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978-1-107-40465-6 - Lay Piety and Religious Discipline in Middle English Literature

Nicole R. Rice

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IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

In late fourteenth-century England, the persistent question of how to live the best life preoccupied many pious Christians. One answer was provided by a new genre of prose guides that adapted professional religious rules and routines for lay audiences. These texts engaged with many of the same cultural questions as poets like Langland and Chaucer; however, they have not received the critical attention they deserve until now. Nicole Rice analyses how the idea of religious discipline was translated into varied literary forms in an atmosphere of religious change and controversy. By considering the themes of spiritual discipline, religious identity, and orthodoxy in Langland and Chaucer, the study also brings fresh perspectives to bear on *Piers Plowman* and *The Canterbury Tales*. This new juxtaposition of spiritual guidance and poetry will form an important contribution to our understanding of both authors and of late medieval religious practice and thought.

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For my parents, for Howard, and for Lana ל”י

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In later fourteenth-century England, the persistent question of how to live the “best life” preoccupied many pious Christians, and new answers proliferated for enterprising laypeople. The literate might read the catechism or monastic meditations translated from Latin into English; the prosperous could participate in administering religious guilds and chantries or perhaps retire to monasteries. During this period, religious reformer John Wyclif argued controversially that perfection was to be found in the life of biblical reading, preaching, and teaching, a priestly discipline that should be accessible in some measure to every Christian. Meanwhile the instabilities and contingencies of religious identity offered ready material for poetic satire. *Piers Plowman*, Langland’s great, inconclusive meditation on the complexity of Christian life, begins as narrator Will dons a shepherd’s clothes, “in habite as an heremite, vnholý of werkis,” assuming a new religious role even as he acknowledges its falseness. In Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, monks persistently flout the Benedictine vow of stability, appearing in taverns, manors, and ladies’ beds: everywhere but in their cloisters.

During a period when many forms of professional religious life were subject to lay interest and emulation, as well as doubt and critique, vernacular authors responded in varied ways to the question of how lay Christians should seek spiritual fulfillment. This book analyzes some of these textual formations of lay piety in an age of social change and religious upheaval, drawing upon a largely neglected body of religious guidance together with reformist discourses and contemporary poetry.¹ At the heart of my study lie five late Middle English prose spiritual guides – the anonymous *Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, *Fervor Amoris*, *Book to a Mother*, *The Life of Soul*, and Walter Hilton’s *Mixed Life* – that propose to define and routinize religious life for lay readers wishing to move beyond catechism to explore the ordered practices and contemplative experience traditionally associated with life in religious orders.² I argue that these guides, written between the beginning of Wyclif’s career and the flowering of “vernacular Wycliffism” in the

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fifteenth century,³ must be newly understood as culturally central texts whose new literary popularizations of the religious life mediate between the requirements of orthodoxy and the impulses of reform. Prose spiritual guidance, which has recently begun to receive critical notice commensurate with its importance in the late medieval period, proves a flexible and innovative literary mode that can be most profitably studied in conversation with poetic and polemical visions of the religious life. This study also brings fresh perspectives to bear on selected works of Langland and Chaucer, poets alternately skeptical and hopeful about the future of religious discipline.

I have selected these particular guides based on their claims to offer plans for devout living to spiritually aspirant lay readers.⁴ The five works considered here are united by similar constructions of their audiences: they posit readers, whether known or imagined, ambitious to move beyond basic religious competence toward fuller dedication to religious life, perhaps even contemplative experience.⁵ Walter Hilton ascribes to his addressee a wish “to serue our lord bi goostli occupacioun al holli, wiþoute lettyng or trobolyng of wordeli bisynesse.”⁶ The author of *Fervor Amoris* solicits a wider group of lay readers who “al day askin how þei schul loue God, and in what maner þei schul liue to his plesaunce for his endles goodnes.”⁷ In response to this perceived demand, each of the guides proposes techniques for transforming lay existence into a form of “goostli occupacioun,” a dedicated religious life in which the reading subject might “serve” and “love” God without undermining priestly intellectual, pastoral, and penitential power.

The key to this balancing act is the careful transformation of religious discipline into textual form. These guides translate contested religious roles into new written models of self-regulation and self-assertion for lay readers, exploiting the overlapping senses of discipline (a system of correction or mortification; a process of education; a branch of learning) to encourage readerly self-regulation and expand possibilities for lay identification with the disciplines of monastic, anchoritic, fraternal, and secular clerical life. These are guides written for readers in the world, and this fact is critical. Their authors endeavor to draw readers *back* to the world on newly rigorous terms, constructing new modes of lay religious conduct to be explored under the careful supervision of clerical authority.⁸

In addition to being linked by their shared concept of audience, these five guides deserve particular attention because they illuminate some of the most significant uses of literary form to shape lay religious knowledge and practice at the end of the fourteenth century and into the early fifteenth.⁹ In the first part of the study, I treat guides that reimagine cloistered modes

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of religious discipline as textual frameworks for lay self-regulation in the world. The monuments of professed religious life – cloister and rule – become literary forms for redefining lay religious practice within the social structures of penance and lay community. In the second part of the book, I explore spiritual guides that present priestly life and the Bible as model and rule for lay Christian conduct, encouraging their lay readers to imitate clerical modes of biblical study, preaching, and pastoral care without encroaching on priestly prerogatives. While the first group of texts is cautious in its textual and ideological strategies, drawing upon cloistered forms of religious life to mediate between powerful lay desires and the actual requirements of penitential discipline, the second group proves reformist,¹⁰ mediating between Wycliffism and orthodoxy to accommodate new forms of lay spiritual authority within the boundaries of ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹¹ In my concluding chapter, I show that circulation of these works in the fifteenth century both complicates their messages and suggests important continuities between fourteenth- and fifteenth-century literary practices, with implications for our larger narrative of Middle English literary history.

The claustral and clerical categories that I am positing describe ways of transforming religious disciplines into didactic literary forms.¹² To create this distinction for texts is not to imply that these categories were distinct in the realm of professional religious practice (for example, monastic and priestly status nearly always overlapped for monks in later medieval England). Nor do the clericalizing texts I consider necessarily disparage the monastic life or contemplative life more broadly. For both groups of guides, the multiple meanings of religious discipline suggest strategies for the formation of lay religious identity on numerous fronts. In the *Abbey* and *Fervor Amoris*, monastic enclosure and contemplation reinscribe pastoral penitential discipline and collective social regulation. In *The Life of Soul*, *Book to a Mother*, and Hilton's *Mixed Life*, reading, preaching, and pastoral care become literary realms in which apostolic life is posited as a site of lay–clerical cooperation rather than a threat to ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Placing spiritual guidance in conversation with reformist discourses and contemporary poetry reveals with new clarity a set of common concerns about lay piety's challenges to contemporary religious roles. As David Aers and Lynn Staley observe in *The Powers of the Holy* – one of few full-length studies to consider canonical poetry together with religious prose – Chaucer, Langland, and Julian of Norwich are all engaged in a “submerged conversation regarding the boundaries between lay and clerical activities” in the period.¹³ By constructing this “conversation” in a new way, in terms of relations among lay piety, religious discipline, and literary form, I show how

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these texts work to investigate, cross, and even redefine lay–clerical boundaries during a particularly fraught period for these categories. Chaucer and Langland share a preoccupation with the status of religious figures as models for laity, and both explore extreme scenarios that the spiritual guides wish to avoid, the crossing of social and disciplinary boundaries that didactic texts strive to reconfigure.¹⁴ Rather than arguing for poetry as “simply another form of vernacular theology,”¹⁵ I suggest that poetry and devotional prose may illuminate each other, for Chaucer and Langland often ask the very questions that didactic authors seek to answer. Chaucer’s response to monastic imitation and clerical impersonation exposes the dangers that exist at both ends of the disciplinary spectrum, while Langland’s work functions both as analogue and counterpoint to the reformist works of spiritual guidance. Where *Piers Plowman* remains theoretical in its approach to diffusing “clergie” among laity and pessimistic about the state of pastoral care, the guides in question attempt to carve out a textual middle ground, reimagining certain intellectual and pastoral aspects of clerical discipline as tools for practical lay use.

The book unfolds as follows. The Introduction establishes a cultural matrix for the readings to come. In the post-plague period, amid institutional readjustments and the expansion of lay religious education, privileged elements of professional religious reading and practice became increasingly available to pious laity. In this section I consider the extension of different forms of religious discipline into the lay world, examining laypeople’s efforts to accrue spiritual capital through affiliation with contemplative religious orders, investment in corporate organizations such as religious guilds and chantries, and use of texts including monastic rules, liturgical books, and books of hours. During the same period, John Wyclif’s polemical writings interrogated the relation between religious discipline and perfection. Asserting that perfection lay in adherence to the dictates of scripture, Wyclif challenged the validity of the religious orders and advocated a radical form of identity between lay and priestly practice. In orthodox lay efforts to participate in and cooperate with clerical practices, I suggest we see an attraction to priestly culture that the authors of spiritual guidance exploit in their efforts to shape acceptable forms of religious practice.

Chapter 1, “Translations of the cloister: regulating spiritual aspiration,” argues that *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost* and *Fervor Amoris* imagine lay pious aspiration as a potentially disruptive social force, a means of evading clerical authority or seeking spiritual transformation that might threaten existing categories of religious status. These works reimagine cloistered

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modes of discipline as ways to inculcate independent lay modes of self-control, returning readers to the supervision of confessors and the social structures of the larger lay community. By analyzing these texts as newly disciplinary translations of older works (for the *Abbey*, a French precursor, and for *Fervor Amoris*, Richard Rolle's anchoritic *Form of Living*), the chapter illuminates the literary workings of their cautious clerical ideologies. When considered alongside these two spiritual guides, Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale* is freshly seen as a knowing response to intersections of lay spiritual desire and monastic discipline, as it registers the confusions of material and spiritual capital that result from bourgeois lay identification with flawed rather than idealized claustral discipline.

While the guides considered in Chapter 1 look to the cloister and rule to construct new modes of lay spiritual discipline, the texts considered in the book's second part simultaneously imagine the pious lay public and confront the Wycliffite challenge as they fashion new orthodox modes of lay apostolic life. Chapter 2, "Dialogic form and clerical understanding," argues that *The Life of Soul*, *Book to a Mother*, and Hilton's *Mixed Life* adopt dialogic forms to posit the sharing of "clerical understanding" between priestly authors and lay readers.¹⁶ This chapter charts the construction of the inscribed lay reader as a textual interpreter who moves toward an individual understanding of the Bible, in conversation rather than competition with the priestly advisor. Techniques of reading, writing, and emendation become implicated in lay addressees' reform in the image of Christ, and the Bible is treated as a source to be consumed in the movement toward a simultaneous *imitatio clerici* and *imitatio Christi*. The emphasis these guides place on Christ as identical with scripture, and on unmediated contact with "holy writ," align them with Wyclif and the later Lollard Bible translators. But in highlighting the materiality and permeability of the Bible, they work – as does *Piers Plowman* – to resist insistence upon the Bible as a transcendent textual entity, refusing to privilege the text at the expense of the reader.

In Chapter 3, "Lordship, pastoral care, and the order of charity," I show that Hilton's *Mixed Life*, written for a wealthy lay lord, engages with contemporary controversy over the meanings of pastoral care and the clerical life in an effort to reform rather than reject the link between temporal and spiritual authority. The chapter explores Hilton's vision of a lay pastoral *imitatio clerici* that assimilates the lives of lay lord, prelate, and Christ, in juxtaposition with moments from Wyclif's writings and *Piers Plowman* that expose the costs to charity of clerical greed and lay spiritual pretension. By examining Hilton's advice on ordering charity in

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tandem with some of Langland's meditations on the elusiveness of this virtue, I show that Hilton's advice to a particular addressee also represents an important response to the broader contemporary crisis over clerical discipline and authority.

Chapter 4, "Clerical widows and the reform of preaching," focuses on the transmission of preaching power, a contested aspect of clerical identity during a period when lay aspiration and heterodox pressure forced the serious evaluation of lay rights to public spiritual authority. The chapter examines selected Wycliffite arguments on lay and female preaching alongside *Book to a Mother's* widowed addressee, who is constructed as a Christ-like teacher, and Chaucer's resistant female preacher, Alison of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. Placed in conversation, these texts render the clerical preaching widow possible and problematic, exemplary and satirical at this fraught moment in religious history. *Book to a Mother* offers a polemically orthodox vision of lay *imitatio clerici* as *imitatio Christi*, proposing to empower the reader and condemn mendicant corruption much as some Wycliffites did, but without abandoning sacramental authority or priestly voice to lay readers.

The Conclusion, "Spiritual guides in fifteenth-century books: cultural change and continuity," considers the circulation of some of these guides in the fifteenth century, in the years after Arundel's Constitutions, written in 1407 and published in 1409, designed to restrict the circulation of biblical translations made since Wyclif's time. The decades following the Constitutions have been characterized as an anxious time for the composition of new religious works, but a period when fourteenth-century works continued to move freely among elite readers.¹⁷ Indeed, I argue, we find affinities between the guides of Chapter 1 and Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, which, in explicit response to Lollardy, looks to the cloister to propose a limited view of the lay reader's capacity for understanding and fitness for public spiritual authority. By considering the circulation of some of the guides in fifteenth-century books, I show that numerous and often surprising varieties of orthodox practice persisted into the fifteenth century.

By considering religious prose together with poetry, as works produced in a shared context of religious ferment, this study will enrich our understanding of how devotional prose mattered to later medieval readers and how it might figure in our own narratives of Middle English literary history. Two abiding questions – what is the best life for the layperson in the world? How might that life take textual shape? – powerfully link didactic prose with canonical poetry.¹⁸ These questions connect to a broad textual

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system of lay religious discipline and self-transformation, in which literary compromise and hybridization become key to shaping new forms of lay spiritual life. By pursuing the complex affiliations of these works as they traveled to fifteenth-century readers of diverse religious statuses, I also hope to expand our understanding of how texts shaped the many varieties of orthodoxy that circulated in late medieval England.

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Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Abbreviations

EETS	Early English Text Society (OS, Original Series, ES, Extra Series)
MED	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
MLQ	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>