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Edwin D. Craun

Excerpt

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I see my friends take discounts for which they're not really eligible, buy and wear clothes they later return, stiff waiters, and in many ways cheat the system. I find this deplorable. Then again, when I was young, I used to do many of the same things. How can I justify my righteous attitude when I've been just as guilty? And what do I say when my friends brag about these dubious achievements?

Randy Cohen's answer to this query, submitted to the *New York Times* Sunday column "The Ethicist" a decade ago, could have come from a late medieval sermon or pastoral text on fraternal correction of sin, save for its references to "Oprah" and Dr. Johnson. You have reformed years ago, Cohen advises Alleghra Behar-Blau of Woodland Hills, California, so you are not being inconsistent. Anyhow, you "needn't be completely virtuous to encourage virtue in others." You can tell your friends what you think "if you speak directly, quietly, and without chastising them."<sup>1</sup>

Fraternal correction of sin, the late medieval practice of admonishing others charitably for their evil conduct in order to reform them, is almost as invisible to medievalists as to most other readers of the Sunday *New York Times*. Even though the movement to expand pastoral care from the early thirteenth century on enjoined all Christians – lay and clerical – to reprove sin as an act of charity whenever they encountered it in a fellow Christian, especially clerics in positions of disciplinary power (confessors, bishops, the Pope), no scholar has examined how fraternal correction was constructed in pastoral writing, let alone how it was seized upon and adapted resourcefully by writers intent on widespread reform. Fraternal correction is absent from, for example, André Vauchez's *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, Anne Hudson's exhaustive study of Wycliffite texts, *The Premature Reformation*, and scholarship on those potent English correctors of sin, Margery Kempe and William Langland. Dropped from the Roman Catholic code of canon law in the revision promulgated in 1917, it ceased by 1950 even to be a topic for dissertations in theology (at least

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published ones).<sup>2</sup> Only Takashi Shogimen has taken up discourse on fraternal correction: He sets forth briefly how thirteenth-century canonists and theologians wrote about correction of superiors so that he can explain how William of Ockham developed from their discourse “a radical theory of legitimate disobedience to papal authority.”<sup>3</sup>

This study of fraternal correction is fundamentally historical. It opens access to materials outside the ken of medievalists: the pastoral writing on fraternal correction, largely in manuscript form, produced by clerics engaged in reforming the conduct of Western Christians over the two centuries from just after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) to the 1440s. Entries labeled “correctio fraterna” and/or general entries on “correctio” or “correptio”<sup>4</sup> that include fraternal correction appear in thirteen general collections of pastoral materials circulating in England before 1440. All four confessional *summae* from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries that survive in British libraries contain a longish entry on “fraterna correctio,” rich sources of catechetical and homiletic material. The entries in both genres are complex mini-treatises on fraternal correction, full of biblical exegesis, patristic authorities, scholastic moral theology (often in large chunks), biblical *exempla*, and canon law, often giving a fully dialectical play to a controverted question about correction – and there are many.<sup>5</sup> Usually built out of these materials, sermons advocating fraternal correction were preached on two set occasions in the liturgical year, the Tuesday after the third Sunday in the great preaching season of Lent and the fourth Sunday after Trinity.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly bishops preached about fraternal correction when they carried out official visitations of parishes or larger communities, as did monastic visitors.<sup>7</sup>

Studying these main (and other) sources on fraternal correction enables us to redraw the relations between clergy and laity in these two centuries in England. Far from only circumscribing religious speech and writing, as most current scholarship would have it,<sup>8</sup> the clergy licensed and nourished lay reformist criticism of individual clerics. Clerical culture not only prescribed fraternal correction as one of the many duties its prescriptive literature laid out for the laity in the centuries of Gregorian and later reform, but it used the practice to regulate clerical conduct both internally (subordinate clerics reproving superiors) and externally (lay people reproving clerics). In the process, pastoral writing portrayed lay people, including women, and clerical subordinates as ethical agents who could resourcefully negotiate both existing power relations and ethical perplexities in carrying out correction of sin. Constructed as an obligatory practice, fraternal correction became a fluid cultural resource for

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reformist writers from just before the Uprising of 1381 to the late stages of Lancastrian suppression of religious speech and writing. Reformist writers and the literary figures some of them imagine in visionary literature and lives, like Will in *Piers Plowman* and the Margery Kempe of “her” book, practice fraternal correction as a clerically sanctioned form of writing and speech, a somewhat safe vehicle for reformist thought, as were the apocalyptic prophecies of Hildegard of Bingen, in Kathryn Kerby-Fulton’s recent discoveries from careful manuscript work.<sup>9</sup> No matter what the genre or the writer’s place on the spectrum from traditional religious thought to radical dissent and heresy, these reformist texts all move to extend fraternal correction to groups, even institutions, and to rethink what is involved in actually bringing about reform. Thus fraternal correction became a resource provided by the institutional Church that promoted vigorous criticism of the forms of English ecclesiastical, social, and political life – political because pastoral texts allow for political authorities, as well as clerical ones, to be the subjects of corrective speech. To steal a term from one of the readers for Cambridge University Press, it could lead to a “critical ecclesiology” – and, less frequently in writing, a critical politics.

To make these claims for what we can learn from studying fraternal correction in these sources is to point to the kinds of history this study practices and writes. Initially and at times throughout, it is a chapter in the history of medieval normative ethics as a branch of intellectual history: I trace how moral theologians and those who disseminated their ideas explored obligations and seemingly contrary goods, texts, and claims, especially as they worked to prevent correction from slipping into deviant speech, like slander and insult. Because fraternal correction is a social practice constructed by a clerical elite (moral theologians and the University-educated clergy), because it must be carried out within existing power relations, and because it deals, in David Gary Shaw’s words, with the “*meanings* that guided people as they lived and altered their worlds,” this study traverses some of the territory of social history.<sup>10</sup> In its last four chapters, I study social agents who imagine themselves practicing correction as presented in pastoral writing, managing and modifying it according to historical conditions and other social values, especially good reputation and truth. However, I do not write fully realized social history. While I labor to place texts and manuscripts in specific locales at specific times, this kind of work is incomplete because we know the exact dates and ownership of very few manuscripts of pastoral texts and sermon collections.<sup>11</sup> Despite much scholarly detective work, the dating and even the authorship

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of many texts are still uncertain – let alone specific communities for which they were written. Moreover, I do not examine, as a social historian would, sources like the records of episcopal visits or of ecclesiastical courts, attempting to determine how much and among whom writing on correction mobilized action (if such evidence exists). Instead, this book works within the world of discursive and fictional texts – their construction, their rhetoric, their mutual influence, the uses writers imagine that their audiences will make of them. It is a broadly narrative literary and intellectual history of fraternal correction as a social practice, rather than social history in a strict sense. It is akin to David Aers's and Lynn Staley's *The Powers of the Holy*, in which (to take just the first chapter and a half) Aers explains how the humanity of Christ was represented differently and used for different religious purposes by writers like Nicholas Love (the crucified body that fosters Eucharistic devotion) and John Wyclif (the itinerant preacher challenging religious authorities).<sup>12</sup>

This study demands such historical hybridity because fraternal correction is a practice. The study of practices, as Paul Strohm conceives of it, “draws textuality, its occasions, its uses, and the events it describes into a socially performative totality.”<sup>13</sup> As I situate fraternal correction as a practice in the communities that constructed and used it, I draw below on Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of practice as a socially constructed activity in which individuals pursue goods internal to the practice itself but also rooted in particular communities (including institutions) and in the individuals' lives. Like the anthropologist Talal Asad's work on medieval monastic practices, MacIntyre's writing considers how people's morality, their practice of virtues, is bound up with participating in practices within social settings.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, MacIntyre, like many social theorists, recognizes the open-endedness of practices, the possibility of extending or altering them, especially through what two of his feminist readers describe as “participants' conscious efforts and arguments about what the practice, and the tradition, *is* – that is, by what we might call a process of interpretive criticism or critique.” I depart from MacIntyre's account of historically embedded practices where the two feminist readers do: in paying attention to the differential power of social agents, their relative power to participate in a practice and to alter it, and in spelling out the political grounding of the various “critical understandings and struggles over practices.”<sup>15</sup> MacIntyre writes as if individuals played their social games on a level field under the same rules, whereas I believe that we need to study the workings of power – especially in institutions, class relations, and gender relations – in structuring agency.

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Attending to power relations is essential in examining not only how people negotiated the practice of correction but how the practice was constructed and disseminated by academic theologians and highly educated priests, and how it served the interests of clerics from popes to parish priests. But to do so is not to see fraternal correction as an instrument that simply advanced the power of the higher clergy, the clergy as a whole, or any other dominant social group. The clergy was far too diverse for that, far too subject to conflicts of interest and interpretation, some of which will emerge in chapter 1. And to return to participants, what Andrew Brown writes of religious rituals could be said of fraternal correction: “the interplay in ritualized activity, between agents [for Brown, authorities who promoted rituals] and participants is often more dynamic than simple imposition of ‘social control’ by the one over the other.”<sup>16</sup>

Such a multidimensional and extended historical narrative demands substantial chapter sketches – inelegant forms, to be sure, but necessary to set forth what this book attempts. These summaries will focus on the central questions about any reform movement. Who were the reformers? What kinds of texts did they write? What conduct – and whose – was to be corrected, “set straight” (to translate literally)? On the grounds of what authority and with what arguments? By what kind of speech – speech that might move offenders to reform while shielding correctors from dismissal, or even harm, as transgressive speakers? For reformers and their opponents alike recognized the “volatile status” of correction, to take a phrase from another reader’s report: that the boundaries between efficacious reproof and speech that maliciously injured individuals and groups could be both difficult to discern and contestable.

The first chapter unfolds how pastoral writing, given impetus by scholastic theologians and canonists as well as by conciliar legislation, uses ethical reasoning to construct fraternal correction of sin within existing power relations. Although the high medieval Western movement to promote pastoral care consolidated clerical authority and power, it also enlisted lay people in combating sin, especially the sins of authorities, mainly clerical but also civil. Its texts enjoin all Christians, out of charity, to reprove individual sinners they encounter in order to reform their lives. The practice is firmly (but not always consistently) distinguished from prelatial or disciplinary correction, in which institutional authorities – like bishops, confessors, and judges – wield punishment and act for the common good. By making fraternal correction a universal precept, the clergy conferred pastoral power on the laity: the power to direct others’ consciences, to persuade them to hew to religious norms, and to

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move them toward salvation. Yet pastoral texts also insist that reprovers acknowledge and negotiate existing power relations in certain ways if they are to practice correction ethically and successfully. So fraternal correction could reinforce social, political, and ecclesiastical hierarchies, even as it made lay people and other disciplinary subjects agents for reforming the lives of authorities.

To carry out, even to contemplate, an act of fraternal correction in specific situations was to face perplexity, difficulties, and even threats. “Negotiating contrary things,” the second chapter, takes up the central questions explored by pastoral writers on fraternal correction as they struggle with competing claims about what people owe each other, and with seeming contradictions and ambiguities in authoritative texts. Whose sins are people bound to correct, given that they live in a world full of sin? Is it ever justifiable, let alone efficacious, for a known sinner to correct a fellow sinner? Are people ever justified, even required, to divulge someone’s sins publicly in the process of reproof? Are harsh words ever acceptable in a practice to be governed by charity? The competing claims of universalizing charity and privacy, of acting for others’ benefit and avoiding hypocrisy, of the common good and individuals’ reputations, of verbal force and charitable speech drive pastoral writers and preachers to complex ethical reasoning, even to sacrificing one good to another in some circumstances. By these means the writers establish norms, especially constraints, governing how reproof can be practiced with moral authority, avoiding the appearance (or reality) of intrusiveness, hypocrisy, slander, and chiding. In this very process, however, they make the competing claims, the apparently contradictory authorities, and the different modes of ethical reasoning available to readers and listeners. They provide the very means by which their own norms can be contested.

The sources for these first two chapters were all written and circulating before the mid 1370s, when the Oxford theologian John Wyclif and the clerically educated author of *Piers Plowman* (probably William Langland), both outraged by the wealth of many ecclesiastical institutions and by the mercenary abuses of pastoral care, deftly altered dominant pastoral norms in order to extend the practice to correction of groups, communities, and institutions. So, pastoral writing before the mid 1370s serves as a benchmark against which to gauge how reformist writers, later ones as well as Wyclif and Langland, transformed fraternal correction into a tool for ecclesiastical and social reform.

The third chapter explores how Langland builds pastoral discourse on fraternal correction into his vernacular visionary satire by creating

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allegorical figures who take different stances toward reformist speech as they collide with each other. *Piers Plowman* first develops the strategies by which the corrupt resist correction: They shrewdly turn the ethical worries of traditional pastoral discourse against their reprovers, who are accused of malice and anger, of disclosing sins in public, of spreading falsehoods, and of complicity in what they denounce – in sum, of being deviant speakers, especially slanderers and chiders. Langland's task then becomes to persuade his reform-minded readers – managers of clerical and lay institutions in a time of ecclesiastical and economic unrest – that fraternal correction can survive such discrediting, emerging as a valuable resource for personal and institutional reform. Social exchanges between the dreamer (Will) and other figures develop how reprovers can use traditional clerically created norms and constraints to make their reproofs efficacious, preventing corrective speech from slipping into deviant speech (or being labeled so). But *Piers* does much more than popularize pastoral teaching in a vernacular poem with a wide imagined (and actual) readership. By deploying pastoral authorities deftly, it extends correction from individuals to the social groups they are part of, making readers aware of the institutional dimensions, even origins, of sin. In this and other ways, its vernacular fiction critiques the limits of, and exposes the fissures in, the general pastoral consensus on how to practice correction.

In contrast to *Piers Plowman*'s concern with the corrector's authority and efficacy, Wyclif's theological treatises and sermons boldly advocate fraternal correction as a means to accomplish large-scale reforms in the institutional Church. In *De civili dominio* and in his defenses against papal censure of his teaching on fraternal correction, Wyclif converts it into a disciplinary process involving not only admonition but also punishment, and performed not only for the soul of the cleric but also for the good of the Church. Then he advocates that the laity, especially lords, use correction to remove obstinately sinful clerics from office and so deprive them of their control over the Church's temporal goods. Since any cleric sins habitually if he exercises control of property, Wyclif envisions his melded fraternal/disciplinary correction as returning the whole English clergy to apostolic poverty and depriving it of disciplinary power. Several years later, Wyclif applies his recast fraternal correction specifically to the papacy: All Christians living in charity should not only admonish a sinning Roman pontiff but also refuse to acknowledge his authority, including his excommunications. Thus, Wyclif re-imagines fraternal correction as a tool to redistribute power and control of wealth in religious institutions at every level.



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After Wyclif's teaching on fraternal correction (and much else) was condemned by the Blackfriars Council of 1382, ecclesiastical and civil edicts began to make reformist speech and writing more dangerous in England. The fifth chapter examines how Wyclif's followers embraced fraternal correction as a way of defining themselves and of defending themselves against oppression. Dismissed as slanderous and viciously insulting by those attacked, their polemical tracts and visionary narratives (in the *Piers Plowman* tradition) from 1381 until just after 1400 respond that Wycliffites hew strictly to the speech of Jesus, whose harsh rebukes of the Pharisees (never an element in pastoral teaching on correction) now become their model. So armed, they toss aside many, sometimes all, earlier constraints on reproof: concern for the sinners' response, fear of committing mortal Sins of the Tongue, reverence for social superiors, the social value of reputation. What validates their jeremiads against clerical groups, witnessing to their pastoral power and moral authority, is their conviction that they, followers of evangelical law and of Jesus, have direct, ecstatic access to God. Wycliffite polemics then go for the institutional jugular: the clergy's practice of pastoral care. All clerics who take tithes or set fees for pastoral acts are hypocrites because they correct others while practicing avarice. Pastoral power has passed to the Wycliffite, who alone knows the truth, alone lives in charity, and so alone can judge what is necessary for the salvation of others.

Wycliffism continued to unleash ecclesiastical reaction, notably in the form of Archbishop Thomas Arundel's Constitutions (1409), designed to extirpate heresy by regulating religious speech and writing in sweeping ways. To what extent did the Constitutions inhibit discourse on fraternal correction and corrective speech itself? After exploring that question, the last chapter takes up two reformist lives, *Mum and the Sothsegger* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which employ similar strategies for conveying boldly the need to practice fraternal correction in this repressive age. They take the practice into somewhat new reformist arenas: political counsel of King Henry IV and a woman's encounter with ecclesiastical authorities. *Mum* defines the good life as a life of truth-telling, of conveying the grievances of the commons to those in power, a life contrasted with that of Mum, who practices self-interested silence and flattery to amass goods and influence. The *Book* depicts a lay woman, shaped by the movement of pastoral reform, who ostentatiously hews to pastoral norms and constraints for corrective speech, while subtly directing pastoral rhetoric to reveal clerical sins and the institutional practices that feed them. In the process, she neatly escapes being judged a slanderer and uncharitable



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reprover of clerics, an offence now closely associated with Wycliffism. Looking back over the whole study, a postscript then addresses a pressing question in literary and historical studies: What effects did the movement for pastoral reform have on English society?

Three historiated initials mark three entries on correction in *Omne bonum*, a vast (and unfinished) encyclopedia of religious knowledge compiled largely of extracts from the Bible, moral theology, canon law commentaries, history, and hagiography, probably by James le Palmer (before 1327–1375), a scribe of the Exchequer and a native Londoner. In the initial before the first entry, on prelatial/disciplinary correction, a group of errant clerics in belted tunics, one with a sword between his legs, is being set straight by a figure pointing his finger at them, whom Lucy Freeman Sandler sees as a scholar or a judge (perhaps lay). A second initial is similar, save that two of the clerics are crouching, huddled, at the scholar's feet; it introduces a short entry on who should correct and a list of topics for the third entry. The third initial, reproduced on the front cover of this book (as the second initial is on the back), prefaces an entry entirely on fraternal correction. In it, two laymen embrace, a gesture of the reconciliation between sinner and corrector that fraternal correction was designed to accomplish.<sup>17</sup> This third initial clearly marks fraternal correction as speech open to lay people. The artist, probably James, himself a cleric, does not choose to represent the more socially leveling kind of fraternal correction: a lay person reproving a cleric, setting him straight, and intending to amend his life. This kind largely engages the reformist writers of this study, lay and clerical alike, who find in the clerics' pastoral movement of reform a practice and a rhetoric that can achieve what lay people find good for themselves, for others, and for the Church and, sometimes, the state.

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## CHAPTER I

*Universalizing correction as a moral practice*

When the Margery Kempe constructed by her *Book*<sup>1</sup> is cast out of the Archbishop of York's presence and then his archdiocese, one of her prime offenses has been practicing fraternal correction of sin. In late 1417, she has been reproving York clerics and lay people for their sins, urging them to amend their lives. In doing so, she is what Meili Steele calls, in familiar post-structuralist terms, "a constructed subject."<sup>2</sup> Just as the *Book* constructs her as an exemplary holy woman in general, the clerics who have catechized her and counseled her over the years have shaped her into an active participant in their program of pastoral care, designed for two centuries to "inspire correct belief and correct behavior,"<sup>3</sup> especially to extirpate sin. The sins she rebukes are clerically designated and defined, and the most common of them, blasphemy, was rated the gravest among all Sins of the Tongue, a violation of the Ten Commandments, certain to bring damnation (as she reminds the culprits) unless repented of and abandoned.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the rhetoric Kempe employs in rebuking sin hews, as we shall see at the other end of this book, to norms laid out in pastoral texts. One of the reasons she escapes the nets cast by her learned accusers is that she is so fully a subject of clerical power, so fully conformed to pastoral discourse on sin and its correction.

To read Margery Kempe at York through this broadly political lens, so commonly used in recent scholarship on early-fifteenth-century literature, is to read in only one dimension, to grasp only one set of relations between the clerics and the lay woman: that of power conferred by priesthood and Latin learning, both restricted by institutions to men (wholly and largely, respectively). It is to see social power only in terms of class, gender, degree of literacy, status, and law.<sup>5</sup> But the *Book* demands at least bifocals, especially in its exchanges between clerics and lay people. For the Margery Kempe who emerges in dialogue with the York clergy, most notably Archbishop Henry Bowet, is also (again in Steele's terms) "a constructing ethical subject,"<sup>6</sup> someone for whom ethical practices can be used to achieve her own sense of the good in a specific situation.