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

Nicole R. Rice

Excerpt

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Introduction

SPIRITUAL CAPITAL AND RELIGIOUS DISCIPLINE IN THEORY

Material success and the search for spiritual certainty often went hand in hand for the lay faithful in later medieval England.¹ Acts of endowment such as chantry foundation and donation to monasteries, where masses were said periodically for the benefit of individual souls, enabled the laity to benefit from the activities of religious professionals, tapping into the network of services dedicated to amassing and distributing the treasury of spiritual merit.² For some fortunate laity, earthly life may have presented greater time and opportunity not only to cultivate the active penitential life, but also to pursue the “spiritual life”: what P. S. Jolliffe calls “the whole of a Christian’s life insofar as it is directed towards that perfection which God demands from him, in which prayer is central and in the course of which sins are purged and virtues implanted.”³ But as numerous scholars of the period have observed, living a life of perfection was easier said than done, and “the desire to meld an authentic spiritual life and a prosperous worldly existence constituted a site of genuine cultural struggle in late-medieval society.”⁴ Texts written to transform this struggle into productive modes of practice are the subject of this study.

In a late medieval English culture characterized by the frequent “intersection of piety and prosperity,” some prosperous laity looked to religious professionals for models of the religious discipline that might eventually lead to perfection. In this introduction, I look first at the venerable monastic idea of *disciplina* as a fundamental plan for perfect living and then at its radical late fourteenth-century rejection by Wyclif, who argued for secular clerical life (i.e., non-vowed clerical life in the world) as the most perfect form of apostolic religious practice.⁵ Although Wyclif viewed the religious orders as lacking scriptural justification and argued for the superiority of secular clerical models, I contend that contemporary practical and textual evidence suggests lay interest in multiple and overlapping various

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forms of religious discipline, an interest upon which the authors of spiritual guidance would capitalize.

Scholars who approach medieval courtesy literature with the aid of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice have noted that conduct guides aided their readers in the attainment of "symbolic capital," defined as "the prestige or renown attached to a family and a name" in return for material and symbolic investments such as protection and economic aid.⁶ Bourdieu argues further, "symbolic capital is always *credit*, in the widest sense of the word, i.e., a sort of advance which the group alone can grant those who give the best material and symbolic *guarantees*."⁷ We might begin to conceptualize the lay search for spiritual self-improvement as in part defined by a search for spiritual capital: a fund of credit for salvation and a repertoire of techniques leading to personal perfection, available in return for financial investment.⁸ For some laypeople in late fourteenth-century England, success in the mercantile economy may have facilitated pursuit of "the disciplined development of the self," freeing up the time and material resources necessary to seek the spiritual "guarantees" available to those in professional religious life.⁹

The required practice of penance linked all Christians, regardless of status, as a minimal religious discipline. From the fourth to the twelfth century, penance had gradually been transformed from a public, one-time act to a private and repeatable practice of confession, contrition, and satisfaction. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 obligated all to engage annually in confession, mandating a form of self-discipline, in cooperation with clerical authority, that would become fundamental to late medieval religious mentalities.¹⁰ The penitent, having expressed contrition for sin, was required to accuse herself and then, separately from the priest's absolution (increasingly given before any satisfaction was performed), to reform her own internal dispositions in order to produce a reformed self.¹¹ Thus, as Asad observes, "[t]he outstanding feature of penance is not merely its corrective function but its techniques of *self-correction*."¹² In a culture where penitential practice was the entry point to religious expression, those individuals who devoted themselves professionally to "self-correction" may have offered the most visible examples of how religious life could lead to personal perfection. On practical and textual levels, the disciplines of regular and priestly life were privileged sites for laity to begin accumulating spiritual capital.

The chance to live according to professional "ritual discipline" was a privileged option available only to a few, and the late fourteenth century witnessed animated conversation over the best version of religious *disciplina*.

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Latin patristic writers had first adopted *disciplina* to represent the Greek term *paideia*, meaning education in its fullest sense, “not only the intellectual element of education, but also its moral aspect . . . the method, its precepts, the *rule* that the master imposes upon the student.”¹³ Synonymous with a “rule of faith,” discipline thus referred both to the act of teaching and to the subject matter taught: “under Saint Augustine’s pen, *disciplina christiana* is the *rule of Christian life*, the law that dictates in every case how to conduct oneself according to the faith.”¹⁴ Another key sense of *disciplina*, arising from this nexus of teaching and learning, denotes its corrective function: “a penalty inflicted to warn and amend the guilty person.”¹⁵

During the early medieval period, the monastery was the site where these meanings of discipline – as educational process, body of knowledge, and technique of correction – had coalesced most clearly into a specific Christian way of life, organized by the *Rule of Benedict* (*Sancti Benedicti Regula Monachorum*, c. 593–94), which quickly became the most widely used monastic rule in the West. The *Rule* defines religious discipline as an exercise in submission to and praise of God, admonishing the reader,

[l]isten carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions . . . This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice. The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience. This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true king, Christ the Lord.¹⁶

The *Rule*, largely devoted to explaining the performance of the *Opus Dei* (the monastic liturgy),¹⁷ uses the term *disciplina* to refer to many aspects of monastic life: to the “good order” the *Rule* establishes in the monastery, to the *Rule* itself, to the proper ways of chanting the psalms or receiving new brothers, and to the “penalties and corrections” imposed for infractions of the monastic discipline.¹⁸ According to the *Rule*, collective prayer, ordered practice, private reading, and meditation should combine to promote each monk’s spiritual return to “him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience.” This complex of meanings became common to medieval monastic authors who treated discipline as a system of practices both mandated by authority and self-imposed, always undertaken in a spirit of radical humility.¹⁹

The monastery remained throughout the Middle Ages the most privileged site for the strictly supervised “disciplined development of the self,” even as monks began to share the laity’s esteem with the new regular orders of friars. The friars became more visible in England after the plague of

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1348–49 and its consequent clerical mortality, for they were permitted to supplement the confessional and preaching duties of secular priests.²⁰ For many late medieval laity, the cloister still represented the most “powerful *symbol* of the mental aspiration toward heaven that defined the ideal spiritual life.”²¹ But in later medieval England, the arguments of theologian John Wyclif on the superiority of priestly discipline in the world offered a radical alternative to the vowed religious life of monks or friars as the ideal site for lay religious identification. Although Wyclif’s positions may not have been shared by most pious laity, his views on priestly discipline have important implications for vernacular texts written to guide lay readers and negotiate boundaries between lay and clerical authority. I consider Wyclif’s arguments here in order to set the scene for the interventions of Middle English spiritual guidance.

Wyclif’s arguments for the superiority of secular clerical life, and against the regular religious orders, built upon his vision of Christianity as a communal practice with the unadorned biblical text as its only legitimate source. The idea of priestly discipline as the ideal form of religious life was hardly novel: as the contemporary priest’s guide *Speculum Christiani* proclaims, “as gold es more preciose than al other metal, so es prestehode more excellent than al other diuine officeȝ and dignites.”²² But rather than emphasizing that priestly worth derived from “office,” Wyclif argued that the priest’s dignity lay in his literal imitation of Christ’s preaching and adherence to his words as recorded in the Bible. Although the monastic order had traditionally viewed its own discipline as the ideal imitation of the apostolic life, as did the friars after them, Wyclif’s vision left no room for the religious orders.²³ As Wyclif argues in *De Civili Dominio* (c. 1375–76), a treatise concerned preeminently with the *lex Christi*, the only source for all human law, true religious life must be based only on Christ’s example, for no rule should be added to the precepts that Christ taught and embodied. Turning the vocabulary of the religious orders against them, he writes, “the rule of religion that Christ instituted is the most perfect possible, therefore if an extraneous thing were added, it would be impious.”²⁴

The mandate to adhere to biblical precedents made any additional rules suspect, particularly those involving “private” observances not dedicated to “edifying” the Church. In developing the contrast between novel, “superadded” private forms of religion and the evangelical model that demands only the performance of virtue, Wyclif casts the cloister as a dangerous place where material goods are mistaken for spiritual, as opposed to the “pure” clerical life in the world, where goods are communal and evangelical movement unfettered. This contrast is expressed in the

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difference between the providential movement of preachers, identified as the “militia Christi,” and the pointless self-restraint of those in the cloister. In Wyclif’s idealizing view, true secular clerics are those who “profess poverty, chastity, and obedience to our mother the church and not to the convent”:²⁵ they actively battle the world, the flesh, and the devil, working to edify the church, while those who “retreat foolishly into the cloister” are tempted by the physical ease of the cloistered life.²⁶ In contrast to those who “bind” themselves to such self-serving observances, St. Paul, next to Christ in exemplarity, steadfastly resisted the torpor of the cloister. Wyclif approves the Apostle’s avoidance of degenerate fellowship, “lest in being bound to any private profession he should be delayed from the work of the gospel, for as Gregory says, the strong athlete of Christ refused to be enclosed in the cloister, in order that he might earn more for his God.”²⁷ Here a very different notion of spiritual capital appears: in Wyclif’s view, merit is amassed to be given back to God in evangelical practice rather than hoarded in the cloister for the sake of individual or communal “spiritual security.”

With his conviction in preaching as the most fundamental aspect of priestly discipline, and his concern about the degeneracy of the contemporary priesthood, Wyclif manages to be pro-clerical in theory but anti-clerical with regard to contemporary practice. In extending his evangelical vision to lay practice, he begins to imply a breakdown between the categories of clerical and lay status, a dissolution that would become more extreme in the theories of his followers and in vernacular Lollardy.²⁸ While forms of religious life lacking scriptural bases are unacceptable accretions to Christ’s “rule,” Wyclif argues that the “religious life” may be lived most genuinely by simply avoiding sin and behaving virtuously.²⁹ Indeed, all Christians should be engaged in some measure in spreading the gospel: “spreading God’s word toward the edification of the church” is for Wyclif the very definition of religious discipline.³⁰ Wyclif’s philosophy, with its emphasis on simplifying the life of pastoral service and evangelism, had much in common with that of the friars, although he came later in life to condemn the mendicants for their entanglement in church property and politics.³¹ In *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, his treatise on the literal interpretation of the Bible, Wyclif goes further to blur the line between priestly and lay responsibilities. His radical interpretation of Christ’s command to Peter to “feed my sheep” requires both priests *and* laity to teach the gospel, for in his view all fathers are priests: “if the fleshly father and elders are required by both testaments to teach God’s law to their sons, how much more must spiritual fathers, in such a way that they should all be priests! Every faithful

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person has the power spiritually to generate children for the church out of the seeds of the strength of faith.”³²

Wyclif’s view of the Bible as the only true “rule” for Christian practice³³ and his arguments for the possibility of shared lay–clerical intellectual, evangelical, and pastoral practice implied a challenge to the entire late medieval system of religious discipline, which depended for its coherence upon the maintenance of distinctions between clerical and lay “office3 and dignites.” For Wyclif, these distinctions became unimportant, as in the case of penance, which was a departure from the gospels and therefore unnecessary. In any case, his belief that God alone could evaluate contrition rendered priestly absolution irrelevant.³⁴ If priest and layperson ultimately possessed the same biblical mandate and the same “power spiritually to generate children for the church,” then the only form of “self-correction” necessary for clergy and laity was absolute conformity to “God’s law.”

SPIRITUAL CAPITAL AND RELIGIOUS DISCIPLINE IN PRACTICE

In later medieval England, laypeople’s practical engagements with religious professionals – monks, friars, secular clergy, and others – suggest sustained lay interest in the disciplines of religious life in many quarters. Practices including confraternity and corrody at religious houses may have offered personal ways for prosperous, pious laity to engage with the religious orders. Others in search of the spiritual capital to be gained through charity and intercessory prayer sought out contact with the practical liturgical aspects of secular clerical discipline, while still apparently respecting the priestly “office3 and dignites” that Wyclif wished to sweep away.

The varieties of semi-religious life remain more elusive for late medieval England than for the Continent where, since the twelfth century, many types of lay practice had appealed to laypeople who, in André Vauchez’s terms, “aspired to perfection while not desiring or being able to enter monastic life.”³⁵ Such options included membership in third orders associated with the friars³⁶ and the custom of abiding by a strict devotional program within the lay household. The lay third orders associated with the Franciscans and Dominicans left few traces in England, although a few scattered references to *sorores minores* may allude to Franciscan tertiaries rather than Franciscan nuns.³⁷ Moreover, almost no mention exists from England of beguinages, the female lay religious communities that flourished in northern Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, although there is evidence of two “communities resembling beguinages” in early fifteenth-century Norwich.³⁸

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Given what may have been the relative dearth of such forms of lay religious organization, lay confraternity with religious houses, as well as the practice of corrody (retirement at a religious house), were two practices whose popularity in later medieval England implies lay interest in regular religious discipline and its attendant spiritual benefits.³⁹ In the case of the letter of confraternity, the lay benefactor donated money or land to a religious house, in return for which the house agreed to distribute alms and perform liturgical commemorations on the donor's behalf. By this means the donor fulfilled the active duty of charity, which was expected as an act of justice and stewardship to the poor and also functioned as a means of penance, to alleviate purgatorial suffering.⁴⁰ Not only did entry into confraternity with a religious house, a ritual that originally involved the ceremonial acceptance of the order's rule, entitle the *confrater* or *consoror* to individualized spiritual capital, but the status of *confrater* or *consoror* might also have given donors an increased sense of participation in the life of a religious house.⁴¹

Letters of confraternity speak a language of spiritual entitlement, explaining that the donor's material gifts will be transmuted directly into spiritual capital, promising, in one typical formulation, "full participation in all the good things, by the tenor of these presents, that the mercy of our savior may grant to be performed by our brothers."⁴² Those in receipt of letters of confraternity could be buried in the habit of the order: this ceremonial garbing ushered deceased members into the "guarantees" afforded to full members.⁴³ In June 1377, John de Meaux, a knight of York diocese, asked to be buried in the church of Saint Bartholomew in Aldeburgh, in the Franciscan habit. His will reads, "I wish my body to be buried in the habit of the Friars Minor, for I am a member of that same order, and I wish my body to be covered by a black rag on the day of my burial."⁴⁴ The combination of habit and black rag seems paradoxically to signify his financial investment in the spiritual rewards of asceticism and humility.

Like lay confraternity with religious houses, with which it may often have overlapped, the practice of corrody offered the promise of spiritual capital in return for material outlay. A corrody, essentially a pension given for cash or a grant of land, comprised a "bundle of privileges" granted to a lodger or non-resident of a religious house.⁴⁵ Corrodies often generated considerable income for late medieval religious houses,⁴⁶ yet in official documents, the practice was sometimes described in spiritual terms suggesting it served as a way for well-off, pious laity to participate in the *habitus* of a chosen religious house, accruing spiritual capital while organizing their religious lives in terms of ritual regulation and ordered contemplation.⁴⁷

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Those who retired to a religious house were entitled to share in all of its material and spiritual benefits, “participating in its religious life, sharing its merit and enjoying the provision of all their physical needs.”⁴⁸ The 1378 *Corrodiu[m] Paynot* grants corrody to Thomas and Johanna Paynot, a burgess and his wife, at the house of the Carmelite Friars of Lynn. After describing the details of their food and lodging, the document grants the couple free access to the spiritual spaces and practices of the friary, permitting them to enter “into their [the friars’] church through the cloister at all hours of the divine office.”⁴⁹ Without obligating them to follow the rule of the order, this agreement suggests that Thomas and Johanna will agree to submit to the friary’s particular “logic of practice.” To borrow from Bourdieu’s formulation, in the system that this document lays out, “the whole social order imposes itself at the deepest level of the bodily dispositions through a particular way of regulating the use of time, the temporal distribution of collective and individual activities and the appropriate rhythm with which to perform them.”⁵⁰ This clause suggests that the couple may be engaged, potentially for much of their day, in observation of the *Opus Dei* with the friars, not just as onlookers but as participants. Along with the right to this flexible engagement in the order’s *habitus*, the corrody also grants Thomas and Johanna the same right to “participation” in spiritual benefit, from the friars’ prayer and other activities, that the above letter of confraternity granted to its *confratri* and *consorores*.⁵¹ This brief look at the evidence of wills, letters of confraternity, and corrodiess suggests that a sense of possibility existed at the end of the fourteenth century for privileged laity to enter in practical ways into regulated and introspective religious lives.

While the cloister attracted some who sought daily access to the rhythms of its “spiritual life,” the parish was the most immediate and primary site for the expression of devotion by most laity. Lay investments and limited participation in clerical discipline, understood both as a “body of knowledge” and as “physical and spiritual practice,” were basic features of late fourteenth-century parish life. Even had they been able to navigate Wyclif’s academic Latin, it is uncertain whether many devout laypeople of the late fourteenth century would have been receptive to his conviction that lay fathers should be considered “presbyteri” or that all Christians could eschew the requirements of the confessional. The ecclesiastical condemnations of some of Wyclif’s views on preaching, the eucharist, and auricular confession in 1382, however much they distorted his actual positions, further removed him from the mainstream of piety.⁵²

However, in parallel with lay participation with religious institutions through practices of confraternity and corrody, collective modes of lay

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practice such as membership in religious guilds and supervision of chantry foundations do suggest quite well-developed lay interest in understanding, superintending, and cooperating with clerical liturgical practices. Religious guilds, perhaps the best known of English lay religious organizations, were “brotherhoods” organized according to *regulae* that probably derived ultimately from monastic sources yet existed to enable lay individuals, male and female, “to participate more fully in the rituals and sacraments of the church.”⁵³ In their church-based activities, focused on securing intercession for deceased members and supporting clerical liturgical practice, guild-members also shared in the spiritual capital to be gained from clerical functions.

Although guilds were usually associated with parishes, a guild’s association with a given parish might be shifting, and its social influence, especially in the case of later urban guilds, could transcend parish boundaries.⁵⁴ Overlap between religious and craft guilds was common: although religious fraternities did not usually restrict their membership to people in specific professions, urban craft guilds were always fundamentally religious organizations. As Caroline Barron argues, “[e]very craft association in London, as elsewhere, had at its core a fraternity or religious brotherhood.”⁵⁵ In the diocese of Salisbury, to take another regional example, membership in the tailors’ guild also entailed being “parterie of the praiers and suffrages of . . . [the] fraternitie of Seynt John the Baptist.”⁵⁶ The tailors considered themselves a religious community bound to maintain divine service for their members, both living and dead.

In addition to administering charity to living members who had fallen upon hard times,⁵⁷ the religious guilds’ most important church-based activities focused upon intercession for souls in purgatory: attendance at members’ funerals and the financing of prayers and masses performed by guild chaplains. The paramount guild duty of light-keeping, the maintenance of candles in the church, was a constant at all liturgical occasions.⁵⁸ The London Guild of the Light of St. Mary, dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin, maintained a perpetual light before Mary’s image, observed a solemn mass on her Assumption day and required the lighting of candles at funerary masses: “thei ordeigne of here comone box v tapres and foure torches for to brenne a bouthe the body at first dirige and o the day . . . at messe at which dirige . . . is asaiyng, and at morwe fro the begynnnyng of the first messe to all the messe be sayd.”⁵⁹ In a particularly resonant ritual, the Holy Sepulchre Guild of Chatteris in Cambridgeshire observed Christ’s death on Good Friday by entering the sepulcher set up in the church carrying thirty tapers, which were set to burn from Good Friday noon until

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Easter matins.⁶⁰ Thus in celebrating its main liturgical occasion, the guild managed to perform intercession for the buried Christ, its own deceased members, and the larger body of all the faithful. With their intense liturgical and sacramental focus, these organizations provided opportunities for close practical cooperation with priests: lay guild members were frequently involved in appointing and maintaining guild chaplains, and in many cases, priests and laypeople founded religious guilds together and cooperated in their administration.⁶¹ In providing charity under the auspices of the church, religious guild members engaged in a heightened expression of the active life that enabled supervision, if not full participation, in clerical liturgical practice.

For laity with more significant funds to invest, chantries (temporary or perpetual) represented another appealing means for procuring the spiritual capital available through intercessory masses and clerical prayer. In later medieval England, the chantry, an endowed chapel employing a priest (or group of priests, in the chantry college) to perform masses for the benefit of founders and patrons, supported a greater percentage of the clerical population than any other intercessory institution.⁶² In the course of the fourteenth century, chantries came to be founded in urban areas not only by wealthy merchants but also by “more obscure craftsmen” wishing particular prayers.⁶³ Although lay chantry founders and patrons may have had less involvement in day-to-day liturgical practice than religious guild members, with their lighting of candles, attendance at funerals, and co-administration with clergy, the foundation and support of a chantry entailed a number of other ways of engaging with clerical discipline. Lay individuals may have founded chantries and supported stipendiary priests primarily for the sake of securing their own immortal souls, but these priests also contributed to meeting liturgical needs and pastoral demands that had developed in the wake of the plague. As Clive Burgess has shown for Bristol, many chantry priests participated in and augmented the daily liturgy of parish churches, and benefactions recorded in the All Saints’ Church Book discuss chantries not only as engines of individual prayer but “in terms of the contribution that each made to the ‘increase of the Divine Service’ within the church.”⁶⁴ Founding a chantry often meant taking an active role in supporting liturgical practice.

Chantry foundation and the support of stipendiary priests also enabled laity to superintend and participate vicariously in other clerical functions with wider effects on the surrounding community. Some chantry founders directed their gifts not only toward liturgical activity but also toward “such vital tasks as serving as assistants in the cure of souls, teaching