century, John

Wyclif (1328-1384) further divorced the ritual of baptism from its final effects. Wyclif describes

the difference between God bestowing grace upon the catechumen via the "baptism of fire" and

physical representations of that effect, baptism of water or baptism of blood:

> The baptism of fire is the baptism of the Holy Ghost, which is absolutely
> necessary to every man if he is to be saved. Accordingly, the two former baptisms
> are antecedent signs, and supposed necessary to this third baptism. So then,
> without doubt, if this unseen baptism be performed, the man so baptized is
> cleansed from guilt: and if this be wanting, however the others may be present,
> the baptism availeth not to save the soul. And since this third baptism is not
> perceptible by the senses, and is so far unknown to us, it appears to me
> presumptuous and unwise to decide thus on the salvation or damnation of men
> simply from the circumstance of their baptism.[6]

According to Wyclif then, the ritual of baptism by water was not strictly necessary for salvation.

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[4] David Burr, "Olivi and Baptismal Grace," 8.

[5] "quia ita pronum sentit se adhuc post baptismum ad actus vitiosos sicut ante; igitur remanet habitus aequaliter nunc inclunans sicut prius." William of Ockham, *De Connexione Virtutum*, ed. and trans. Rega Wood in Rega Wood, *Ockham on the Virtues*, 116 and 117.

[6] John Wycliffe, *Trialogus*, in *Tracts and Treatises of John de Wycliffe*," book II, ed. and trans. Robert Vaughan (London: Blackburn and Pardon, 1845), 159.

In his theology, the ritual is useful but insufficient unless God completes the ritual with His own spiritual baptism. Thus participation in the sacrament did not determine salvation. Theologians of the fourteenth century perceived a division between earthly performances and the sacrament's spiritual effect.

In contrast to theological ideas that suggest that sacramental acts were not, in themselves, enough to produce change or save the individual, Will wants to assume that baptism and belief are universally and perfectly effective in granting salvation. But Will is confronted by Trajan who escaped from Hell without baptism, implying that God's criteria for salvation are more complex than Will would like to think. In his analysis of how the Trajan legend was interpreted through history, Gordon Whatley argues that Langland has changed the legend to imply that Trajan was saved by his good works alone.[7] Through Trajan, Langland implies that even as salvation can come to the unbaptized, the baptized are not as secure as reason and law might let them assume: a theology similar to that of Wyclif's in regard to baptism. Trajan explains that "Whoso loveth noght, leve me, he lyveth in deeth deyinge."[8] Trajan goes on to explain that the love he speaks of is expressed in good works, helping the poor, and personal suffering. Though Trajan's idea, that salvation can be earned, seems to border on heresy, he is convincing enough to destabilize the notions of baptism that had comforted Will.

By invoking Trajan, Langland reflects the uncertainty surrounding baptism that was part of the late fourteenth century. Baptism, at least according to those who shared Trajan's point of view, is not as important as moral thought and action. Langland never comes to a perfectly

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[7] Gordon Whatley, "The Uses of Hagiography: The Legend of Pope Gregory and the Emperor Trajan in the Middle Ages," *Viator* 15 (1984): 51.

[8] Langland, *Piers Plowman*, 174 (XI. 176).

satisfactory answer to the questions he raises about baptism, but does suggest that an active Christian life as the most likely source of salvation. But at this point in the text Trajan leaves Will, a lost pilgrim, uncertain about his own salvation and the usefulness of the sacraments as instruments of God's grace. In his confusion, Will may remind the modern audience of other famous literary pilgrims caught among diverse ideologies, seeking answers to many of life's problems including the usefulness of baptism.

The questions about baptism's use and effect that Langland's Will explores in his dream are quite similar to the questions Geoffrey Chaucer dramatized in the *Canterbury Tales*. Through the dialogue among his pilgrims, Chaucer captures much of the uncertainty and confusion that plagued a society reeling from the effects of the Black Death, the Schism of the western church, the Rising of 1381, and intrinsic social changes that coincide with the rise of the merchant class. Chaucer references many of the issues of his time in an attempt to understand how individuals within a diverse society can cohabitate peacefully and productively while moving toward salvation. While Langland suggests that relying on sacramental theology could inhibit the individual from behaving morally, Chaucer sees the sacrament within the context of the diachronic Church community. Both Chaucer and Langland call for ecclesiastical reform, but Chaucer does not depict reform outside the structure of the church. Rather, Chaucer depicts the sacraments themselves as constituting a call to reform. Baptism is mentioned in only three of the *Canterbury Tales*: the *Man of Law's Tale*, the *Second Nun's Tale*, and the *Parson's Tale*. However, in these cases, Chaucer uses baptism and its effects as symbols to explore a specific topic: the diachronic and synchronic unity of the church. Demonstrating the unity of the church through baptism also meant adhering to a tradition of diversity within the church, a tradition that was becoming less visible in the fourteenth century as two popes claimed to occupy the seat of

St. Peter and calls for reform were met with charges of heresy.

Baptism in the *Canterbury Tales* always involves an exploration of church identification and unity, which were issues of historical importance in England at the end of the fourteenth century. The Christian church was understood as the unified body of Christ, an indissoluble whole, but the Great Schism of the western church that began in 1378 and continued until 1417 called such an understanding into question.[9] The Schism divided the church between Pope Urban VI, who held the loyalty of Rome and England, among other European territories, and Pope Clement VII, who was supported by France and Spain. The Schism continued even after the death of Urban in 1389 when Pope Boniface IX was elected. While English clergy and government initially supported to Urban, by the 1390s the climate had shifted and many in the church and the government sought to end the Schism with little success.[10] Yet, by that time, the damage to the institution of the church had already been accomplished. Walter Ullmann explains: "The fundamental basis of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and of the whole edifice of the church, now became matters of dispute and uncertainty."[11] Even as the church was showing signs of rupture on an international scale, Wyclif's doctrines were causing the church to fracture on the domestic stage.

While the Great Schism weakened the notion that the church united all European

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[9] Basic information concerning the Schism is derived from Walter Ullman, *The Origins of the Great Schism* (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1948), with reference to Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Schism 1378- 1417* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), and Thomas Walsingham, *The St Albans Chronicle: The Chronica maiora of Thomas Walsingham*, vol. I, *1376- 1394*, ed. and trans. John Taylor, Wendy R. Childs, and Leslie Watkiss (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 249-63, 627-57, 787-89.

[10] Margaret Harvey, *Solutions to the Schism: A Study of Some English Attitudes 1378-1409* (Gesamtherstellung, EOS Verlag der Erzabtei St. Ottilien, 1983), 83-112.

[11] Ullman, *Origins of the Great Schism*, 99.

believers into one community, the theology of John Wyclif brought about division among

English believers. Of course, it is difficult to draw the line between moderate Wycliffism, which

sought to reform the church and was invested in church unity and Wycliffism that sought a

dramatic secession from the existing church structure. However, it is clear that the Wycliffite

movement was perceived by many of those within and without as a division, splitting a group of

people from the larger church body. Malcolm Lambert describes the development of Wyclif's

thought in terms of confrontation with the orthodox church: "A heresy charge was a recognized

hazard in the intellectual contests of the Schools, and not necessarily of great import; deliberate

defiance of the church, such as Wyclif came to make in his last years, was another matter

altogether."[12] Such defiance became an even larger issue because Wyclif's ideas took hold of

the laity. Anne Hudson notes that "in Lollardy or Wycliffism... is found a sequence unusual in

medieval times, of a heresy that began as a product of academic speculation but that moved out

of the academic world to become a popular movement."[13] Wyclif's own work as a theologian,

and the effects his work had upon the greater society, probably influenced Chaucer's work. The

exact nature of Chaucer's relationship with Wyclif and his doctrine has been the subject of much

speculation. [14] However, my point is not to explain the relationship between Chaucer's work and

Wycliffism. Rather, I argue that Chaucer's depiction of baptism is a response to a milieu of

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[12] Malcolm Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation* (Maldon: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 249.

[13] Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 62.

[14] Some examples of works analyzing the relationship between Chaucer and Wyclif: John S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer and Wyclif," *Modern Philology* 14 no. 5 (Sept., 1916): 257-68; Lynn Staley Johnson, "Chaucer's Tale of the Second Nun and the Strategies of Dissent," *Studies in Philology* 89 no. 3 (Summer, 1992): 314-33; William Kamowski, "Chaucer and Wyclif: God's Miracles against the Clergy's Magic," *The Chaucer Review* 37 no. 1 (2002): 5-25; and Frances McCormack, *Chaucer and the Culture of Dissent: The Lollard Context and Subtext of "The Parson's Tale"* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007).

ecclesiastic fragmentation that marked the last decades of the fourteenth century.

Chaucer's depiction of baptism presents an alternative to the historical divisions the author witnessed in his lifetime. In his tales, Chaucer uses three storytellers to present different points of view in the theological debates that swirled around the sacrament in the fourteenth century and to consider the consequences of various positions on baptism with regard to church unity. The *Parson's Tale* places baptism in the context of a penitential manual and in the context of a penitential life. The tale presents an orthodox view of baptism as a necessary and universal origin point for a Christian's identity and, by extension, a means of understanding Christian unity. The *Man of Law's Tale* similarly stresses the continuity and solidarity of the church even as it depicts the introduction of Britain into the Roman world. However, the tale de-emphasizes the necessity of baptism and in so doing makes conformity to social norms a primary sign of Christian identity rather than conformity to sacramental practice. The Life of St. Cecilia, which Chaucer translated before beginning the *Canterbury Tales* but later included as the *Second Nun's Tale*, offers an alternative to the *Man of Law's Tale* by suggesting how baptism can ensure continuity of Christian identity among individuals while also establishing a diverse Christendom. Through the dialogue created in these tales Chaucer deals with theological issues raised by Peter Olivi, William of Ockham, and John Wyclif. In these three texts, baptism comes to be associated with the trans-historic nature of the church, a symbol of unity across time. However, in using baptism to link the church of the past and present, Chaucer also presents baptism as a call for reform, particularly a call to tolerate difference for the sake of unifying a fractured church.

One Church, One Christening: Orthodox Baptism in the *Parson's Tale*

The *Parson's Tale* says little that is new or original concerning baptism, which is unsurprising since the tale says little at all that is new or original to Christian thought. However,

despite being a rather dry prose account of the sacrament of penance, along with a description of

the seven deadly sins, Chaucer's tale contains references to baptism that help explain why people

are in need of penance. In crafting the tale, Chaucer relied primarily on two sources: the chapter,

"De paenitentiis et remisionibus," from Raymund of Pennaforte's *Summa de paenitentia*, and

William Peraldus's *Summa de vitiis et virtutibus*.[15] However, two of the three references to

baptism within the tale are interpolations into the text, both relying heavily on baptismal

theology found in the second book of Peter Lombard's (1100-1160) *Sentences*. In adding

baptismal references to a translated manual on penance, Chaucer implies that it is quite

important, despite the fact that penance is the focus of the text. In its various appearances,

baptism serves to symbolize a state of innocence that encourages all Christians to understand that

they have fallen into sin. As such, it is a mark of commonality that unifies the church. Chaucer

presents the *Parson's Tale* as perfectly orthodox, but in so doing he reaffirms the symbolic

importance of baptism as a sacrament that intersects the realm of the individual and of the

communal. In the *Parson's Tale*, orthodox representations of baptism serve to unite all

Christians into a single church community that can include both sinners and saints.

It may appear strange to begin an analysis of Chaucer's use of baptism with the

concluding tale of the *Canterbury Tales*; however, the fact that the *Parson's Tale* is based on, but

not necessarily completely dependent upon, conservative orthodoxy even as it offers a call to

reform makes it a useful introduction to the reading of the trope of baptism in Chaucer's work.

Siegfried Wenzel, in his review of literary studies of the *Parson's TaleI,* summarizes the general

critical approaches to the tale:

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[15] For a complete analysis of Chaucer's sources for the *Parson's Tale* see Richard Newhauser, "The Parson's Tale," *Sources and Analogues of the "Canterbury Tales*," vol. I, ed. Robert M. Correale (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 529-613.

> In the attempt to relate The Parson's Tale to the other tales and the pilgrimage framework and to reconcile its obvious differences in tone, style, and subject matter, the reader has, I think, two basic options: one is to read The Parson's Tale as one among twenty-four tales in which Chaucer has a wide variety of characters tell tales that, to say the least, fit their narrators' professions and personal characteristics, and may do so in an ironic vein; the other is to read The Parson's Tale as in some fashion set apart.[16]

Wenzel goes on to note that the latter view has come to predominate and that the tale is often understood to comment upon the other tales and the larger frame narrative. While it may seem presumptuous and limiting to assume that the *Parson's Tale* is *the* final word that provides the key to Chaucerian interpretation, it is *a* final word and through the lens of the Parson's orthodoxy it is easier to interpret Chaucer's use of baptism as a literary trope. Indeed, the tale's prologue suggests that the tale is designed to cap the tales already told. The Host calls upon the Parson to add a final tale as the day draws to a close, saying, "For, trewely, me thynketh by thy cheere / Thou sholdest knytte up wel a greet mateere."[17] Though the Host seems to imply an act of individual creation in the verb "knytte" the Parson takes the verb differently: "I wol yow telle a myrie tale in prose / To knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende" (X [I], 46-47). Here, "knytte" suggests conclusion, creation, and joining together disparate parts. When applied to the "feeste," the verb has the Parson's tale gathering together and making a whole of all the materials presented during the storytelling contest, and by extension, uniting the tellers into one unit. The use of baptism found in the *Parson's Tale* supports the interpretation that the tale

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[16] Siegfried Wenzel, "The Parson's Tale in Current Literary Studies," *Closure in "The Canterbury Tales": The Role of The Parson's Tale*, Ed. David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 6. In the introduction to the same volume, David Raybin notes the divergent attitudes toward the *Parson's Tale*, noting that it is often dismissed or rejected because of the differences between it and the preceding collection of tales that Wenzel notes. See, David Raybin, "Introduction," *Closure in "The Canterbury Tales": The Role of The Parson's Tale*, xi-xxi.

[17] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale," *The Canterbury Tales* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), 287 (X [I], 27-28). All quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* will be derived from this edition and cited with fragment and line numbers.

serves to unite the pilgrims as it too functions as a symbol for lost innocence that unites all Christians. In its use of orthodoxy, the *Parson's Tale* offers a useful key through which to interpret the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale*. Baptism is part of the non-controversial conservative rhetoric Chaucer uses to imply that the true church is a unified and relatively tolerant community.

In translating Pennaforte, Chaucer initially appears to reduce the role of baptism in the *Parson's Tale*, though his work does ensure his audience understands baptism as the necessary precursor to penance. The first reference to baptism within the tale sets up the sacrament as the *sine qua non* of the penitential life. Chaucer translates Pennaforte, who quotes St. Augustine, to describe the three states in which penance is necessary:

> ...now shul ye understonde that ther been three acciouns of Penitence. / The first is that if a man be baptized after that he hath synned, / Seint Augustyn seith, 'But he be penitent for his olde sinful lyf, he may nat bigynne the newe clene lif.' / For, certes, if he be baptized withouten penitence of his olde gilt, he receyveth the mark of baptesme, but nat the grace ne the remission of his synnes, til he have repentance verray. / Another defaute is this, that men doon deedly synne after that they have received baptesme. / The thridde defaute is that men fallen in venial synnes after hir baptesme, fro day to day. / Therof seith Seint Augusten that penitence of goode and humble folk is the penitence of every day.
> (X [I], 95-101)

The text's topic is penitence, but one of the first means of explaining that sacrament is to put it in the context of baptism. Adult catechumens need to be repentant before receiving baptism, and penance is required after sin, either venial or deadly, because sin taints baptismal purity. Chaucer's version eliminates a few explanatory sentences provided by Pennaforte and thus diminishes the complexity of ideas surrounding baptism. The original *Summa de paenitentia* clarifies, in reference to the first action of penance, that children "are exempt from this penitence

when they are baptized, because they are not capable of exercising a free will."[18] When one

considers that the baptism of adults would have been extremely unusual during Chaucer's time,

eliminating this passage in favor of the more simplified version may seem curious. However, the

baptisms that appear in the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale* are all performed on

adults, with one minor exception. In this regard, the Augustinian belief that baptism must be

performed on a penitent catechumen becomes of greater importance than the baptism of infants.

Chaucer does not appear to be focused on baptism as actually performed but on baptism as a

symbol for entering religious life at this point in the text. In eliding the passage, Chaucer draws

attention to the ideas of penitence and renewal associated with baptism, rather than on debates

about the nature of infant baptism.

Instead of focusing on theology concerned with infant baptism, Chaucer has the Parson

use baptism to symbolize an ideal of purity from which all sinners have departed and to which all

sinners should hope to return.   Pennaforte's explanation of the final action of penitence simply

states "The third one is done for venial and daily sins."[19] Chaucer's rendition takes the

opportunity to mention baptism yet a third time: "The thridde defaute is that men fallen in venial

synnes after hir baptesme, fro day to day" (X [I], 100). While a fairly simple addition, the

inclusion of baptism in each action of penance suggests that it may have a particular importance

to Chaucer even as it depicts sin within the context of baptism. Baptism's role as a point of

origin for the Christian is confirmed later in the text in an interpolation not found in Pennaforte.

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[18] "Ab hac paenitentia, cum baptizantur, soli parvuli sunt immunes, eo quod non possunt uti libero arbitrio."
Raymund of Pennaforte, *Summa on Penitence*, trans. Richard Newhauser in *Sources and Analogues of the
"Canterbury Tales,"* vol. I, ed. Robert M. Correale (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2002), 544 and 545.

[19] "Tertia est quae fit de peccatis venialibus et cotidianis." Raymund of Pennaforte, *Summa on Penitence*, 544 and
545.

Chaucer follows Pennaforte's structure in listing three species of penitence, but in the midst of describing confession of mouth, Chaucer includes a long description of the seven deadly sins taken from a separate source, William Peraldus's *Summa de vitiis et virtutibus*, and a brief reference to baptism. After describing the deadly sins, Chaucer returns to confession of mouth and follows Pennaforte through a list of details that penitents must be sure to tell their confessor. However, Chaucer's text deviates from Pennaforte's in offering a reason for penitence: "For understond wel that after tyme that a man hath defouled his baptesme by synne, if he wole come to salvacioun, ther is noon other wey but by penitence and shrift and satisfaccioun; / and namely by the two, if ther be a confessour to which he may shriven hym, and the thridde, if he have lyf to parfournen it" (X [I], 980-81). In a brief departure from Pennaforte, Chaucer again references the baptismal state as a state of purity that is later marred by sin. As in Langland, baptism alone is not enough to guarantee salvation; rather, baptism initiates the individual into a process of continual restoration of Christian perfection. As Karl Morrison explains in regard to his analysis of twelfth-century notions of conversion: "Conversion was normally understood as a continuous process.... In fact, all of life, rightly lived, was conversion."[20] Penitence is important because it can restore the state of purity that the individual once possessed, and must perpetually return to, throughout that individual's life. The inclusion of baptism at this point suggests that, for Chaucer, penance can be best understood through the belief that all baptized Christians once existed in a state of innocence. Baptism creates a perfect state that Christians perpetually leave and to which they perpetually return. It initiates a life of penance.

While baptism serves as an origin point for the Christian, Chaucer's inclusion of baptism's connection to original sin also allows the sacrament to be a unifying feature of western

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[20] Karl F. Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), xii.

Christendom. Chaucer's description of baptism uses theology borrowed from Peter Lombard to

develop Pennaforte's description of penitence. Before the tale moves on to a description of the

seven deadly sins, Chaucer departs from Pennaforte's structure and describes how sin entered the

world. He uses the images of the serpent, Eve, and Adam to describe how sin, through

temptation by the devil, enters both the body and reason. In this, Chaucer borrows from Peter

Lombard, who in turn is borrowing from St. Augustine.[21] Baptism, according to the Chaucer's

Parson, removes original sin:

> Of thilke Adam, tooke we thilke synne original; for of hym fleshly descended be
> we all, and engendred of vile and corrupt mateere. / And whan the soule is put in
> oure body, right anon is contract original synne; and that that was erst but oonly
> peyne of concupiscence is afterward both peyne and synne. / And ther fore be we
> alle born sones of wratthe and of dampnacioun perdurable, if it nere baptesme that
> we receyven, which bynymeth us the culpe.
>
> (X [I], 333-35)

Chaucer's text condenses several chapters of Lombard's *Sentences*, which explore the notion of

original sin, its nature, and how it adheres to the individual's soul.[22] In condensing the argument,

Chaucer's language emphasizes inevitable damnation due to original sin. Though humanity is

wholly sinful, the sacraments, initially baptism, give hope for salvation. The language here is

not the distanced vantage point of the philosopher and theologian; rather, it is the language of a

community. Chaucer uses the first person plural to unite his speaker with the audiences, both the

fictional pilgrims and the text's flesh-and-blood audience, into a single group of Christians.

Original sin and baptism become, in Chaucer's representation of Lombard's theological work,

issues the entire community of humanity must face. In describing the origin of sin, Chaucer

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[21] Larry D. Benson, Explanatory Notes for "Fragment X: The Parson's Tale," *The Riverside Chaucer*, 959 n.350-56.

[22] Peter Lombard, *The Sentences: Book 2 On Creation*, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008), 107-63. Baptism is the special focus of Distinction 32.

draws all humans together as being in need of the sacraments to escape damnation. Baptism, like penance, is an essential tool for spiritual survival.

To further the idea that baptism is useful as well as universal, Chaucer mentions the traditional effects of the sacrament. Chaucer uses Lombard's theology to describe what baptism actually does in order to explain how baptism makes Christian behavior possible: "Therefore, al the while that a man hath in hym the peyne of concupiscence, it is impossible but he be tempted somtime and moeved in his flesh to synne. / And this thing may nat faille as longe as he lyveth; it may wel wexe fieble and faille by vertu of baptesme, and by the grace of God thurgh penitence" (X [I], 398-99).[23] Here Chaucer explains the necessity of baptism and its role in freeing an individual from the driving desire for sin. While the description is reminiscent of the powerful imposition of character found in the Auchinleck romances, the stress is less upon transformation and more upon God's help given to the Christian. Baptism is a comfort and support for an otherwise miserable Christian driven by temptations that cannot be avoided. The sacraments, including baptism, are necessary, and not in an abstract way. They affect daily life and are intrinsic to the individual's identity as a performing Christian.

Chaucer's emphasis on the necessity and usefulness of baptism stands in contrast with other fourteenth-century manuals on penance, which find greater sanctity in the repeatability of penance than in the singular moment of baptism. Robert Mannyng's *Handlying Synne* (1303), a highly influential text designed to educate lay people concerning the basic tenets of faith, outlines the Ten Commandments, the seven deadly sins, and the seven sacraments in English verse. Mannyng's work then returns to describe the nature of penance at length. In the

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[23] The ideas present in Chaucer's passage are drawn from Peter Lombard, *The Sentences: Book 2 On Creation*, 158. Lombard is also drawing on St. Augustine at this point.

description of the graces given to the individual through penance, Mannyng compares that sacrament to baptism: "Baptem for [from] adams synne vs drewe [turned], / But shryfte clesneþ vs eury day newe. / ... / As ofte as þou to shryfte art went, / As ofte helpeþ þe sacrament."[24] Baptism, though still functioning as an origin point, comes across as a distant second compared to the daily renewal offered through penance. Such judgment is made explicit in *Of Shrifte and Penance*, a penitential manual from the end of the fourteenth century translating the same text Mannyng was adapting, *Le Manuel Des Pechés*. Written in prose, the translation is roughly concurrent with the *Parson's Tale*, yet has a different attitude toward baptism: "Crystnyng navaileth nat but o tyme to aquite vs of synne, but confession availeth alwey for þe synnere may haue refute as ofte as he wol hym schryue."[25] More so than Mannyng, the prose de-emphasizes baptism, whose singular effects are of no immediate importance to the adult Christian. In the choice to elevate penance over baptism, Mannyng prioritizes a private, individual sacrament, which is often secret and excludes the involvement of the larger community, above a sacrament that was public and emphasizes the universal human condition. In the *Parson's Tale*, Chaucer chose to affirm baptism's necessity and its usefulness as a means of understanding sinful human condition. Such an affirmation retains the notion that the sacraments are a universal marker of the Christian community even as the text focuses on the individual in describing penance at length.

Through the Parson, Chaucer presents baptism as useful for the penitent Christian. By

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[24] Robert, Mannyng, *Handlying Synne*, 305. Composition date for the manual is taken from Idelle Sullen, Introduction to this edition, xii.

[25] *Of Shrifte and Penance: The ME Prose Translation of "Le Manuel des Peches"*, ed. Laus Bitterling (Heidlesberg: Universitatsverlag C. Winter, 1998), 120. Composition date for the manual is taken from Laus Bitterling, Introduction to this edition, 29.

relying on Lombard to create such an impression, Chaucer removes the Parson from the

theological debates of the time. The passages from Peter Lombard quoted in the tale are

perfectly orthodox. In contrast with Wyclif's controversial claims, Chaucer renders baptism in

the *Parson's Tale* with an orthodox simplicity that avoids debates by using older, commonly

accepted authorities. Richard Newhauser notes that "The basis for Chaucer's penitential and

moral theology in the *Parson's Tale*, thus, has a conservative foundation, for it is derived from

contextual sources which were roughly 150 years old by the time he adopted them for this

treatise."[26] Newhauser is referring to the main sources for the tale, Pennaforte and Peraldus, but

the general trend toward older and orthodox sources is shown in Chaucer's use of Peter

Lombard's theology as well. The *Parson's Tale* presents a baptism that adheres to orthodox

views of baptism by relying on earlier theological texts. Moreover, both Chaucer's language in

adapting Lombard call attention to baptism as a unifying feature of Christendom, an ecumenical

standard that helped define the Christian sense of self. In relying on orthodox works and in

presenting the sacrament as a common feature of Christendom, Chaucer has his Parson present

baptism as at once traditional and common. In the *Parson's Tale*, baptism is depicted as beyond

controversy and as such is able to function as a unifying feature of the church.

      While Chaucer's Parson may use orthodox, conservative texts, his tale serves as a call to

reform the church so that the Christian community may avoid fragmentation. In the *Parson's*

Tale the church appears as a unified whole in which even habitual sinners have a place besides

the saints.[27] The *Parson's Tale* begins with a quote, Jeremiah 6:16, which refers to seeking and

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[26] Richard Newhauser, "The Parson's Tale," 531-32.

[27] Paul Strohm interprets the Parson as "a voice that would transcend worldly fragmentation and division, situated in a work [the *Canterbury Tales*] that treats fragmentation and division as inevitable aspects of life in the world." Paul

finding proper paths. The Parson interprets these lines, saying "Manye been the weyes

espirituels that leden folk to oure Lord Jhesu Crist and to the regne of glorie. Of whiche weyes

ther is a ful noble wey… which may nat fayle to man ne to woman that thurgh synne hath

mysgoon from the righte wey of Jerusalem celestial; and this wey is cleped Penitence" (X [I],

79-81). The curious reference to multiple ways seems to suggest a multiplicity of methods for

reaching salvation. While such multiplicity could refer to any number of situations that allow

one to be saved that do not involve penance but are completely orthodox, the implication could

also be that multiple ideas and theologies are acceptable. Such multiplicity should not be too

surprising in a time of multiple religious orders and attitudes. Among the different paths,

penance is 'a full noble way' that never fails. As such, it is the best method to reach salvation.

Moreover, penance reminds all in the church that any mistakes in doctrine are not necessarily

permanent and can be forgiven. The church can include those who have embraced unorthodox

opinions or adopted different religious attitudes since they can always repent as soon as they

recognize their fault.[28] Any divisions that are present now will be resolved when the church

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Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 181. However, unlike my reading of the Parson's depiction of baptism as a sacrament that unifies all people on a horizontal plane, Strohm argues that "within the hierarchizing formations of the *Parson's Tale* the horizontal world of new social arrangements exists only as a deviation to be condemned." Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 178. Strohm looks to the images the Parson uses and argues that the *Parson's Tale* seeks to defend hierarchical social structures. I argue for a less socially conservative reading that suggests the *Parson's Tale* is attempting to imagine a horizontal church structure that emphasizes commonality rather than hierarchical differentiation.

[28] Francis McCormack notes how this reference to "ways" is similar to the Lollard use of the same word. However, McCormack interprets the use of "righte wey" in line 80 to be essentializing rhetoric. Frances McCormack, *Culture of Dissent*, 58. I chose to interpret these same lines as much less essentializing, emphasizing the multiplicity of paths that can gain heaven. My reading supports David Raybin's argument: "To read The Parson's Tale as predicated upon the inseparability of intrinsically imperfect and various human behavior and immeasurably forgiving divine response is also to see the tale as confirming a basic Chaucerian tolerance for a flawed humanity and justifying the poet's interest throughout the *Canterbury Tales* in exploring... many aspects of human nature and experience that would be deemed unsatisfactory by the spiritually conservative." David Raybin, "'Manye been the weyes': The Flower, Its Roots, and the Ending of the *Canterbury Tales*," *Closure in the "Canterbury Tales": The*

reaches paradise. According to the Parson: "Thanne shal men understonde what is the fruyt of

penaunce; and, after the word of Jhesu Crist, it is the endelesse blisse of hevene, / ther joye hath

no contrarioustee of wo ne grevaunce; / ther alle harmes been passed of this present lyf; ther as is

the sikernesse fro the peyne of helle; ther as is the blissful compaignye that rejoysen hem

evermo, everich of otheres joye" (X [I], 1076-1077). The Parson suggests that heaven is a

community in which all people rejoice in each other's joy. The Parson recalls and excludes the

argumentative relationships developed over the course of the storytelling contest by offering an

idealized vision of a community without grievances. Diversity on earth is tolerable because it

will become unity in heaven. Nicholas Watson has argued that Chaucer's religious views were

distinct from others if his time: "Chaucer's ecclesiology is also inclusive and anti-perfectionist,

refusing a fashionable current definition of the church as 'all who shall be saved,' rather than 'all

baptized Christians,' and *incorporating* even the most visible public sins of clergy and laity

alike."[29] While it is difficult to determine Chaucer's actual religious beliefs, Chaucer's Parson,

as evidenced by the description of multiple ways that, though diverse, all lead to Christ

apparently advocates a theology similar to that which Watson's assumes of Chaucer. The

Parson's representation of baptism is in keeping with such a theology. Though the Parson

Role of "The Parson's Tale," ed. David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 35. While I agree with Raybin's general argument, I do believe that one should be careful not to push the idea of 'Chaucerian tolerance' too far, as the *Canterbury Tales* is as much about reforming certain behaviors as exploring them.

[29] Nicholas Watson, "Chaucer's Public Christianity," *Religion & Literature* 37 no. 2 (Summer, 2005): 106. Italics are original to Watson. Later in his argument Watson uses the concept of *mediocriter boni* to explain how Chaucer understands the church and its acceptance of men and women who often fall into habitual sin. The notion that some Christians had to sin as part of their lives and could not attain the same level of sanctity as the saints or those in monastic orders could help explain the Parson's 'many ways.' However, the division of heaven into different levels can be as divisive as any other categorization of Christians. I see the *Parson's Tale*, along with the *Second Nun's Tale*, as attempts to keep the field of salvation more level. The Parson appears to claim that, because sin is universal, those in ecclesiastical power should be careful before trusting to their own sanctity as a means of condemning another.

throughout his tale focuses on penance as the key to entering the idealized community of heaven, baptism is the first step, the initial moment in which penance and community become possible. The Parson's use of baptism reinforces the idea of the church as composed of diverse individuals who are bound together by knowledge of their own imperfection.

The *Parson's Tale* concludes the *Canterbury Tales* and that position means it can, as the Parson implies in his prologue, "knitte" the diverse materials of the tales together. Rather than suggesting that the *Parson's Tale* concludes interpretation, however, the depiction of the orthodox but suggestive use of baptism within this penitential text points to baptism's use as a symbol that transcends the sacrament's normal use in life. Specifically, baptism functions in this tale as a reminder of the state of innocence all Christians were in at some point in their lives. The presence of the sacrament can thus serve as a sign of commonality that unites the church. In order to depict baptism as such a sign, Chaucer relied on older, less controversial texts, including Peter Lombard's work on baptism. The Parson's is but one way of understanding the sacrament and both the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale* offer alternative ideas about the sacrament. However, in each example, baptism appears as a means of understanding the intersection between individual behavior and participation in the collective community of the church.

Translatio Baptismi in the *Man of Law's Tale*

While baptism in the *Parson's Tale* focuses on the sacrament's role within Christendom, the *Man of Law's Tale* explores baptism as a ritual that supposedly negotiates differences between Christians and heathens. Despite including various elements of fantastical romance, the *Man of Law's Tale* downplays the potential transformative and miraculous aspects of baptism found in the romances of the Auchinleck manuscript. Unlike the *Parson's Tale*, which relies on

older traditionally orthodox texts, the *Man of Law's Tale* explores the ramifications of a baptism that appears more in keeping with the various theological analyses formed throughout the fourteenth century. The Man of Law retells the story of a Roman princess, Constance, who remains true to her faith despite uncertainty and hardship. The story originated in Nicholas Trivet's Anglo-Norman Chronicle and was retold by John Gower in his *Confessio Amantis*. In Chaucer's retelling, as in the other versions, the saint-like Constance comes into contact with two social/ethnic groups: the Saracens and the Northumbrians. While both appear to seek conversion, only the latter are successful. The two sections of the text invited an audience to consider why the English are successful in converting while the Saracens are not. Geraldine Heng suggests an ethnic mode of difference, seeing the Saracens as too alien to be acceptable.[30] Chaucer is certainly playing with notions of ethnicity when depicting different groups within the text; however, the stress in Chaucer's work is on behavior. A communal identity that shares behaviors with Christendom makes the Northumbrians a more attractive and more easily convertible community than the Saracens. In comparing how Chaucer depicts the successful and unsuccessful conversion moments within the text, I argue that the role of baptism is diminished in favor of a focus on internal and spiritual action in the *Man of Law's Tale*. Church unity is determined not by baptism but by a continuity of identity between the English, the true and predestined inheritors of religious truth, and the historical church of Rome. Baptism, in its absence, becomes exclusive as conversion is depicted more as a matter of similarity to pre-

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[30] Heng, when comparing *The King of Tars* to the story of Constance through the lens of ethnic studies, notes that "Both Syria and English Northumberland might be heathenish foreign lands to a Christian 'Roman' princess, but Syria… presents a prospect of penultimate alienness, an alienation beyond the pale, by virtue of the race and color of its constituents, even if the aliens have been Christianized." Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 232. Heng's focus on somatic difference does not seem to fit Chaucer's rendition of the tale, in which physical description is rarely noted in favor of spiritual disposition.

existing ideas of Christianity rather than transformed religious belief. Rather than simply presenting such a theology, the end of the narrative and the tale's epilogue suggest that relying exclusively on contiguousness to understand the church is problematic for a community seeking salvation.

The first baptism in the tale, that of a Saracen sultan, appears as an attempt to navigate difference, and emphasizes the benefits of exogamy for Christianity. Like the romance of *The King of Tars*, the action of the *Man of Law's Tale* begins with love that crosses religious and ethnic boundaries. However, unlike the Sultan of *The King of Tars*, the Sultan here is willing to convert in order to gain the virtuous and beautiful Constance. The Sultan states clearly: "Rather than I lese / Custance, I wol be cristned, doutelees. / I moot been hires; I may noon oother chese" (II [B1], 225-27). The Sultan's desire for baptism is not based upon any religious desire, particularly as the Sultan offers himself not to God, as would be appropriate for a catechumen, but to his potential lover. The love the Sultan bears exists despite the differences that separate the two cultures, differences that the Sultan's counselors believe to be insurmountable (II [B1], 220). The Sultan sees baptism as a prerequisite before marriage, a means of negotiating the differences between two cultures. Other narratives, particularly that of Thomas Becket's mother in the *South English Legendary*, depict positive outcomes of similar baptisms undergone for the sake of romantic desire. Indeed, the Romans accept the Sultan for their own reasons: "al the chirche, and al the chivalrie, / That in destruccioun of mawmettrie, / And in encrees of Cristes Law deere, / They been accorded... / How that the Sowdan and his baronage / And alle his liges should ycristned be, / And he shal han Custance in marriage" (II [B1], 235-42). The church and the nobility both hope this baptism and the subsequent marriage will allow those who were heathen Saracens to integrate into Christendom. Both the Sultan and the Romans expect baptism

to create change, as it should according to its depiction in the Auchinleck romances. The desire

to integrate the heathen is powerful here and both groups expect the physical performance of the

sacrament to achieve that integration. However, the narrative does not depict a converted

Saracen nation. In fact, the attempt to convert the Saracens results only in bloodshed as the

Sultan's mother, who is also baptized, kills all those who have converted, including her own son.

The narrative disrupts audience expectation by depicting a baptism that leads not to a greater

Christendom but rather reveals that the sign of baptism can be abused by an unbelieving

catechumen.

Baptism fails to reconcile the Saracens and the Romans because the transformation from

one culture to another is not wholly embraced and so the sign of conversion is made infelicitous.

The Sultaness refuses to abandon her religion, declaring to a group of like-minded Saracen lords,

"ye knowen everichon, / How that my sone in point is for to lete / The hooly lawes of oure

Alkaron, / Yeven by Goddes message, Makomete. / But oon avow to grete God I heete, / The lyf

shal rather out of my body sterte, / Than Makometes lawe out of myn herte!" (II [B1], 331-37).

The Sultaness draws attention to the major differences of religion that distinguish Saracen from

Christian, mentioning Mohamed as the prophet and the Quran as the book of law. The ideas of

conversion espoused by both the Sultan and the Christian people are found to be overly

optimistic in the case of the Sultaness who cites difference as more powerful than any desire to

unify people. In order to defend her culture and faith, the Sultaness falsifies her baptism. She

tells the Saracen lords to hypocritically participate in baptism:

> We shul first feyne us cristendom to take,-
> Coold water shal nat greve us but a lite!
> And I shal swich a feeste and revel make
> That, as I trowe, I shal the Sowdan quite.
> For thogh his wyf be cristned never so white,

> She shall have need to wasshe awey the rede,
> Thogh she a font-ful water with hire lede.

<div align="center">(II [B1], 352-57)</div>

To the Sultaness, the sacrament is only a physical event: it is only water that will have no actual

effect on the spiritual state of the catechumen. Similarly, the cruel joke that Constance's pure

baptized state will be sullied by her own blood, so much so that further baptism will be unable to

cleanse her, also addresses the notion that baptism is only a physical event: an act of cleansing

the body. Like the impenitent catechumen used as an example in the *Parson's Tale* (X [I], 97-

98), her sacrament cannot bestow grace but only the mark of baptism. Similarly, Aquinas

stressed the importance of will during baptism, writing: "As Damascene says, God does not force

a man into righteousness. Therefore, that a man be justified through baptism requires that his

will embrace both the sacrament and its effect."[31] The Sultaness fails to will her own

transformation. By willing against the sacrament, the Sultaness reduces the spiritual experience

to a physical one that carries with it no spiritual transformation and no integration into the

Christian community. However, the Sultaness still partakes of the ceremony so that she can

perpetuate her treachery. The sign of baptism becomes a means of deceit. In this, the narrative

draws attention to the danger of trusting in the signs of the sacraments as they can be falsified.

The Sultaness also suggests that baptism will provide no support or protection for Constance,

further suggesting the falseness of the sacrament, or at least the powerlessness of the sacrament

to protect her as the representative of the Christian community. Of course, the Sultaness is

wrong in Constance's case; the grace of God does protect her and see her through her trials

though such grace is not attributed to the sacraments. In making her baptism a lie, the Sultaness

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[31]"Dicendum quod, sicut Damascenus dicit, Deus non cogit hominem ad justitiam. Et ideo ad hoc quod aliquis justificetur per baptismum, requiritur quod voluntas hominis amplectatus et bapitsmum et baptismi effectum." *Summa Theologicae* 3a, 69, 9.

challenges the older romance notions of how baptism effects integration and can mitigate difference.

Comparing the Sultaness's baptism with other baptismal narratives reveals the magnitude of her claim that baptism is nothing but 'cold water.' The earlier baptismal romances of the Auchinleck manuscript depicted baptism as effective, causing changes that create a connection between catechumen and Christendom. In the *Man of Law's Tale*, true conversion, or lack thereof, is only recognizable if one has access to the inner person. Similarly, *The King of Tars* betrays concerns that inner conversion is ultimately unknowable when its Christian princess supposedly converts to the Saracen religion. *The King of Tars* relieves its concern by clearly depicting conversion to Christianity through baptism as simultaneous with physical and spiritual changes. The physical reality of baptism combined with the spiritual transformation it is supposed to induce makes baptism appear as a reliable signifier of spiritual change within *The King of Tars*. The *Man of Law's Tale*, by contrast, shows the sacrament to be ineffective at inducing a change; baptism does nothing to change either the physical or spiritual character of the Sultaness. A similar situation arises in the Anglo-Norman romance *Boeve de Haumtone*: Boeve's giant servant converts from the Saracen faith, is baptized, but later betrays his master. In order to preserve the depiction of baptism found in *The King of Tars*, the Middle English translation, *The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, had been reworked so the giant was not actually baptized, keeping the power of the sacrament intact. Chaucer has no such qualms about having the Man of Law depict a much more realistic and less magical baptism. The Sultaness accepts the outward sign of baptism, a baptism that has no spiritual effect since the Sultaness still holds to her old faith and to her murderous plans. Because the Sultaness's baptism is dependent in part on the belief and will of the catechumen, the sacramental sign cannot be considered

definitive. Baptism by itself does not have the power to give an unwilling individual access to Christendom.

By falsifying her baptism, the Sultaness ensures that difference rather than conversion will determine the relationship between the Saracens and Christians. When the Sultaness kills her son and the Christians she had invited to a wedding feast, "Ne was ther Surryen noon, that was converted, / That of the conseil of the Sowdan woot, / That he nas al tohewe er he asterted" (II [B1], 438-90). While it may be possible to imagine the Sultan and those baptized with him as Christian martyrs, the text does not offer any such indication. Rather, the Sultaness's slaughter of any converts appears to be utterly complete, erasing the legitimate use of baptism from the narrative. The slaughter continues when the Romans learn of the Sultaness's treachery. The Romans take bloody vengeance and then return home (II [B1], 957-69). There is no indication that there is any further contact between Rome and Syria. The differences between the two nations and the fact that conversion and baptism have been falsified have ensured that there is no reconciliation or connection between the two cultures. The lines of difference are violently maintained and true conversion reserved for a community that appears more like the Christian Roman community.

Though the Saracens are not integrated into Christendom, the Northumbrians are converted and are thus revealed as the true inheritors of Christianity. After the slaughter of the Sultan, the Sultaness puts Constance in a rudderless boat that eventually finds its way to England. In all versions of the tale, Constance's arrival in England eventually leads to the English recalling the British Christians to help them convert. In both Gower and Trevet, the

conversion is accompanied by several baptisms performed by British priests.[32] Chaucer, on the other hand, depicts the English conversion without mentioning baptism (II [B1], 538, 574, 686). While basing any reading on negative evidence is questionable, Chaucer had ample opportunity, given both Trivet and Gower's own retelling, to include the baptisms of the various English converts in his own work.[33] Yet, Chaucer chose to reference baptism only when narrating how Constance's infant son gained his name "at the fontstoon" (II [B1], 723). Sacramental descriptions of conversion are deliberately elided in favor of evidence that shows continuity of identity between Rome and England.

Though England is clearly a pagan nation, Chaucer has subtly changed the narrative at several points to imply that England is already connected to Christendom, making the English conversion natural and acceptable. The narrator is careful to point out that those who rescued Constance from her boat "Were payens, and that contree everywhere" (II [B1], 535). But despite being among pagans, Constance's language indicates that England, for all its pagan status, is part of Christian Europe. When she arrives, her "Latyn corrupt" is enough to make her understood (II [B1], 519). Though Trivet makes much of Constance's command of various languages and her ability to understand the Saxon language, Chaucer implies that Latin is already a lingua franca connecting those in England with those in Rome.[34] Chaucer was very much aware of language

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[32] Nicholas Trivet, "Of the Noble Lady Constance," trans. R. M. Correale in *Sources and Analogues of the "Canterbury Tales,"* vol. II, ed. Robert M. Correale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 304 and 305, 310 and 311. John Gower, "Book 2," *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 116-17 (lns. 890-909).

[33] There is also the possibility that baptism is mentioned in a stanza thought to be missing between lines 566 and 567. The stanza would probably have described how Constance and Hermengild actually healed the blind man. However, there is no baptism at this point in either Gower or Trivet so it is likely that only the miracle, not a baptism, is lost with this stanza.

[34] Trivet notes that the emperor had Constance learn many languages early in the text. When Constance reaches Northumbria, Trivet reminds his audience why language is not a barrier for her: "And she, as one who was skilled in

and the dangers of translation. By denying the heroine the ability to speak the Saxon language she has in Trivet's version and relying instead upon a continuous language, Chaucer has mitigated the difference between the two cultures.[35] Such narrative shifts appear throughout the story of the English conversion, reinforcing continuity, rather than difference, between Christendom and England.

In Chaucer's narrative the transition from paganism to Christianity in England is made to appear easy because a pre-existing British Christian presence is emphasized in the text. Chaucer's account is historically accurate in pointing out that the pagan English had driven the Christian Britons away (II [B1], 540-42). But the text also notes that Christians are still present in the country: "But yet nere Cristene Britons so exiled / That ther nere somme that in hir privetee / Honoured Crist and hethen folk bigiled" (II [B1], 547-49). The underground community of British Christians explains the sudden appearance of the blind Christian whom Hermangild, the wife of the constable who took Constance in, heals. Trivet simply has the blind Christian Briton appear on the beach with no mention of a Christian community outside of

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various languages, as mentioned above, answered him in Saxon, which was Olda's language." [Et (ele) lui respoundi en Sessonieis, qe fu langage Olda, come cele q'estoit apprise en diverses languages, come avant est dit." Trivet, "Of the Noble Lady Constance," 302 and 303. Constance in Trivet's version is more clearly a means of contacting and possibly integrating the non-believer into Christendom. Her role is to negotiate difference. Chaucer's Constance, by comparison, serves as the means by which already existing neo-Christian cultures can become seamlessly continuous with Christian tradition. It is not a matter of contacting those outside Christendom but initiating connection.

[35] The alteration to Constance's linguistic abilities has been the subject of several other works. Christine Cooper suggests that the ability to communicate is a miraculous sign in Christine F. Cooper, "'But algates thereby was she understoode': Translating Custance in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36 no. 1 (2006): 27-38. Similarly, and in direct contrast with my own argument, Kathryn Lynch argues that the language difference allows the English to be as foreign as the Saracens. Kathryn L. Lynch, "Storytelling, Exchange, and Constancy: East and West in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 33 (1999): 409-22. I believe that such readings create a supernatural or extreme rationale for an incident that is not intended to be so fantastic. Instead, Latin can be understood as a language that links the culture of Rome with that of Northumbria.

Wales.[36] In fact, when the constable converts after seeing the blind man healed, Trivet notes that

a bishop is fetched from Wales to perform the baptism. Trivet's version carefully distinguishes

the pagan community in which Constance finds herself from the Christian community in Wales.

Chaucer's Christian community within Northumbria makes the shift from pagan nation to

Christian nation less dramatic. Similarly, Chaucer's version omits details about the Christian

Britons brought into the Anglo-Saxon kingdom. In Trivet's version such details indicate a shift

from the nation's pagan past to its Christian future. In the *Man of Law's Tale* a "Britoun book,

written with Evaungiles" serves as an object on which to swear an oath with no indication of

how it came to be in a pagan kingdom or why it is used in a pagan trial. Similarly, after Alla

converts, a bishop is called to take custody of Constance when Alla must go to fight the Scots (II

[B1], 666, 716). Trivet reminds his audience that both book and bishop are there because the

bishop was called from Wales to Northumbria to preside over the baptism of the constable and

his household.[37] By omitting such references, Chaucer's narrator implies a constant Christian

presence in Northumbria before and after conversion. The presence of the Latin language,

Christians, Christian books and bishops, all mitigate the difference between Northumbria and

Christendom, despite the English being nominally pagan. When the text describes the king of

Northumbria, Alla, converting before his marriage to Constance, he and Northumbria become

part of Christendom without the need to mention the sacrament of baptism. Because of the

constant mention of Christianity within England, the sacrament does not appear necessary as a

rite of initiation. Despite depicting England's pagan past, Chaucer's text denies that England is

or ever was very foreign to western Christendom, but rather strives to create a narrative in which

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[36] Trivet, "Of the Noble Lady Constance," 304 and 305.

[37] Ibid., 306 and 307.

Christendom is more constant, making the inclusion of the English a natural continuation of that community. This is not to say that England did not need conversion but to suggest that the validity of that conversion, made clear in the behavior of the converts, is made possible in part by the close connections between the two cultures that pre-date England's conversion.

In the *Man of Law's Tale*, pagan England is not so very different from Roman Christendom, but King Alla's mother, Donegild, serves to suggest the importance and danger of both difference and exogamy. When Constance gives birth, her wicked mother-in-law takes the opportunity to do away with her foreign daughter-in-law, since "Her thoughte a despit that he [King Alla] sholde take / So strange a creature unto his make" (II [B1], 699-700). Donegild shifts the perspective of the narrative. To her, Constance is foreign and radically different from her son. Donegild acts on her desire to alienate Constance when she forges a letter to King Alla saying that Constance had given birth to "so horrible a feendly creature / That in the castel noon so hardy was / That any while dorst ther endure. / The mooder was an elf, by aventure / Ycomen, by charmes or by sorcerie" (II [B1], 751-55). Considering the lump-child from *The King of Tars*, Donegild's lies seem quite believable within the realm of romance: a match between different faiths or ethnicities could produce monsters. However, Donegild sees what is not there; there is no obvious foreignness separating Alla and Constance. Thus, the effective baptism of *The King of Tars*, which had the power to produce radical physical transformations, which allowed for the union of Christian with the foreign, is unnecessary. In the *Man of Law's Tale* baptism does not have to be visible in order to grant humanity to the catechumen. Rather, humanity is a simple fact found in both Romans and Northumbrians. Though Donegild might see difference, Chaucer stresses the notion of continuity between the spouses and, by extension, their nations.

Despite Donegild's claim that the child is monstrous, Constance's son, Maurice, confirms that the union of England to Christendom is proper since his form suggests a continuation of Constance's own consistency. Maurice is his mother's exact image: "Now was this child as lyk unto Custance / As possible is a creature to be" (II [B1], 1030-31). Unlike the defective lump-child produced by the Princess and the Sultan in *The King of Tars*, Maurice is not a new combination of different ethnic or religious groups but an example of self-replication. Constance remains constant even in her offspring, despite the fact that she has had intimate contact with England. So far from marrying a 'strange creature' as Donegild supposed, Alla is so similar to Constance that their offspring is simply a continuation of Constance with no changes beyond the shift to the masculine. The connection between the English king and the Roman princess is natural, producing natural offspring, suggesting that England is a natural continuation and inheritor of Rome's religious purity. In this light, Maurice's baptism serves that notion of continuity: "The tyme is come a knave child she beer; / Mauricius at the fontstoon they hym calle" (II [B1], 723). The actual ritual is not mentioned, only the fact that a name is given at the font. However, there is no real need to describe Maurice's baptism. The naturalness of Maurice's Christianity, given his lineage, is beyond question. The casual reference to the baptismal font links the sacrament with children and individual identification. Baptism here is less about initiation of the foreign than about establishing the new generation of Christians who will be continuous with the present generation.

The conclusion of Chaucer's narrative celebrates consistency by ending Constance's journey where it began. Constance and her infant son suffer various adventures after being exiled from England due to Donegild's machinations. At last, they find themselves back in Rome. Eventually, Alla comes to the continent and recognizes Maurice. The family is reunited.

Constance is reunited with her father, and Maurice is made the emperor's heir. Constance and

Alla return to England but only for a year. As soon as Alla dies, Constance returns to Rome

where she eventually dies. During these homecoming moments, Chaucer amplifies Constance's

emotional responses, creating a homecoming that is the true fulfillment and conclusion of the

heroine's journey. Upon seeing her father the first time, she cries "Now, goode fader, mercy I

yow crye! / Sende me namoore unto noon hethenesse" (II [B1], 1111-12). By comparison, in

both Trivet and Gower her initial homecoming is focused on seeing her father, not her pitiable

cry to remain in Christendom. Gower writes: "Mi lorde, mi fader, wel you be! / And of this time

that I se / Youre honour and your goode hele, / Which is the helpe of my querele, / I thonke unto

the goddess myht."[38] In Gower, Constance is pleased to see her father. In Chaucer, Constance's

reaction is extreme and focused on a desire to protect herself from the non-Christian world.

Considering that her husband was found outside the bounds of Christendom, such a reaction

might seem a bit cruel to Alla, but it is understandable from a human standpoint considering the

amount of suffering she has undergone since she first left Rome. Constance's desire to remain in

Rome suggests a desire to exclude contact with the foreign. Even England, so carefully

constructed to be continuous with Roman Christianity, is dismissed in favor of the center of

Constance's culture. More surprisingly, Constance's final return to Rome after Alla's death

results in an equally emotional reaction:

> And dame Custance, finally to seye,
> Toward the toun of Rome goth hir weye.
> Now is she scaped al hire aventure.
> And whan that she hir fader hath yfounde,
> Doun on hir knees falleth she to founde;
> Wepynge for tendernesse in herte blithe,
> She heryeth God an hundred thousand sithe.

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[38] Gower, "Book 2," *Confessio Amantis*, 1513-17.

> In vertu and in hooly almus-dede
> They lyven alle, and nevere asunder wende;
> Til deeth departeth hem, this lyf they lede.
>
> (II [B1], 1148-58)

Save for a final blessing from the narrator, this passage ends the tale, making Constance's final

return and death in Rome the conclusion of the narrative. On the other hand, Trivet offers a

reason why Constance returns to Rome: Constance learns that her father is ill.[39] While Gower,

like Chaucer, emends the narrative to imply that Constance sees Rome as her true home, only

Chaucer presents Constance's intense emotional response to her returning home, particularly to

her father. Chaucer notes that "*Now* is she scaped al hire aventure" to suggest the importance of

the homecoming as the means of completing the narrative. Carolyn Dinshaw describes the

meeting between father and daughter: "their highly charged, emotional reunion at the end of the

tale affects the final closure of this narrative of potentially ceaseless wandering."[40] Constance's

tears only stress the positive nature of returning Christendom's ambassador to Rome to stay. In

this way Chaucer reinforces the notion that consistency and stability are to be praised and further

suggests the heartbreak that goes along with exogamy. Such emphasis is unsurprising. As the

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[39] Trivet, "Of the Noble Lady Constance," 328 and 329.

[40] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 101. Dinshaw further notes that the language describing the relationship between father and daughter, particularly 'nevere asunder wende; til deeth departeth hem," is similar to that of a marriage ceremony suggesting an incestuous and unchanging relationship. Similarly, R. Allen Shoaf notes that the Man of Law's preoccupation with constancy forces him to control and limit the action within the story he tells: "A narrative must be found in which the necessity of movement, dynamism, flow is checked at every point by the prediction of prescription of the same…Such a narrative will be…finally incestuous, as well as (predictably) about incest, for in order to ensure the return of the same, it will be always and only about itself." R. Allen Shoaf, *Chaucer's Body: The Anxiety of Circulation in the "Canterbury Tales,"* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 45. Both Dinshaw and Shoaf see the *Man of Law's Tale* as a flawed narrative that closes off the potential of Christendom to grow. Instead, the outreaching aspect of the community, personified by Constance and her family, turns in upon itself, denying exogamy and the value of alterity. While these critics may over-emphasize incest within Chaucer's text, the tale does suggest that consistency is far more valuable than contact with alterity, recalling the Man of Law's discussion of incest from his prologue.

minimal use of baptism indicates, the text stresses continuity of community rather than inclusion of alterity. By circling back on itself, Christendom, personified by Constance, becomes closed and complete: solid and stable. However, the text's happy ending is troubled by the similarities between the desire to remain at home and desires of the Sultaness and Donegild. These stepmothers wanted to avoid contact with the foreign, which was from their perspective Constance herself. Such perspectives allow the value of continuity and stability to be questioned. The narrative condemns expanding the boundaries of community for fear of violence and pollution but also undercuts that condemnation by making it parallel to the desires of the villainous characters. The tale's conclusion avoids the foreign by returning the circle of the community to its tightest bounds, the immediate family but fails to account for the problematic nature of such a closed community.

The tale's conclusion closes off Christendom, an act that reinforces the notion that baptism could not open up the Christian community to that which is foreign but was, in fact, exclusive to catechumens already resembling Christians. In Trivet, the English are baptized and Constance, by virtue of her linguistic skills, serves as a mediator between English and Roman. As in the *South English Legendary*, the sacrament serves as an important mediator between differences, and as a basis of unity among Welsh, English, and Roman. In Chaucer's version, baptism is stripped of any sort of mediating role. Rather, conversion is successful only when difference is minimal and continuity between cultures is historically easy to see, as in the case of the English who, particularly in Chaucer's narrative, show signs of pre-existing Christian connections. Maurice's baptism, briefly mentioned, puts the sacrament in the role of affirming previously existing connections even as the tale's finale places emotional fulfillment within the pre-existing family unit. Chaucer's emphasis on continuity of the church appears to reflect the

notion that certain individuals are predestined or able to become Christian while others are not, e.g. the English, with a few exceptions, as opposed to the Saracens. Such a reading makes baptism, and by extension the other sacraments, less instrumental in creating a sense of community of believers than other shared performances that define the communal identity. Since universalizing ritual performance cannot be trusted, other similarities replace the ritual as signs of shared identity. In the *Man of Law's Tale*, Constance is able to participate in the English culture because there are enough similarities to suggest continuity between England and Rome before and after conversion.

In contrast with the tale' apparent emphasis on shared behavior as defining Christian community, the epilogue to the *Man of Law's Tale* reveals the dangers inherent in denying sacramental foundations to Christian unity. It is no coincidence that this particular tale's epilogue contains a clear reference to Lollardy. After the host praises the Man of Law's story, he requests a tale from the Parson. The Parson ridicules the host for swearing, to which the host replies: "O Jankin, be ye there?/ I smelle a Lollere in the wynd" (II [B1], 1172-73). He again invites the Parson to tell his tale but apparently the accusation of Lollardy has made some pilgrims uncomfortable. The Shipman interrupts and stifles the Parson's voice: "Here schal he nat preche; / He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche. / We leven alle in the grete God,… / He wolde sowen som difficulte, / Or springen cokkel in our clene corn" (II [B1], 1179-83). Ironically, the Parson is accused of heresy while the Man of Law is praised for his story, despite the fact that the Man of Law's use of baptism is more in keeping with Wycliffite thought while the Parson's concern over the host's swearing is orthodox. The Shipman, meanwhile, is very much concerned about the unity and shared belief of the company: that "We leven alle," is necessary if the "clene corn" is to be maintained. The Shipman desires a harmonious, consistent

community. And he relies on communal homogeneity to maintain that community, much as the tale portrayed continuity between Rome and England to be of more value than sacramental contact with the more foreign Saracens. Thus, the Parson's inability to adhere to the behavior of his fellows counts more than his role as priest. However, the exchange should be understood as ironic, since the community's best hope for salvation lies with the Parson. As shown above, the Parson uses baptism to attempt to recreate a community that is united and more tolerant of error and alterity.

For the medieval audience, the value of consistency and continuity offered in the *Man of Law's Tale* was probably acceptable and laudable. However, the tale's praise of consistency is repeatedly troubled. While an audience can assume the Sultaness does not truly understand the power of the sacrament when she dismisses baptism, the tale appears to agree with her assessment by depicting baptism as ineffective in the conversion of the Saracens and omitting it completely in the conversion of the English. Similarly, while Donegild's hatred of Constance as a foreigner wedded to her son can be dismissed because she is a villain, the tale seems to hold to her point that exogamy is problematic by emphasizing Constance's joy at finally being able to return to Rome and initial family. Baptism's presence and absence within the text highlight these troubling moments. In reducing the sacrament to a performance that may or may not signify conversion and replacing it as a means of uniting cultures with notions of previously existing continuity, the Man of Law stresses the consistency of Christendom and the links between England and Rome. However, the tale when combined with its epilogue lays out the danger of avoiding the foreign and different. Baptism, if taken on faith as a true sign of Christian identity, can create a community that is more open and diverse than the one valorized by the Man of Law.

Christened Communities in the *Second Nun's Tale*

While the *Man of Law's Tale* depicts a Christian community determined by continuity,

the *Second Nun's Tale* presents a view of the early church in which baptism produces a growing,

dynamic Christian community. The *Second Nun's Tale* is a retelling of the life of St. Cecilia,

and probably pre-dates the rest of the *Canterbury Tales*. According to Sherry Reames, the tale is

a fairly direct translation of two sources: the *Legenda aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine and a

Roman curia/Franciscan abridgment.[41] Though the *Second Nun's Tale* is Chaucer's only

experiment in true hagiography, the tale deals with translation, gender relations, and the

formation of societies: all concepts that are quite at home among Chaucerian texts. Moreover,

hagiographic narratives are traditionally orthodox. By adapting such a narrative, Chaucer has the

opportunities to explore the nature of orthodoxy. In this case, the *Second Nun's Tale* includes a

conception of the church that is at once orthodox and invites the church of fourteenth-century

England to reform. Within the text, baptism affects the catechumen, bestowing divine grace and

Christian character in the form of spiritual vision. However, beyond being an effective ritual,

baptism also serves as a means of creating a community of believers in much the same way that

sacraments are used as the foundation of the Christian community in the *Parson's Tale*. The

Second Nun's Tale also contrasts with baptism's appearance in the *Man of Law's Tale*¸ in which

baptism fails to negotiate difference in the attempt to form a larger Christendom. The *Second*

Nun's Tale shows how orthodox belief in the foundational nature of the sacraments, particularly

baptism, can produce true Christian communities that are continuous with the eternal church,

despite the fact that such communities may appear unorthodox by the standards of the fourteenth

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[41] Sherry Reames, "The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale," *Sources and Analogues of the "Canterbury Tales,"* vol. I, ed. Robert M. Correale (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 492-527. See also Sherry Reames, "A Recent Discovery Concerning the Sources of Chaucer's 'Second Nun's Tale,'" *Modern Philology* 87 no. 4 (May, 1990): 337-61.

century.

The church community imagined in the *Second Nun's Tale* originates in a sacrament that

has actual effects, and Chaucer's few changes in translation help emphasize the power of the

sacrament to effect change within the catechumen. While not overly surprising, it is important to

note that such effectiveness is quite different from the *Man of Law's Tale*. Valerian, as the first

catechumen in the narrative, is the first convert given the ability to see what others cannot

through baptism. After Cecilia, a Christian who has promised to remain pure before God, and

Valerian marry, she declares that God's angel protects her virginity. Valerian, a pagan, suspects

that his wife keeps a lover and demands to see the angel: "If I shal trusten thee, / Lat me that

aungel se and hym biholde; / And if that it a verray angel bee, / Thanne wol I doon as thou hast

prayed me" (VIII [G], 163-66). Chaucer's translation is very close to the *Legenda* original: "If

you want me to believe you, show me this angel; and if I determine that he is truly an angel, then

I will do as you say."[42] However, by using both "see" and "behold," Chaucer emphasizes sight

as the important faculty. Cecilia sends her husband to Pope Urban who baptizes Valerian. When

he returns home he is able to see the angel, a power given to him through baptism. Spiritual

sight marks the effects of baptism, demonstrating the power of the sacrament.

The motif of sight appears throughout the narrative, reinforcing the notion that the ritual

of baptism actually changes the catechumen and, through change, creates a distinct community.

After seeing the angel, Valerian asks that his brother also be saved. The angel agrees to the

request and immediately after, Tiburce arrives. Upon entering the room he can smell the

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[42] "Si vis ut credam tibi, ipsum angelum mihi ostende; et si vere probavero, quod angelus sit, faciam, quod hortaris." *Legenda aurea*, trans. Sherry Reames in Sherry Reames, "The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale," *Sources and Analogues of the "Canterbury Tales,"* vol. I, ed. Robert M. Correale (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 506 and 507.

flowered wreaths Valerian and Cecilia have been given by the angel but cannot see them. As

Valerian says, "Two corones han we, / ... / Whiche that thyne eyen han no might to see; / And as

thou smellest hem thurgh my preyere, / So shaltow seen hem,... / If it be thou wolt, withouten

slouthe, / Bileve aright and knowne verray trouthe" (VIII [G], 253, 255-59). Chaucer's 'no might

to see' well translates Jacobus: "We have crowns, which your eyes are powerless to see." [43] Both

versions imply a weakness in Tiburce. The rite of baptism gives Tiburce the might he lacked

because afterwards "every day he saugh, in tyme and space, / The aungel of God; and every

maner boone / That he God axed, it was sped ful soone" (VIII [G], 355-57). He sees the angel

and his prayers are heard and granted by God after his participation in the sacrament.   Similarly,

Maximus, a Roman official who is converted by his captives, is given a vision after his baptism.

When he witnesses Valerian and Tiburce martyred along with other Christians: "This Maximus,

that saugh this thing bityde, / With pitous teeris tolde it anonright, / That he hir soules saugh to

heven glyde / With aungels ful of cleernesse and of light" (VIII [G], 400-4).[44]   Here again

conversion and subsequent baptism result in a vision of spiritual reality. Within the narrative,

baptism changes the catechumens by granting them spiritual sight: an effect that stands in direct

contrast to the infelicitous baptism of the Sultaness in the *Man of Law's Tale*. Their willingness

to accept the sacrament creates a situation in which divine grace can work to create a

community. In the *Man of Law's Tale*, fear of the foreign kept baptism from functioning as a rite

of initiation and lead to the sacrament being de-emphasized. Here, individuals mean their

baptism and miraculous visions result. The ability to see what others cannot separates the

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[43] "Coronas habemus, quas tui oculi videre non praevalet." *Legenda aurea*, trans. Sherry Reames, 508 and 509.

[44] Chaucer at this point in the narrative has switched from translating Jacobus to translating the more abbreviated Franciscan revision and as a result does not include Valerian predicting Maximus' vision.

Christian community from their unbaptized fellows, creating a separate community that Chaucer explores further in his translation.

While the church community created in baptism is separate from the larger Roman community, Chaucer takes pains to depict that community as continuous with the original apostolic church through the figure of St. Paul. When Valerian reaches Pope Urban, the pope praises God and describes Valerian as "a fiers leoun, [that] she [Cecilia] sendeth here, / As meke as evere was any lomb" (VIII [G], 198-199). The transformation from a predatory beast to a lamb also appears in reference to the conversion of St. Paul in the *Legenda aurea* when Jacobus quotes St. Augustine: "The Lamb that was slain by wolves turns a wolf into a lamb."[45] Applying the comparison to Valerian helps links the Roman convert to the church father. Immediately after Urban compares Valerian to a tamed lion, a mysterious man, presumably the apostle Paul himself, miraculously appears and shows Valerian a book. Here Chaucer's translation becomes ambiguous: "Valerian as deed fil doun for drede / Whan he hym saugh, and he up hente hym, tho, / And on his book right thus he gan to rede: / 'O Lord, o faith, o God, withouten mo, / O Christendom, and Fader of alle also, / Aboven alle and over alle everywhere'" (VIII [G], 204-09). The pronouns, 'he,' 'his,' and 'him,' are easy enough to deduce from context until "thus he gan to rede." At that point it is unclear, in Chaucer's translation, who is actually reading the book, Valerian or the old man. Regardless of whether such confusion is intentional, the effect is of continuity between the church of old, represented by St. Paul, and the current church, represented by the catechumen. They are brought together in reading the scripture that further

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[45]Jacobus, "The Conversion of St. Paul," *The Golden Legend*, 119. Similarly, in the *South English Legendary*, God says of Paul "lomb he is bi-come" when the apostle converts, further suggesting the tradition of describing conversion as a metaphoric transformation into a lamb. "The Conversion of St. Paul," *The Early South English Legendary or Lives of Saints*, 50.

emphasizes the unity of the Christian community. The words in the book are a translation of Ephesians 4: 5-6, which is thought to have been written by St. Paul. Jacobus writes: "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in us all."[46] Of particular interest, Chaucer translates 'unum baptisma' as "o cristendom" and expands "in omnibus nobis" to "everywhere." On the one hand, removing the unambiguous reference to baptism might seem to weaken the focus on the sacrament; however, in using a term that can refer either to the community of the faithful or to baptism, Chaucer further conflates the two.[47] Moreover, Chaucer's version does not limit God's presence to a group of individuals, "in us all," but rather sees God's presence as a human universal. Unlike many saints' lives, Chaucer selected a tale that emphasized both the sanctity of the saint and also the development and eternal unity of the church, a unity that becomes the focus during Valerian's baptism and after.

Baptism further unifies the Christian church by re-forming human relationships, creating connections more real and less stratified than secular relationships. When Tiburce denounces idols at Cecilia's teaching, the saint is overjoyed and declares:

> This day I take thee for myn allye,
> ...
> Lo, right so as the love of Crist...
> Made me thy brothers wyf, right in that wise
> Anon for myn allye heer take I thee,
> Syn that thou wolt thyne ydoles despise.
> Go with thy brother now, and the baptize,
> And make thee clene, so that thou mowe biholde
> The angels face of which thy brother tolde.

<div align="right">(VIII [G], 292, 295-301)</div>

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[46] "Unus dominus, una fides, unum baptisma; unus deus et pater omnium, qui super omnes et per omnia et in omnibus nobis." *Legenda aurea,* trans. Sherry Reames, 506 and 507.

[47] *Christendom* can refer to either the Christian faith, or the geo-political group of Christian nations, or a means of declaring or submitting to belief, including baptism. See *MED*, s.v. 'cristendom,' definitions 2 (b) and 3.

Even as Cecilia notes that baptism grants spiritual sight, she also implies that Tiburce's

conversion has made real the relationship they share. Here Chaucer uses *allye*, and while he may

have been looking for a rhyme word, his choice refers not only to kinship but also to kinship

specifically formed through marriage.[48] In using *allye* to translate "cognatum," which refers

more generally to kinship, a specific relationship is created in the English translation.[49] As a

result Cecilia does not only suggest that all baptized Christians are related, but also that existing

secular relationships, including being a sister-in-law, are made more real through

Christianization. As Valerian says to Tiburce earlier, "In dremes...han we be / Unto this tyme,

brother myn, ywis. / But now at erst in trouthe our dwelling is" (VIII [G], 262-64). The notion

of dwelling in truth suggests that conversion and baptism change the catechumen's place in the

world, creating a situation where all things, including relationships, are now truly legitimate.

Baptism and right belief allow individuals to live in real relationships and, by extension, form

true communities.

While relationships are maintained through baptism, the hierarchy associated with the

earthly notion of relationships is broken down through baptism and replaced by a more

egalitarian community. Most obviously, Cecilia's true belief allows her to maintain her own

authority after her marriage. Further, Cecilia's final conflict with the Roman prefect,

Alamachius, centers on Alamachius's authority or his lack thereof. In both cases Cecilia retains

power and control because of her faith. But previous to their debate, the narrative emphasizes

that the Christian community, formed through baptism, does not have the same rigid hierarchical

system that exists in secular relationships. When Tiburce is baptized he is declared to be

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[48] *MED*, s.v. 'allie,' definition 2.

[49] *Legenda aurea,* trans. Sherry Reames, 509.

"Goddes knyght" " (VIII [G], 353). Chaucer translates the Roman curia/Franciscan

abridgment's "militem" as 'knight,' using a word that is easy to rhyme, evokes a more chivalric

image, and reflects the character's nobility.[50] But the nobility inherent in the term 'knight' is

bestowed upon others who are baptized. When the Roman official, Maximus, meets Valerian

and Tiburce, he and his entire household convert. After they profess the desire to be Christian,

Cecilia comes and encourages them:

> Cecilia cam, whan it was woxen nyght,
> With preests that hem cristned alle yfeere;
> And afterward, whan day was woxen light,
> Cecile hem seyde with a ful steadfast cheere,
> 'Now, Christes owene knyghtes leeve and deere,
> ...
> Gooth to the corone of life that may nat faille;
> The rightful Juge, which that ye han served,
> Shal yeve it yow, as ye han it deserved.'
>
> (VIII [G], 379-83, 388-90)

Chaucer again returns to the image of knighthood. But here an entire household has been given

the noble title. The baptism creates a community where all who are prepared to give up their

lives are knights in their service to Christ regardless of earthly origin. Further, Chaucer's choice

to turn to the Roman curia/Franciscan abridgment allows him to create a tale that emphasizes

Cecilia's role within the Christian community. While both the Roman curia/Franciscan

abridgment and the *Legenda aurea* have Cecilia call those who are baptized soldiers of Christ,

the Roman curia/Franciscan abridgment followed by Chaucer does not have Pope Urban

presiding over the baptism of Maximus's household. Without Urban's presence, Cecilia appears

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[50]*In festo Sancte Cecilie virginis et martyris*, trans. Sherry Reames in *Sources and Analogues of the "Canterbury Tales,"* vol. I, ed. Robert M. Correale (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 523.

to be at the head of the priests who come to give baptism.[51] Cecilia's central position is due to her sanctity, not her position within any sort of hierarchy, suggesting that any saintly Christian can assume a position of authority. Further, Cecilia in the abridgment notes that all martyrs will bear crowns, recalling the crown that Cecilia and Valerian received. The fact that these martyrs will also receive a crown implies that the differences between these martyrs and Cecilia are not that great, but rather that all martyrs are equal in their glory. Sanctity and sacrifice, not birth or gender, or even earthly church structures, determine the hierarchy of Christendom. In their devotion and their desire to serve Christ even unto death, these people are of one type, one community.

Baptism as it appears in the *Second Nun's Tale* shows the sacraments of the church to be effective and vital to the foundation of the church community, a depiction that is completely orthodox. Even as the decrees of the Council of Vienne (1312) affirmed that baptism both cleansed original sin and confers God's grace on the catechumen, which, barring sin, was enough for salvation, later Middle English texts affirm that sacraments actually change the catechumen. Middle English sermons, dated from the end of the fourteenth and to the beginning of the fifteenth century, re-affirm the orthodox position of the Council of Vienne. "He [God] ordeynes vij sacraments in holy-churche, þe wiche shall esely brynge vs to þe blisse ȝiff we be of good gouernaunce. In oure ȝonge [journey], bapteme, þat clenseþ men of þe first synne, þat we hade of oure elders, and ȝeves gret grace to vs þat ben purgett."[52] As in the *Parson's Tale*, the sacraments here are part of the well-governed life. Though baptism is not a guarantee of salvation, it does bestow grace. Another sermon, when listing those things a Christian must

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[51] Ibid., 523.

[52] "Sermon 6," *Middle English Sermons Edited from British Museum MS. Royal 18 B. xxiii*, ed. Woodburn O. Ross, EETS OS 209 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 30.

believe in order to be saved, claims "The xii is þe feyȝthe of þe sacramentis of holychurche, for

euery Cristen man muste beleue þat þe sacraments of holy church haue vertewe and powere to

fulfill þoo þinges þat þei ben ordeynt fore."[53] This sermon at once confirms the notion that the

sacraments are, in themselves, effective, and that the Christian must also accept those powers. A

belief in empowered sacraments was necessary for Christian salvation within orthodox thought.

Chaucer, in the *Second Nun's Tale*, depicts baptism as an empowered sacrament that is not only

necessary for salvation but also bestows grace, here depicted through miraculous visions. The

Second Nun's Tale shows the church empowered by a belief and trust in the sacraments, a belief

that produces a more radical vision of the church than such orthodoxy might lead one to assume.

Despite the apparent orthodoxy of baptism within the tale, the consequences of that

baptism in the *Second Nun's Tale* appear to have unorthodox consequences that are reminiscent

of Wycliffite thought. For example, roles in Cecilia's church are not based upon rank but upon

sanctity. The author of the Wycliffite tract, *De Papa*, addresses the nature of the source of

ecclesiastical power: "trowe [have trust in] þou to virtuous dedis of prestis, & algatis [in all

ways] to þer mekenesse, þat þey coueyten noon hye staat þat is not grounded in goddis lawe."[54]

Priests are only as worthy of congregational support as they are holy in their actions. Similarly,

one of the "Sixteen Points on which the Bishops accuse Lollards" states that "euery good man is

a prest and haþ power to preche þe worde of God."[55] Cecilia's preaching and her dismissal of

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[53] "Sermon 3," *Middle English Sermons*, 15.

[54] "De Papa," *The English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted*, ed. F. D. Matthew, EETS OS, no. 74 (London: Trübner 7 Co., 1880), 479. This tract focuses primarily on the problems and opportunities facing to the church as a result of the Schism of the western church that troubled many in the late fourteenth century.

[55] "Sixteen Points on which the Bishops accuse Lollards," *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*," ed. Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 19.

authority not granted by God could suggest a Lollard attitude in a time when the difference

between radical and heretical behavior was not that great. Lynn Staley supports such a reading

of Cecilia by describing Cecilia in terms that suggest her own role as a reformer: "Cecilia's

apostolic poverty, the critique of the present-day church she implicitly offers, her aggressiveness,

and her preaching make her as threatening a figure as Wyclif."[56] Though her abuse is directed

at a secular authority figure rather than any anointed ecclesiastical figure, her defiance and

confidence in her own belief in the face of persecution could easily translate to ridicule of church

authorities. Reames notes that the choice of texts allows Chaucer to create "a satiric commentary

on a contemporary ruler or rulers whom he saw as re-enacting the sins of such ancient Roman

persecutors.... The particular sins in the indictment... are sufficiently broad to apply to a number

of possible targets in the late fourteenth century, including both secular and ecclesiastical

rulers."[57] Furthermore, the curious moment in which Valerian or the man in white reads from

the book could imply that catechumens should be capable of reading the Bible. Biblical

translation and lay education would become cornerstones of Wycliffite doctrine and are

presented within the tale as part of a miraculous baptismal moment.[58] Though quite orthodox in

its description of baptism and the rite's effects, the tale shows those orthodox effects producing

radical behaviors. Such a reversal is hardly surprising, considering Chaucer's own ironic

playfulness. However, that the only true saint's legend in the Canterbury canon should produce

such a radical community suggests that calls to reform are implicit within orthodox

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[56] Lynn Staley, "Chaucer and the Postures of Sanctity," *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 213.

[57] Sherry Reames, "Artistry, Decorum, and Purpose in Three Middle English Retellings of the Cecilia Legend," *The Endless Knot: Essays on Old and Middle English in Honor of Marie Borroff*, ed. M. Teresa Tavormina and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 198.

[58] See particularly "Biblical Translations," *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*," 107-09.

understandings of the church and its ceremonies.

The tale of Cecilia, though orthodox in its treatment of baptism, follows the consequences of that baptism toward rather unusual conclusions. The tale ends with Cecilia's martyrdom and her home being sanctified as a church, "In which, into this day, in noble wyse, / Men doon to Crist and to his seint servyse" (VIII [G], 552-53). Even as the tale had earlier looked back to the early days of the church through the figure of St. Paul, here the text looks to the present day, further uniting Christendom throughout history. In the move to suggest the continuity of the church, baptism functions as a foundational sacrament, even as it also serves to unite the church synchronically in the *Parson's Tale*. Yet the sacrament appears within the tale as the foundation of a particularly unusual community that disrupts earthly or preconceived notions of hierarchy and social roles. In accepting baptism, the catechumens break from normal societal structures only to reform new, more spiritual and more legitimate social and familial bonds. In selecting his sources and in translating those sources as he did, Chaucer creates an odd mix of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, all the while using the foundation of legitimate baptism. In such a construction, Christian identity implies tolerant behavior toward alterity. Much in the same way that the *Parson's Tale* calls for Christian unity by means of the sacraments, the *Second Nun's Tale* suggests that divergent images of the Christian community do not disrupt the continuity of Christendom but are in fact, foundational to Christendom. Baptism, as a Chaucerian trope, draws attention to continuity of the communal Christian identity, even as it challenges exclusionary definitions of that community.

Chaucer's Baptism vs. the Rhetoric of Exclusion

To attempt to prove that Chaucer was responding to a particular cultural event is folly, yet in comparing the textual reactions to the Great Schism and the Wycliffite movement to

Chaucer's depiction of baptism, one can see how Chaucer's use of the sacrament can be imagined as a call to reform. Where several concurrent authors and preachers sought to exclude particular groups from the notion of the universal church, Chaucer imagined a more inclusive institution that transcended even the vital debates over the head of the church or the heretical teachings of the Wycliffites. To reform the church was to value its role as a sacramental institution that bound the diverse national and international society of the fourteenth century together.

The Great Schism was, as its name suggests, a source of division that broke down the unity of the church, and some fourteenth-century writers embraced essentializing rhetoric to ensure that their audiences accepted only one notion of the church body as orthodox. The language used by Thomas Walsingham in *The St. Albans Chronicle* demonstrates the power of the Schism to support and strengthen political antagonism and thus fragment the church, which should transcend political difference. Walsingham describes the election of Pope Clement IX as completely illegal and appears to support Pope Urban's war against him. When describing how the king of France supported Clement, Walsingham writes:

> O how detestable, impious, and damnable is, not the ignorance, but the malice of this king! For he is well aware how unjust, how unconstitutional, how contemptible is the claim of this false pope, and yet the king endeavors to prostrate himself before this pretender, and to venerate and exalt him, not only at the peril of his own soul but to the damnation and destruction of many others, as well as the confusion of the church.... All faithful Christians therefore consider support for him anathema.[59]

The strong language serves to condemn the French king and all who support him. Such language

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[59]"O detestanda, profana, dampnanda, non ignorancia, set malicia huius regis, qui non ignorant quam iniustus, quam inualidus, quam uilis sit titulus huius pseudopape, et tamen non slum in pernicdiem anime sue set multorum damnacionem et interitum, et tocius ecclesie submersionem, nititur tale isolum adorare, colere, et exaltare...et ideo dampnibilis eius fauor omnibus fidelibus esse uidetur." Walsingham, *The St Albans Chronicle*, vol. I, 276 and 277.

justifies taking arms against the French and allows a war between Christian states to be elevated to a crusade. Unsurprisingly then, the Bishop of Norwich called upon Pope Urban VI to declare a crusade against Pope Clement IX in 1382. Walsingham summarizes the language used to inspire these crusaders. The Bishop of Norwich along with a prominent knight, Sir Hugh Calveley, "asked, urged and entreated them [the troops] to abandon all fear and to attack the enemies of the Cross, in the knowledge that they would earn no less a reward from killing these dogs than they would from destroying as many Jews or Saracens."[60] The language of crusade de-humanizes and makes heathen those Christians adhering to Pope Clement. The call to crusade was apparently successful according to Walsingham, even if the military outcome was not. Religious language was used to separate the international community of Christians, justifying political divisions.

Even as Walsingham's rhetoric suggests that the Schism reinforced and added a religious dimension to pre-existing political differences, so a sermon delivered by a Carmelite Friar suggests how the exclusive language affected religious thought. Delivered in 1386, the sermon seeks to defend the call to crusade made that year. Pope Urban offered the same set of indulgences to John of Gaunt and all who supported him in his bid to take the Spanish throne as he had given to the bishop of Norwich in 1382. The sermon seeks to convince its audience of the need to bear arms against fellow Christians and to put away reluctance:

> And this holy church, outside of whose unity no one is saved, is the Roman church, which is mother of all churches.... Those, on the other hand, who do not believe in the unity of this church, who believe it to be broken, and do not work for its unity, those divide themselves from it.... And because they dissent from obedience to the true pope and from the unity of the true church, therefore it is permitted to persecute them corporally even unto death, unless they wish

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[60] "...rogant, hortantur, adiurant, ut omni metu deposito hostes crucis inuadant, non minus recepturi meritum de dictorum canum mortibus, quam si tot de gente Iudaica uel Saracenica peremissent." Walsingham, *The St Albans Chronicle*, vol. I, 672-75.

differently and repent.[61]

The sermon uses the rhetoric of church unity to suggest a perfect unanimity of thought,
separating the true church and its adherents from all others and using that separation to justify
violent retribution. The sermon goes on to criticize those who suggest that forgiveness is the
proper course of action for a divided Christendom:

> Besides, they say that those who move men to war against the Spanish are without
> charity and have forgotten that part of the speech of God, 'Forgive us our debts,
> etc.' This I say to those same people: they do not understand what they declare,
> because Christ in that prayer held us to forgive our debts, not theirs or those of
> other people. Now this injury that the pope and the duke avenge in Spain is not so
> much an injury against their own person as it is a communal injury against Christ
> and his entire church, whose unity they have scattered and divided. Therefore, it
> ought to be greatly avenged rather than be endured by them.[62]

In attempting to re-interpret the biblical passage to justify the crusade against Spain, the author
of the sermon reveals a dedication to maintaining division despite the apparent meaning of the
basic tenets of Christian faith. The author's audacity is quite impressive. While the success of
such a rationale can be debated, the fact that such a sermon could be preached and was in
keeping with papal policy reveals the various divisions that existed in the church during
Chaucer's time. Not only did the Schism separate the church into rival political factions, but
those who sought reconciliation and reunification could easily find themselves in conflict with

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[61] "Et haec sancta ecclesia, extra cujus unitatem nemo salvatur, est Romana ecclesia, quae est mater omnium ecclesiarum.... Illi autem nec credunt in unitatem hujus ecclesiae, quia credunt eam schismaticam, nec faciunt ad unitatem ipsius, quia dividunt se ab illa.... Et quia sic discesserunt ab obedientia veri papae et ab unitate ecclesiae, ideo licitum est persequi eos corporaliter usque ad mortem, nisi velint aliter reverti." "Fragment of a Sermon preached by a Carmelite Friar, A.D. 1386," *Fasciculi Zizaniorum* ed. W. W. Shirley (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858), 508-09.

[62] Dicunt etiam quod illi qui movent homines bellare contra Hispanos sunt extra caritatem, et obliti sunt illam partem orationis dominicae, *Dimitte nobis debita nostra*, etc. Hic dico quod ipsimet non intelligunt quod allegant, quia Christus in illa petitione monet nos dimittere debita nostra, non sua vel aliena. Jam haec injuria quam papa et dux vidicant in Hispanos non tam est injuria propria personarum suarum quam communis injuria Christi et totius ecclesiae cujus unitatem ipsi dispergunt et dividunt. Ideo debet magis vindicari quam tolerari ab eis" Ibid., 509-10.

the pre-existing church hierarchy.

Chaucer's portrayals of baptism, whether intentionally or not, offer an alternative to the rhetoric of exclusion that dominated orthodox reports of the Schism in the 1380s in England. Both the *Parson's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale* depict baptism as a means of bringing the church together, suggesting that underlying similarities are essential for the continuation of the church as a unified community. In particular, the *Second Nun's Tale*, featuring an earlier Pope Urban, shows a unified church body that is in contest with secular authority, a direct contrast to the entangled nature of the papacy and national politics that marked the Schism.[63] Baptism within the tale unites diverse people: popes, nobility, servants, men and women into a single community. Though Urban is the pope within the tale, baptism is consistently urged by Cecilia, suggesting that conversion and the church unified was the product of devoted Christians, not church leaders. The *Parson's Tale*, in taking a close look at penance, could be read as a response to the Carmelite Sermon. Where forgiveness in the sermon is denied those who apparently attack the unity of the church, the Parson takes forgiveness of sins, which begins with baptism, as the very foundation for Church unity. For Chaucer's Parson, the Carmelite Sermon contains questionable theology for it suggests that sin causes separation from the church that must be met with violence where the *Parson's Tale* recognizes sinfulness as a fact of life and offers penance as a means of overcoming it. However, the *Man of Law's Tale* appears to fit in well with Walsingham's rhetoric, which excludes those following Pope Clement IX. The *Man of Law's*

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[63] Lynn Staley Johnson also links the depiction of the church in the *Second Nun's Tale* with the events of the Great Schism. She analyzes the tale as a work of dissent against the apparent corruption of the church, making an argument quite similar to my own but focused more on Chaucer's general call to reform, rather than a specific idea of the church as a sacramentally structured means of unifying all Christians. Johnson, "Strategies of Dissent," 314-33. Similarly, John C. Hirsh argues that "Chaucer's concern with the Schism itself influenced both his choice of subject matter and his handling of his material." John C. Hirsh, "The Politics of Spirituality: The Second Nun and the Manciple," *The Chaucer Review* 12 no. 2 (Fall, 1977): 129.

Tale stresses continuity between Rome and England, making them culturally and religiously similar, in contrast to the alien Saracens who are the object of crusade, even as the French and Spanish were. However, as noted above, the tale is problematic, particularly as the language of exclusion that would deny Christian unity is consistently in the mouths of the villainous mothers-in-law. The problematic nature of the tale troubles the firm conviction that England and Rome are inherently linked to the exclusion of alterity. In depicting baptism as a means of constructing a unified church, Chaucer's work could serve to criticize those who suggested that it was holy to bear arms against other Christians for the sake of one's side in the Schism.

The Schism was an international division within the church, yet Chaucer was also faced with the Wycliffite movement, which resulted in a similar rhetoric of exclusion within the domestic English church. Wycliffite thought was often identified as separate from the orthodox church, a standard tactic to control and condemn heretical ideas. For example, Walsingham quotes a papal bull from 1378, in which Pope Gregory IX (who reigned before the Schism) writes that Wyclif's works

> are an attempt to undermine and weaken the status of the whole Church.... John Wyclif is not afraid to declare, teach, and publically proclaim these doctrines in the said kingdom, causing many of Christ's faithful disciples, who are under his bad influence, to stray from the catholic faith, without which there is no salvation.[64]

The perfectly orthodox notion that there is no salvation outside the church is used to condemn Wyclif's ideas because they challenged the authority of the church's structure, effectively calling into the question the notion that the church on earth was continuous with the church in heaven. After 1401, of course, the full weight of the Parliament was also brought to bear against the

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[64] "que statum tocius ecclesie subuertere et eneruare conantur.... non ueretur in prefato regno asserere, dogmatizare, et publice predicare, nonnullos Christi fideles eis maligne inficiens, ac a fide catholica, sine qua non est salus, faciens deuiare." Walsingham, *The St Albans Chronicle*, vol. I, 186 and 187.

Wycliffites in the act commonly referred to as *De heretico comburendo*. The language of the

parliamentary decrees perpetuates the notion that Wycliffites were separate from the church:

> various perfidious and perverse people of a certain new sect, believing damnable
> things of the said faith, the sacraments of the church, and its authority, rashly
> usurping the office of preacher, contrary to divine and ecclesiastical law,
> perversely and maliciously preach and teach these days, publicly and secretly,
> under simulation of the color of sanctity, various new doctrines and wicked,
> heretical and erroneous opinions, contrary to this same faith and the holy decrees
> of the sacrosanct church.[65]

The notion that the Wycliffites were a new sect definitively separated them from the church.

Though appearing after Chaucer's death, *De heretico comburendo* summarizes the sectarian

language used by Wyclif, Wycliffites, and their opponents in regard to the heretical movement.[66]

Those following Wyclif's doctrine were heretical, and as such their ideas and calls for reform

could be completely separated from the church, effectively silencing alternative theologies.

But even as the orthodox church condemned and dismissed the Wycliffites, later Lollard

thought was also guilty of dividing the church by suggesting that only those who adhered to

Lollard ideology were to be considered part of the true church. Wyclif's followers could

dispense with baptism because only God decides who is saved and who is damned. A Lollard

sermon offers this definition of the church: "Cristus chyrche is men þat schal aftur be sauyd in

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[65] "diversi perfidi et perversi cujusdam nove secte, de dicta fide, sacramentis ecclesie, et auctoritate ejusdem dampnabiliter sencientes, et contra legem divinam et ecclesiasticam predicacionis officium temere usurpantes, diversas novas doctrinas et opiniones iniquas, hereticas, et erroneas, eidem fidei ac sanctis determinationibus ecclesie sacrosancte contrarias, perverse et maliciose, infra dictum regnum in diversis locis, sub simulate sanctitatis colore, predicant et docent, hiis diebus, publice et occulte." "Henry IV: Parliament of January 1401," *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England, 1275-1504*, ed. and trans. Chris Given-Wilson et al. (Leicester: Scholarly Digital Editions and The National Archives, 2005), Membrane 10, 48.

[66] Hudson notes the ubiquity of the term 'sect' in writing having to do with the Wycliffite movement. She notes that such terminology may or may not refer to an actual historical situation in which the Wycliffites could be understood as a separate church. However, actual historical situations are not as immediately important as the perception that surrounded the Wycliffite movement in the late fourteenth century. It seems clear that the language associated with Lollardy was that of sectarianism. Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, 170.

heune."[67] The church being only those who are saved appears also in *The Lanterne of Liʒt*, a Wycliffite text which contrasts the true church of those saved from the church as a "coming togidder of good and yuel in a place þat is halowid, fer from worldli occupacioun, for þere sacramentis schullen be tretid and Goddis Lawe boþe radde and prechid."[68] Describing the church as all those who will be saved is not terribly heretical, but separating the true church from the church on earth divides the Christian community according to specific beliefs rather than participation in baptism. Further, both texts imply that only those who practice a reformed Christianity belong in the true Church. Hudson notes the language of exclusivity as a marker cited by Thomas Netter, an impassioned anti-Lollard writer of the 1420s: "Wyclif, he thought, had broken the unity of the church by encouraging men to separate themselves from other Christians, and to withdraw from participation with them in the sacraments of the church."[69] Though Netter is writing well after Chaucer, Hudson notes that such an attitude is found from the 1380s onwards and appears in the works of both Wycliffites and anti-Lollards. The Lollard use of essentializing language could and did segregate society into those saved and those damned. Though the church on earth may include sinners, the true church is determined by God and is separate from the rest of the world.

Chaucer's use of baptism stands as a sign of unity against the rhetoric of both Wycliffite and orthodox writers that exclude unorthodox believers from the church. The figure of the Parson serves to intimate the need to understand and possibly accept Wycliffite criticism. The Parson recalls Wycliffite values in language and description; yet nothing he says or does is ever

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[67] "Sermon 79," *English Wycliffite Sermons*, vol. II, ed. Pamela Gradon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 139.

[68] "The Nature of the church," *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, 116.

[69] Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, 169.

unorthodox. As Karen Winstead notes, "many critics find his tale strangely at odds with the Lollard resonances that mark his portrait in the General Prologue, and for most, his recitation of a tract on penance establishes his orthodoxy beyond a doubt."[70] The Parson's portrait recalls Wycliffite ideals of a proper preacher and his actions apparently suggest Wycliffite behavior to the Host in the epilogue to the *Man of Law's Tale*. Moreover, despite the orthodox topic of the tale, Winstead goes on to note the several instances in which the *Parson's Tale* appears to lean toward Wycliffite thought, particularly that it reduces the role of the priest and oral confession within the sacrament of penance. Similarly, Francis McCormack takes pains to note the Wycliffite language used in the Parson's tale. McCormack argues that such language reinforces the notion that Chaucer is at least sympathetic to Lollard ideas and calls for reform.[71] Yet the use of baptism within the tale does not contain the same essentializing language as Lollard texts. The *Parson's Tale* emphasizes that baptism serves as a foundation for all Christians even as his appearance and message are acceptable to both Wycliffite and orthodox thinkers. In his person as an idealized preacher, the Parson calls the church to reform, and in his tale he offers a means of negotiating with error through repentance and forgiveness. In telling an orthodox tale about orthodox baptism, the tale comes into conflict with the essentializing language of both orthodox and Wycliffite texts. The Parson becomes an advocate for the unity of Christendom by challenging any position that would divide the church.

Even as baptism within the *Parson's Tale* suggests a need for Church unity despite an

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[70] Karen A. Winstead, "Chaucer's *Parson's Tale* and the Contours of Orthodoxy," *The Chaucer Review* 43 no. 3 (2009): 239.

[71] McCormack, *Culture of Dissent*, 103-04. Earlier in his argument, McCormack explains that The Parson's use of essentializing language stresses personal penance as the proper way to conduct life, not the difference between salvation and damnation. The difference in language use reinforces the notion that the Parson chooses to understand the church in a much broader sense than the Lollards. Ibid., 60.

apparent split between orthodoxy and Wycliffism, both the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale* further support the belief that Christendom as a whole could contain divergent ideas. St. Cecilia, as Chaucer depicts her, is very much like Chaucer's Parson. Both are orthodox but recall the fact that orthodoxy includes voices of reform. The mix of solid orthodoxy with challenges to the current rhetoric of exclusivity makes it clear that the church, as an ideal institution, depends upon multiple voices. Against the reforming presence of Cecilia and the Parson is the *Man of Law's Tale* with its ineffectual baptism. In the *Man of Law's Tale*, Rome and England stand isolated from the outside world. Such continuity is not condemned within the text and is, in fact, to be praised. However, Chaucer appears to suggest in his epilogue to the tale that such isolation may be dangerous. There, the community of the baptized is quick to bring the charge of heresy against the holiest member of the pilgrimage because the Parson seeks to reform the company's behavior. The charge of Lollardy silences the voice of reform and divides the company. Though it may seem a fairly modern idea, Chaucer presents baptism as a sign of the unity of the church despite alterity among its members because all have participated in the sacrament. As such a sign, baptism also serves as a call for a certain level of tolerance lest division harm the church.

Conclusion

Baptism, as used by Chaucer, stresses the diachronic unity of the church body, a means of identification that links all who have participated in the sacrament. Yet using a sacrament to relate such an orthodox sentiment as Church unity in the late fourteenth century was to advocate reform. Through an analysis of Chaucer's baptism, that call to reform is revealed as a call for tolerance. Such a conclusion reinforces Brenda Schildgen's analysis of non-Christians in the *Canterbury Tales*. She argues that "The tales' inclusions portray Tartars, pagans, friars,

Epicureans, and Stoics, all without teleological morality and eschatology that traditional

medieval Latin Christendom upheld."[72] Similarly, Paul Strohm argues that Chaucer imagines

society as a horizontally understood group that does not rely on hierarchical determinations to

create stability. Rather, "Chaucer's commonwealth is implicitly utopian in its accommodation of

varied socially and vocationally defined voices and points of view, its opening of existing

hierarchies to infiltration by new classes of people and categories of discourse, its treatment of

heterogeneity as a normal condition of civic life."[73] Baptism serves as another reminder that

Chaucer's work depicts alternative means of understanding society and the individual's place

within it. Baptism reinforces the belief that each Church member was part of a historical church

as in the *Second Nun's Tale*, a church that spanned nations as in the *Man of Law's Tale*, but also

a church that acknowledged that no one could claim perfection or the moral ability to judge

others. In the orthodoxy of the Parson, Chaucer advocates an understanding of Church

participation that is grounded in an individual understanding of sinfulness. But in the

understanding that all men sin and are in need of the sacraments lies an opportunity to accept all

baptized individuals as Christian, no matter how sinful or much in error. Despite the apparent

fragmentation of the church both outside England and within its own borders, baptism could

serve as a call for rebirth and renewal, bringing all the church into a unity that seemed lost by the

end of the fourteenth century.

As in the *South English Legendary*, baptism in the *Canterbury Tales* carries with it the promise

of acceptance into the body of Christ, a perfectly orthodox idea that offers hope to the

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[72] Brenda Schildgen, *Pagans, Tartars, Moslems, and Jews in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales"* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 125.

[73] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 182.

catechumen and offers salvation to all. Like the older romances of the Auchinleck manuscript,

Chaucer depicts baptism as effective, imposing a Christian character upon the catechumen, in

both the *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Parson's Tale*. In depicting baptism as both effective and

inclusive, Chaucer invites his audiences to consider their position within the church body that

transcended history and the church as it existed in the particular historic moment of the late

fourteenth century. Oddly enough, for a poet so concerned with social position and order,

Chaucer's baptism touches primarily on ecclesiastical matters. However, concurrent vernacular

literary works, both hagiographic texts and romances, did depict baptism in such a way that the

sacrament touched upon the drastic social as well as religious changes that were occurring while

Chaucer was writing.

Chapter Four

Baptized into Brotherhood: Baptism and Romance at the End of the Fourteenth Century

By way of a brief introduction, I again turn to William Langland's dream vision, *Piers Plowman*. Christ in Passus XVIII explains his motivation for enduring the cross and grave:

> Ac to be merciable to man thane, my kynde [nature] it asketh,
> For we beth bretheren of blood, but noght in baptisme alle.
> Ac alle that beth myne hole bretheren, in blood and in baptisme,
> Shul noght be dampned to the deeth that is withouten ende.[1]

Christ declares that his own physical nature makes him a member of the brotherhood of humanity, and he is further joined to those men and women who are baptized. Langland claims that the double bond of nature and baptism links all Christians to Christ. Based on these links, Langland posits that a familial relationship exists which places Christ among his followers.[2] Though Christ is in a position of authority – he determines who shall receive mercy or condemnation – the overall image is remarkably horizontal. Salvation is dependent not on Christ's lordship but on recognition of the similar nature between Christ the man and all human beings. Langland's concept of baptism creates an egalitarian fellowship among the baptized, as all are brothers with Christ, and all share in Christ's mercy together.

In the next passus, Langland further explores the effects of baptism, creating a social image that further argues for an egalitarian notion of Christian society. Langland compares the

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[1] Langland, *Piers Plowman*, 322 (XVIII. 376-79).

[2] Langland's language is interestingly reminiscent of Von David Burr's analysis of Pierre Olivi's understanding of baptism. Burr analyzes Olivi's explanation of the 'character' granted the catechumen upon being baptized: "Rather than picturing the character as a quality placed in man, Olivi sees it as a continuing relationship between God and man. It is, to be sure, a legal relationship.... It is also the beginning of a new sort of personal relationship between God and man in which God commits himself to continuing assistance." David Burr, "Olivi and Baptismal Grace," 10-11. Langland's notion of brotherhood here suggests a similar personal relationship between the baptized and Christ.

state of the unbelieving Jews and the now believing Gentiles to the state of serfs and freedmen:

> The jewes, that were gentil men, Jesu thei despised-
> Bothe his lore and his lawe, now are thei lowe cherles.
> ...
> And tho that bicome Cristene bi counseil of the Baptiste
> Aren frankeleyns, free men through fullynge [baptism] that thei toke,
> And gentil men with Jesu – for Jesus was yfulled [baptized]
> And upon Calvarie on cros ycouned kyng of Jewes.[3]

Here, denying Christ makes the Jews churls, while accepting baptism makes individuals franklins, free citizens. Further, the brotherhood mentioned in the earlier passus becomes a social order as the baptized become 'gentlemen' with Jesus, capable of sharing in the glory of the crucifixion and coronation. Taken metaphorically, the notion that baptism makes catechumens 'free men' is not that surprising; however, Langland was writing in the last quarter of the fourteenth century when issues of estate and social order were hotly contested.[4] Baptism comes to be associated with a change of social rank. That baptism made all people 'gentil men with Jesu' fulfills the suggestion of the previous passus: all people are united in baptism into a single elevated social order. Langland uses a metaphor that upsets the assumed social order and draws attention to baptism as a model through which individuals could challenge and explore modes of social as well as religious identification.

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[3] Langland, *Piers Plowman¸* 327 (P XIX. 34-35, 38-41).

[4] The earliest definitive version, the A text, is dated to 1367-70; the B text, the source for the quotations above, to 1377-79; and the C text, which includes several revisions that may imply Langland sought to distance his work from the rebels of 1381 and from the rising Wycliffite heresy, to 1385-86. See A. V. C. Schmidt, introduction to *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, xix-xxvi. Langland's work apparently helped inspire the rebels of 1381 who advocated a more egalitarian society (to be discussed next chapter). For the relationship between *Piers Plowman* and the rebellion see Helen Jewell, "*Piers Plowman* – A Poem of Crisis: an Analysis of Political Instability in Langland's England," *Politics and Crisis in Fourteenth-Century England*, ed. John Taylor and Wendy Childs (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1990), 59-80; Pamela Gradon, *Langland and the Ideology of Dissent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); and Anne Hudson, "*Piers Plowman* and the Peasants' Revolt: A Problem Revisited," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 8 (1994): 85-106.

While Chaucer uses baptism to explore the nature of the diachronic church and to suggest that unorthodox ideas should be tolerated lest the Church break apart, other vernacular poets and translators working concurrently used baptism as a means to explore how religious and secular identifications were related. Baptism could suggest diverse social identities, as Langland does in *Piers Plowman*, where baptism becomes a means by which men who might be churls can understand themselves as free, beholden to no other man except Christ. Such an idea stands in stark contrast to the baptisms analyzed in the Auchinleck Manuscript. In those earlier narratives, baptism appeared as a means of maintaining the difference between Christians and heathen foreigners. The resulting image of baptism was exclusive. The heathen could not be invited to participate in the sacrament without first being subjugated to Christendom or without first being transformed so as to conform to a chivalric Christian ideal of identity, either as servant, wife, or knightly comrade. Baptism in the Auchinleck was a means of justifying and perpetuating the authority of Christendom over those who were once non-believers: a subjugating baptism. Because baptism was used to keep hierarchical authority in the hands of those born to the Christian, chivalric elite, the sacrament helped affirm traditional ideas of secular power. Though there is never quite the same metaphoric disturbance of secular order that is found in Langland, the romances of *Sir Ferumbras, The Sowdone of Babylon*, and *Sir Gowther*, all dating from the late fourteenth century, offer baptisms that trouble the older notions of secular authority found in the baptismal romances of the Auchinleck manuscript.

While the heroes and villains who undertake or refuse baptism in the late fourteenth-century romances appear very similar to those in the Auchinleck manuscript, the actual depiction of the sacrament in the later texts challenges the way in which baptism helped construct chivalric authority as found in the Auchinleck romances. Two romances, *Sir Ferumbras* and *The*

Sowdone of Babylone, both adaptations of the same *chanson de geste*, *Fierabras*, depict a baptism more inclusive than those found in the Auchinleck manuscript. The baptisms allow the characters to develop new social and religious identities without sacrificing signs of alterity despite pre-existing relationships of blood or culture. However, these inclusive baptisms still appear as part of the process by which the non‑believer is subjugated to Christian chivalric authority, a process similar to that seen in the Auchinleck romances. The combination of inclusiveness and subjugation is not a comfortable one, and the narratives reveal the problematic nature of baptismal identities produced through coercion. Another late fourteenth century Middle English romance, *Sir Gowther*, features a baptized warrior who, like Merlin, is the son of a demon father. Yet Gowther is also clearly a part of Christendom, a child of European nobility. Gowther is given his identity by his social position and demonic heritage. However, his baptism gives him the freedom of will necessary to construct a heroic identity independent of other inheritances. Gowther's freedom breaks down the link between baptism and subjugation that is only troubled in the Middle English *Fierabras* romances. The Auchinleck romances relied on violence to insure that baptism was only granted to those acceptable to European Christendom. In those narratives, baptism was a certain and permanent creator of identity, firmly controlling the boundaries of Christian society. In contrast, the Middle English *Fierabras* texts and *Sir Gowther* offer baptisms that allow individuals to question and even resist coercive formations of social identity.

Baptized Knights: Desired or Defeated?

Inclusion and Subjugation in the Middle English *Fierabras* Romances

At first glance, the *Fierabras* legend appears to celebrate the crusading mentality that relates subjugation with baptism. However, the Middle English renditions of the material appear

to independently question this mentality.   The process by which the original Old French
Fierabras (ca 1190-1202), a continental *chanson de geste*, came to be translated into three
distinct Middle English versions is quite complicated, with various independent texts in French
and Anglo-Norman intervening.   The first Middle English version, *Sir Ferumbras*, found in the
Bodleian MS Ashmole 33, can be dated to ca. 1380. *Firumbras*, found in the Fillingham
manuscript (British Library MS Add. 37492), is dated to 1375-1400. Finally, *The Sowdone of
Babylone*, in Princeton University Library Ms Garrett 140, is dated to 1400.[5] Of these three
versions, the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* and *The Sowdone of Babylone* (*Sowdone*) are of greater
interest and offer the most engaging depictions of baptism.[6] In *Sir Ferumbras* and *Sowdone*,
baptism is central to the depiction of the identities of the Saracen Sultan – Balan in the Ashmole
and Laban in *Sowdone* – along with his son and daughter. Baptism also becomes important
when two infant giants are orphaned and adopted by Charlemagne over the course of the
emperor's campaign in Spain. Both the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* and *Sowdone* reveal a tension
between depicting baptism as inclusive, including the foreign non-believer as an independent
subject in Christendom, and depicting baptism as a means to subjugate and control alterity, a
process that ultimately renders the catechumen an object. In showing baptism's function in both
these capacities simultaneously, the texts raise questions about the proper structuring of
boundaries between cultures, religions, and social orders. Though these texts follow the same

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[5] Information on the original Old French *Chanson de gest* and on the Middle English manuscripts is derived from
Marianne J. Ailes, "A Comparative Study of the Old French and Middle English Verse Texts of the *Fierabras*
Legend" (PhD diss., University of Reading, 1989). See also H. M. Smyser, "Charlemagne Legends," *A Manual of
the Writings in Middle English, 1050- 1500*, vol. 1, *Romances*, 82-87.

[6] The Fillingham version of the *Fierabras* legend is incomplete due to several missing leaves. Ferumbras' baptism
is absent. Further, the other baptisms in the text are often so condensed as to be less useful for this study than the
other two versions. Though I do not go into depth in analyzing the Fillingham *Firumbras*, I will refer to it at several
points where comparison is useful.

narrative, they actually approach this tension in different ways at different points in the story.

Sowdone challenges the hierarchical structuring of society and its treatment of alterity by

suggesting that baptismal subjugation actually destroys the very identities it seeks to incorporate.

The Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* is less direct in its exploration of the relationship between

subjugation and baptism. Baptism within *Sir Ferumbras* can include alterity while freeing the

baptized from previous relationships; however, in depicting such a liberal baptism, the text also

shows how baptismal subjugation objectifies the catechumen.

The *Fierabras* legend is similar to that of *Otuel* found in the Auchinleck manuscript, but

it is far more complex and depicts several baptisms. The narrative begins with a Saracen prince,

Ferumbras, coming to the court of Charlemagne to challenge the peers. Oliver decides to engage

him in combat and eventually gives Ferumbras a bitter wound. As a result, Ferumbras cries for

mercy and agrees to be baptized. He also warns Oliver that his army is approaching. Oliver tries

to escape but he is taken captive, along with Roland and several other peers. Charlemagne

arrives at the scene, hears what has happened from Ferumbras and agrees to have the Saracen

prince baptized. Unfortunately, neither Ferumbras nor Charlemagne knows where the peers have

been taken. Meanwhile the twelve peers are imprisoned in the sultan's castle. The sultan's

daughter, Floripas, takes pity on them. She kills her nursemaid and the jailor and has the

prisoners transferred to her chambers. She declares that if Sir Guy, one of the peers, marries her,

then she will continue to help them and be baptized. Roland convinces Sir Guy to agree and

together they take the castle and withstand an extended siege. They send one of their company,

Sir Richard, to seek help from Charlemagne. When the emperor hears of the situation he rallies

his men and invades Spain to rescue the peers. After a vicious battle at the bridge of Mantrible,

in which Charlemagne kills a giant and the giant's wife, Charlemagne reaches the castle in which

the peers are besieged. Another battle follows in which the sultan is captured and the Saracens

defeated. The sultan is offered baptism but refuses and is subsequently beheaded. Floripas

accepts baptism and is married to Sir Guy. Spain is divided between Sir Guy and Ferumbras.

The Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* follows only this basic plot, while *Sowdone* adds a prologue telling

the story of how Ferumbras sacked Rome. The complex story traces points of contact, usually

violent, between the European Christian and the Saracen foreigner.

The titular character of the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* undergoes baptism as a result of his

violent defeat at the hands of Oliver, but his subsequent inclusion into Christendom suggests that

violent defeat can produce a felicitous baptismal moment. Indeed, when Oliver first responds to

Ferumbras's challenge, he claims that baptism is his primary goal: "Charlis þe sente be me to say

'Þov torndest [should convert] to crestendome, / & for-soke þy false lay [religion] & to folloȝt

[baptism] sone þov come: / Belyue þou scholdest on god almiȝt þat for ous gan blede, / & ells y

challenge wiþ þe to fiȝt outher y schal haue þy stede [steed], / & fleo þov schalt of þis lond as a

ladde doþ on þy fote."[7] The combat, therefore, is not a duel to the death, but rather part of a

conversion strategy. Oliver eventually gains the upper hand, severely injuring Ferumbras.

Ferumbras's reaction to his defeat is to assume his gods have failed: "Hit is my wille cristned to

bee certis [certainly] þat is my þoȝt. / My godes þat y me affied [trusted] on buþ [are] noȝt to

haue on mynde, / Þay moȝe [may] no more do þan a ston" (*Sir Ferumbras*, 755-57). As in

earlier romances, particularly *Sir Beues*, martial victory serves as a confirmation of divine power.

Defeating Ferumbras is not so much about martial victory over an enemy but a means of

determining true religious belief. Ferumbras responds properly, accurately interpreting the

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[7] *Sir Ferumbras*, ed. Sidney J. Herrtage, EETS ES 34 (London, Trübner & Co., 1879), 14 (*Sir Ferumbras*, 396-401).
All quotations from *Sir Ferumbras* will be from this edition and will be cited with the title and line numbers in
parentheses.

action as a spiritual event.[8] Whereas a miracle from was required to induce a change of heart in

the romance of *Otuel* in the Auchinleck manuscript, Ferumbras accepts his defeat and moves

toward Christendom through a conscious decision. Ferumbras acknowledges his false belief and

declares his own will to take baptism, and in so doing, he retains his knightly position and is

incorporated fully into Christendom. The text creates a situation in which violence is a

legitimate means of conversion, setting the stage for an inclusive baptism that acknowledges the

will and desirability of the foreign.

Ferumbras appears to be a desirable candidate before his baptism and that desirability

translates into a post-baptismal identity that retains a connection to his heathen identity. The

narrator expresses a desire for a Christian Ferumbras when, just before the duel with Oliver,

there is a pause to describe Ferumbras: "huge was he of lengþe, / Fifteuene fet hol & sound &

wonderliche muche [wonderfully great] of strengþe. / Had he ben a cryst [on Christ] be-leued &

y-vollid on þe haly fant [been baptized in the holy font], / A better knyȝt þan he was preued [a

better knight than he was proved to be] þo was þer non lyuand [living]" (*Sir Ferumbras*, 546-49).

The admiration offered to Ferumbras because of his physical prowess includes admiration for his

giant body. Such a monstrous body is viewed as a potential asset to Christendom, not a sign of

destructive or villainous behavior. The characters of Charlemagne and Ogier confirm this point

when the text again focuses on Ferumbras's body after his defeat and before his baptism:

"Charlis himself & sire Oger ounarmede [unarmed] him þo anon, / & wan he was single amoung

hem þer hy auysed [took account of] is schap echon. / Brode scholdres had he with-alle & brusts

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[8] There is also a concern for social position in Oliver's threat. As in Langland, the failure to acknowledge proper religious belief goes along with a fall in social status. In this case, Ferumbras would leave the country on foot, "as a lad," if he were defeated and had refused baptism. Though 'lad' could simply refer to a young boy, it was also associated with servitude or even churlishness. To be referred to as 'lad' had social implications, even as being on foot means a loss of status for a chivalric knight. *MED*, s.v. 'ladde,' definitions 1(a) and (b) and 2(a), (b), and (d).

ful quarree [square], / Wyþ longe sides & middle smalle a wel schapte man was hee" (*Sir Ferumbras*, 1070-73). A giant Christian is not necessarily surprising, considering that Charlemagne was described as twenty feet tall in *Roland and Vernagu*.[9] However, within *Sir Ferumbras*, the two physical descriptions, both associated as they are with the character's conversion, create an oxymoronic hybridity on two counts: Ferumbras is a beautiful giant, a rare combination, and he will become a Christian Saracen, another odd combination.[10] Ferumbras's otherness serves as a source of attraction, not condemnation. The text appears to embrace the hybrid identity that Ferumbras must embody when he is baptized, creating an inclusive baptism.

That Ferumbras retains his pre-baptismal name must be read within the context of his attractive hybridity. When Charlemagne finds Ferumbras after the duel, he brings in a bishop to baptize the Saracen prince: "Þan was cristned sir Firumbras a man of gret deffens [defense], / ys name ther y-chaunged was & was ihote [named] Florens, / ac þoʒ he tornde þar ys name as þe manere [custom] was, / Euere ʒut after a bar þe same & men clipped [called] him Firumbras" (*Sir Ferumbras*, 1086-90). Ferumbras is given a baptismal name, but it does not replace his pre-Christian name. That he does not fully shed his old Saracen identity through baptism suggests

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[9] *Roland And Vernagu* in *The Taill of Rauf Coilyear with the Fragments of Roland and Vernagu and Otuel*, 49 (lns. 431-33).

[10] Marianne Ailes notes of the original Old French *Fierabras* that Ferumbras looks like a European knight and that: "If *Fierabras* is to realize his full chivalric potential and become a true Christian knight then it is important he should also look the part, a man of stature, not a monster." Marianne Ailes, "Chivalry and Conversion: The Chivalrous Saracen in the Old French Epics *Fierabras* and *Otinel*," *Al-Masaq* 9 no. 1 (1996): 10. Though the Middle English Ferumbras is no monster, his distinct body is also different enough to suggest that the Middle English translator sought to depict difference as potentially attractive, suggesting a desire to incorporate the heathen into Christendom without erasing marks of difference. Suzanne Conklin Akbari notes the complexity of Saracen bodily identity. She suggests that the body, rather than existing as either human or not, can be understood as existing along a spectrum of possibilities with true monstrosity existing at one end and the male, European body, understood as normative, at the other. Ferumbras' body, Akbari notes, occupies an odd middle position within the body spectrum, attractive yet different. Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 159-164.

two possible readings. The first is that Ferumbras is never completely a part of the Frankish

court system, that his origin outside Christendom means he can never completely integrate into

the culture.[11] The second reading is that Ferumbras is able to enjoy a Christian identity that does

not force him to completely renounce his past. Given that Ferumbras is embraced by the narrator

earlier for his physical alterity as a gigantic figure, it would seem that Ferumbras's earlier

identity was acceptable except for his religious convictions. Further, when Ferumbras later

attempts to convert his father based upon their familial relationship, it would seem that

Ferumbras is well aware of his pre-existing identity and the relationships that define him.   His

identification with his father never incites condemnation from those born to Christendom.[12]

Ferumbras is included as a member Christendom in a way not seen in many of the Auchinleck

baptisms: he retains his difference even as he becomes a lauded Christian figure.

　　　While Ferumbras's baptism appears positive, the baptism of the baby giants shows how

desiring and baptizing one who is different can be associated with objectifying that one when

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[11]Though writing about *Sowdone*, Bonnie Millar-Heggie and Emily Houlik-Ritchey argue that the retention of the pre-baptismal name suggests an incomplete inclusion into Christendom. Bonnie Millar-Heggie, "The Performance of Masculinity and Femininity: Gender Transgression in *The Sowdone of Babylone*," *Mirator Lokakuu* (Oct., 2004): 1-14, and Emily Houlik-Ritchey, "Troubled Conversions: The Difference Gender Makes in *The Sultan of Babylon*," *Literature Compass* 5 no. 3 (2008): 493-504. While such readings are in keeping with actual historical situations of Jewish converts in medieval England, I argue that the Ashmole text retains the name to suggest a continuity of identity that can be considered positively.

[12] While it is a slight emendation, it might be telling that the Ashmole does not contain a brief conversation between Charlemagne and Ferumbras before the final battle of the narrative found in the Fillingham version. In the conversation, Charlemagne seeks to determine if Ferumbras is willing to see his father killed. Ferumbras replies by asking that Charlemagne seek Balan's baptism rather than his death. *Firumbras* in *Firumbras and Otuel and Roland*, ed. Mary Isabelle O'Sullivan, EETS OS 198 (London, Oxford University Press, 1935), 47 (lns. 1451-64). The inclusion of the aside in the Fillingham draws attention and suspicion to the dual role the converted must play. The absence of such a question in the Ashmole suggests that Christendom within that text is more willing to accept the foreigner's baptism without question.

violence is involved. [13] In an effort to rescue Roland, Oliver, and several other knights who are

besieged in a castle in the Saracens' land, Charlemagne conquers a town that was defended by a

host of Saracens, including a giant and his wife. After the city is taken Charlemagne distributes

the plentiful riches found there. Also found there are the giants' two children. They are brought

before Charlemagne who desires to incorporate them into Christendom:

> Wan þay come to Charlies syȝt, A blessed hym-selue anon ryȝt,
> > As he to batial scholde;
> & sayde þanne on ys sawe, He nolde noȝt þay were a-slawe,
> > For a somers charge [the burden of a packhorse] of golde:
> Þe kyng het anon riȝt þan, To an archebisschop þat hiȝt Herman,
> > y-folled [be baptized] þat þay were.
> Þe Archebysschop fullede [baptized] boþe anon, & Roland þanne he het þat on,
> > & þat other Olyuere.
> > > > > > > > (*Sir Ferumbras*, 4859-66)

The giant infants are baptized and given the names of Charlemagne's favorite knights. That the

giants are so easily baptized suggests an inclusive baptism, through which a somatically different

body may be invited to share in the identity of the great figures of Christendom. Further, the

Ashmole does not conclude the episode with the information that the infants cannot survive

without their mother, a fate recorded in the French originals and in *Sowdone*. The survival of the

giants indicates a greater sympathy with the notion that baptism can truly incorporate the foreign

into Christendom. Considering that the two giants who come close to conversion in the

Auchinleck romances, Ascopart in *Sir Beues* and Vernagu in *Roland and Vernagu*, do not

actually accept baptism, Ferumbras's conversion and the baptism of the infant giants reveal a

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[13] The shift in attitudes towards baptism may be the result of a shift in the manner in which the romance was produced. At line 3411 the meter drastically changes and becomes more complex. Ailes notes that the change in style could be a change of author, of source material or could simply a choice of the translator. Ailes, "Chivalry and Conversion," 353-57. Regardless of the source of the shift, the change in meter mirrors a change in attitude toward baptism and how it can produce identity. While having two different authors may explain the tensions within the text, it does not provide an analysis of the apparent results of yoking the two different parts together. I seek to explore the effect of the text as it was known by its original audience: a complete, if uneven, narrative.

very different approach to the Saracen in this romance. However, the giant infants are also spoils of victory. They are not individual subjects who are to be incorporated in the same manner as Ferumbras. The text emphasizes the infant giants' position as objects when Charlemagne suggests he would rather they live than receive a substantial amount of gold. However natural the expression Charlemagne uses, the earlier distribution of wealth won in battle is recalled in comparing infants' lives to a monetary value. In being compared to the spoils of war, the infants are signs of victory, and as such, their baptism is acceptable. That they can be raised by Christians stresses Charlemagne's success over their parents who cannot raise them to be threats to Christendom. While baptism remains as inclusive as it was in Ferumbras's case, the context of these baptisms show a desire to spread the faith combined with a military victory that serves to objectify the catechumens. The resulting objectification that coincides with baptism uncovers the tension between a desire to include alterity as part of Christendom and a desire to signify victory over the individual embodying that alterity.

While the giants' infant state makes their role as objects somewhat understandable – they cannot actively choose or refuse baptism – the Sultan, Balan, refuses the sacrament as a voluntary subject, and in so doing shows how objectification actually limits inclusion. After Charlemagne and his knights defeat the Saracens, Balan is captured and the following day brought to a make-shift font to be baptized. After Charlemagne takes the time to explain the tenets of Christian faith, Balan initially refuses, smashing the font and swearing to remain faithful to his gods. Charlemagne, in anger, draws his sword, but Ferumbras steps between the two, begging that his father be given another opportunity. Charlemagne again asks and notes that "if a wolde þat it were so, A wolde be ys frend for euere-mo, / On what lond þat he lende; / And þat he nel bynyme [take away from] hym lond no fee, Bot euere scholde beo to him pryuee,

/ In-to ys lyues ende" (*Sir Ferumbras*, 5771-74). Charlemagne asserts that Balan would be able

to keep lands and that Charlemagne would "beo to him pryuee," that is 'familiar' or 'friendly.'[14]

Compounded with the declaration of friendship, Charlemagne's offer would not make Balan a

subject to the emperor but would rather make them equals. As with Ferumbras, the apparent

subjugation only exists before the baptism, and Charlemagne assures Balan that he will retain his

elevated social standing after the sacrament. In a similar situation at the end of the *Sir Beues of*

Hamptoun, the Christian hero invites the Saracen king to convert so that he might not go to Hell

upon death. However, there is no talk of friendship or acceptance in the *Sir Beues of Hamptoun*,

implying that the Saracen will be eliminated from this world even if he may still gain heaven. In

Sir Ferumbras baptism appears inclusive because the Saracen can enter into Christendom

without losing his or her pre-baptismal identity or social positioning. Similarly, Ferumbras's

attempts to persuade his father further demonstrate the importance of pre-existing family ties that

baptism would strengthen.

The Ashmole version of the *Ferumbras* narrative puts great emphasis on the relationship

between Balan and Ferumbras, which creates a notion that baptism can free the catechumen from

previous relationships without destroying those relationships. After Charlemagne asks Balan a

second time to consent to be baptized, Ferumbras adds to Charlemagne's request:

> Þan Fyrumbras ys sonne hym sete on knen By-fore ys fader & cryede aȝen-
> 　　'Mercy, fader,' he sayde,
> 'Swete fader, do hys lykyng, And ne make þer-of no more taryyng,
> 　　For gode loue y pray þe.
> And þan myȝtou haue al þun Awe [your own], And libbe þy lyf on godes lawe
> 　　& kepe þe so fro sore;
> And þilke þat buþ now þun fon [your foes] Wolleþ þe Louye euerchon,
> 　　& worschypy þe euere-more.'
>
> 　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(*Sir Ferumbras*, 5775-82)

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[14] *MED*, s.v. 'privē' (adj. 1), definition 2 (b).

Ferumbras, by converting, has chosen an identity radically different from that into which he was born. In calling his father to accept baptism, he affirms his Christian identity. However, asking his father to convert also affirms that he still retains the ability to connect to the identity he had before his conversion. Ferumbras's supplication twice recalls the parental relationship. Ferumbras attempts to save his father's life precisely because he wishes the father/son relationship to endure through baptism, further suggesting the inclusive nature of the text's depiction of baptism.[15] Ferumbras did not give up his identity as Balan's son, but neither is his whole identity determined by that relationship. The emotional nature of the plea further emphasizes the continuity of Ferumbras's identity despite his changed religious affiliation. Baptism trumps the ties of blood, freeing the catechumen, but it does not erase those ties. The offer of baptism reveals a nuanced attitude toward the difficult position of converts and the desire for Christianity to spread so that both families and former enemies might be united. When Balan initially agrees, the reaction is positive as Ferumbras, Charlemagne, and the barons all "wax ful glad" (*Sir Ferumbras*, 5787). The universal pleasure they experience further implies the positive outcome of baptism: though violent subjugation and control of the Saracen preceded the sacrament, all people find joy together in including a new figure into Christendom.

However, despite the supposed inclusive nature implied in the way Charlemagne offers Balan baptism, the means by which Balan is brought to the font suggest how subjugation undermines such inclusivity. The initial moment of baptism recalls the fact that Balan is a

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[15] Similarly, the Fillingham text has Ferumbras recall his relationship with his father in language that is as emotional and also more direct: "My dere fadyr, y am thy son! Hue mercy & pyte! / do after my cownseyl, and let thys soru3e be!" *Firumbras* in *Firumbras and Otuel and Roland*, 54 (lns. 1701-02). The Fillingham, although it takes less space to depict the interchange between Ferumbras and Laban, intensifies the same emotional language and thus also emphasizes the familial relationship.

prisoner and a defeated lord. Charlemagne commands Balan to be brought the font and stripped.

"Wan þay by-gunne ys cloþys of-do [they began to take his clothes off] Myche strif made þe

Amerel [Emir] tho, / And tornde & wende faste, / Ac Roland and Olyuer hulde hym so, That

whather he wolde oþer no, / ys cloþys of thay caste" (*Sir Ferumbras*, 5715-18). Balan is

stripped, a humiliating moment for the proud ruler. In his resistance he reminds the romance's

audience that he, like his son, is a conquered figure, subject to Charlemagne, and that the

emperor's offer of baptism is clearly made from a position of power. The specific reference to

the fact that Balan's will is of no consequence in this moment – he is stripped "whether he willed

it or not' – makes the subsequent offer of baptism problematic. Unlike his son, who asked for

mercy and whose clothes were stripped so that his life might be saved, Balan's will and clothes

are removed from him, making him more like the objectified giant-children. Finally, Balan

refuses baptism for the third time, claiming that he would rather die than submit to baptism. In

response, Ferumbras says to Charlemagne: "Doþ now syre by thys man / As it is þy wille; /

Certys y ne haue now no wonder þoȝ ȝe hym do hewe ech lyme on sonder, / Þorȝ-out flechs &

bone, / Suþþe he wil noȝt for no pray [any request] Belyue on god & for-sake ys lay / Ne folloȝt

[baptism] take non" (*Sir Ferumbras*, 5853-58). Here Ferumbras divorces himself from his

father, an act possible because his baptism frees him from such relationships. However,

Ferumbras also places his father under Charlemagne's will, making the emperor's will

paramount at this moment. Considering that Ferumbras clearly stated that it was his own will to

accept baptism after he was defeated by Oliver, the fact that Balan's fate is now to be determined

by Charlemagne's will subtly calls into question the decision offered to Balan. The

catechumen's will is less important in this instance than it was earlier, highlighting the dangers

of coercing the non-believer to change his or her identity in conjunction with their baptism, as it

makes the nature of the willed choice uncertain.[16] Charlemagne's will is more important here

than Balan's, a fact that calls both the supposed friendship Charlemagne offers and Ferumbras's

own inclusive baptism into question, as baptism comes to be associated with the surrender of

personal determination to a secular authority. Balan's final choice to hold to the Saracen faith

can be interpreted as a last effort to retain his own autonomy in the face of subjugation, even

unto violent death. Despite the apparent inclusiveness of the offer, baptism becomes a means of

rendering the non-believer as an object.

Despite the joy that might occur should Balan become Christian, the difference between

the ways he is treated before and after his ultimate refusal makes questionable the move to use

subjugation to bring a catechumen to an inclusive baptism. After Ferumbras gives up trying to

convert his father, Charlemagne declares that Balan shall be executed:

> þan Charlis askede of ys men a-boute, Hwych of hem wolde of al þe route
> Sle þat heþene hounde.
> Ogyer hym ansuerede-'y wil hym slo, for myche tene [harm] he haueþ me y-do,
> Her ys his bane y-found.'
> Ys swerd a drow þat het corteyn, Wel many a Saraȝyn had he sleyn
> That-with that by-fore.
> Ogier in the nekke thar-wyþ hym gerte [struck], þat þe heued fro þat body sterte,
> Ys owen lengþe & more.
>
> (*Sir Ferumbras*, 5859-66)

The Saracen is dehumanized with the traditional epithet of "heathen hound,' an insult more

consistent with the typical relationship between Christians and Saracens found in the Auchinleck

romances than the previous call for conversion from Ferumbras. The experiment with inclusive

baptism has been brought to a definite close. The figure is no longer Ferumbras's father but a

creature in need of extermination. Ogier's swift answer recalls again the violence that plagues

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[16] See *Summa Theologicae* 3a, 69, 9. If the catechumen's will is absolutely necessary in accepting baptism, then it is difficult to blithely accept the validity of the baptism offered to the sultan under the threat of force, as his will is obviously subjugated to the will of others.

the boundary between Christian and heathen. His sword is an instrument for the elimination of

Saracens, and the continuation of its use suggests that the violent interaction with the heathen is

not over. The beheading, brutal and described with some relish, perpetuates the notion that

violent action against the non-believer is perfectly acceptable. Indeed, such behavior is normal

for a romance, and might go uncommented except for the tight juxtaposition of violence with

Ferumbras's impassioned plea. The sudden leap from attempting to convert the Saracen through

love and a sense of family unity to beheading him – from "Sweet father," to "heathen hound" –

is far more striking than the similar situations in *Otuel* or *Sir Bevis*. In those texts, the Christian

hero who has defeated the villainous Saracen calls the defeated heathen to convert. In *Sir

Ferumbras*, the moment becomes an anti-baptism, in which the catechumen not only remains

heathen, but becomes fully alien, a being that can be destroyed without guilt or remorse. Yet

Balan's death cannot erase Ferumbras's extended pleas for his father to convert, any more than

baptism can erase Ferumbras's heathen name. There is no resolution of the two understandings

of Balan's character, and the text remains in tension.

The final baptism, that of Floripas, is successful precisely because it fully objectifies the

catechumen. Immediately following Balan's execution, Floripas reminds everyone of Sir Guy's

promise to marry her. Charlemagne gives his blessing and Floripas quickly prepares to be

baptized by stripping off her clothes. The poet offers a luxurious description of Floripas's white

skin, grey eyes, and golden hair, concluding with the reaction of those watching: "Wan þys lords

had seyȝen hur naked, In alle manere wyse weel y-maked, / On hur þay toke lekynge. / Was non

of hem þat ys flechs ne-raas [his flesh was not raised], Noþer kyng, ne baroun, ne non þat was, /

Sche was so fair a þynge" (*Sir Ferumbras*, 5887-90). The text cuts off here and the actual

baptism and subsequent marriage is lost. However, Floripas's baptism is clearly not a stately or

particularly spiritual affair. Rather, it is a sexually charged moment, in which the Saracen body

is revealed to the titillation of the Christian men around her. Here, Floripas's alterity, her past

violence, and even her demands for her own father's execution, behaviors that do not fit with

Christian ideals even if they do show commitment to the Christian faith, are subsumed before her

attractive foreign body, the object of desire.[17] Like her brother's, her body is attractive, but

unlike Ferumbras, she does not partake of a hybrid physicality. Baptism allows for the body to

be revealed. When she reveals her body, she is recognized as already acceptable, exhibiting the

standard hallmarks of European feminine beauty. Moreover, when she reveals her body, the

reaction of the onlookers uncovers for the text's audiences the notion that the desire for the

foreign can be a sexual desire. That Floripas "dispoilled" herself of her clothes voluntarily

fulfills the masculine fantasy, even as Balan's refusal to do the same earlier justified the violence

done against him (*Sir Ferumbras*, 5879).[18] She willing subjugates herself, as many Saracen

princesses do in various romances. The overt sexuality of the scene reveals the fantasy of

subjugation that is a hidden but driving force in other similar romance moments, including the

baptism of the Saracen princess, Josian, in *Sir Beues of Hamptoun*. In revealing her body,

Floripas becomes an object to be seen, like the infant giants and, to a lesser degree, like Balan

and Ferumbras. To fulfill the desire of chivalric Christendom, the catechumen becomes an

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[17]Jacqueline de Weever notes that the baptisms of Saracen princesses, which should be examples of rebirth, occur with "the questions aroused by her [the Saracen princess's] actions remaining unresolved." De Weever, *Sheba's Daughters*, 40. The supposed rebirths do not necessarily redeem or explain away the earlier violence that marked the catechumen. De Weever specifically cites Floripas of the *Chanson de geste* as being in need of contrition before baptism.

[18] Millar-Heggie, while perhaps over simplifying the case of Ferumbras' baptism, notes that "Floripas' betrayal of her family, religion, and country, together with her welcoming of Christianity justifies the Christian conquest." Millar-Heggie, "The Performance of Masculinity and Femininity," 10. In Floripas' baptism the various strains of European desire for conquest and for the foreign body are combined in such a way as to make questionable the supposedly more pure desire to see Christendom spread and embraced by heathens.

object that is perfectly acceptable because that individual is both subservient and ultimately European in body. Rather than allowing such an idea to remain comfortably hidden, *Sir Ferumbras* exposes it by uncovering Floripas's body.[19]

The baptisms in the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* attempt to include desirable foreigners as part of Christendom. However, the text seeks to include the catechumen as a subject even as it seeks to perpetuate that inclusion through violent subjugation, a feature of romances that maintain an exclusive baptism. Within the narrative, the two modes of interacting with the foreign catechumen appear to fit uneasily. Unlike the Auchinleck romances, which subjugate and erase alterity, *Sir Ferumbras* presents a baptism that can integrate the heathen as someone different than other Christians by allowing the convert to retain alternate physicality and relationships. The results of the first baptism in the narrative seem to demonstrate that violent subjugation can produce an inclusive baptism. However, the subsequent baptisms become associated with unsettling images: the infant giants are linked with the spoils of war, as is Floripas in her flagrant sexuality. And Balan's failed baptism reveals the divergent character of a catechumen who is a beast that can be killed and also a subject that is a beloved father. This romance subtly exposes the assumptions, so firm in the Auchinleck romances featuring baptism, that baptism helps confirm boundaries between Christian and heathen. By extension, the audience of this romance may also question the supposedly sound boundaries between cultural and social groups. The baptismal images trouble the relationship between coercing identification with Christianity and baptism, even as the text offers an inclusive baptism in the context of a

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[19] The damage to the manuscript means that modern audiences do not know how the text ended, but it is not too difficult to imagine that the romance ends happily, as its precursors do, with Ferumbras and Sir Guy splitting the rule of Spain and Charlemagne returning to France with the stolen relics. Yet the traditional conclusion to the narrative does not erase the troubling depictions of baptism found throughout the text.

romance. Similarly, *The Sowdone of Babylon* (*Sowdone*), written independently of the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras*, depicts a troubled series of baptisms. However, *Sowdone* is far more explicit about presenting the problematic nature of subjugating baptism. In *Sowdone,* subjugating baptism becomes destructive, making inclusion, which is presented as a goal early in the text, impossible so long as converted identities are achieved through violence.

Ferumbras in *Sowdone* comes to Christianity in much the same way as described in the Ashmole version of the narrative; however, the connection between social subjugation and Christianization is pronounced in *Sowdone*. The duel between Oliver and Ferumbras in the Ashmole ends when Ferumbras renounces his gods, calls upon Oliver's mercy, and promises to yield himself to Charlemagne. In *Sowdone* Ferumbras is initially concerned with his relationship with Oliver: "Hoo, Olyvere, I yelde me to the, / And here I become thy man. / I am so hurte, I may not stoned [stand], / I put me alle in thy grace."[20] The reference to being dependent upon Oliver's grace is common to both the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* and *Sowdone*; however, Ferumbras in *Sowdone* yields directly to Oliver and becomes his vassal.[21] Such language reappears when Charlemagne comes upon the wounded Ferumbras, who explains his situation to the emperor: "Olyuere my maister me hight / to be Baptised by goddis grace, / And to dyen a Cristen knighte. / Honur were it noon to the / a discoumfite man to slow, / That is conuerted and Baptized wolde be [wishes to be] / And thy man bycomen also" (*Sowdone*, 1460-66). Here Ferumbras declares that he has a master in Oliver, the knight who defeated him, and it is Oliver's

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[20] *The Romaunce of the Sowdone of Babylone and of Ferumbras his sone who conquered Rome*, ed. Emil Hausknecht, EETS ES 38 (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1881), 39 (*Sowdone*, 1353-56). All quotations from *Sowdone* will be derived from this edition and will be cited with the abbreviated title and line numbers in parentheses.

[21] To 'become someone's man' implies taking on a subservient position under that individual. *MED*, s.v. 'man' (n), definition 8a (b).

request that drives him to be baptized. He also declares himself to be Charlemagne's vassal as

well, reinforcing his position within the Christian chivalric hierarchy. In placing the

responsibility for baptism in the context of combat and social hierarchy, the text makes clear the

implied connection found in so many other romances. It is not that the defeat of the Saracen

figure makes the heathen realize the error of his or her ways and seek baptism. Rather, the defeat

subjugates the defeated to the victor, and it follows that the defeated adhere to the beliefs of the

new authority figure. The translator of *Sowdone* draws attention to the implicit language of

social relations that often coincides with conversion narratives.

Despite the apparent connection between subjugation and accepting baptism, *Sowdone*,

like the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras*, goes on to note the value of Ferumbras to Christendom,

justifying the earlier violence. When Ferumbras declares his intention to Charlemagne to be

baptized, the emperor immediately has pity on the Saracen prince, brings him to the doctors and

commands Bishop Turpin to prepare a font. The baptism is felicitous and Ferumbras is

integrated into Christendom:

> He [Ferumbras] was Cristened in þat well,
> Floreyne the kinge alle him calle,
> He forsoke the foule feende of helle
> And his fals goddis alle.
> Nought for than [despite that] Ferumbras
> Alle his life cleped was he,
> And aftirwarde in somme place,
> Floreyne of Rome Cite.
> God for him many miracles shewed,
> So holy a man he by-came,
> That witnessith both lerned and lewde,
> The fame of him so ranne.
>
> (*Sowdone*, 479-90)

As in the Ashmole, the text conflates Ferumbras's pre- and post-baptismal identities, an act that

can be read as an inclusive baptism. Whereas the Ashmole version only notes the persistence of

Ferumbras's name, here Ferumbras's two names appear to identify him. The persistence of his

Saracen name alongside his future miracles suggests that retaining pre-baptismal traits is no bad

thing and has little bearing on later sanctity. After his death, Ferumbras is completely

assimilated in Christendom, his foreign origins are completely forgotten when his own physical

form is not present to suggest his alterity. On the one hand, such a baptism can suggest the

inclusiveness of the Church that assimilates all into one holy collective. On the other hand,

Ferumbras grows in holiness, eventually performing miracles. The extreme holiness could

suggest that Ferumbras must perform Christianity beyond any doubt, as if the catechumen's

integration were somehow perpetually incomplete. Regardless, the fact that his fame persists

implies the potential value of the hybrid Christian. Ferumbras's baptism in *Sowdone*, though it is

dependent upon subjugation, appears to end quite happily, with the catechumen fully included

without losing his alterity.

However, while Ferumbras's baptism appears to have produced a true Christian figure

through subjugation, the baptism of the infant giants, found later in the text, suggests that violent

subjection of the heathen foreigner and successful baptism are incompatible. After killing a

giant, Astragot, Charlemagne is attacked by the giant's giant wife, Barrock. She too is

dispatched. After the Christians win the bridge the giants were defending, Charlemagne

discovers the giants' two children, less than a year old and already fourteen feet tall. He is

delighted with his discovery and seeks to have them baptized:

> Grete joye the kinge of hem hade.
> Hethen thay wer both, wele I wote,
> Þerefore hem to be cristenede he bade.
> He called þat one of hem Rouland,
> And that other he cleped Olyuer:
> 'For thai shalle be myghty men of honde.'
> To kepen hem, he was fulle chere [he was very glad to keep them].

Thay might not leve, her Dam was dede;
Thai coude not kepe hem forth [they could not continue to keep them].
Thai would neyþer ete butter nere brede,
Ner no men was to hem worthe.
Her Dammes mylke they lakked ther,
Thay deyden for defaute of here dam.
Kinge Charles made hevy cher,
And a sory man was than.

(*Sowdone*, 3024-38)

Cohen reads much into the death of the infant giants, noting: "they die because Charlemagne's men can never provide a home, never provide a protective structure of 'joye' anything like a family.... As long as Charlemagne's 'joye' is a sword, a weapon aimed against Saracen domesticity and collectivity, Christian fraternal identity is doomed to inhabit a circumscribed, diminishing world."[22] As Cohen emphasizes, Charlemagne cannot provide nourishment, and because of that lack, the infants die.[23] The familial/social relationship the emperor seeks to create with the giants is untenable because his earlier violent acts have deprived the infants of their mother's milk, a move that suggests that the emperor has severed the continuity of identity that is necessary for life. In attempting to replace material/familial identification with baptism, Charlemagne assumes that mandated religious identification is complete in itself, when in truth baptism forms one of many relationships that are vital for body and soul. Charlemagne

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[22] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "On Saracen Enjoyment," 132. Cohen's insightful reading of *Sowdone*, that the text draws to light the problematic nature of common western depictions of Saracen difference but allows the romance's audience an imaginative insight into the subjective nature of that difference, informs my own reading. However, Cohen's work is centered firmly on the depiction of the Saracens, revealing the problematic notion of relationship between that which is similar and that which is different. By focusing on the baptismal moments in the text, I am working to develop Cohen's reading still further by suggesting the importance of social dynamics within the text.

[23] Akbari reads the milk of the giantess as "a material – not spiritual – connection to Saracen identity. Precisely because it is material and not spiritual, this milk is aptly associated with the faith of the Saracens.... Nonetheless, without this support the Saracen Other remains unable to be assimilated, although it remains the object of desire." Akbari, *Idols in the East*¸172. I read baptism as a failed attempt to compensate for the broken connection between the infants and the Saracen identity. However, unlike Akbari, I read the milk as a material familial connection that does not necessarily represent a particular religious belief.

incorrectly believes that baptism can fulfill basic human needs and connections. Where Ferumbras is able to retain his name and his knightly position – though he does become a vassal – through his baptismal transformation, the infants are so fully separated from those elements of their previous existence that they cannot survive. Charlemagne cannot use baptism to mitigate that loss. The emperor's attempt to baptize the giants undermines the value system that puts chivalric authority and baptism above familial relationships. In the end, Charlemagne mourns the loss of the infants, the wonderful alterity that, theoretically, could add to Christendom. However, he fails to recognize that his own attempts to violently subjugate the foreign giants led to the elimination of that which he hopes to integrate. The link between baptism and subjugation becomes problematic as it brings death to the catechumens and sorrow to the Christians.

Even as baptism cannot save the infant giants, the offer of baptism hardly tempts the Saracen sultan, renamed Laban in *Sowdone*, because it is offered while the sultan is utterly powerless. On the one hand, the sultan's baptism can be interpreted as orthodox and enriching because the catechumen is humbled before he is called to accept the sacrament. In Ferumbras's case, he subjects himself to Oliver who has conquered him in battle. That humbling moment allows Ferumbras to be baptized and enter Christendom, where he grows until he becomes a hero of the faith. The move from subjection to elevation is not unusual in a conversion narrative. Both Saints Paul and Christopher, along with the Emperor Constantine, are humbled before they become worthy Christian heroes.[24] Such a comparison may help alleviate the tension present in Laban's baptismal moment, in which Laban is humbled before Charlemagne:

> King Charles did calle bisshope Turpyn

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[24] Paul Bancourt, in studying the Old French *Fierabras*, notes that Ferumbras' conversion is reminiscent of St. Paul's, particularly in the shift from persecutor to defender of the Church. Paul Bancourt, *Les Musulamans dans les chansons de geste du cycle du roi*, vol. I (Aix-en-Provence: Universite de Provence, 1982), 532.

And bade him ordeyne a grete fat [vat],
To baptyse the Sowdon yne;
'And loke what he shalle hat [possess].
Unarme him faste and bringe him ner,
I shal his godfader be.
Fille it fulle of water cler,
For Baptysed shalle he be.
Make him naked as a Childe,
He moste plunge ther-inne.
For now most he be meke and mylde,
And I-wash awaye his synne.'

(*Sowdone*, 3151-62)

Laban responds by striking Bishop Turpin, spitting in the baptismal water, and cursing both

Floripas and Ferumbras. His extreme reaction, his pride and inability to prostrate himself at the

font, can be understood as an inability to humble himself and make the necessary steps toward

Christian truth. His execution is unavoidable since he cannot bear to yield himself to another's

authority. Read in this way, the text suggests that without humility there can be no baptism.

Such a reading, however, is not tenable. While a comparison to saints who undergo baptism may

suggest a universal need for humility, neither Christopher nor Paul submit themselves to secular

authority, but to divine authority. Charlemagne seeks to present himself as both a secular and

religious authority, a problematic combination that makes it difficult for Laban to submit to

baptism. In attempting to convert a prosecutor of the church Charlemagne attempts to occupy

the position of a saint. However, his treatment of the catechumen is more reminiscent of the

prosecutors of the saints found in hagiography. He has Laban unarmed and stripped. He does

not directly address the sultan but commands other to manipulate him. He assumes that his

power is enough to coerce Laban to behave properly, to be meek and mild. Further,

Charlemagne assumes the role of godfather in Laban's baptism, establishing a relationship with

the sultan that could be considered quite honorable. However, in so doing, he explicitly puts

Laban in the role of a child and asserts his authority over the sultan. Such condescension is a far less friendly than the invitation to convert in the Ashmole version. Rather, Charlemagne's attitude here recalls the emperor's desire to keep the infant giants and to rename them after his best knights. In both situations, Charlemagne is at once patronizing and ignorant of the effect his actions have upon the felicitous outcome of the baptism. In light of such treatment, Laban's reaction is hardly surprising, and can even be seen sympathetically. Charlemagne's speech reveals that, for the Christians within the text, the hope of conversion and integration is frustrated by an inability to separate secular subjugation from religious conversion. The unsuccessful baptisms of both the giants and Laban invite the romance's audiences to reconsider Ferumbras's successful baptism.

Despite an initial baptism that stresses the usefulness of including the foreign catechumen into Christendom, *Sowdone*'s baptisms, since they are often combined with violence, cannot truly bridge the gap between the Christian and the heathen. The final baptism, that of Ferumbras's sister, Floripas, is barely mentioned and is reduced to three lines (*Sowdone,* 3191-93). Her conversion becomes unimportant as her potential otherness is subsumed under her husband's authority. Of the three baptisms explored within the text, one suggests the value of Ferumbras as a foreign catechumen within Christendom. The other two reveal how baptism is unsuccessful as giants and a sultan are lost to Christendom, even though baptism could theoretically incorporate them. In both the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* and *Sowdone* versions of the *Fierabras* legend, baptism is no longer the excluding sacrament it was in the Auchinleck romances. Rather, these texts suggest a desire to include alterity within Christendom. However, by combining the baptism with the process of violent subjugation, the tensions within the text reveal how such a combination is difficult. The depiction of baptism within the texts manifests

the potential dangers of having hierarchical structures determine identity. To be baptized while in a subservient position to social authority may result in objectification and even destruction. The inclusive depiction of baptism shows that baptism could also be used to combat such coercive social identity formations. As baptism appears to act against subjugation as a means of identification, the texts appear to respond to the shift from hierarchical to horizontal social relationships that were occurring in fourteenth-century England.

A reader or listener of these romances living through the societal shifts that occurred in the late fourteenth century could potentially see in Middle English *Fierabras* romances a way to question traditional modes of identity that required authoritative affirmation. In his cultural analysis of *The Canterbury Tales*, Paul Strohm explores the changing and diverse methods by which medieval men and women understood society and their place in it. In analyzing the sermons of Bishop Thomas Brinton, Strohm notes the use of the body as a metaphor for society. In particular, Strohm urges that "The idea of interdependence... had always been implicit in the three-estate theory, but was invoked only rarely, usually in a perfunctory justification of the special privileges of those in positions of civil and spiritual responsibility. More congenial to the concept of functional interdependence were those social descriptions employing the metaphor of the social body or body politic."[25] Rather than the three-estates structure, the metaphor of the social body implies a certain level of equality and connectedness that challenges the supposedly inherent authority of certain social groups. Even as the breakdown of the estates model caused shifting attitudes toward social identity, so too did the relationship between the lord and retainer begin to shift. Strohm notes the shift from the oath-based relationships of the feudal system to contractual obligations between lord and retainer: "As a contract rather than a sworn oath, the

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[25] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 4.

indenture permits a degree of voluntarism not possible (or at least emphatically discouraged) within the system of vassalage."[26] In discussing a specific case, Strohm describes the newer form of agreement as "contractual rather than sacramental in nature."[27] The link between spiritual identity and social identity was not as strong in the late fourteenth century as in previous years. Rather, the pattern of society was shifting, allowing for more freedom of identification, even as the means by which an individual could identify him or herself religiously, through sacraments or sacred oaths, was not as firmly bound to social means of identification.

Similarly, in *Sowdone* as in *Sir Ferumbras*, the baptisms enforced or determined by hierarchy are challenged, suggesting that such subjugation to a lord through religious conventions may not be the best form of identification. Within the narratives, attempts by Christian authorities, here embodied in Charlemagne, to force identities upon others – sultans, princesses, or giants – results in objectifying and even destroying those others. In contrast, identity that is the product of the individual will, as in the case of Ferumbras in *Sir Ferumbras*, seems far more attractive. Even though Ferumbras is defeated, his baptism has freed him from his past identities without erasing them: an inclusive baptism. Baptism, once freed from the subjugating role, could be used to combat the very coercive structures it had once upheld. In Langland, baptism involved social liberation. In these romances, baptism evokes social subjugation, but such a link is ultimately problematic. While neither *Sowdone* nor *Sir Ferumbras* is completely disassociated from the tradition of exclusive, subjugating baptism, the texts call such subjugation into question. Thus the texts allow gives support to the metaphoric Langlandian baptism as more in keeping with the shifting means of social identification that

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[26] Ibid., 18.

[27] Ibid., 16-17.

involved horizontal relationships between individuals than the baptisms that appeared in the Auchinleck romances.

Who is this Knight? Demonic Origins and Baptismal Freedom in *Sir Gowther*

While *Sir Ferumbras* and *Sowdone* only hint at baptism's ability to free the individual from coercive modes of social identification, *Sir Gowther* explores how baptism helps free the individual to form his or her own identity independently. Dating from approximately 1400, *Sir Gowther* is found in two manuscripts: National Library of Scotland Advocates MS. 19.3.1 and British Museum MS. Royal 17 B.43. The narrative has no known direct source, but is related to the Robert le Diable legends found throughout the continent. These legends tell the story of a man whose mother made a pact with the devil so that she might conceive.[28] *Sir Gowther* depicts the state of a man whose father, like Merlin's, is a demon. Unlike Merlin, whose demonic identity is changed in baptism as described in the Auchinleck manuscript's *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, Gowther's identity is not transformed as a result of his baptism. Instead the text explores how individual will is influenced by notions of identity. As in the *Parson's Tale*, penance is the focus of the narrative but penance and the relationship with God needed to live morally find their origins in baptism. In *Sir Gowther* baptism frees the catechumen's will to move beyond social and hereditary forms of identity and embrace a spiritual idea of self.

The narrative of *Sir Gowther* moves quickly and offers several evocative images.

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[28] For the relationship between *Sir Gowther* and *Robert le Diable* and a description of the *Gowther* Manuscripts, see Shirley Marchalonis, "*Sir Gowther*: The Process of Romance," *The Chaucer Review* 6 no. 1 (Summer, 1971): 14-29. Critical opinions of the work vary considerably. Joanne A. Carbonneau claims "Sir Gowther includes too many jarring elements to be satisfying, consistent or coherent." Joanne A. Carbonneau, "From Devil to Saint: Transformations in *Sir Gowther*," *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*, ed. Phillipa Hardman (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 27. In contrast, Andrea Hopkins argues "that the structural and thematic changes made to the story of *Sir Gowther* are radical, purposeful, and skillful... they serve the poet's didactic aims in an artistically successful way." Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990), 145.

Gowther begins his life as a monstrosity, the son of a human woman, a duchess desperate to give her husband a child, and an incubus, the same demon that fathered Merlin. Gowther grows up violent and cruel, yet despite his behavior is knighted by the duke, his supposed father. When the duke dies, it falls to an old earl to point out that Gowther's actions are more befitting a child of a demon than a Christian man. Gowther, shocked by the thought that he may be of questionable parentage, goes to his mother, who confirms the truth. Gowther immediately repents of his past wickedness and goes to Rome to seek penance from the pope. The pope tells him he must not speak, and may eat only food that he can snatch from the mouth of dogs, until he receives a sign from God that he is forgiven. Abiding by this penance, Gowther becomes a fool in the court of the German emperor. The emperor's mute daughter takes pity on Gowther. When Saracens come demanding the princess, Gowther miraculously receives arms to help the emperor in battle. While fighting, Gowther is wounded, and upon seeing this, the princess falls to her apparent death. But she is revived two days later with a message from God that Gowther is forgiven. The two marry and Gowther eventually becomes emperor. After his death, miracles are performed in his name. The story resembles hagiography, and the way in which it resolves the problem of Gowther's identity suggests that God's inscrutable will can help the individual transcend mundane modes of identification.

Gowther undergoes baptism as an infant but, unlike his half-brother Merlin, grows to be monstrous, challenging the assumed virtues of the sacrament as it appeared in the Auchinleck manuscript. Merlin is mentioned in the first stanza of the poem as an example of how demons impregnate human women, which sets up the eventual description of Gowther's conception.[29]

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[29] The first fourteen lines of the poem are missing from the Advocates MS and so are preserved only in the Royal MS.

The connection is made explicit just before Gowther is born: "This child within hur was non

odur / Bot eyvon Marlyon [Merlin's] halfe brodur, / For won fynd gate hom bothe [one fiend

begot them both]."[30] The declaration of Gowther's relationship connects the story to the more

famous Arthurian story and creates certain expectations about the events of the narrative. The

child is of demonic origins, and thus evil. However, "Ylke a day scho grette fast / And was

delyverid at tho last / Of won that coth do skathe [could do harm]. / Tho duke hym gard to kyrke

beyre, / Crystond hym and cald hym Gowther, / That sythyn wax breme as barre [fierce as a

bear]" (*Sir Gowther*, 100-105). Like Merlin, the child is clearly not human as evidenced by his

great size, and he, like Merlin, is immediate baptized after his birth. In the earlier romance, *Of

Arthour and of Merlin*, baptism immediately freed Merlin of any demonic influence, allowing

Merlin to use his supernatural abilities to serve Christendom. However, baptism apparently does

little to curb Gowther's demonic nature. He grows up monstrous, kills his nursemaids with his

ravenous appetite, bites off his mother's nipple, and eventually becomes a terror of the

countryside. His vile acts culminate in the rape and murder of a group of nuns. *Sir Gowther*

overturns audience expectations set by a familiarity with the Merlin narrative. Gowther is

baptized, but the text does not depict the sacrament as a capable of miraculously influencing the

character of the baptized.

Just as the religious ceremony appears to have little effect on Gowther's character, his

social position does not curtail his violent behavior, although it can explain why such

monstrosity persists. Despite Gowther's violence, his father still dubs him a knight: "Tho duke

hym might not chastise, / Bot made hym knyght that tyde [at that time], / With cold brade bronde

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[30] *Sir Gowther,* in *Six Middle English Romances* ed. Maldwyn Mills (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1973), 150
(*Sir Gowther*, 94-96). Mills depends primarily on the earlier, Advocates Manuscript. All quotations from *Sir
Gowther* will be derived from this edition and will be cited with the title and line numbers in parentheses.

[with a cold, broad blade]: / Ther was non in that londe / That dynt of hym durst byde [that could endure his blows]" (*Sir Gowther*, 146-50). The social ceremony has no more effect on his behavior than the religious ceremony of baptism, but both ceremonies cement his social position as the supposed son of the duke and as a knight of the land. The juxtaposition of Gowther's initiation into a chivalric social position and his continued violence should not be surprising. As Jeffrey Cohen notes in analyzing the figure of the giant: "The line between gigantism and knighthood is thin and frequently trespassed."[31] Chivalric identity, far from stemming the tide of violence, appears to enable the natural proclivities of Gowther's demonic origin.[32] As Gowther grows, "He wolde wyrke is fadur wyll" (*Sir Gowther*, 173). By recalling Gowther's biological father in the midst of the prolonged description of his depraved violence, his character is bound to his genetic heritage, a defining characteristic that drives his behavior even as his knightly identity gives that violence a means of expression. Gowther's understanding of his social identity reinforces the violent performance that is the product of his hereditary identity as a monster.

Gowther desires to change his behavior only after finding out the truth of his parentage; his identity can be changed only when the pre-existing social relationships that had supported his violent identity are broken down. The first public declaration of Gowther's true parentage comes from an older earl seeking to curb Gowther's behavior. He tells Gowther, that he "howpe thou [Gowther] come never of Cryston stryn [stock], / Bot art sum fendys son, we weyn [the people

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[31] Cohen, *Of Giants*, 77.

[32] It is worth noting that, according to Marchalonis, Robert in the *Gowther* pre-cursor, *Robert le Diable*, becomes an outlaw for a time, breaking from his chivalric heritage. Marchalonis, "The Process of Romance," 15. Though knighthood actually imposes a civilizing force on Robert, for Gowther it does nothing to change his monstrous activity but rather gives him a greater freedom to indulge in his monstrous appetites.

believe], / That werkus hus this woo; / Thou dose never gud, bot ey tho ylle [always you do evil]: / We hope thou be full syb tho [kindred of the] deyll" (*Sir Gowther*, 204-09). Within five lines, the earl describes three different relational systems: heritage (*stryn*), parentage (*fendys son*), and fraternity (*syb*). The earl effectively breaks down Gowther's identification with the familial and chivalric culture that had placed the monstrous knight in his position of power, and replaces such identification with a demonic set of relations. When Gowther loses his means of identification, he is shaken from his evil complacency and self-acceptance. He tearfully demands the truth from his mother and, upon hearing it, weeps further and resolves to seek penance in Rome. The transformation is sudden, but it seems natural that Gowther is driven to immediately re-establish his identity through a new set of religious relationships that promise to replace those that have been revealed to be false.[33] Gowther had long depended upon social and familial ties to dictate and maintain identity, leaving him free to indulge in violent behaviors. By losing these, the monstrous knight must will a new identity independent of both his social origin and his hereditary drives: he must seek a religious form of identification.

Though baptism failed to impose any behavior-changing character on the catechumen, Gowther's visit with the pope reveals the importance of the sacrament in establishing a religious relationship with God, despite Gowther's unwanted physical relationship with the devil. When Gowther asks the pope how he might do penance for his evil actions, the pope replies with several questions concerning Gowther's identity:

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[33] Cohen notes in his Oedipal analysis of *Gowther* that the need to establish a father drives the narrative. In the end, Cohen argues, the earthly and sinful origins of the knight's identity are replaced by a heavenly relationship to the divine father, effectively eliding all feminine ties for a masculine ideal. See Cohen, *Of Giants*, especially Chapter 5: "The Body Hybrid: Giants, Dog-Men, and Becoming Human," 119-140. While my own reading of baptism as it appears in the text has been influenced by Cohen's psychological analysis, Cohen's argument neglects the importance of earthly institutions, such as baptism and penance, as a means of accessing the spiritual identification Gowther desires.

'Whethon art hou and of what cuntree?'
'Duke of Estryke, lorde,' quod hee [Gowther],
'Be tru God in trone.
Ther was Y geyton with a feynde
And borne of a duces hende [lovely duchess];
My fadur hase frenchypus fone [few friends].'
'Y wyll [give you shrift and absolution] gladly, be my fey;
Art thou crystond?' He seyd, 'Yey,
My name it is Gwother.'

(*Sir Gowther*, 268-76)

The pope responds to Gowther's final answer by giving thanks to God that Gowther has come, since the pope feared that he would have to go to war to destroy Gowther as an enemy of the Church. Though baptism may appear to be a brief aside within the exchange between the pope and Gowther, the fact that baptism is cited at all suggests its continued importance. Baptism appears as a part of Gowther's system of identification. The pope begins his interrogation by seeking Gowther's country of origin, to which Gowther replies by listing a diverse series of identifiers: his social status, place of origin, and his demonic heritage. Interestingly, none of these identifiers are unique to Gowther: he is one of two dukes of Estryke that appear in the poem and, with Merlin, one of two demonic children. The pope's next question – whether or not Gowther is baptized – narrows down the level of identification to the individual. Gowther replies by affirming that he has been and offers his name. Baptism labels Gowther specifically. The pope then gives Gowther the terms of his penance. The mention of baptism sits at the intersection of identification and penance, suggesting that baptism created a relationship between Gowther and God. Though Gowther's baptism did not actually affect his character, it does place him within a religious relationship through which penance is possible.[34] Heritage, not baptism,

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[34] Helen Phillips analyzes the very brief mentions of baptism in the alliterative romance *The Awntyrs of Arthure*, and suggests that baptism serves a similar function for the grim ghost of Guinevere's mother that frightens the queen and Sir Gawain. Phillips notes that "The ghost links baptism with penance in purgatory," since the ghost only has access

shaped Gowther's earlier behavior. When he sheds other forms of identity, as he will when he

voluntarily becomes a beast outside the normal social order, baptism remains vital to his sense of

self. The sacrament creates an individual position for Gowther within the Christian religious

structure, a position that allows him to move towards a holier, more human identity.

Gowther's strange penance eventually leads him to a point at which he can reconstruct

his identity, an identity defined by his own will and a relationship to the divine that sublimates

but never erases his earlier relationships. After living mute, eating only what can be snatched

from the mouths of dogs, and fighting Saracens to defend the emperor and the princess,

Gowther's penance is complete. The mute princess, who fell from a tower after witnessing

Gowther being wounded in battle, miraculously comes to life and gives Gowther God's message:

"My lord of heyvon gretys the well / And forgyffeus the thi syn yche a dell [every bit] /... / Thou

schallt be won of his" (*Sir Gowther*, 655-56, 60). Gowther will be one of God's own people.

His fate was questionable in the past, but is now affirmed because of his penitential actions.

Similarly, the pope, upon hearing the formerly mute princess pronounce God's forgiveness,

shrives Gowther and declares "Now art thou Goddus child; / The thar not dowt tho warlocke

wyld [you need not be concerned about the wild devil]: / Ther waryd [worried] mot he [the devil]

bee" (*Sir Gowther*, 667-69). Gowther is identified here with a spiritual relationship: he is God's

son. In the same moment, the pope notes that Gowther need not fear the devil, recalling

Gowther's parentage. The pope succinctly re-writes Gowther's initial means of identification,

his relation to his demonic father, and replaces it with a new familial relationship to God.

Though his identity is now formed through spiritual means, it is enough to allow Gowther not

to purgatory through the sacrament. Helen Phillips, "The Ghost's Baptism in *The Awntyrs of Arthure*," *Medium Aevum* 58 no. 1 (1989): 52. Baptism serves a similar purpose here, allowing Gowther access to the means of forgiveness even though the sacrament does not guarantee his salvation.

only to speak, but to fully participate in the highest echelons of the human community – he can now marry and become emperor. Though willing and performing penance are the primary means by which the new identification can replace the old, baptism allows Gowther to will an identity distinct from the identity determined by his natural appetites. Gowther's actions re-establish the bond baptism had originally put into place.

In establishing a pattern of identification, *Sir Gowther* imagines baptized monstrous difference as a way of understanding the human condition. Gowther occupies the unique position of monstrous Christian fallen from baptismal grace and given to demonic alterity. However, in Gowther's monstrous difference, an audience can recognize themselves; they can entertain a notion of the monstrous that includes their own sinful identities.[35] Andrea Hopkins argues that Gowther "is also Everyman, who has inherited Original Sin, and seeks to escape from the burden of his naturally sinful flesh."[36] Through identification with the hybrid/monstrous catechumen and the process by which that catechumen becomes fully human, an audience can see a similar process by which they can find their identity by participating in religious ritual. Baptism is a key part of the religious framework through which Gowther is redeemed. This is

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[35] Unfortunately, in focusing on Gowther as the figure of difference that can be understood as part of the Christian community, the romance relies upon the unbaptized heathens, the Saracens, to establish an entertainingly violent identity for the hero. The Saracens serve only as a means of performing chivalry in a perfect godly fashion. Far from the complex means of understanding Saracen difference and baptism found in the Middle English *Fierabras* legends, *Sir Gowther* is content to integrate one form of alterity in an attempt to explore the individual's salvation at the expense of an exploration of cultural difference. While such a choice is hardly surprising given the tradition of using the Saracens as a stock threat to Christendom, it does weaken the concepts of alterity explored throughout the text.

[36] Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights*, 170. Cohen, agreeing with Hopkins, when analyzing Gowther's confrontation with his mother, states that "a theological reading of the passage must stress that Gowther has just been faced with the stark reality of his *human* birth into Original Sin, the fallen state of humankind." Cohen, *Of Giants*, 127. Additionally, Jane Gilbert also reads Gowther as an exemplary figure for individual penance. Jane Gilbert, "Unnatural Mothers and Monstrous Children in *The King of Tars* and *Sir Gowther*," *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Brown et al. (Turnhout: Brepolis, 2000), 329-44.

similar to the sacrament's use in Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*, in which baptism is situated as the

origin point of the individual's penitential life. In replicating actual baptismal practice –

Gowther is baptized as an infant – the text offers a fairly realistic picture of how a member of the

romance's audience might have understood his or her own baptism and subsequent sins.

The notion that baptism gave the individual the freedom to will his or her own identity is

reminiscent of various theologians who posited the ultimate freedom of the will. By the late

fourteenth century, the role of baptism in establishing character had changed, and *Sir Gowther*

offers its own model of how its audience might use the sacrament to establish identity. As

described in Chapter 3, theologians, starting with Peter Olivi (1248-1298), theorized that the

grace in baptism did not simply make catechumens into good Christians by imposing a particular

character that informed behavior. In particular, William of Ockham (1288-1348) noted that

baptism does not actually affect behavior. Similarly, the grace imparted in the ritual as

performed on Gowther did not actually determine or change the will but left that individual will

free to make redemptive choices in response to lived experience.[37] The baptism Gowther

receives leaves him free to choose to follow his natural inclinations or resist them and choose a

path to salvation. In this way, Gowther's baptism and his road to redemption can be understood

as a combination of Thomas Aquinas's (1225-1274) understanding of baptism with a Scotian

notion of free will. Duns Scotus (1256-1308) theorized that the human will was designed to be

free. He suggested that the will, free of sin, could seek God: "I concede the conclusion that by

purely natural means any will could love God above all, at least as human nature existed in the

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[37] In so doing, *Sir Gowther* challenges the notion that baptism determines identity, a notion carefully preserved in the Auchinleck's *Sir Bevis* and that text's withholding of baptism from the traitor-giant Ascopart.

state in which it was instituted."[38] Scotus notes that the will to seek God independently of God's

help is only possible in the will as it was originally created, not in a will twisted by original sin.

Gowther is doubly kept from seeking God: by his demonic nature and the original sin that is

common to all humans. However, Gowther's will, like the will of all Christians is freed through

God's grace in baptism. Though *Sir Gowther* does not depict baptism as determining behavior,

it does mirror Aquinas's belief that "concupiscence is diminished by baptism so that it is no

longer our master, so also difficulty in doing good and proneness to evil are diminished that a

man may not be overwhelmed by them."[39] Baptism frees the catechumen from enslavement to

sin but it does not affect the will of the catechumen. The will, as Scotus postulates, is free to

seek God and through God's help can become free of concupiscence. Baptism's function, as

Aquinas states, is to perform the act of liberation that allows Gowther to act as he does and will

good as well as evil. Gowther's will is free so that he can choose to deny the heritage that was

imposed upon him, both demonic drives and humanity's original sin. The baptized will is given

the grace to determine an identity independently of any factors, spiritual as well as material.

Even as the romance offers the redemptive message that baptized free will can, through a

long and arduous process, escape concupiscence and evil to achieve a relationship with God, the

depiction of Gowther as everyman with a will free to determine identity also challenges the

notion that heredity and social position alone determine identity. Gowther's adopted role as

knight, as member of the social elite, only reinforces his hereditary identity as monster. Both of

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[38] "concede conclusionem, quod ex puris naturablibus potest quaelibet voluntas, saltem in statu naturae institutae, diligere Deum super omnia." Duns Scotus, *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, selected and trans. Allan B. Wolter (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 438 and 439.

[39] "Sicut tamen per baptismum diminuitur concupiscentia, ut non diminetur, ita etiam diminuitur utrumque istorum, no homo ab his superetur." *Summa Theologicae* 3a, 69, 4.

these can and must be abandoned when Gowther takes on a position at the very lowest fringes of society. Eventually, because of his deeds and religious performance, he is able to claim an even higher position than he originally occupied. In so doing, Gowther's movement appears almost reminiscent of Langland's baptism: the sacrament makes free men, which is a social as well as spiritual identity. Gowther can determine his own identity and is not bound to any particular hereditary or social position, and must, in fact, experience many different forms of social identification – violent knight, fool, virtuous knight, emperor, saint – on the road to salvation. In baptism, he, along with all other members of Christendom, is given the ability to determine his own identity. In establishing a diminished but vital role for baptism in the creation of individual identity, *Sir Gowther* offers a pattern of understanding applicable to the audience, an understanding that at once validated sacramental performance and also encouraged considering the individual will as a means of establishing identity.

Conclusion

The romances that feature baptism in the late fourteenth century offer a much less certain notion of the effects of baptism than their counterparts found in the Auchinleck manuscript from half a century or more earlier. The Auchinleck romances offered a binary of Saracen and Christian. Any attempts to cross that binary required an exclusive baptism, a ritual that called for the catechumen to be subject to Christian authority and to assimilate to European/Christian standards of belief, behavior, and appearance. Such a baptism places chivalric Christendom in a position of authority. The Middle English *Fierabras* romances and *Sir Gowther* were produced at a time when social identification was radically changing, as new elements of society rose to challenge the traditional estates model and social relationships were no longer determined entirely by loyalty and feudal hierarchy. These later romances present a baptism that does not

necessarily reinforce societal notions of identity as applied to the individual. Instead, the

baptism can be used to resist coercive social formations of identity.

Like the Middle English *Fierabras* romances and *Sir Gowther*, overtly religious

narratives of the late fourteenth century also used baptism as a literary trope to explore the

interaction between authoritarian structures and Christian. The diversity of ideas that could be

explored using baptism is even more in evidence among overtly religious texts as the religious

debates of the late fourteenth century come to affect how writers understood their identity as

Christian in relationship to the individual's will, the Church, and social authority.

Chapter Five

Baptismal Equality:

Hagiographic References to Baptism at the end of the Fourteenth Century

In his account of those rebels who instigated the Rising of 1381, the chronicler Thomas

Walsingham paraphrased a sermon by John Ball, an excommunicated priest and ringleader of the

rebels.[1] Walsingham thus describes the subject of Ball's sermon:

> 'When Adam delved, and Eve span,
> Who was then a gentleman?'
> Continuing the sermon he had begun, he endeavored, through the words of this
> saying which he had taken as his text, to introduce and prove the notion that all
> men were by nature created equal from the beginning, and that servitude had been
> brought in wrongly by unjust oppression of human beings, contrary to the will of
> God...[2]

If the chronicle is accurate, Ball's sermon, which might sound prosaic to modern ears, is nothing

short of revolutionary.[3] Though the rebellion was stifled and achieved none of its goals, the

chronicles do provide a glimpse at the way social critiques were expressed. The Sermon

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[1] The Rising of 1381 has previously been known as the Peasant's Revolt, which is something of a misnomer. Rodney Hilton notes the presence of a diverse group of artisans and craftspeople among the rebels. He argues that "those major social grievances acute enough to generate rebellious actions were not the ones that divided the poor from middling and rich peasants, or the laborers from their employers, but rather those which divided the mass of the population from the lords, the lawyers and government officials." Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free* (London: Routledge, 2003), 184. For further information see Christopher Dyer, "The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381," *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 9-42 and A. F. Butcher, "English Urban Society and the Revolt of 1381," *The English Rising of 1381*, 84-111 in the same volume.

[2] "Whan Adam dalf, and Eve span / Who was þanne a gentilman? / Continuansque sermonem inceptum, nitebatur, per uerba prouerbii quod pro themate sumpserat, introducere et probare ab nicio omnes pares creatos a natura, seruitutem per iniustam oppressionem nequam hominum introductam contra Dei uoluntatem..." Walsingham, *The St. Albans Chronicle*, vol. I, 546 and 547.

[3] Hilton sees no reason to doubt that the chroniclers are accurate in expressing the basic notions of the motives and desires behind the rebellion, noting "The demand for freedom was not simply a demand for the advantages of common-law freehold.... More important, it was part of a more general demand for an end to lordship." Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 225. Similarly Dyer describes the rebellion as part of a period in which "we find serfs seeking to assert their freedom, and being thwarted by their lords." Dyer, "Social and Economic Background," 31.

imagines a very different social order, one based upon horizontal relationships in which people from various groups may be equal.[4] The proverbial question that is the theme of Ball's sermon, while not original, does use biblical imagery to justify social reformation.[5] In harkening back to an Edenic paradise in which all people were of the same estate, Ball apparently sought to justify a breaking down and rebuilding of the structures of medieval society. Both nature and the will of God serve as models through which a proper society might be understood. Like texts seeking to uphold the current societal structures of the late medieval period, those dissenting voices turned to biblical or religious exegesis to justify their ideas.

Similarly, an anonymous late fourteenth century sermon also uses the will of God to justify an idea of society, this time the traditional three estates model. Here, propounded from the pulpit, the common medieval image of society was linked to faith and salvation:

> We must also beleue þat euery parte principall of Goddes lawe aftur þe vndirstondying of þe Holygoost is feyȝthfull and trew, y-ordeynd for mans saluacion.... And farþur we must beleue þat þoo þinges þat ben in þe mater of feyȝthe determined by Cristes Church ben trewe, and suche determynacions and ordinaunce, to obeye þem, for it is Cristes commaundement.... And so it were ryght sittyng þat euery man held hym content to common [things which are common to a community] in maters of ys faculte, policy, and gouernance, so þat knyȝthes and oþur gentils with hem shuld sett her besines abowte þe good gouernaunce in þe temperalltee in þe tyme of pees and also abowte diuers poyntes of armes in þe tyme of were.... Prestes shuld principally entermet to lern þe lawe of Criste and lawfully to teche itt. And lower men shuld hold hem contente with þe questions and þe sotelte of þer own labour.[6]

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[4] I borrow the language of horizontal versus hierarchical relationships from Paul Strohm. Strohm describes a shift in society that occurs as a reaction to the rise of the merchants and gentry as well as a shift towards monetary rather than oath-based relationships. See Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 1-21.

[5] Though the two line proverb appears in England in the late fourteenth century, the basic idea of going back to Eden for societal understanding has a long tradition. See Sylvia Resnikow, "The Cultural History of a Democratic Proverb," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 36 no. 3 (July, 1937): 391-405.

[6] "Sermon 39," *Middle English Sermons*, 223-24.

Individuals were advised to remain content in the estate to which they were born. To fulfill

one's own role within one's estate is equivalent to a religious duty. God's law, the ultimate

authority, insists on a delegation of earthly authority to certain individuals and groups. Those

with authority are held to certain standards, and the sermon goes on to offer extended critiques of

the first two estates. Both the clergy and the nobility must reform their behavior if all are to exist

harmoniously and in God's will. Despite such calls to reform, the sermon implies that the basic

structure of society is immutable and inherently good. The sermon depicts the orthodox,

conservative view of societal identification that was still alive in England at the end of the

fourteenth century despite the drastic social changes that were occurring. Like John Ball's

sermon, the sermon relies on a spiritual justification for a particular form of social order.

It should come as no surprise then, that during the tumultuous final decades of the

fourteenth century, when both of the above texts were written, depictions of baptism, even in

overtly religious contexts, can be related to the shifting notions of societal structures. Baptism's

diachronic function as an essential rite of passage that incorporated individuals into the

community of Christendom made it a useful trope in these religious texts. Focusing on baptism

as a ritual with social ramifications distinguishes later hagiographic texts from the earlier *South*

English Legendary. In the *South English Legendary,* baptismal narratives, while still addressing

the social impact of the sacrament, were more focused on the catechumen him or herself. While

the three texts to be discussed here vary considerably in terms of philosophy, emphasis, and

possible goals, baptism is consistently depicted as having social impact. John Mirk's *Festial*, a

series of sermons that, like the *South English Legendary*, retells numerous saints' lives,

highlights the divine effect the sacrament has upon the catechumen. Mirk uses a divinely

sanctioned baptism to justify an attitude similar to the one expressed in the anonymous sermon

quoted above: that performing the role one was born into was a religious obligation. John Gower uses the story of Constantine's baptism as the conclusion to the second book of his *Confessio Amantis*. Gower's portrayal of baptism emphasizes the human somatic situation, a precursor to the essential value of pity. However, Gower, like Mirk, seeks to maintain the traditional social order. Even as his portrayal of baptism evokes a notion of pity as a universal human value, his work attempts to neutralize baptism's threat to the freedom of authority necessary for the king to enact justice. Finally, the Middle English alliterative poem *St. Erkenwald* focuses on all the baptismal elements – divine effect, administrator, catechumen, and ritual – in its depiction of a miraculous baptism that incorporates a historic other into Christendom. Similar to Gower's baptism, *St. Erkenwald*'s justifies a form of justice that transcends estate as an essential element of Christian society. Each of the three texts is radically different from the others. However, all deal with baptism as a diachronic sacrament that can incorporate and justify a certain societal ideal as being natural to Christendom. When associated with social understanding, the trope of baptism can maintain, reform, or even destabilize the very institution of Christendom it perpetuates.

The Gift of Determined Identity: Baptism in John Mirk's *Festial*

John Mirk's *Festial*, a tool for preaching to lay people, illustrates how lay audiences might have understood baptism as a means of constructing their own identities in a socially conservative framework. The *Festial*, like Mirk's other Middle English poetic work, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, was designed to help relatively uneducated priests preach to their uneducated parishes. Written in the late 1380s, the collection of sermons proved quite popular. Drawing upon stories from the *Legenda aurea* as well as church ritual and tradition, the sermons

offer insight into the sort of information and guidance being offered to lay audiences.[7] Utterly

orthodox, the text seeks to make firm the role of the Church within the lay person's life. Judy

Ann Ford, in her extended study of Mirk's work and its responses to the social pressures of the

late fourteenth century, particularly the rise of Wycliffite thought and political rebellion, argues

that "Mirk's sermons celebrate lay agency, yet they subsume that agency into a larger structure

of clerical dependence."[8] The agency appears in the individual's direct contact with God,

contact that does not conflict with church authority. When baptism appears in the text, it appears

to serve a very different function than one might suppose, reading Ford's argument. Like the

South English Legendary, the baptismal narratives in Mirk's work offer a model by which the

audience might understand their mundane and earthly lives as integrated into spiritual existence.

However, unlike the *South English Legendary*, Mirk's narratives stress the ecclesiastical nature

of sacramental performance and the spiritual effects of the sacrament on the catechumen. Those

effects help determine the baptized's role in both the church and society.

    Mirk defends the necessity of baptism as a sacrament against notions that salvation could

be achieved outside the structures of the church. In his sermon for the Feast of the Holy

Innocents, Mirk notes that a catechumen can be brought to salvation through baptism by water,

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[7] Date and manuscript information derived from Susan Powell, Introduction to *John Mirk's Festial*, by John Mirk, ed. Susan Powell, EETS OS 334, vol. 1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xix-lix. See also Martin F. Wakelin, "The Manuscripts of John Mirk's *Festial*," *Leeds Studies in English* 1 (1967): 93-118 and H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 276-78 and 311-20. Spencer uses the manuscript information from the fifteenth century to suggest not only the continued popularity of the *Festial* but also to argue for a degree of competition between the *Festial* as an orthodox work and the collected Lollard Sermons as each seemed to be of equal popularity and was copied continuously throughout the same time period. As to the date of the text, Alan J. Fletcher notes that Mirk's work "should be regarded as the product of the same decade [the 1380's] as saw the public condemnation of Wycliffe [sic] and the growing unease of the orthodox establishment with the content and implication of Wycliffite thought." Alan J. Fletcher, "John Mirk and the Lollards," *Medium Aevum* 56 no. 2 (1987): 220.

[8] Judy Ann Ford, *John Mirk's "Festial": Orthodoxy, Lollardy, and the Common People in Fourteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 33.

blood, or faith. The Holy Innocents, infants killed by King Herod in his efforts to kill the Christ

child, were baptized in blood:

> þey weren also folwed [baptized] in hure same, þat ys, in hure owne blod, in no
> font but in schedyng of hure blod. Wherefor ȝe shul vnderstond þat folth
> [baptism] cometh þre ways: in watur, as we crysten men ben folwed in þe font
> ston at þe chyrch; in schedyng of blod, as þese children and mony þowsand of
> oþur martyres þat schedden hure blod for Crystes loue; þe þrydde folþe ys in
> feyth, in þe which feyth al patriarchus and prophetus and al oþur holy fadres þat
> weren byfore Crystes incarnacyon, þat leueden in Cristes comyng, þey weren
> folwed in þe folþe of feyth.[9]

Here Mirk deals with the problematic idea that baptism was not absolutely necessary for

salvation. Even as Aquinas noted that desire for baptism could be enough to achieve the effect

of the sacrament, Wyclif also theorized that the effect of the ritual, what he called baptism by

fire, could be achieved without the actual ritual.[10] Where Wyclif understood baptism of faith to

be the true means of entering the spiritual church and an event that could occur independently of

the physical sacrament, Mirk positions such a spiritual baptism in the distant past before Christ's

coming and firmly beyond the realm of the his audiences. The historical period in which the

ritual of baptism was unnecessary has passed. Now physical baptism and martyrdom are the

only avenues available for salvation. Mirk further suggests that physical baptism unites the

audience being addressed and the speaker. The reference to the font stone further grounds the

experience of the audience as being common to their culture but different from the patriarchs and

martyrs. Mirk acknowledges the philosophical idea that there are three forms of baptism but

denies that baptism by fire/faith is accessible to current believers. To be a Christian, one was

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[9] John Mirk, *John Mirk's Festial*, ed. Susan Powell, EETS OS 334, 2 vols. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), 37. All quotations from the *Festial* will be from this edition and will be cited with an abbreviated title and page numbers in parentheses.

[10] For Wyclif's understanding of baptism see John Wycliffe, "Trialogus," *Tracts and Treatises of John de Wycliffe*, 159.

required to participate and perform religious rituals within the structure of the church. Baptism,

as a sacrament of the church, could not be replaced, and so created a united community of those

christened. Through his discussion of baptism, Mirk tries to ensure that his audience will not

consider alternative notions that Christian identification or salvation could be achieved outside of

the established ecclesiastic hierarchy.

Later in the *Festial*, Mirk uses a miraculous baptismal event to support further the belief

that the sacrament is divinely sanctioned and unquestionable, a feature which allows Mirk to use

it to support a traditional model of society free from any threat of dissent. At the end of his

sermon for the Eve of Pentecost, a holiday traditionally set aside for baptism, Mirk offers a brief

miracle story designed to "styr ʒoure deuocion þe more to þis holy sacrament" (*Festial*, 146).

The story describes the baptism of King Clovis of France by Saint Remy. Because of the crowd,

the saint's assistant cannot deliver the chrism which would be used in this instance to sanctify the

newly-made font. To ensure a proper ceremony, Remy prays to God and a miracle occurs:

> anon þer com fleying fro heven in sight of alle þe pepul a clovyr [dove] as whyte
> os mylke, beryng in hyr bill a fial ful of crème to þe byschop. And whan he
> opynned þat fyal, þer com oute so sote [aromatic] a smel þat alle þe pepul was
> gretly wondred þerof and was gretly comforted þerby, and last so til alle þe seruis
> was don. Hereby ʒe may know wel, þaw þe prest say þe wordys, þe Holy Gost
> wyrcheth þe sacrament and doth þe vertu of þe wordys be hallowing of þat þe
> prest sayth in hering.
>
> <div align="right">(Festial, 146)</div>

The baptism used to illustrate the power of the sacrament is a public one, a feature which

associates the sacrament with society at large. Similarly, the smell of the chrism oil permeates

the crowd, further uniting the people in their appreciation of the sacrament. More importantly,

the minor miracle is offered as proof that the sacrament is not an earthly event. Rather, the

sacrament is a divine miracle through which God works. The miracle here specifically involves

the chrism used to hallow the font, an element of the sacrament not strictly necessary during an emergency baptism but a standard feature of the sacrament as performed by a priest at a church. Mirk's choice of baptismal miracles emphasizes the sacrament as structured and performed within the church.[11] The emphasis thus falls upon the ritual of the sacrament as divinely justified and upon God's own role in conferring grace. Mirk links God's sanctification with church ritual, effectively maintaining the clergy's authority despite noting that God empowers the sacrament and despite the fact that baptism could be performed by anyone in the case of an emergency. By using a miracle that emphasizes the links between God, the role of the clergy, and the sacraments, Mirk takes a decidedly anti-Lollard position, making baptism a sign of orthodox Christian identity. Further, the miracle also implies that God approves of the effects of baptism that are discussed before the illustrative narrative.

Mirk's narrative serves to prove that his description of baptism, as a source of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, is theologically sound; however, in so doing, Mirk defends an image of baptism as the means by which one's identity and subsequently one's estate are pre-determined by God. Earlier in the sermon for the Eve of Pentecost, Mirk describes each of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.[12] He explains that different individuals receive different types and different quantities of these gifts, gifts that sometimes determine that individual's place within society: "Somme a ȝeuyth grace of wisdom and makyth hem clerkys and wyse in holy scripture, and ȝefeth hem so grete sauoure and lykyng þerine, þat þei ben lusty to prechyn and techen þe vertu and þe grace þat þei felon þerine" (*Festial*, 144). Some are given gifts that lend themselves and their

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[11] In *Instructions to Parish Priests*, Mirk's other work, he stresses only the bare essentials needed for baptism.

[12] Mirk's list of the gifts of the Holy Spirit – wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, learning, pity, and fear of the Lord – is ultimately derived from Isaiah 11: 2-3.

recipients to participate in the clergy. Those destined to be clerks are subtly different from those mentioned later to whom "he ȝeueth also grace of diuerse sciens [knowledge] in lernyng of diuerse craftys, and somme to lerne one and somme anoþer, so þat vche man hath be ȝefte of þe Holy Gost grace to lerne a sciens be þe wyche he may geton hys lyflode [livelihood] in trewth" (*Festial*, 145). The gift of learning is designed to ensure people know how to work for a living. The diversity of crafts comes from the lord and produces a diversity of livelihoods. Mirk depicts the gifts as the means to determine where and how an individual will live his or her life. Different livelihoods, determined by God's gifts, find their origins in baptism: "And þese [gifts] þe Holy Goste assyneth to vche man in tyme of hys christening. Wherefore þe byschopp whan he confermeth chyldryn þat ben follod [baptism], he rehersyth þeis ȝeftys, praying þe Holy Goste to confermyn hem aftur in here lyving þat be assyned to ham in here cristening" (*Festial*, 146). In baptism, God gives gifts that determine individuals' mode of life and, by extension, identity. The language of 'assigning' implies that the individual is powerless in determining his or her identity in the face of the divinely sanctioned sacrament. By determining individual identity, baptism serves to stabilize social disorder. It suggests that identity, including livelihood and by extension social position, is determined by God and should not be questioned or denied. Baptism receives divine sanction, and serves as a sign of the stability of individual identity.

Mirk's rendition of the narrative of St. Paul's conversion and baptism further reinforces the authority of the clergy and the belief that God determines identity. Starting with Paul being struck blind on his way to Damascus, Mirk stresses a personal relationship between Paul and God. When Christ first appears, Mirk explains why Christ identifies himself as he does: "But for þey leueden þat he [Christ] was ryson fro deth to lyue, þerfore Saul pursued hem [Christians] most and sayde þat þey leuedon on a ded mon, herfore oure Lord Ihesu sayde: Y am Ihesu of

Nasareth, þat ys þe name of hys monhed. þen leuede Sual on hym anon" (*Festial*, 52). Mirk explains that Christ focuses on Paul's particular area of misbelief and is aware of Paul's particularly failings. Ford analyzes Paul's conversion along with other moments in the text to argue that "In these narratives, all Christians are able to speak to Christ directly. They will be saved or damned by their own actions."[13] Ford explains that such personal contact with God does not preclude the church's authority or usefulness. Individuals must still go to priests for confession if they are to be forgiven or, as in this case, undergo baptism.

Though the actual description of Paul's baptism does not suggest any radical interpretation of the sacrament, Paul's preaching immediately following his baptism implies that his baptism granted him a particular place within Christian society. As in the original biblical text, Paul is healed, then baptized, and then begins to preach the gospel: "And when he [Ananias] hadde folwod hym, he kalled hym Poule.... And þen he [Paul] wente into þe temple and opunly preched of Ihesu Cryst, preuyng clerkly þat he was Crist and non oþur" (*Festial*, 53). The sacrament appears to do little besides allow for a name change. Compared to the impressive contact that Paul has had with God, the sacrament appears almost inconsequential. However, Paul preaches the gospel 'clerkly.' Though the adverb may refer to Paul's education, it also suggests his ability to speak as a member of the clergy.[14] Paul's baptism coincides with his taking up clerical duties, which fits the description of baptism bestowing the gift of wisdom on those meant to be clerks in the sermon on the Eve of Pentecost. Paul's position within the clergy is connected with conversion and baptism. Like the gift of learning is given by the Holy Spirit at baptism, Paul's knowledge comes directly from God. While Paul is waiting in Damascus to be

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[13] Ford, *Orthodoxy, Lollardy, and the Common People,* 51.

[14] *MED*, s.v. 'clerk,' definitions 1 and 2.

healed of his blindness, "Þe Holy Gost taght hym Crystes lawe" (*Festial*, 53). Paul's ability and authority to preach come from God as does his place in the structure of the church. In describing Paul's transformation, Mirk compares Paul and the unicorn.[15] As the unicorn is violent but bows to the maiden, so Paul was wild but bowed to the church: "Seynt Poule was furst so ferus and prowd þat þer durst no preacher dele with hym. But when God schewed hym þys maydon, þat ys þe feyth of Holy Chyrche, anon he fel doun of hys pride and was sympul and meke and suget to al cryston seruans" (*Festial*, 53-54). Part of the miracle of Paul's conversion was his meekness and humility: not a particularly controversial description of the event. However, Mirk draws attention to Paul's relationship to representatives of the church both before and after his conversion. Before, priests could not come near him. After his conversion and baptism, he is "subject to all Christian servants." While 'Christian servants' could easily refer to all Christian people, the parallel structure between these servants and the preachers who could not deal with Paul before his conversion suggests that Paul is subject to the clergy. Through his conversion and baptism, Paul is no longer outside the church structure but rather within it. His simplicity and meekness are Christian virtues and allow him to hear preachers, serve them, and function as one of them. Paul's conversion and baptism, as events that transcend their original historic position, are designed to be examples for the audience and reinforce the notion that accepting ecclesiastical authority is an inherent part of Christian identity.

Mirk mentions baptism several other times throughout the *Festial*, though such references are often in passing as saints are converted or convert others. Yet, neither the idea that baptism can determine identity nor the idea that baptism positions the individual within the ecclesiastical

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[15] While Mirk attributes the comparison to St. Augustine, Powell notes that the actual source of the comparison is unknown. See Susan Powell, explanatory notes to *John Mirk's Festial*, 301 n 85-96.

structure is ever called into question. Rather, Mirk affirms baptism as necessary for salvation,

combating notions concerning the sacraments made popular by John Wyclif. But Mirk goes

further than simply defending the importance of the sacrament. He depicts baptism as a tool

through which his audiences may understand their identities as determined by God through

church ritual. In this way, baptism could function as a means to quell the possible desires among

Mirk's audiences to understand society as John Ball might have. Walsingham records a minor

miracle that supposedly occurred during the Rising of 1381, in which the seal of St. Alban

refused to adhere to a charter granting the villeins of the town liberty. "It was as though the wax

knew assuredly that the martyr [St. Alban] did not wish the villeins to be the masters, but wished

himself to be lord over them as had been so up till then."[16] The saint advocates that traditional

societal structures continue, and he condemns as unrighteous a desire to have the individual

determine his or her own identity. Mirk's depiction of baptism is similar to the minor miracle of

the wax seal in Walsingham's chronicle: both maintain a social structure in which identity was

not fluid. Baptism functions as a symbol for identity that is stable and God-given. The depiction

of baptism could serve to limit and squelch desires like those that motivated the rebels in 1381

even as it affirms the value of the orthodox church in the face of the growing Wycliffite

movement. Ford's suggestion that Mirk seeks to empower lay people within the Church

structure does not take into account how carefully the sermons work to limit and direct the little

authority to which lay people may have access.[17]

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[16] "prenosticans produldubio martirem nolle eos fore dominos, set uelle dominari, ut hactenus, super eos." Walsingham, *The St. Albans Chronicle*, vol. I, 472 and 473.

[17] Ford compares the potential for both Mirk and Lollard texts to be put to radical uses and argues that "the representations in Mirk's sermons, in some instances, may have had even more radical potential and thus exercised even more popular attraction, even though, in the ideologies of both Mirk and the Lollards, that radical potential

Though Mirk may show the lay person coming into contact with God, contact actually strips those lay people of their agency. Instead, baptism affirms that lay people are dependent on the clergy and that they should accept the roles given to them in life. Mirk's baptism stands in stark contrast to that found in *Sir Gowther*, which celebrated free will as produced in baptism. Mirk is able to use baptism because of the sacrament's diachronic function of incorporating the individual into Christendom. Mirk assumes that incorporation comes along with a pre-determined position in society. Where other depictions of baptism, like that found in *Sir Gowther*, may explore new ways of understanding social structure, Mirk limits interpretation of baptism to solidify society and the individual's place within it.

An Emperor's Pity: The Baptism of Constantine in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*

Mirk's *Festial* offers its audience a baptism that makes their role in society clear by exploring the spiritual effects of the ritual. In contrast, John Gower is less concerned with the ritual as a means for God to touch the catechumen, than with the catechumen's will as it is affected by a specific understanding of the sacrament as a universal experience. John Gower retells the story of the Emperor Constantine's baptism in his Middle English work, *Confessio Amantis.* Begun around 1386 and revised several times, *Confessio Amantis* is structured as a confessional in which a victim of unrequited love, Amans, confesses his sin to a spiritual confessor, Genius.[18] As Amans complains of his situation, Genius describes each of the deadly sins and their counterpart virtues, illustrating each description with various narratives. Despite

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needed to be restrained from bursting forth into rebellion against legitimately constituted secular leadership." Ford, *Orthodoxy, Lollardy, and the Common People*, 85. I agree with Ford that Mirk's work does advocate maintaining the status quo of English society; however, in terms of baptism, at least, Ford does not recognize how the conservatism in Mirk's work offers a means of controlling and derailing any radical spirit within its audience.

[18] Date and other background information from Russell A. Peck, Introduction to *Confessio Amantis*, by John Gower, ed. Russell A. Peck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), xi-xiii, xxx-xxxiii.

the apparent personal issues at stake, the poem contains much social commentary, particularly in the prologue, which describes the three estates in much the same way as the anonymous sermon quoted above. Like the sermon, Gower calls for the clergy and nobles to reform so that all may live in peace. The story of Constantine's baptism appears at the very end of the second book, dedicated to the sin of envy. Both Russell A. Peck and Peter Nicholson note in their analyses of Gower's work that envy is a social sin.[19] Constantine's baptism serves as the climax of a narrative of education, in which the emperor learns to value the idea of human commonality. The complexities of Gower's rendition of the story of St. Sylvester and Constantine in the *Confessio Amantis* offer baptism as emblematic of the universal nature of mankind. In accepting baptism, Constantine has accepted that he must employ pity in his relations with all humans if he is to rule properly. While such a lesson seems quite reformist, Gower concludes the narrative in such a way as to stress the danger of taking the lesson of baptism too far. To be too merciful, to see all humans as equal, is to lose the will to maintain social structures. Throughout his work, Gower struggles to devise a mode of justice proper for a king. In Constantine's baptism, Gower struggles with the notion that God's mercy is universal, a value a king should share but only to a certain extent. Gower finds baptism problematic since it at once allows Constantine to see all people as sharing common traits but in so doing threatens to diminish the value of social boundaries.

The brief narrative of Constantine's baptism offers a unique opportunity to consider the role of baptism and the king's mercy in establishing a Christian society. The story begins with the Roman emperor afflicted with leprosy. The emperor's wise men declare that he can be cured

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[19] Russell A. Peck, "The Phenomenology of Make Believe in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Studies in Philology* 91 no. 3 (Summer, 1994): 250-69. See especially 260-61. Peter Nicholson, *Love and Ethics in Gower's "Confessio Amantis"* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). See especially 174-78.

if he bathes in the blood of children. Constantine gives orders to round up children from the

countryside. Before he begins the slaughter, he hears the lamenting mothers and children who

are gathered outside of his window. According to Jacobus in the *Legenda aurea*, Constantine

declares that a sense of piety prevents him from killing the children.[20] Gower gives pity as the

reason that Constantine spares the children. Constantine decides to endure his physical ailment

and sends the children and mothers away with lavish gifts. The following night, Peter and Paul

appear to Constantine in a dream and tell him to be baptized by St. Sylvester. Constantine agrees

and has Sylvester brought to him. After Sylvester explains the tenets of faith, Constantine is

baptized and, through his baptism, is miraculously healed of his leprosy. He commands that all

Rome should be made Christian and gives much of his wealth to the church. Before he has

Amans return to the virtue of pity, Gower concludes his narrative with a voice from heaven

condemning Constantine's donation as a poison that will corrupt the Church. In Gower's

rendition, baptism stands not only as a ritual of conversion but also as a symbol for

understanding the human condition, an understanding linked to the virtue of pity.

Constantine's path to baptism begins when he recognizes the commonality of the human

condition. After gathering together the children whose blood will supposedly cure him of his

leprosy, the emperor is awoken one night by the cries of the children and their mothers. Upon

seeing them he comments on the universal nature of somatic existence:

> The povere is bore as is the riche
> And deieth in the same wise,

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[20] Jacobus, "St. Sylvester," *The Golden Legend*, 64. Ryan offers a note on 'piety,' explaining that it refers to a Roman virtue of devotion and kindness. Andrew Galloway explains that "The word *pietas* is invariably translated by Gower in the *Confessio Amantis* (as the Latin glosses show) as "pity" rather than "piousness" or "dutiful respect," the classical and earlier medieval Latin sense." Andrew Galloway, "The Literature of 1388 and the Politics of Pity in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *The Letter of the Law: Legal Practice and Literary Production in Medieval England*, ed. Emily Steiner and Candace Barrington (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 86.

> Upon the fol, upon the wise
> Sikness and hele entrecomune [find common entrance];
> Mai non eschuie that fortune
> Which kinde [nature] hath in hire lawe set;
> ...
> And ek of Soule reasonable
> The povere schild is bore als able
> To vertu as the kings Sone.[21]

Constantine notes several points of diversity among people – some are rich or poor, wise or foolish – but he focuses on elements that unite people: all are subject to somatic existence and all possess reason. These universal qualities drive him to recognize that his own worth is not greater than any other man's, making him subject to the law of *kinde*, just like everyone else.[22] A little later in the same speech, Constantine recognizes a third universal quality of humanity, the will. Constantine considers "For every man his oghne wone [in his own manner] / After the lust of his assay [experience] / The vice or vertu chese may. / Thus stonden alle men franchised / Bot in astat thei ben divised; / ... / Bot yit as every man deserveth / The world yifth noght his yiftes hiere" (*Confessio*, 2.3263-64, 3268-69). All are "franchised" in that they can will either good or evil. Gower's text is one of the first, along with the C-text of *Piers Plowman*, to use

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[21] John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 149 (*Confessio*, 2.3246-51, 3257-59). All quotes from the *Confessio Amantis* will be derived from this edition and will be cited with an abbreviated title, book number, and line numbers.

[22] Several critics have noted the importance of *kinde* to Gower's work, particularly as the poet's means of explaining how natural law precedes and informs human morality. That the natural world can work to draw the individual closer to God suggests an inclusive Christian attitude. Through baptism, Constantine's understanding of moral law derived from nature can be translated into Christian morality. While such inclusion is quite interesting, I am more concerned with the social implications of Constantine's recognition of *kinde* in conjunction with his baptism. For more on the use of *kinde* in Gower's rendition of the story of St. Sylvester and Constantine, see Russell A. Peck, *Kingship & Common Profit in Gower's "Confessio Amantis"* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), especially 74-78 and Kurt Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the "Confessio Amantis"* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), especially Chapters 7, "Pride, Passion, and Kinde," 73-91, and 8, "Constance and the Argument Ad Motum," 92-106. For other explorations of kinde, see Peter Goodall, "'Unkynde abhomynaciouns' in Chaucer and Gower," *Parergon* 5 (1987): 94-102 and Hugh White, "Nature and the Good in Gower's Confessio Amantis," *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 1989), 1-20.

"franchise" in English, a word carried over from Old French, meaning 'to make free.'[23]

Franchised will is set against the estate each individual finds him or herself within, and that

position, like wealth or wisdom, is not based upon what the individual deserves.[24] The will is

universal: all are subjects rather than objects despite differences in social standing. In

recognizing universals that transcend social situation – the body, soul, and will – Constantine

understands himself united with his people. He is a king, subject to nature. As such, he knows

that he should recognize the humanity all people share and have pity.

Constantine's decision to have pity is first produced by recognizing a universal human

condition, but it is later reflected in God's own sense of justice as described by the pope, St.

Sylvester. Saint Sylvester teaches Constantine, as he would any catechumen, that social status

will have no bearing when God judges the individual:

> Whan time comth, the qwike and dede
> At thilke woful dai of drede,
> Where every man schal take his dom,
> Als wel the Maister as the grom
> ...
> Ther mai no gold the Jugge plie,
> That he ne schal the soothe trie
> And setten every man upriht,
> Als wel the plowman as the kniht:
> The lewed man, the grete clerk
> Schal stond upon his oghne werk,
> And such as he is founde tho,
> Such schal he be for everemo.
>
> (*Confessio*, 2.3405-09, 3419-26)

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[23] See *OED*, s.v. 'franchise,' *v*, Etymology. Similarly, the Middle English Dictionary records that later uses of the word describe social freedom or participation within a guild, among other meanings. *MED*, s.v. 'fraunchīsen,' definitions 1 (c) and 2 (b), (c), and (d).

[24] Gifts and the position of the individual within an estate are imperfect gifts of the world in Gower, a depiction that is in contrast with Mirk's use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit to imply that such individual identities are divinely bestowed.

God's judgment will correct accidents of birth or station, accounting for each individual

according to individual behavior. When placed in the context of Constantine's earlier speech,

the fact that all men are to be made equal before God becomes more immediately important. As

everyone gathers to be judged, the listing of various social positions recalls Constantine's earlier

recognition of humanity's common somatic condition. Gower suggests that knowledge of

universal judgment independent of earthly status affects behavior by linking that judgment to the

same universality of humanity that drove Constantine toward charitable behavior. God's

judgment is associated with *kinde*'s law, and baptism stands between the two universalizing

philosophies. Despite the language of judgment, such ideas about humanity's commonality are

equally applicable to baptism's role as a sign of God's universal mercy and pity. Constantine

learns to behave in a manner that does not assume the inherent value of social distinction, but

rather comes to understand pity as applicable to all.

Gower depicts Constantine's baptism as the culmination of all that the emperor has

learned: of the need to recognize universal humanity and to be merciful to all, both of which

reflect aspects of God's own justice. After Constantine learns about Christianity as a

catechumen, he eagerly embraces baptism: "Unto Silvestre he thane ansuerde, / With al his hole

herte and seith / That he is redi to the faith. / And so the vessel which for blod / Was mad,

Silvestre, ther it stod, / With clene water of the welle / In alle haste he let do felle, / And sette

Constantin therinne / Al naked up unto the chinne" (*Confessio*, 2.3442-50). Gower adapts the

story as told by Jacobus so that the baptismal font is the same vessel that Constantine had made

for his blood-bath.[25] This additional detail allows Gower's audience to compare the two bathing

moments. In the first, Constantine was to restore his health by abusing his authority and

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[25] Jacobus, "St. Sylvester," *The Golden Legend*, 65.

demanding the lives of others. Here, he submits himself to Sylvester and to God and is pitied by

God even as he pitied the children. Sylvester occupies the position of subject. The pope has the

bath filled and he sets Constantine in the font. Though it is unlikely Gower is implying that

Sylvester literally placed Constantine in the bath, the text does infantilize Constantine as the

naked, passive recipient of the sacrament. The position is humbling and thus reveals that

Constantine is not superior to other Christians. Baptism serves as a strong reminder of the

human solidarity Constantine earlier contemplated. The sacrament represents God's universal

pity, and it reminds the catechumen of his or her somatic existence. As the same bath that was to

be used for the children's blood, it reminds Constantine that a ruler needs to have mercy on all

regardless of social status in order to be a recipient of God's mercy.

Baptism becomes a powerful symbol that combines the notion that humans are all equal

in many ways with the need for those in power to recognize that notion in order to behave

mercifully. However, such ideas about human commonality are not uniformly positive within

the narrative. They can cause problems because they limit the ruler's will to maintain social

order. Gower concludes the narrative with two events following Constantine's baptism: the

conversion of Rome and Constantine's donation to the church. The first of these has Constantine

utilize his prerogative as ruler to guide the will of the people: "Tho knew this Emperour in dede /

That Cristes feith was forto drede, / And sende anon his letters oute / And let do crien al aboute, /

Up peine of deth noman weyve / That he baptesme ne receive: /After his Modor qweene Heleine

/ He send, and so between hem tweine / Thei treten, the Cite all / Was cristned" (*Confessio*,

2.3467-74). That Constantine threatens death to force conversion is not questioned or

condemned. Constantine, in sending his letters, is able to will his subjects' conversion. The

situation may initially appear morally ambiguous: the threat of violence and the earlier notion

that all individuals are given free will seem to suggest that Constantine's use of authority is not as laudable as it might seem.[26] Yet Constantine is emperor and has the authority to guide his people's will. Though he may be equal with his subjects in terms of their shared universal humanity, Constantine retains his position to determine what is good for the city. Further, Constantine's decision is preceded by recognition of God's own power. Constantine sees God's authority and emulates it in a way that is neither unnatural nor unsuitable within the text.

Constantine's second act after being baptized, however, is condemned and reveals the dangers of taking the notion of religious devotion and human commonality under God too far. Constantine's baptism made him subject to God's law. Constantine decides to continue the process by dedicating his worldly position and wealth to the church, which represents God on earth. However, such an impulse actually taints Christendom:

> This Emperour, which hele hath founde
> Withinne Rome anon let founde
> Two cherces, whiche he dede make
> For Peter and for Poules sake,
> Of whom he hadde avisioun
> And yaf therto possessioun
> Of lordschipe and worldes good.
> But how so that his will was good
> Toward the Pope and his Franchise,
> Yit hath it proved other wise,
> To se the worchinge of the dede:
> For in Cronique this I rede;
> Anon as he hath mad the yifte,
> A vois was herd on hih the lifte,
> Of which al Rome was adrad,
> And seith: 'Today is venym schad
> In holi cherche of temporal,
> Which medleth with the spiritual.'
>
> (*Confessio*, 2.3477, 3475-92)

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[26] Gower develops the question of the proper use of violence in Book Four, which deals with the sin of wrath, particularly in *Confessio*, 4.2492-2515.

Constantine, whose health stemmed from recognizing that all people deserve mercy and from baptism, extends his own conversion to his 'lordship' and his 'worldes good.' He converts both into tools for the church. Kurt Olsson argues that the problem with the donation derives from assuming the universal value of natural law: "The sharing is natural, but so too is the confusion, for... it originates in natural law itself, and specifically in the inheritance of the fall and a *natura lapsa*. For all that this tale articulates about a good in nature, just as important is what it does not explicitly develop."[27] Olsson is correct that Constantine's mistake is in confusing how to apply different types of law. However, it is not natural law that proves problematic, but divine mercy. The natural law that drove Constantine to have mercy is mirrored in divine justice. While both are valuable and must influence the king, to subjugate the king's authority to God's earthly representative, the church, is to break down social order. Rather than retaining his position of lordship and using it to help the church in the realm of the political, as he did when he commanded all people in the city to undergo baptism, he gives the church power and wealth. The unnatural mixing of the estates corrupts the church and eventually makes it more difficult for society to function properly. Since the donation is linked to Constantine's health, restored by baptism, the text implies the dangers of the universal pity symbolized in that sacrament. Baptism has the potential to link human and divine mercy. It can also break down the boundaries between bodily and spiritual matters and between estates. Taking these ideas of baptism as a model for society leads the ruler to make unwise decisions that may seem holy but are actually detrimental to society.

Gower's work suggests a concern with baptism because the sacrament is linked to the politically dangerous virtue of pity. Conrad van Dijk explores the notion of justice as a political

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[27] Olsson, *Structures of Conversion*, 105.

issue in the court of Richard II and as an issue for Gower. He notes that "the Statute of Pardons

of 1390 was part of a larger attempt to curtail the king's power of pardoning. Gower likewise

seems wary of such excessive use of the king's privileges."[28] Issuing pardons, having pity on the

accused, was a privilege of the king and could be used to preserve justice if the lower courts

failed. However, it could easily disrupt justice and throw society into turmoil. Similarly,

Andrew Galloway offers a historical analysis of Gower's definition of pity that draws

extensively upon the feuds between the king and parliament. Galloway argues, "charged as it

became with enormous political and legal power, pity was a threat as well as a binding social

ethic. Gower articulated both, and tried...to disentangle them."[29] Far from being a universal

good, as it appears in most of the narrative of Constantine, pity is actually quite problematic for

Gower. In Constantine's baptism, Gower articulates a particular problem with pity, the potential

to confuse the ruler's need to enact consistent justice within societal structures with God's

universal notions of mercy that is applicable to all humans. Pity was of historical importance

during a time when the king seemed to vacillate between being too forgiving and too cruel.

Gower suggests that baptism is a reminder of the king's equality with other men and his

dependence upon God's pity, things the king should know. However, in adopting such ideas, the

king, like Richard II, can abuse his authority and actually endanger society.

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[28] Conrad van Dijk, "Giving Each His Due: Langland, Gower, and the Question of Equity," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 no. 3 (July, 2009): 331.

[29] Galloway, "The Literature of 1388 and the Politics of Pity," 104. In a similar study, focused more on literary than historical texts Yoshiko Kobayashi comes to a similar conclusion: "pity in Gower's poetry is a protean notion; it sometimes denotes weakness of mind... which may lead to the king's failure to perform his judicial functions; or it can be used in the sense of manifestation of – rather than an internal restraint upon – royal power, which may be put to both proper and improper use." Yoshiko Kobayashi, "*Principis Umbra*: Kingship, Justice, and Pity in John Gower's Poetry," *On John Gower: Essays at the Millennium*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 91.

All men are, in certain ways, equal according to Gower's rendition of Constantine's baptism, and a ruler must acknowledge that fact if he or she is to act justly. However, the king must consider the roles of each estate and the hierarchy of authority when making other decisions. In order to be properly just, the king must retain his authority and not give it away. In this text, baptism serves as a symbol for pity, pity that is equally applicable to all people. Thus the sacrament also serves as a reminder for the commonality of all people, a function that is reminiscent of Chaucer's use of baptism. However, such a meaning for baptism creates a particular difficulty for Gower. In the lead-up to Constantine's baptism, the emperor's attitude seems to mirror John Ball's, as both seem to suggest that the estates are not natural or godly. However, in *Vox Clamantis*, Gower offers a dream vision that compares the rebels of 1381 to beasts, particularly beasts that have broken with the natural order of things: farm animals become predators and chickens take the talons and beaks of eagles and hawks.[30] Gower uses his poetic metaphors to argue that the rebels have subverted the divine structure of the world, challenging both nature and God. In developing this baptismal narrative, Gower presents baptism as a symbol for humanitarian pity while concluding the narrative with an affirmation of societal divisions. The notion of an authority that recognizes the commonality of all people, an idea suggested by Gower's initial depiction of baptism, ultimately is not tenable in Gower's narrative, though baptism is a useful reminder for the king to act properly in regard to his people. Unlike Langland, who appears to celebrate the notion that baptism can make all gentlemen with Christ, Gower seeks to ensure that those in authority understand the need to treat all people with mercy even as the king retains a position of authority above the estates of both church and commons

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[30] John Gower, *Vox Clamantis*, in *The Major Latin Works of John Gower*, trans. Eric W. Stockton (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962), 49-88.

despite any commonalities he might share with other people, including his baptism.[31] Baptism's

role as a universal sacrament, uniting all people, suggests a notion of egalitarian justice that

could reform royal actions. However, such an understanding of the sacrament is problematic, so

the narrative ends by condemning an attempt to destabilize the hierarchical structure of the

estates.

Justice is Christened: Baptism in *St. Erkenwald*

Like Gower's baptism, which appears in conjunction with issues of justice and mercy, the

baptism in the Middle English alliterative poem *St Erkenwald* is associated also with social

justice. Though St. Erkenwald was a popular saint, as evidenced by several Latin vitae and his

role as a patron saint of London, the story told in the Middle English poem, of St. Erkenwald

reviving a long-dead pagan judge and bestowing baptism on the body so the righteous heathen

might be saved, is apparently unique.[32] The poem, dated to the last decades of the fourteenth

century or very early fifteenth, is found in only one manuscript, British Library MS. Harley

2250, which also contains several other religious texts, including portions of the *South English*

Legendary, of Mirk's *Festial*, and of Mirk's *Instructions for Parish Priests*.[33] The baptism in

the text is possibly the most analyzed baptism in Middle English literature, and critics have often

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[31] Langland, *Piers Plowman*, 327 (XIX. 38-41).

[32] Information on St. Erkenwald's popularity in fourteenth-century London is derived from Clifford Peterson, introduction to *Saint Erkenwald*, Ed. Clifford Peterson (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 35-51. The narrative bears more than a passing resemblance to the story of Pope Gregory and Trajan, found, among other places, in *Piers Plowman*. For a detailed account of the relationship between the Trajan narratives, the other vitae of St. Erkenwald, and the Middle English poem see Gordon Whatley, "Heathens and Saints: *St. Erkenwald* in Its Legendary Context, *Speculum* 61 no. 2 (April, 1986): 330-63. While Whatley offers useful background information, his primary argument, that the Middle English poem is inherently conservative, is not sustainable.

[33] Manuscript information derived from Clifford Peterson's introduction to *Saint Erkenwald*, 1-17. Christine Chism, in her well-researched argument on the historical impact of *St. Erkenwald*, finds some of Peterson's argument for a later date less than convincing and suggests the date of composition to be in the 1380's. Christine Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 276, n 7.

found themselves advocating one of two distinct readings: that the heathen but righteous man is saved by his own merit, much like Emperor Trajan in *Piers Plowman*, or that the work celebrates the absolutely necessary role of the clergy and the sacraments in assuring salvation.[34] Recently, critics have begun to note the complexities of the baptism as depicted in the poem. As a result a third reading has developed that seeks to explain salvation in the poem as not dependent exclusively on either sacramental performance or earthly moral performance.[35] While my argument will be in keeping with the more recent analyses of the poem, no critic has drawn enough attention to the fact that the baptism as depicted in *St. Erkenwald* should not be felicitous. Rather, the baptism is highly unorthodox in that it actually effects a transmission of grace without being intended. Yet, the poem has baptism function as the means by which the individual achieves salvation. The miraculous effectiveness of the baptism draws attention to a necessary interaction between individual morality, divine grace, and Church performance. Baptism links earthly, ecclesiastical, and divine ideas of justice. In depicting a miraculous baptism, the poem uses the sacrament as a means of integrating the historical foreigner, along with his odd societal position and the timeless value of egalitarian justice, into mainstream

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[34] Whatley details these two critical approaches and is representative of those critics who believe the text to defend conservative ecclesiastical privilege. Whatley, "Heathens and Saints," 332-33. To varying extents, William Kamowski, "*Saint Erkenwald* and the Inadvertent Baptism: An Orthodox Response to Heterodox Ecclesiology," *Religion and Literature* 27 no. 3 (Autumn, 1995): 5-28; and David Coley, "Baptism as Eucharist: Orthodoxy, Wycliffism, and the Sacramental Utterance in *Saint Erkenwald*," *Journal of England and Germanic Philology* (July, 2008): 327-47, agree with Whatley's conservative reading. In recent criticism, Frank Grady, "*Piers Plowman*, *St. Erkenwald* and the Rule of Exceptional Salvations," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 6 (1992): 61-86, stands as an example of a more humanist reading of the salvation of the righteous judge.

[35] Jennifer L. Sisk argues that the conservative nature of the text is unsettled by the apparent frustration of certain generic expectations in Jennifer L. Sisk, "The Uneasy Orthodoxy of *St. Erkenwald*," *English Literary History* 74 (2007): 89-115. Annemarie Thijms argues that the poem does not advocate a conservative reliance on church sacraments nor on righteous living but suggests that salvation derives from God's grace in Annemarie Thijms, "The Sacrament of Baptism in *St. Erkenwald*: The Perfect Transformation of the Trajan Legend," *Neophilogus* 89 (2005): 311-27.

Christendom.

The poem's story is fairly straight forward but involves many issues that were problematic in late fourteenth-century England. The poem begins by describing the conversion of the English people and the construction of St. Paul's Church in Anglo-Saxon London. While preparing the foundation, the workmen find a beautiful casket, in which is a perfectly preserved and regally dressed body. All of London is curious about this wonder, and it falls upon Bishop Erkenwald to seek an explanation. After a night of prayer and a celebration of mass, the bishop calls upon God to make the corpse reveal its origin. The corpse miraculously speaks and explains that he was a righteous judge, condemned because he lived and died before Christ's time. Erkenwald, pitying the judge, begs that the corpse be given life long enough to receive baptism and thus be saved. As he recalls the baptismal formula, one of his tears falls upon the corpse. The corpse declares that he has been baptized and that his soul is in heaven. The body disintegrates and the Bishop, along with a great company of people who were witness to the exchange, process through London. Through the course of the action, the Bishop interacts with civic leaders, a sacrament is performed and found powerful, and London is placed in the spotlight of both social and religious events. Dealing with such matters, the poem attempts to explore, through baptism, the social issues that plagued late fourteenth-century England, particularly the unrest of the commons and the need for egalitarian justice.

The baptism of the judge's corpse is an unusual moment, yet few critics realize that the baptism, as it appears in the text, is not technically viable as an actual sacrament, calling into question the assumption that this baptism affirms the authority of the established church. When Erkenwald supposedly performs the baptism, he is actually quoting the baptismal formula as a portion of indirect speech. He calls upon God to bring the corpse to life long enough to bestow

the sacrament:

> 'Oure Lord lene,' quoþ þat lede, "þat þou lyfe haves,
> By Goddess leve, as longe as I myȝt lacche water,
> And cast upon þi faire cors, and carpe þes words:
> "I folwe þe in þe Fader nome and his fre Childes
> And of þe gracious Holy Goste," and not one grue lenger.
> Þen þof þou droppyed doun dede, hit daungerede me lasse.'³⁶

> ["May our Lord grant," that man said, "that you have life, by God's leave, just as
> long as it takes me to obtain water, and to cast it upon your fair body and say
> these words: 'I baptize you in the name of the father and of his blessed Child, and
> of the gracious Holy Ghost,' and not a moment longer. Then, though you
> dropped down dead, it would grieve me less."]

Erkenwald's recitation of the proper baptismal formula and the subsequent tear that falls upon

the corpse are apparently enough to effect the sacrament. Gordon Whatley describes

Erkenwald's actions as "inadvertently baptizing the corpse with his tears."³⁷ Yet, what Whatley

describes is an impossible oxymoron: one cannot accidentally or inadvertently baptize, since one

must have intent in order to perform a felicitous sacrament. As Mirk notes in *Instructions for

Parish Priests*, the words of the formula must be said with intent to baptize: "But ȝef hyt were

hys fulle entent / to ȝeue þe chylde þat sacrament, / Þenne mote hyut stond wyþoute nay."³⁸ For

Mirk, only when the baptismal formula is said with full intent can the baptism stand as having

actually been effective.³⁹ Though Erkenwald desires to baptize the judge, he assumes that the

words he says within the passage above are not an actual baptism. They are said strictly in the

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³⁶ *Saint Erkenwald*, ed. Clifford Peterson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 80-81 (*St. Erkenwald*, 315-20). All quotations from *St. Erkenwald* will be taken from this edition and cited with the title and line numbers in parentheses.

³⁷ Whatley, "Heathens and Saints," 330.

³⁸ Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, 18 (lns. 592-94).

³⁹ Mirk is supported by Thomas Aquinas who addresses the need for intent to be present in a sacramental performance in *Summa Theologicae* 3a, 64, 8.

hypothetical and are meant to describe a baptism, not perform one. J. L. Austin's analysis of speech acts begins with intent. He asks "Surely the words must be spoken 'seriously' and so as to be taken 'seriously'? This is, though vague, true enough in general – it is an important commonplace in discussing the purport of any utterance whatsoever. I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem."[40] Though Erkenwald is not joking or writing a poem, he is describing a ritual not performing it. Such a distinction places Erkenwald's utterance of the baptismal formula among the same 'unreal' utterances that Austin mentions. The difference is crucial, as it makes the baptism that does happen within the text as much a miracle as the speaking corpse.

The judge's account of his own baptism emphasizes the miraculous nature of the sacrament, drawing attention to the interaction of God's grace, Erkenwald's own action, and the judge's moral worth. The judge's body remains alive long enough for him to assure all those witnessing that his soul has been saved, but the presentation of that information is designed to be shocking. As soon as Erkenwald has declared his desire to baptize, one tear falls on the corpse:

> Wyt þat worde þat he warpyd, þe wete of eghen
> And teres trillyd adoun, and on þe toumbe lighten;
> And one felle on his face, and þe freke syked.
> Þen sayd he with a sadde soun: 'Our Sauvyoure be louvyd!

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[40] Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, 9. Austin does note that intent can be unclear since the vocalization of a promise still creates a promise regardless of intent on behalf of the speaker: "In the particular case of promising, as with many other performatives, it is appropriate that the person uttering the promise should have a certain intention, viz. here to keep his word... Do we not actually, when such intention is absent, speak of a 'false' promise? Yet so to speak is *not* to say that the utterance 'I promise that...' is false, in the sense that though he states that he does, he doesn't.... For he *does* promise: the promise here is not even void, though it is given *in bad faith*.... Moreover, we do not speak of a false bet or a false christening." Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, 11. The reference to a false baptism is particularly interesting, suggesting that speaking the words without intent does not invalidate a sacramental verbal performance. However, Erkenwald's recitation above is not intended to be a ritual. Without the actual performance, it is beyond the possibility of being felicitous or infelicitous. Sisk notes the importance of Austin's speech act theory within the context of Erkenwald's baptism but focuses more on the presence of the formula within the poem as a fictional representation of the sacrament. Sisk, "The Uneasy Orthodoxy," 103-04.

Now herid be þou, heghe God, and þi hende Moder,
And blissid be þat blisful houre þat ho The bere in,
And also be þou, bysshop, þe bote of my sorowe,
And þe relefe of þe lodely lures þat my soule has leuyd in!
For þe wordes þat þou werpe, and þe water þat þou sheddes-
Þe bryȝt bourne of þin eghen – my bapteme is worthyn;
Þe fyrst slent þat on me slode slekkyd al my tene.
Ryȝt now to soper my soule is sette at þe table,
For wyt þe wordes and þe water þat weshe vs of payne
Liȝtly lasshit þer a leme, loghe in þe abyme,
Þat spakly sprent my spyrit wyt vnsparid murthe
Into þe cenacle solemply þer soupen alle trew.'

<div align="right">(<i>St. Erkenwald</i>, 321-36)</div>

[With that word that he (Erkenwald) spoke, the water of his eyes and tears
trickled down and fell upon the tomb; and one fell on his (the judge's) face, and
the man sighed. Then he said with a grave sound: "Our savior be praised! Now
blessed be you, High God, and your gracious Mother, and blessed be that happy
hour in which she bore you! And also blessed be you, bishop, the cure of my
sorrow, and the relief of the loathsome pains in which my soul has lived! For the
words that you spoke and the water you shed, the bright stream from your eyes,
has become my baptism; the first splash that fell on me slacked all my pain; right
now my soul sits at the table for the feast. For with the words and the water that
washed us of pain, immediately a light flashed low in the abyss that quickly sent
my spirit with unspared mirth into the dining hall where all the true ones eat."]

The careful rendition of the events leading up to the judge's salvation makes the judge's

declaration exciting and emotional. Only after the poet describes the tears in general does the

poet focus on the single one that falls upon the body. The immediate result of the tear is only a

sigh, an understated reaction compared to that which follows. The judge then breaks into a

declaration of praise that stands in stark contrast to the somber tone that precedes it. Only

eventually does he reveal why he pours out so many blessings. The build-up enhances the

surprise: the baptism that was not quite a baptism has been effective. The corpse goes on to

explain twice how the combination of words and water effected his soul's miraculous salvation.

He even draws attention to the fact that it was the sacrament of baptism that was felicitous. Such

careful attention to the baptismal ritual may serve to assure the poem's audience that, despite all

appearances or understanding of the ritual, this particular performance was effective.[41] The

oxymoronic 'unintentional baptism,' appears deliberate, and it invites a carefully interpretation

of why the rules of the sacrament are bent in this situation.

The miraculous baptism draws attention to the complex factors involved in effecting a

felicitous sacrament and in effecting an individual's salvation: individual will, divine grace, and

ritual performance. According to Whatley, the judge "is in hell, and if it were not for the church,

Bishop Erkenwald, and the sacraments of the Eucharist and baptism, he would no doubt stay

there forever."[42] Whatley is right. The sacrament is absolutely essential and the judge includes

the bishop in his list of blessings when declaring his salvation, suggesting the bishop's vital role

in achieving that state. However, other critics have noted the complexity of the supposedly

effective ritual. Sisk points out that "the administration of the sacrament is... a fluke of timing

rather than a premeditated and intentional act. This happy coincidence raises the question of

how much agency Erkenwald actually has in effecting the judge's salvation."[43] Sisk does not

emphasize the problems with the baptism enough but does draw attention to the fact that it is not

the bishop or the church that hallows the sacrament. It is a miraculous movement by God. God's

role in the sacrament is a feature explored by Thijms: "The judge was saved not due to the

intercession of Erkenwald, but due to the intercession of God's grace."[44] Yet Thijms' conclusion

does not address the importance the judge places on Erkenwald's necessary participation in

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[41] My reading is in contrast with David Coley's reading in "Baptism as Eucharist," which argues that the poet's attention to the baptismal formula argues for the efficacy of the language of the ritual as being all-important and containing all the power to effect a felicitous baptism.

[42] Whatley, "Heathens and Saints," 350.

[43] Sisk, "The Uneasy Orthodoxy," 101-102.

[44] Thijms, "Perfect Transformation," 320.

achieving that salvation. Neither element, God's grace nor the sacrament, is complete without

the other, as Sisk argues: "Rather than taking an either/or position on the theological and

ecclesiological questions he raises, the *Erkenwald* poet occupies an idiosyncratic position that

uneasily negotiates the distance between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in a way we might better

describe as both/and."[45] Sisk, in noting only the happy coincidence of the baptism and not its

impossibility fails to emphasize how important the idea of 'both/and' might be. The

impossibility of a baptism that remains effective reveals the inextricable links between not only

ecclesiastical action and God's grace, but also the morality of the judge himself.

While grace and ritual grant the judge's soul ultimate salvation, it is the judge's just life

that brings the elements together in the miraculous conjunction necessary to effect that salvation.

The judge notes that his present royal accoutrements and his miraculously preserved state are a

direct result of his good deeds: "embawmyd wos I never / ... / Bot þe riche Kynge of reson, þat

riȝt ever alowes, / And loves al þe laws lely þat longen to trouthe; / And moste he menskes men

for mynnynge of riȝtes, / Þen for al þe meritorie medes þat men on molde usen; / And if tenkes

for riȝt þus me arrayed has, / He has lent me to last þat loves ryȝt best" (*St. Erkenwald*, 265, 267-

72). [I was never embalmed... but the powerful King of reason, who always recognizes justice

and faithfully loves all the laws that belong to righteousness, (did). And He honors men most for

minding rights, rather than for all the meritorious rewards that men possess on earth. And if men

arrayed me thus for righteousness sake, He that loves righteousness best has granted that I should

last so long.] God's will keeps the judge's body intact as a reward for the judge's righteous life.

The judge functions as a secular saint since miraculous bodily preservation is often a sign of

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[45] Sisk, "The Uneasy Orthodoxy," 107-108.

sanctity in hagiography.[46] If moral action produces earthly signs of sanctity, then it is not too far-fetched to assume that moral action can also lead one to salvation. Yet, the judge explains that he cannot be saved through his own merits, a difficulty that challenges the role of justice within Christendom.

Even as merit has granted the judge God's blessing of bodily preservation, so earthly merit, when combined with the judge's spiritual suffering, draws forth the tear that will be the source of salvation for the judge. Upon hearing of the judge's good deeds in life, Erkenwald assumes the judge has a chance at salvation. The judge replies in the negative, bitterly pointing out the injustice of his situation: "Maȝty Maker of men, thi myghtes are grete- / How myȝt þi mercy to me amounte any tyme? / Nas I a paynym vnpreste þat never thi plite knewe, / Ne þe mesure of þi mercy, ne þi mecul vertue, / Bot ay a freke faitheles þat faylid þi laghes, / Þat ever þou, Lord, wos lovyd in? Allas, þe harde stoundes!" (*St. Erkenwald*, 283-88). [Mighty Maker of men, your power is great! How might your mercy come upon me at any time? Was I not a pagan, unblessed, who never knew your condition, or the measure of your mercy, nor your great virtue, but I was always a man faithless that lacked your laws, which cause you, Lord, to ever be praised? Alas, the hard times!] The judge's first rhetorical question is particularly biting, almost accusatory, as are the following references to mercy, which the judge longs for but cannot receive. The judge recognizes that his situation is both just and unjust. He is not a recipient of God's grace and so cannot gain access to heaven, but that he was not a recipient is not his fault.

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[46] Sisk explores the ramifications of confusing various elements of hagiography within the narrative. She explains "The discovery of a long buried yet wholly incorrupt body raises hagiographic expectations that are difficult to shake, even when we remember that the poem is not an *invention*, that the body does not belong to the saint who is the focus of the poem.... No matter that the body belongs to a pagan – the stage is set for God to save the judge's soul, and for reasons that have everything to do with the audience's expectations and nothing to do with Erkenwald." Sisk, "The Uneasy Orthodoxy," 98.

The judge's intolerable position makes his references to God's law that helps generate devotion in mankind at once tragic and ironic. The judge goes on to explain his situation, which is followed by Erkenwald tearfully proclaiming his desire to baptize him. The judge's earthly performance appears more right than God's own justice. The situation is a tragedy that drives Erkenwald to seek some sort of resolution. That resolution comes in the miraculous form of an impossible baptism. The judge's actions in life produce God's blessing of preservation, and the judge's current spiritual state when compared to his earthly behavior produce the tears that serve as the means of baptism. Though, as Whatley points out, the judge's righteous behavior is not enough to save him, it is enough to produce the means of salvation. Not God's grace, nor sacramental ritual, nor Erkenwald's will, nor the judge's behavior alone can save the judge. However, together they can achieve a supposedly impossible salvation. One might well ask why the complex process is necessary within the poem to enact a salvation that seems merited to all involved, and of what value it is that the Christian Londoners and Bishop Erkenwald are present and involved in this baptism.

In creating an impossible baptism, the poem integrates the judge, a historical foreigner, and his notion of justice that transcends chronology into Christendom. In a sense, the question of whether or not righteous living can gain salvation is not appropriate to the poem. Rather, the poem draws attention to a specific mode of righteousness that is so necessary for Christendom that the poet constructs a complex system to ensure the poem's audience recognizes its importance. The historic other is included into the Christian community precisely because he embodies certain ideals that need to become part of the Christian identity: particularly a trans-historic notion of justice that is universally applicable and a social hierarchy based upon righteous merit. Such ideals are not obvious, either in the London of the poem or in the English

society in which the poet wrote. Christine Chism's extensive research into the London of the

1380s reveals a troubled city that "was a particularly fraught nexus of social confrontation,

proximal to the royal government at Westminster, protective of its hierarchies of civil

administration with their particular liberties, and porous to the different artisans, laborers,

merchants, and landed gentry who sought advancement within its walls."[47] Chism sees the

potentially disruptive folk of London within the poem as conflated with the people of London in

the 1380s. Against the potentially disintegrating society stands the image of the just judge whose

virtue can help the citizens, provided those in authority follow his example. The fact that the

people are witness to the impossible baptism is vital, as both they and the bishop must

understand that God accepts the judge's sense of social justice. The poem becomes a social

commentary as it baptizes supposedly ancient ideas of justice into modern Christendom and

offers an image of how the mercy and justice of God, Church, and secular authority can function

in tandem.

The judge initially appears in the text as an unknowable historic figure, whose absence

weakens Christendom. Historical difference is related to religious difference early in the poem,

as the narrative notes the transition from pagan past to Christian present. Unfortunately, as the

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[47] Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, 43. Chism's research into the town of London and the tensions between
ecclesiastical and lay authorities, along with continued discontent among less powerful sections of society, is
invaluable to my argument. However, Chism argues the end of *St. Erkenwald* shows that "if the bishop can
demonstrate the celebrated pagan's need for the church's ministrations, then the watching mob of London folk who
are not such paragons will accept their own dependence on the church." Chism, *Alliterative Revivals,* 60. Chism
concludes, like Whatley, that the poem advocates ecclesiastical control of the lay people. Similarly, David Coley
notes some of the social implications of the unity produced at the end of the poem, unity he ascribes to the assertion
of sacramental power, particularly that of the Eucharist. Coley, "Baptism as Eucharist," 347. Though I agree that
the poem does strive to ease the tensions that existed in London in the 1380's, I argue that the poem does so by
advocating that social justice be incorporated into Christian practice rather than by affirming ecclesiastical authority.

text implies, the change involves some degree of loss. [48] When the judge's body is found, the

people assume that information about such a man must be available, saying:

> 'Hit myȝt not be bot suche a mon in mynde stode longe;
> He has ben kynge of þis kithe, as couthely hit semes
> He lyes doluen þus depe hit is a derfe wonder
> Bot summe segge couthe say þat he hym sene hade.'
> Bot þat ilke note wos noght, for nourne none couthe,
> Noþir by title ne token ne by tale noþir,
> Þat ever was breuyt in burghe ne in boke notyde,
> Þat ever mynnyd suche a mon, more ne lasse.
>
> <div align="right">(St. Erkenwald, 97-104)</div>
>
> ["Such a man must remain in memory a long time. It certainly seems that he was
> a king of his people. He lies buried so deep; it is a dreadful wonder unless
> someone can say that he had seen him." But that trouble was for naught, for none
> could say anything, from title or token or tale that was ever received in the city, or
> from a note in a book that ever mentioned such a man, either more or less.]

The knowledge of the past has been lost, and the signs that are usually relied upon to yield up

identity – tokens, titles, books, or oral tales – are all useless before that loss. The judge's

garments appear particularly frustrating as they are the most easily readable but the least

illuminating. Society should hold a memory of a figure so revered as to be dressed as a king.

That he remains unreadable is a sign of confusion and a breakdown in the culture. When

Erkenwald hears of the mystery that is causing confusion throughout the city, he prays: "digne

hit my Lorde, / In confirmynge þi Cristen faithe, fulsen me to kenne / Þe mysterie of þis meruaile

þat men opon wondres" (*St. Erkenwald*, 123-25). [Allow it, my Lord, in confirming your

Christian faith, that you help me understand the mystery of this marvel at which men wonder.]

Earlier, 'wonder' referred to the fact that no one, including the ecclesiastics, knew of such a

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[48] Chism notes the apparent continuity between the pagan past and Christian present through the alliteration that allows identities to slide into one another. Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, 51. She assumes that the poem is troubled by such continuity. I would argue that while a distinction between pagan past and Christian present is necessary for the poet, the apparent continuity needs to be more fully embraced and understood in order to be beneficial to the Christian society that has grown out of the pagan past.

figure. Erkenwald speaks of the wonder of the body itself. Both wonders are miraculous and

both are causing difficulty for the city. In resolving these wonders, Erkenwald prays that social

knowledge, understanding who this man is, will affirm Christianity. The past is a threat to the

faith only so long as it remains mysterious. Full disclosure and understanding of the past can

strengthen Christendom. Indeed, the marvel of ignorance that so disturbs the London populace

would not arise if knowledge were better preserved and shared.

The judge, despite his mysterious initial appearance, is eventually revealed to be

understandable and desirable because he embodies a concept of universal justice. The judge

declares his own sense of justice: "Bot for wothe ne wele ne wrathe ne drede / Ne for maystrie ne

for mede ne for no monnes aghe, / I remewit neuer fro þe riȝt by reson myn awen / For to dresse

a wrange dome, no day of my lyue" (*St. Erkenwald*, 233-36). [Never in my life, either for

danger, or good fortune, or wrath, or fear, or for mastery, or for a bribe, or for awe of any man

did I ever move from the right as my own reason saw it, so as to render a wrongful judgment.]

The judge, like Christ, is not swayed by the station or wealth of men.[49] His universal justice is to

be valued, prompting Erkenwald's question about the fate of the judge's soul: "Quere is ho

stablid and stadde, if þou so streȝt wroghtes? / He þat rewardes vche a renke as he has riȝt seruyd

/ Myȝt evel forgo the to gyfe of His grace summe brawnche" (*St. Erkenwald*, 274-76). [Where is

she (your soul) stabled and held, if you performed so perfectly? He who rewards each man as

that man served justice would do ill if He withheld from you some share of His grace.]

Erkenwald recognizes as virtuous the judge's ability to render justice regardless of social rank.

Erkenwald assumes such justice to be Christian, a part of any divinely sanctioned society, even if

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[49] The description of the just judge's treatment of those who come to him is similar to Pope Sylvester's description
of the last judgment in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. In both narratives, judgment is seen as valuable only in so far as
it recognizes all people equally.

it does appear in a pagan man who lived in an unbelieving society. In recognizing the apparent

injustice of damning such a man to Hell's torments, Erkenwald is moved to the tears that rectify

the situation. If it were not for the miraculous nature of the baptism, one might argue that human

notions of justice and mercy almost trump or at least drive divine judgments. Rather, the

baptism brings the judge's, Erkenwald's, and God's notions of justice all into perfect alignment,

justifying them all as righteous. The judge waits to enter heaven but his time on earth grants the

Christian citizens an understanding of the value of even-handed justice.

       While Erkenwald and the citizens of London accept the judge's sense of justice as

Christian, the way the ancient pagans treated the judge also demonstrates an important lesson to

the Christians. The greatest difference, besides religious belief, that separates the citizens of

Christian London from the pagan citizens of New Troy is an ability to recognize the value of

righteous judgment. As noted above, the Christians look upon the crown and scepter of the

judge and assume the body to be that of a king. However, it was not a royal position that merited

such internment, but rather the judge's righteous behavior and the pagan citizenry's

understanding of the worth of such a man. The judge explains his regalia as gifts from the

people:

> And for I was ryȝtwis and reken, and redy of þe laghe
> Quen I deghed for dul denyed alle Troye.
> Alle menyd my dethe, þe more and the lasse
> ...
> For þe honour of myn honeste of heghest enprise
> Þai coronyd me þe kidde kynge of kene iustises
> Þat ever was tronyd in Troye oþir trowid euer shulde.
>
>   (*St. Erkenwald*, 245-47, 253-55).
> [And since I was righteous and upright and ready to uphold the law, when I died
> grief resounded in all of Troy. All mourned my death, both the great and the
> least.... To honor my honesty of highest renown they crowned me the famous king
> of all wise justices that ever were enthroned in Troy and, so they believed, ever
> would be.]

The judge claims that the people saw him as a king because of his righteous behavior while he held a position of authority. While the Christian citizens of London assumed the crown and scepter belonged to a ruler, the judge claims that such regalia is a sign of the people's honor, which they bestowed on a figure who loved impartial justice.[50] In the judge's pagan New Troy, the citizens were capable of crowning an individual based upon merit and honored righteous judgment as royal. In the poem's present, the Christian Londoners learn that such pagan values are worth re-instituting as part of their culture.[51] The baptism signifies that the judge and the values of his culture are part of Christendom, eliding difference while spiritually preserving desirable values. Even as the judge's body is preserved so that it might bear witness to a value that Christendom needs, so too baptism translates that value to the eternal feast. In the end the body and its regalia disintegrate but the values the judge embodied have transcended their pagan origin to become accessible to all Christians in all times.

St. Erkenwald assures its audience that social justice, though not overtly spiritual, is a vital part of a Christian society, so it depicts a Christendom that is capable of baptizing and integrating values of an ancient pagan society. The final image of the poem is that of societal unity in response to the judge's miraculous baptism: "Þen wos louynge oure Lorde wyt loves vp-halden, / Meche mournynge and myrthe was mellyd gt-geder; / Þai passyd forthe in procession

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[50] The judge was alive during a period of civil war (*St. Erkenwald*, 209-15). In setting up such a particular historic moment for the judge, the poet appears to be comparing the rule of justice to the destructive rule of hereditary kings, a volatile issue considering that the authority of King Richard was being questioned in Parliament, and that England would see Richard deposed by Henry Bolingbroke.

[51] My argument reinforces Frank Grady's observation that "the judge inserts his story neatly into – and between – pagan and Christian history, just as he himself will shortly bridge the two cultures and be welcomed to the celestial banquet. When the historical status of the judge has been rendered intelligible – and only then – he can be worked into the Christina eschatology of the bishop and his fellow Londoners." Grady, "Rule of Exceptional Salvations,' 84.

and alle þe pepulle folowid / And alle þe belles in þe burghe beryd at ones" (*St. Erkenwald*, 349-52). [Then there was praising of our Lord with hands upheld. Much mourning and mirth were mixed together. They [Erkenwald and the nobility] passed forth in procession and all the people followed, and all the bells in the city resounded at once.] The people, so frustrated earlier, are now part of a procession that apparently includes the mayor and barons and other dignitaries who were present for the judge's speech (142-43). Thijms notes of the poem that "one of the main themes, if not the main theme, is the transformation of the secular to the religious."[52] Thijms is correct in that the secular judge becomes part of a larger religious truth, but her analysis fails to recognize how closely entangled the notions of social and spiritual justice become by the end of the poem. The text offers an image of a just society and uses the image of a pagan individual brought forward into Christian London to do it. The secular values of the pagan are acceptable to Erkenwald, God, and the worried populace. The poem further sanctifies a judge who appears as a king.   The judge's righteousness, like the mercy of Constantine in Gower's *Confessio* and Gowther's penance, destabilizes social distinctions. However, unlike Gower's, the baptism of *St. Erkenwald* posits a need for that even-handed justice to actually be crowned king, rather than restricted to ensure the ruler's continued authority. Through baptism, universal secular justice becomes a divinely sanctioned value within the Christian society. Even as the poet creates a perfect judge, the rebels of 1381 desired to re-establish the justice system and had a particular grievance against lawyers and justices. Alan Harding notes the extent to which the revolt sought redress for judicial wrongs.[53] Similarly, while Anthony Musson and W. M. Ormrod argue that

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[52] Thijms, "The Perfect Transformation," 312.

[53] Alan Harding, "The Revolt against the Justices," *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 165-93.

the law could serve both gentles and commons, they also suggest that: "the attacks launched...

not only upon justices of the peace but also on a whole range of local crown representatives...

speak forcefully for the lower orders' sense that the new judicial system had effectively removed

from them the lawful right to appeal against the oppressions of the king's own government."[54]

Baptism, as a rite of passage designed to include others across history, allows the anonymous

author a means of constructing diachronic values. The poet creates a narrative in which social

justice is valuable and valued, justice that appears very similar to that which the rebels of 1381

sought. In order to accomplish this, the poet has a pagan figure baptized with an impossible

baptism. The baptism not only saves the judge's soul but also sanctifies the values the judge

embodied.

Conclusion

Baptism, as it appears among the hagiographic texts discussed above, is a fluid symbol.

It reflects a multiplicity of attitudes toward the individual's place within societal structures.

Though the Rising of 1381 did not have a large immediate impact upon the structure of English

society, ideas of equality and freedom that drove the rebels had entered English cultural thought,

and they offered alternatives to traditional modes of society. Indeed, the end of the fourteenth

century did see increasing changes to the ways in which an individual might understand his or

her identity, and the revolt gave voice to how diverse such understandings might be. Authors

attempted to add their own values to the mix, advocating justice and reform even as they differed

greatly in how those values might be expressed among the populace. These literary texts depict

baptism in such a way as to offer a sacrament that could be understood as a means of stabilizing

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[54] Anthony Musson and W. M. Ormrod, *The Evolution of English Justice* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 181.

society even as it could engender reform.

Baptism's orthodoxy lends weight to the ideas proposed and explored within the texts. Because baptism is an orthodox and diachronic ritual that unites all Christians throughout history, it serves as a perfect tool to defend or challenge different modes of identification. John Mirk's depiction of baptism sought to stabilize social identities within an unquestionable church hierarchy. Baptism granted gifts from God and those gifts established individuals in their proper social order. Gower, on the other hand, is far less secure about baptism's usefulness as a means of establishing a firm social order. Baptism's ability to unite all people in an inclusive body of believers is useful to Gower in that it recalls the fact that all people are one under both natural and divine law. But Gower sees that very baptismal unity as a source of danger, as it may drive individuals, particularly the king, to disregard proper societal divisions. Both Gower and Mirk limit the possibility for their audiences to understand baptism as Langland depicts it: an image of social equality. In *St. Erkenwald*, baptism's role as a diachronic ritual that can make the earthly eternal comes into play. Baptism makes a supposedly historically specific idea of justice diachronic and worthy of emulation. The diachronic position of baptism in establishing the structure of Christendom lends itself to forwarding egalitarian modes of social understanding in *St. Erkenwald*. Though the uses of baptism are diverse in these texts, the general concern with social issues remains constant. Baptism's position as a foundational sacrament was used to affirm certain understandings of the social order as acceptable and divine. Yet, that very foundational nature meant that baptism could be used to support certain egalitarian attitudes as easily as it could be used to maintain authoritarian control.

Conclusion:

Using Baptism to Negotiate Identity in the Middle Ages

In the mid-fifteenth century John Metham wrote *Amoryus and Cleopes*, a romance that

adapted the Ovidian narrative of Pyramus and Thisbe. Metham places the narrative in the time

of the Roman Emperor Nero and gives Amoryus several acts of valor, including a dragon fight

that Pyramus never had. Yet the story still comes to a climax as the two lovers are separated by

a wall built by their fathers. Amoryus and Cleopes escape by night, just as in Ovid. While

hiding in the woods, Cleopes, like Thisbe, is frightened by a lion and flees, leaving her kerchief

behind. Amoryus, upon seeing the lion chewing on Cleopes's kerchief, assumes she is dead and

commits suicide. Cleopes returns, finds Amoryus dead, and commits suicide herself. However,

Metham does not conclude the narrative with tragedy. Instead the story continues when a

Christian hermit finds the bodies. The hermit prays and God resurrects the lovers. Overjoyed,

the hermit explains Christian doctrine and in response Amoryus and Cleopes declare that they

wish to become Christians. The hermit prepares to baptize the happy couple:

> 'Wele,' quoth this ermyght, 'than fully be ye
> In purpose to forsake alle the custum and gouernauns
> Of paynymmys [heathens'] secte; and now yf ye this forsake,
> I schal yow baptyse and krystyn make.'
> ...
> And off alle odyr thingys necessary,
> Thys ermight enfformyd them fully in the feyth;
> And baptysyd them in that welle ryght devoutely;
> And aftyer...
> Thys ermyght axyd of qwat stok thei come, and qwy
> Thei had so fordone [killed] them-selff, and how thei come in-to that place.
> And thei teld hym, as I rehersyd be-ffore alle the case.
>
> 'Now trwly,' quoth this ermyght, 'gret pyte yt had bene
> That to so semly personys so schuld a dyid;
> And more pyté, the los of yowre soulys to have sene,

But vertuus love of God was never denyid.'[1]

I have taken the time to quote such a lengthy passage to conclude my work on medieval literary

baptisms to illustrate not only that Metham used baptism within the narrative to incorporate the

pagan lovers into Christendom so that they might have a happy ending, but also to affirm that the

use of the sacrament can incorporate pagan narratives into Christian culture. From the late

thirteenth century and into the fifteenth, baptism was used as a literary trope to define and

redefine what could constitute Christian behavior and identity within a text.

Metham's baptism is a moment of transition between the classical pagan world and the

Christian present that both includes and excludes modes of identification in the initiation of the

catechumens into Christendom. On the one hand, the pagan world and its wonders must be

denied in order to construct a Christian identity. Instead of pagan "customs and governance," the

catechumens must adopt different identifying performances and beliefs so they might enter a

different society. However, after baptism the hermit declares that their lives as heathen knight

and lady were of some value. They are "semly" individuals who should not be lost to

Christendom. The hermit defends their resuscitation and baptism by noting that "virtuous love

of God was never denied." Despite the fact that the love evidenced in *Amoryus and Cleopes* is

of the romantic sort and drives the lovers to suicide, love here has become associated with

Christian devotion and romantic love is interpreted as a Christian performance. The baptism of

the lovers occurs between the hermit declaring that they must forsake pagan culture and the

hermit telling them that God blesses the love they embody. As in the *South English Legendary*,

baptism in this secular adaptation of a pagan story is the fulcrum that shifts the nature and

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[1] *Amoryus and Cleopes* in *The Works of John Metham including the Romance of Amoryus and Cleopes* by John Metham, ed. Hardin Craig, EETS OS 132 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., and Oxford University Press, 1916), 71-72 (lns. 1900-03, 1911-21).

direction of textual interpretation. The sacrament functions as a point of difference, but also

serves to expand what defines Christendom by including behaviors that originated in a pagan

society. Because those behaviors brought the lovers to baptism, the pagan world and its texts

become valuable from a Christian perspective.

Placing baptism within a pagan narrative not only baptizes the characters but also serves

to baptize the text itself into Christianity. Ovid's work, including the *Metamorphoses* in which

the story of Pyramus and Thisbe appears, was consistently controversial throughout the medieval

period. Several commentators condemned Ovid's sexual themes and depictions of love, while

others praised his elegance and attempted to justify his narratives and ideas.[2] One such

justification of the Pyramus and Thisbe story read the text as an allegory for the relationship

between Christ and Mary with the lion as the Devil.[3] Instead of an exegetical means of

incorporating the romantic story into Christian culture, Metham's use of baptism elevates the

Ovidian romance above reproach. After Amoryus and Cleopes are baptized, the hermit asks

specifically to be told those parts of the romance that mirror the story of Pyramus and Thisbe:

how the lovers came to kill themselves. Thus, he receives a rendition of an Ovidian tale turned

into a secular romance when the lovers explain their story. The hermit reacts approvingly of the

lovers, and by extension approves of the narrative they relate. Just as it would be a "pity" if the

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[2] For a brief overview of the reception of Ovid's work throughout the medieval period see Jeremy Dimmick, "Ovid in the Middle Ages: authority and poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, ed. Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 264-87. Dimmick describes much of the condemnation of Ovid and the use of Ovid's stories as exemplum in sermons. He also details a narrative in which pious poetry lovers attempt to posthumously convert Ovid.

[3] Stephen F. Page, Introduction to *Amoryus and Cleopes*, by John Metham (Kalamazoo, Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 1999), 6. According to Robert Glendinning, the Pyrmaus and Thisbe story was also frequently used as a classroom text students were set to translate. The implications suggest the usefulness of Ovid's Latin even as it begs the question of the effect Ovidian texts had on students. Robert Glendinning, "Pyramus and Thisbe in the Medieval Classroom," *Speculum* 61 no. 1 (January, 1986): 51-78.

lovers where lost to Christendom, it also would be a pity if Christendom had to completely forsake any connection to the pagan past, its stories, peoples or behaviors. The values within Metham's and Ovid's texts can be emulated because the romantic love that drove Amoryus and Cleopes is now connected to sacramental devotion to God. Metham uses baptism to justify and elevate the literary material, perpetuating certain secular values as spiritual. Baptism's role as a rite of passage allows Metham to subvert normal expectations of Christian distinctiveness from secular and pagan cultures. The use of the sacrament within the text effectively baptizes the text itself, incorporating it into Christian tradition and making Christian culture continuous with the pagan culture that preceded it.

Metham's use of baptism is but one example in a long tradition of depicting this sacrament in vernacular texts so as to justify religiously the inclusion or exclusion of modes of identification into or from Christendom. The careful distinction between what can be included and what should be excluded through baptism found in Metham's *Amoryus and Cleopes* is also found in the vernacular texts surveyed in this work. Exclusive or inclusive, communal or individual: the various foci of baptismal texts present the diachronic presence of the sacrament in multiple ways to suggest how Christian identity can be determined amid the myriad identifiers available to an individual in late medieval England. Similar to the baptisms of Amoryus and Cleopes, the baptisms found in the *South English Legendary* are depicted as more inclusive, as they serve to incorporate material matters and aspects of secular life, including romantic love, as part of a Christian identity. A century later, *St. Erkenwald* used a miraculous baptism to include a belief in humanitarian justice as part of Christendom. In contrast, the baptismal romances found in the Auchinleck manuscript, the romance of *The King of Tars* in particular, focus attention on baptism as a rite of initiation that excludes or controls the identities of the

catechumens. *Sir Ferumbras* and *The Sowdon of Babylone* explore the nature of excluding and subjugating baptisms but in such a way as to allow a romance reader or listener to question and perhaps even condemn such practices and the nature of authority they imply. John Mirk's *Festial* and the romance of *Sir Gowther* use baptism as a symbol for individual identification within a religious structure; however, the former seeks to stabilize identity with baptism while the latter offers baptism as a means of using religious identification to free the individual from imposed hereditary or social identifiers. Less focused on the individual and more on the social, Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower depict baptism as a socially useful way to imagine the Christian community. In their texts, baptism recalls the universal nature of human existence. The diversity of uses to which baptism could be put is evidence of the flexibility of the religious symbol, flexibility that allowed authors and translators to respond to historical and social pressures.

The myriad uses of baptism are related to the complex interaction between historical situation, academic theology and textual production. Ideas concerning baptism were debated among academic theologians attempting to understand the relationship between salvation and the sacraments. However, because information about baptism and the other sacraments were necessary for Christian behavior, beliefs about the sacraments were shared with the laity through decrees, sermons, and other texts. Because of baptism's foundational role as a rite of initiation, theories about how this sacrament functioned helped determine its use and appearance as a symbol for Christian identity in vernacular texts. However, notions of identity were also affected by the social milieu in which the texts were produced. As such, textual baptism could be used to explain, justify, and/or reform notions about identity that were part of the culture of late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England. The difficulties of determining national loyalty in

the early fourteenth century, what defined Christian belief during the fragmentation of the church that was the result of the Schism and the rise of the Lollards, ideas about liberty and self-identification that were articulated and fought over during the Rising of 1381: how Christian identity was to be constructed in light of such dramatic social events was explored through the trope of baptism. The various depictions of baptism found in vernacular literature illustrate the complexity of the relationships between vernacular textual production, academic theology, and social issues. Acknowledging such an interrelationship begs the question of why Metham chose to incorporate a pagan text and its vision of romantic love into Christendom through baptism in the mid-1400s. Further study is necessary to explain the use of baptism as a literary trope in this particular text that was produced after the rise of the Lancastrians and in the wake of Arundel's constitutions. I expect to find in my further studies that the sacrament continues to be a tool to justify and explore what can or cannot constitute a Christian identity even as baptismal texts explore the boundaries between that which is already Christian and that which is different.

Baptism is unique because it is a completely necessary and orthodox sacrament that is the mark of Christian identity, but alternately it also forces Christendom to be open to alterity and the diversity of texts, cultures, and bodies. Focusing on baptism as a medieval literary trope gives modern readers access to notions of identity and diversity available to a medieval English audience that might otherwise be passed over. The medieval individual who was in any particular text's audience could associate his or her own baptism with the baptism of a giant, a knight, a foreign princess, a rebel, a saint, or a demonic monster. Through baptism, such fictional identities and the means by which those identities were made part of Christendom could influence how the audience members understood themselves and their own place within the larger community of Christendom. For a medieval author and audience, baptism sat in the

liminal space between God and mankind, Christian and heathen, animal and human, salvation

and damnation. As such, it was a means of enjoying or at least controlling the anxiety caused by

such liminal spaces. Baptism could be used to advocate an intolerant mentality that embraced

the notion that belief, nation, and estate were identifiers only available to some. However,

baptism could also be used to understand an individual identity, regardless of estate, social role,

body, or culture, as valuable to God and a positive part of the Christian community. In

attempting to understand medieval notions of identity, it is vital that modern critics understand

that such diverse thoughts were available in the culture of late medieval England. There was

much at stake for medieval authors and audiences even in this overlooked and ubiquitous

sacrament, for baptism was a foundation of Christian individual and communal identity that was

always in a state of being determined.

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