The Recontextualization of Scripture

and the Limits of the Dialogic

in Middle English Literature

by

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ABSTRACT

Using Mikhail Bakhtin's The Dialogic Imagination as a theoretical framework, this thesis examines the recontextualization of scriptural texts and scriptural tradition in four Middle English works. The first chapter of the thesis talks about the various ways in which scriptural texts were transmitted to medieval readers, and the remaining three chapters describe the dialogization of scriptural texts in the fictional contexts of the Gawain-poet's Patience, the Wakefield Noah play, William Langland's Piers Plowman, and Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Prologue in the Canterbury Tales. These works raise problematic questions about scriptural interpretation which often have larger social and political implications, for they implicitly question interpretations which lead to the oppression of marginal groups in society. Although often these works resume a monologic narrative stance in keeping with official culture, the interpretative difficulties they introduce remain nevertheless.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

Using Mikhail Bakhtin's The Dialogic Imagination as a theoretical framework, this thesis attempts to explore how selected medieval writers recontextualize (or dialogically reinterpret) scriptural texts in Middle English Literature. According to Bakhtin, the "exhibition" of the scriptural text in the language of a particular speaking subject serves to foreground the world view of the subject and acts as a kind of dialogic response to the text and its other contexts in exegetical tradition. What results is a "dialogue between points of view, each with its own concrete language that cannot be translated into the other" (DI 76). In addition, Bakhtin's conception of the perpetual conflict between the monologizing and dialogizing forces in official culture, forces which either attempt to unify language and interpretation or struggle against such unification, proves useful for talking about the broad range of ways in which medieval writers recontextualize Scripture and scriptural tradition (DI 272).

The study will consider four works which vary widely in their respective ways of dialogizing scriptural texts. The Gawain-poet loosely translates the Vulgate Book of Jonah in the homiletic poem Patience, presenting a rather different "reading" of God's nature from his biblical source, albeit a reading still compatible with contemporary

exegesis. The Wakefield <u>Noah</u> playwright represents dramatically the biblical story of Noah's flood. Noah's recalcitrant wife is a sympathetic character who need not be read according to the dictates of official culture, which would make her a negative <u>exemplum</u> of "the overly aggressive wife who willingly violates the personhood of her husband" (Davidson 74). William Langland paraphrases and quotes Scripture directly in <u>Piers</u> <u>Plowman</u>, but the large number of contradictory interpretations in the poem undermine the ostensible monologic stance of its various speakers. Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath parodies scriptural texts and exegetical writings outright in the <u>Canterbury</u> <u>Tales</u>, thereby criticizing the antifeminist monologism of official culture. Each "new representation[,]" as Ruth Morse puts it, thus creates new opportunities, both "visual and verbal, for interpretation" (211).

I have also borrowed part of my critical vocabulary from Linda Hutcheon's <u>A</u> <u>Theory</u> <u>of</u> <u>Parody</u>, although perhaps only one work in this study, the <u>Wife</u> <u>of</u> <u>Bath's</u> <u>Prologue</u>, may be called overtly parodic. In particular, Hutcheon's term "critical distance" (37), which refers to the range of evaluative stances the author (and by extension the reader) may take toward an appropriated text, proves useful for considering works which are ostensibly monologic in their overall purport, but which open up problematic interpretative possibilities with their dialogic exhibition of scriptural texts. Some Middle

English didactic works, like the Pricke of Conscience and
Robert Mannyng's Handlyng Synne, tend to appropriate
Scripture as if its meaning were fixed, and also tend to
treat scriptural tradition as if it were a monologic body of
interpretation. These works served a practical purpose in a
society in which few readers had access to scriptural
texts. Other works tend to foreground contradictions among
auctoritees which undermine the monologizing tendencies of
official culture even as they recontextualize these
auctoritees in ostensibly orthodox ways. Sometimes, these
recontextualizations may have larger ideological
implications, although in the literary work they usually
"collapse" back into the monologism of official culture. In
Passus VI of Piers Plowman, for example, the labourer
"jangles" against Cato's advice, which tells him to bear
patiently his poverty. In doing so, he implicitly
criticizes the social system whose law suffers him to go
hungry. Although the passage is part of a larger one in
which the narrator is complaining about "wastours," he also
makes it clear that there are honest labourers who are being
treated unfairly (Baldwin, ed. Alford 71-72).

The four works under consideration in this study all
draw heavily from commonplaces in both exegetical tradition
and sermon literature, and for the most part, remain
orthodox even in their tendency to modify or criticize
certain aspects of official culture. In the critical
distance they establish from scriptural tradition, they are
not atypical works of the period, despite their somewhat

unusual degree of literary sophistication. _Patience_ is an entirely orthodox homiletic poem: its literary game is wholly subordinate to the rhetorical purposes of the poet. As G.R. Owst demonstrates, _Piers Plowman_ has strong affinities with a long tradition of social satire and complaint in sermon literature and exegetical tradition. Of the plays, he notes that "[t]he preachers, with their merry satire and _exempla_ interlarding the sermon, were themselves sometimes guilty of worse profanties than the pranks of a rascally sheep-stealer, or Noah's troublesome wife" (478-9). The _Wife of Bath's Prologue_ has affinities, as Lee Patterson notes, with the _sermon joyeux_, which "inverts the spirit of medieval orthodoxy but neither its structure nor its content" (677-8).

The first chapter of the thesis will outline some of the ways medievals saw the connection between literary works and theological instruction and attempt to situate the works under consideration among others that appropriate scriptural texts: it will also establish the Bakhtinian framework for the rest of the thesis. The remaining three chapters will examine _Patience_ and the Wakefield _Noah_, _Piers Plowman_, and the _Wife of Bath's Prologue_ respectively.

Chapter 1

Scripture and Middle English Literature

The relationship between literature and theology in the medieval mind was a potentially problematic one frequently discussed among religious commentators. Ancient classical and ecclesiastical authorities long maintained that the most important function of the literary work was the moral benefit it imparted to its readers. For the commentators, the purposes of literature were ultimately subordinate to those of sacred study, and therefore they valued works that retold biblical stories and demonstrated the truth of scriptural texts.[1]

Although exegetical writings do not by any means constitute a homogeneous body of scriptural interpretation, they tend to be received and "distilled" as such in Middle English didactic works. Vernacular didactic writing in fourteenth-century England served a practical purpose in the Church, for clerical and religious learning were confined to only a small selection of the general populace (Deanesly 210). This writing acted as a kind of necessary extension of religious instruction and as an avenue of access to exegetical tradition and scriptural texts. Works like Archbishop de Thoresby's Lay Folks Catechism, for example, issued in 1357, were intended to "amend the ignorance and neglect of the parish-priests" (Simmons xv). There were also works that

translated religious treatises and manuals originally in Latin, like <u>The Pricke of Conscience</u> (Quick 24). Large collections of moral tales and <u>exempla</u> in the vernacular, like Robert Mannyng's <u>Handlyng Synne</u>, paraphrased scriptural texts and interpreted them for the spiritual instruction of their readers.

When Chaucer wrote in the headlink to the <u>Tale of Melibee</u> that the "sentence" of the four gospels was "al oon," although there was "in hir tellyng difference" (VII.958, 942),[2] he could also have been describing the wider way in which vernacular religious literature rewrote and retold scriptural texts and stories. In some cases they were very crudely translated, as in <u>The Lay Folks Mass Book</u>; in others, they appeared as part of quotation collections like Peter the Chanter's <u>Verbum abbreviatum</u>; in still others they were rewritten in liturgical books or lyric poems, but the holy and perfect biblical text carried an authority that was unnassailable, however it appeared.[3] The scriptural interpretations of the Church Fathers and other exegetes carried a similar authority as well, as did the sermon literature that, according to Siegfried Wenzel, "handed on and popularized a good deal of the verbal material and even the thought processes developed and applied in biblical exegesis" (ed. Alford 156).

Anne Quick notes that by the fourteenth century certain biblical texts had linked themselves with certain topics, and had "set" interpretations in didactic literature. The story of Lot and his daughters, for

example, becomes common in works that contain exhortations against the excesses of drink. The story finds its way into both Piers Plowman and the Pardoner's Tale (11). Scriptural texts were thus enshrined and encrusted, so to speak, in a body of other works which tended to preserve certain standard interpretations. This function was especially important for the Church in the late fourteenth century, given the presence of an increasingly literate middle class not associated with the clergy (Adams, ed. Alford 109). The threat of private (and contrary) readings of the words of the Bible began to emerge (Schibanoff 84).

When considering the wide range of ways in which scriptural texts were re-written in the middle ages, it is important to stress the primarily rhetorical emphasis in a majority of these works: writers aimed to move their audiences to the contemplation of God and to an appreciation of their own deficient spiritual state. Rhetorical strategies had as their highest function the uncovering of the "core meaning" of scriptural texts in the interest of spiritual improvement (Morse 5). Interpretative traditions not part of the collection of texts we call "scriptural" nevertheless had scriptural status and served exemplary purposes, like the tradition in which "the devil used [Noah's wife] to attempt to prevent the floating of the ark" (Davidson 74). G.R. Owst refers to one sermon in which the writer exploits the notion (from Bartholomaeus Anglicus' De proprietatibus rerum) that "ever betwix the eddure and the Elephaunte, be keende, is grett strive. . . . But at the

last this malicious worme, the neddyr, styngeth the elephaunte in the eye. . . . And so sodenly the eddur distrowith the elephaunte." The adder is subsequently likened to the Devil and the elephant to the human soul (198).

Religious commentators were by no means in agreement, however, about what constituted the improper use of Scripture. Sander Gilman notes that "the entire weight of the Church was brought down on the parody of liturgical texts." These parodies were associated with feast days like the _festum innocentium_ (18). Overt scriptural parody in Middle English works is not very common, at least in the fourteenth century, despite a rich co-existent body of Latin and continental parody. English didactic works, with their characteristic tendency to streamline their more complex and ambiguous sources, tended to encode a kind of official division between what Piers Plowman calls tales of "harlotes" (frivolous tales of worldly provenance) and tales "of wisdom or of wit" (VI.52, 51).[4] In Robert Mannyng's _Handlyng Synne_, for example, there appears the story of a minstrel who is killed by a falling arch-stone as he leaves the residence of a bishop. The unhappy entertainer had interrupted the bishop's prayer with his loud and unholy storytelling (156-158).

Despite the implicit separation in subject matter between these two categories, there are considerable discrepancies between the restrictive literary rules of some religious commentators (which tend to be picked up by

didactic writers) and actual literary practice. Many vernacular texts occupy an ambiguous space between these two extremes: works were tolerated that clearly celebrate not only secular concerns but also the literary game apart from its moral function. This space suggests that literary works have a kind of self-legitimating existence apart from sacred purposes. Certainly some commentators objected to works like the romances, which, as Susan Dannenbaum notes, "uphold secular values of self-determination, family strength, and worldly success" (351-2).

Jesse Gellrich and Ruth Morse argue that one of the primary ways writers express dissatisfaction with and doubt about traditional ways of seeing is in the fictional contexts of medieval literature, for "fiction plays with those orders that the Book of culture presents as absolute" (Gellrich 48-9). By the "Book of culture," Gellrich means a whole world view, grounded in church tradition. One of its many manifestations is the

> commonplace attempt to gather all strands of learning
> into an enormous Text, an encyclopedia or summa, that
> would mirror the historical and transcendental orders
> just as the Book of God's Word (the Bible) was a
> speculum of the Book of his Work (18).

Ruth Morse, in a similar fashion, speculates that "it may have been art, rather than science, which was the greatest threat to religion, because it is multivalent and multivocal" (10). While didactic writers tended to refer to scriptural tradition as if it were a homogeneous body of

interpretation, poets tended to foreground its contradictions and ambiguities.

Not surprisingly, then, more conservative commentators objected to and were rather suspicious of what they called the "fictions of the poets," except where these fictions might be seen as a vehicle for some moral truth.[5] Conrad of Hirsau, for example, writes of Aesop's Fables that the author "wove together the false fictions of his fables, inventing nonsensical or at any rate illogical stories, intertwining the childish and the serious," but he nonetheless has "it all serve as a comparison with human life" (qtd. in Minnis, MLT 47). The narratives of the Bible were an important exception to this general suspicion. When commentators attacked Boccaccio for his use of fictional narrative, he retorted, "My opponents need not be so squeamish--Christ, who is God, used this sort of fiction again and again in His parables!" (qtd. in Minnis, MLT 424).

A.J. Minnis notes that even the Divine Comedy, with its ostensibly religious subject, created new concerns because of its concurrent focus upon human love. The question inevitably arises: how reconcile the scriptural and traditional idea that "amor (the love between man and woman) was at best regarded as a limited and transitory good that had to give way to caritas (the superior love of God and one's neighbour)" with a "poetry that had human love as its main subject and professed that woman was man's joy and all his bliss?" (Minnis, MLT 378). Such a poetry is difficult to rationalize in light of exegetical

writings, even in a work which ostensibly adheres to scriptural tradition.

However difficult it may be to justify a double focus like that in the <u>Divine Comedy</u>, commentators had nevertheless already begun to ask potentially troubling questions about scriptural texts and their re-writing or recontextualization. In the twelfth century, Peter Abelard acknowledged, however tentatively, the presence of "some corrupt passages even in the Gospels owing to the ignorance of scribes," and even further, that "this should sometimes happen also in the writings of the Fathers who wrote at a later period, [and] who have far less authority." The Fathers, it seems, have made statements "that have . . . been retracted . . . when they have subsequently come to know the truth, as St. Augustine did in many instances. . . ." They may also have "reported the opinion of others rather than stating their own conclusions" (qtd. in Minnis, <u>MLT</u> 90). Commentators worried about the decidedly immoral life of David and its connection with the writing of the Psalms: St. Bonaventure wondered if someone living in mortal sin with Bathsheba influenced the efficacy of the scriptural text (Minnis, <u>MLT</u> 207). He acknowledged that Solomon used several different personae in Ecclesiastes, sometimes with identities and functions that were difficult to reconcile with each other (Minnis, <u>MLT</u> 207).

Although these questions were answered in ways that saved the appearance of a unified and divinely ordained

cosmos like the one Jesse Gellrich describes, both commentators and poets seem very much aware that when God's words are rewritten, they enter a new "fictional" context, and become subject to interpretation in light of that context. There are a number of medieval works which, at the same time that they appropriate scriptural texts, even imitating established usage, also exhibit what Linda Hutcheon calls a certain "critical distance" (37; cf. Bakhtin, DI 343) from them. This critical distance makes itself felt in the contrast between the texts' traditional contexts and the fictional or literary context of the work. Placing the scriptural text in a fictional context divests it to some extent of the authoritative textual buttressing that accompanies it in exegetical tradition--and in the more conventional vernacular works--and subjects it to a new scrutiny at some distance from tradition.

The work may signal such critical distance in a variety of ways. Where scriptural texts tend to retain their traditional weight, as they do in Piers Plowman, for example, other elements combine potentially to subvert this emphasis. The encyclopedic scope of the poem as a whole, the fictional context of Will's search (he dreams not one problematic dream but eight), the varied language of those who employ the scriptural text, and the often difficult range of interpretations presented raise questions, at the very least, about the real unity of the "Book of Culture," to adopt Gellrich's term once again. Piers' description

of the pilgrims' journey to St. Truth in terms of a textual
landscape (the Ten Commandments) in Passus VI, for example,
belies the complexity of the real journey in the rest of the
poem.

Mikhail Bakhtin provides an illuminating theoretical
context for examining the ways in which medieval writers
signal a certain critical distance from the scriptural
text. According to Bakhtin, a writer may achieve this
critical distance by "exhibiting" the scriptural text
dialogically as the words of a particular speaking
subject, an act which foregrounds the peculiar world view of
the subject as a kind of response to the scriptural text (DI
76-77). Such a "dialogized hybrid" of languages creates a
confrontation between "points of view, each with its own
concrete language that cannot be translated into the other"
(DI 76). In such dialogic works, one may or may not be able
to locate an overarching authorial intent or judgement
upon the appropriated text. Rather, as Hutcheon notes, the
appropriation may target certain interpreters or
interpretations of the text (50). In the monologic work,
on the other hand, the artist "does not recognize someone
else's thought, someone else's idea, as an object of re-
presentation." Instead, Bakhtin maintains, they are either
"affirmed" or "repudiated" (PDP 78-79). Monologic voicing
thus serves the rhetorical aims of the work.

This study will concern itself with those literary
works in which various "subjects" do not speak the
monologic (what Bakhtin calls "unitary and central-

izing") language of church tradition. In these works, various dramatic contexts combine to subvert (or at least unsettle) the monologic direction of the work, and foreground possibilities for other "sociolinguistic points of view" that do not so easily fit into an "official" theological framework (DI 273). Although in light of the real dialogism of Scripture and scriptural tradition, it is difficult to decide just what constitutes "official" interpretation, medieval works tend to set monologically received scriptural interpretations against problematically dialogic ones. One may argue, for example, that the Parson's Tale forms an implicit standard against which the reader may judge the Wife of Bath's exegetical efforts. Dialogic voices like the Wife of Bath's challenge authoritative discourse because they represent a "socio-linguistic point of view" that the discourse of authority excludes. These points of view may, however, claim a kind of authority for themselves: the dialogic work does not so much dismiss or mock authority as present a counterpoint for it that the monologic voice cannot comprehend, even in works where the viewpoint might be officially unnacceptable.

The larger implications of the dialogic appropriation of scriptural texts are, however, difficult to assess for Middle English works. The problem of reconciling opposing dialogic voices in the text arises because medieval interpreters of the Bible claim for it not only the ultimate authority to interpret human experience, but also the

ultimate kind of referentiality: Scripture is "true" in a way that no other text can be. To a certain extent, then, the medieval works that incorporate scriptural texts can also claim for themselves this kind of already-established authority. At the same time, however, they declare their own limits: a didactic work can never hope to convey truth in the same way that the scriptural text can.

When other voices appropriate scriptural texts however, the configuration changes: the literary work itself gains what Gary Saul Morson calls "semantic authority" over the appropriated text (Rethinking 69), albeit a temporary one. Bakhtin acknowledges both the revolutionary ideological possibilities for the dialogic and its more or less temporary and merely textual nature. For Bakhtin, the representation of other languages and ways of seeing may not threaten or endanger the existing order, even when it is an overtly parodic one. Rather, it merely affirms growth (albeit on a bodily level) toward "a happier future," as well as "a more just social and economic order" (RW 81).

It is necessary, nevertheless, to modify the idea of the dialogic for the Middle-English works in this study. Because this literature in general tends to be more didactic than, for example, the French literature of the same period, moralizing even where it adopts or translates more truly dialogic continental models, the possibilities for a real challenge to established authority like the ones Bakhtin envisions are

rather   limited. In   the end, many of   these works "collapse" back into a monologic view of things, but not without a fairly problematic process of reconciling apparently contradictory points of view: dialogically structured texts create gaps or possibilities for interpretation that are not easily closed again. It is again important to acknowledge the relative rarity of the medieval works that recontexualize scriptural texts in problematic ways, and to acknowledge the automatic authority that scriptural texts and the words of the Fathers carried for medieval readers and writers in whatever context.

The works we will examine in the second chapter of the thesis acknowledge to a great degree this automatic authority. Potential   interpretative   problems   do occur, however, with   any   rewriting   of   biblical material. The chapter will thus focus upon orthodox texts that merely suggest a range of interpretative possibilities rather different from those of scriptural tradition. It will examine the Middle English poem <u>Patience</u>, a fairly loose translation of the Vulgate Book of Jonah, and assess the ways in which the poet's dialogic rewriting of biblical material offers new ways of looking at the Vulgate book. It will also look at the Wakefield <u>Noah</u> and assess the role of the domestic details (the quarrels between Noah and his wife) in the play.

The third chapter will examine the use of scriptural texts   in   William Langland's <u>Piers Plowman</u>, focussing particularly   upon   the   ways in which dialogized

interpretations of scriptural texts interact with one another in the Meed episode, in the Dowel debate, and in the Harrowing of Hell episode. In <u>Piers Plowman</u>, exegetical activity produces a kind of interpretative chaos, and even the discourse of authority itself becomes problematically dialogic. The quest for truth in the poem becomes a quest of faith guided by Conscience, rather than the quest for intellectual understanding that it first appears.

The final chapter will look at the overtly parodic exegesis of Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath, who parodies both St. Jerome and scriptural texts to serve her own decidedly temporal aims. Her critique of Jerome's exegesis, and of anti-feminist texts in general, however, is a valid one.

Chapter 2

Patience and the Wakefield Noah

When scriptural texts are dialogized in the various
contexts of medieval literature, questions about their
official interpretation may arise. Although many works are
cast in what Bakhtin would call a falsely dialogic form,
where "even discourse about doubts must be cast in a
discourse that cannot be doubted" (DI 286), others open up
interpretative gaps or possibilities that become
potentially problematic, even in an ostensibly monologic
work: languages tend to intersect and illuminate one another
ambiguously.

We can identify two possible problems that the task of
retelling and translating biblical stories carried for
medieval writers, problems which also surface in the
discussions of parody and appropriation examined in the
first chapter. In a number of instances, "translation"
involves not "just" a text, but rather a re-representation
of the subject matter, as Ruth Morse has put it (211). "A
new representation" of a biblical story "offers [further]
acts, visual and verbal, for interpretation" (211). These
new opportunities for interpretation need not inevitably
result in readings that accord with the polarized
theological categories we associate with the monologism of
official culture. A second difficulty arises when there are
incongruities in the re-written version of the biblical

story. When, for example, the words of biblical characters are dialogized so that we may locate their language in a lower (more colloquial) linguistic register, the resultant comedy is often difficult to assimilate into an interpretative framework that satisfactorily answers the harsh moral dictates of tradition. It is possible, of course, that a medieval audience would have had a different conception of such anomalies, but it is also possible that the boundaries for scriptural interpretation were somewhat wider than many of the religious writings seem to imply. In the poem Cleanness, for example, the poet puts in God's mouth a rather atypical celebration of sexual love: God calls himself the originator of the "play of paramorez" (698)[6] and declares, "When two true togeder had tyȝed hemseluen, / . . . such merþe shulde come, / Welnyȝe pure paradys moȝt preue no better" (702-4). In light of exegetical tradition, which separates quite emphatically the spirit from the flesh and calls celibacy the highest spiritual good (Robertson, A Preface 328), the declaration is highly unusual. In the cycle plays, many of the biblical characters overtly parody religious codes, but are nevertheless sympathetic. In the Wakefield Master's Mactacio Abel (The Killing of Abel), the playwright puts into Cain's mouth what Anthony Gash calls "controversial social comments[,]" and has him "articulate the frustrations of a ploughman reluctant to pay tithes because he is working poor land with a limited supply of seed and no help forthcoming from his parish priest or neighbours"

(76). Cain hears the voice of God and retorts: "Whi, who is that hob-ouer-the-wall? / we! who was that that piped so small?" (297-8).[7] Such a comic reduction of the voice of God, a temporary deprivileging, underscores the legitimacy of Cain's social complaints.

This chapter will examine two Middle English works that raise both the problems outlined above: the first, the poem Patience, is marked by a fairly conservative ethos (Hutcheon's term, 38) that nevertheless innovates and departs somewhat from traditional interpretation, for the poet transposes the Vulgate Book of Jonah into a lower linguistic register so that the character of God becomes humanized and more potentially problematic. The second work is more difficult to approach because of its ambiguous comedy. In the Wakefield Noah play, Noah's wife, like the Wife of Bath, is a character based in antifeminist portraits of women: she quarrels with her husband over the issue of "maistrye" and refuses to board the ark. Although, in the final analysis, her rebellion must be condemned morally, she is to some extent a sympathetic character, and her quarrels with Noah show him in a rather debased light. The Chester Noah's wife, who wants to save her friends from the impending flood as well, is even more sympathetic. It would seem, then, that the dialogic re-representation of biblical stories does indeed open up interpretative gaps which in turn suggest that traditional readings do not quite account for the varieties of human experience. Although the

two works examined in this chapter finish in a monologic summary and blessing, they suggest a wider range of interpretative possibilities for scriptural texts that exegetical tradition excludes.

Patience

In _Patience_ we find two superimposed dialogic relationships, the first between God and Jonah, suggesting a number of ways in which we might perceive the distance between divine and human perspective, and the second an implicit one between the Vulgate text of the Book of Jonah and the poem itself. From the beginning of the poem, Jonah's language differs quite significantly from that in the Vulgate, for it is much less formal in diction and tone: in addition, the poet amplifies considerably where the biblical text is silent, adding a psychological depth that is somewhat unusual for didactic works.

Both the God and the Jonah of _Patience_ are individuated sharply at the beginning of the poem, where in contrast we find no dialogue in the corresponding Vulgate verses, only "the word of the Lord" coming to Jonah and instructing him to "[a]rise, and go to Ninive the great city, and preach in it: for the wickedness thereof is come up before me" (Jonah 1:1-2).[8] God is rather impatient for vengeance at first, declaring, "For iwysse hit arn so wykke þat in þat won dowellez / And her malys is so much, I may not abide, / Bot venge Me on her vilanye and venym bilyue" (67-71). Jonah

grumbles at the divine command as he does not in the Vulgate, and speaks in a lower register that at once humanizes his character and makes him ridiculous, for he fears the anger of the Ninevites, those "traytoures" and "typped schrewes" who will "[w]rype [him] in a warlok" or "wrast out [his] yȝen" (76, 80). We have some sympathy here for Jonah, although we may smile at his grim vision of his fate in the hands of the Ninevites: the poet thus encourages the reader to identify with Jonah. The biblical narrative does not encourage such identification, but rather enforces a more formal and distanced providential perspective.

Once God sends the storm and removes Jonah to the whale's belly, however, the narrative account becomes much more like the biblical one (as far as the reader's perspective is concerned) with the innovative description of the "ramel and myre" where Jonah finds himself. The pettiness of his "janglings" becomes apparent even as he pokes around the "glaym and glette" trying to find his way. The poet translates Jonah's prayer from the whale quite closely, and thus encourages a celebration of God's mercy in allowing Jonah to survive.

The woodbine episode departs once more, however, from the biblical narrative in order to emphasize the human attributes of God. Jonah, angered that God has changed his mind about destroying Nineveh, worries that the Ninevites will think him a fool for prophesying a divine vengeance that never comes about. Jonah asks God, rather interestingly, to judge his own behaviour with regard to the

Ninevites, as if the divine being were somehow guilty of outrageous inconsistency and did not fully contemplate the consequences of his own actions (413). Jonah retreats to a field outside the city to sulk, "al joyles and janglande" (432) in a "bour" which he builds for himself, and God causes an ivy to grow and shelter him from the sun. The "bour" becomes one of the ambiguous gardens of medieval literature, where Jonah glories in a kind of self-sufficiency:

> Such a lefsel of lof neuer lede hade,
>
> For hit watz brod at þe boþem, boȝted on lofte,
>
> Happed vpon ayþer half, a hous as hit were,
>
> A nos on the norþ syde and nowhere non elleȝ,
>
> Bot al schet in a schaȝe þat schaded ful cole.
>
> . . . .
>
> Þenne watz þe gome so glad of his gay logge,
>
> Lys loltrande þerinne lokande to toune;
>
> So blyþe of his wodbynde he balteres þervnder,
>
> Þat of no diete þat day þe deuel haf he roȝt.
>
> And euer he laȝed as he loked þe loge alle aboute (448-
>
> 452, 456-461).

Jonah credits himself with the provision of the "wodbynde," and once more complains bitterly when God causes it to wither, this time somewhat humourously: he accuses God of being "sette [his] solace to reue" (486) and asks peevishly, "Why ne dyȝttez þou me to diȝe? I dure to longe" (487). God, rather dryly, refers to Jonah's "ronk noyse," and asks "Why art þou so waymot, wyȝe, for so lyttel?"

(492), thus highlighting the difference between the divine and human perspectives. Jonah, still peevish, complains that the whole thing is a matter of principle (492). God uses the situation as an <u>exemplum</u>: if Jonah can become so overwrought over a dead "wodbynde" that he did not even cause to grow, then it follows that God should worry that much more over the Ninevites, whom he created. He worries, like a human labourer, over the time he spent creating Nineveh, and decides that he likes the look of the place much more than he did at first.

<u>Patience</u>, in making God a rather human character who is impatient for vengeance and who changes his mind after the Ninevites' penitence, invites questions about the divine nature. As might be expected of an Old Testament narrative, Jonah predicts Nineveh's imminent destruction with no possibility of God's recanting. The king of Nineveh, however, takes a chance that God might be merciful and urges the people to change their ways. The narrator of the poem declares: "And God þurȝ His godnesse forgef as He sayde; / Þaȝ He oþer bihyȝt, withhelde His vengeaunce" (406-408). The first "He" of the passage, in line 406, more likely refers to the king's words, and should not be capitalized, for God never promises forgiveness, even in the Vulgate. Instead, it is the human initiative that changes God's mind, and seems to teach him the lesson of patience, especially the poem's rendition of the king's speech, which arouses the reader's sympathy for the fasting Ninevites, even down to the children (391). In the Vulgate, the king's words have a

more formal impact. When the narrator finally declares "And God saw their works, that they were turned from their evil way: and God had mercy with regard to the evil which he had said that he would do to them and he did it not" (Jonah 3:10), the mercy and understanding, rather than the possible capriciousness, of the divine nature are underscored.

The poet thus arranges the narrative so that it moves back and forth between the formalized, providential divine perspective that we see in the Book of Jonah to one in which God's perspective (and indeed character) seems nearly human. W.A. Davenport, in a similar fashion, suggests the inconsistency is deliberate, and

> has the effect of making the extremes in his nature further apart; because the poet has intensified his anger and power, his mercy and forbearance seem a great dramatic reversal. . . . [There is] a sense of arbitrariness in the nature of God" (132).

While God's behaviour may be influenced by human choices, he is, disquietingly, not at all constrained by them. This sense of arbitariness is in keeping with a view of God like that of the Ockhamists, who argued that God could not be understood in human terms at all (Delany 48).

The Wakefield <u>Noah</u>

In contrast to an exemplary narrative like <u>Patience</u>, medieval drama presents rather different kinds of opportunities for the dialogic representation of

the scriptural text. Glynne Wickham has characterized medieval drama as a "preponderantly social art which could be given a religious, political or sexual dynamic as need and occasion demanded" (4). He refers to the 'total theatre' experience of the medieval play, with "song, dance, wrestling, sword-play, contests between animals, disguise, spectacle, jokes, disputation and ritual" all combined at once in the performances (4). Many plays contain what modern audiences think are mutually incompatible elements: the plays juxtapose, for example, the comically bawdy and the scatological with the spiritual and reverent. Some critics hold, with Bakhtin, that the seemingly incompatible elements do "collapse" in the end into an affirmation of monologic values seen, as it were, from the underside. Others, like Albert Tricomi, contend that the comic scenes of medieval drama "break the rules of one kind of humanity"--a monologically conceived kind- "to create another" (17).

The Wakefield <u>Noah</u> play presents the reader with a vision of humanity that need not inevitably be judged by monologic rules either. The rebellion of Noah's wife, although not central to the action of the play itself, is nevertheless an addition to the biblical story that creates another occasion for interpretation. The issue is one already frequently discussed about the "maistrye" of women in the literature of the middle ages. In addition, A.C. Cawley notes that the tradition of Noah's cantankerous wife is quite old: an illustration of her refusing to board the

ark appears in the Junius Manuscript, which dates from about 1000, and, although Noah's wife is unique in English theatre, she occurs in continental paintings and folklore (35).

Although God himself early in the play commends both Noah and his wife as spiritual exemplars--"ffor thay wold neuer stryfe / With me ne me offend" (106-8)--there are subsequent signs that their domestic life is not quite so peaceful. The playwright suggests rather that Noah is somewhat henpecked, for he fears telling his wife about God's command to build the ark. She is, he worries, "full tethee, / ffor litill oft angre, / If anything wrang be / Soyne is she wroth" (186-89). His wife's complaint when he does approach her, however, is a legitimate one from her perspective: "Do tell me belife / where has thou thus long be? / To dede may we dryfe / or lif for the, / ffor want. / When we swete or swynk, / thou does what thou thynk, / Yit of mete and of drynk / haue we veray skant" (192-198). Gill's words are grounded thoroughly in the domestic and practical sphere. As Albert Tricomi suggests, "[w]hen Mrs. Noah [later] spins at her wheel, refusing to enter the ark, she is . . . affirming the values of everyday living" (17). She does not understand Noah's timidity or apprehensions about the building of the ark. When he prefaces God's command with the announcement that they "ar hard sted / with tythyngis new," she makes fun of him: "Bot thou wert worthi be cled / In stafford blew; / ffor thou art alway adred / be it fals or trew" (199-200). However wrongheaded

her   exclusive focus on material life appears from a larger theological perspective, that she is included among the refugees in the ark indicates by implication a certain tolerance for her "sin" on God's part.

The physical quarrel between Noah and his wife serves to lower Noah somewhat from the position he occupies at the beginning of the play, where the playwright makes him the mouthpiece for a speech praising God and summarizing the story of the creation and the present state of mankind. He shows due humility when God announces the plan to save Noah's family (174). At Gill's provoking, when she says she shall "qwite hym his mede" (216), however, he lashes out at her: "We! hold thi tong, ram-skyt / or I shall the still" (217), and, in a phrase reminiscent of the Wife of Bath's characterization of herself, declares: "Thou can both byte and whyne, with a rerd; / ffor all if she stryke / yit fast will she skryke" (229-30). Later, when Gill refuses to enter the ark, more colorful name-calling on both sides results. As Tricomi also notes, the use of terms like "Nicholl nedy" and "Wat wink" grounds the dialogue in a domestic reality that is somewhat removed from the lofty divine perspective at the beginning of the play (16-17). Noah   only   once   invokes   tradition   and authority: "Yee men that has wifis / whyls they ar yong, / If ye luf youre lifis / chastice thare tong" (2978), but one of their sons must eventually intervene: "A! whi fare ye thus? / ffader and moder both!" (415). Finally, both husband and wife give up the quarrel because they are

exhausted and pained. Noah entreats: "Bot, wife / In this hast let vs ho, / ffor my bak is nere in two" and she answers, "And I am bet so blo / That I may not thryfe" (410-414). This mutual decision to end the quarrel over "maistrye" is later reinforced in the ark, when Noah asks his wife to take the helm while he sounds the sea to see if the waters are receding (433-5). The play ends with marital harmony as the ark reaches dry land.

Both Patience and the Wakefield Noah, then, create interpretative gaps, which in turn produce potentially problematic comic episodes. In the end, however, these episodes reinforce their monologic and audience-directed rhetorical aims, as might be expected from a sermon and a religious drama respectively. With Piers Plowman and the Canterbury Tales, however, we enter a more consciously textual universe. Both poems show their poets and narrators more aware of the gap between the text and "the world" (Hutcheon 100), as well as of the possibilities of textual play and interpretative problems. As a result, it becomes more difficult to distinguish a controlling monologic intent. Both Chaucer and Langland exhibit various dialogized scriptural texts and set them against each other, foregrounding the problem of interpreting conflicting authoritative texts.

Chapter 3

Dialogism and Interpretation in Piers Plowman

Critical approaches to Langland's use of scriptural texts in Piers Plowman have tended to emphasize the poet's theological orthodoxy, imposing external unifying models upon the poem that are drawn from religious tradition. Raymond St.-Jacques, for example, suggests that the liturgical cycle acts as a structuring principle for the whole poem, and that Langland's central thematic concerns coincide with its 'high points:' the poet, according to St.-Jacques, "purposely employed images and motifs from the liturgy and even imitated the order in which they appear so that he could make his point more forcefully" (222). D.W. Robertson, Jr., in Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition, urges the poem's conformity to exegetical tradition, and uses the tradition as his sole basis for its reading.[9]

Such approaches, in locating most of the criteria for the poem's interpretation outside the text, tend to ignore fictional contexts within it that foreground contradictions and ambiguities, not only in exegetical tradition, but also in scriptural texts themselves. Although there is unques-tionably room for a certain dialogism in scriptural interpretation, the poem's contexts set various interpretations against each other and do not always make it clear which voices the reader is to privilege: we may detect a certain critical distance from even the most

orthodox speakers in the poem. Although Holy Church tells Will, "Whan alle tresors arn tried, Truthe is the beste" (I.135), our reading of "Truthe" changes as the poem proceeds and as more complex and antithetical readings of scriptural texts emerge. Any number of speakers use the tautological declaration that "Truthe woot the sothe" to support their very different positions. In Bakhtinian terms, the poem might be said to foreground some of the contradictions of official culture, for it is difficult to find a reading of Piers Plowman that reconciles its apparent claim that Scripture must be read monologically with the opposing dialogic interpretations the poem presents. Such is the case with the Dowel debate, in which the various speakers explain the concept in "inherently contradictory" ways that nevertheless "remain compatible with orthodoxy" (O'Driscoll 19, 24).

When the wastour begins to "jangle" at the end of Passus VI against Cato's advice, "Paupertatis onus pacienter ferre memento" (314),[10] we find that the labourer's "jangling" goes further and implies a larger questioning of authority: he "greveth hym ageyn God and gruccheth ageyn Reson / And thanne corseth he the Kyng and al his counseil after / Swiche lawes to loke, laborers to greve" (315-7). It is not the first time we hear voices "jangling" against each other, for they reverberate through-out the poem. Holy Church's reading of Lady Meed as the daughter of Fals is later contradicted by Theologie, who insists that Meed is the daughter of Amendes. Both figures

use Scripture to arrive at their contradictory definitions and both figures are authoritative. The various speakers' attempts to show forth the "truth" of scriptural texts create ambiguity, but at the same time, the narrator consistently reinforces the view that there is a "right" way to read them. As Malcolm Godden has put it, Langland concerns himself with the 'right' answers to a whole range of social and theological questions: he "presents the[m] as issues on which different views can be cogently, even passionately, held, and yet which desperately need resolution" (1).

This chapter will examine the dialogic exhibition of selected scriptural texts in the Meed allegory, the Dowel debate, and the Harrowing of Hell episode. This exhibition is emblematic of the troubling but necessary dialogism that for Langland characterizes much contemporary exegetical activity. On one hand, the "kynde knowyng" to which Holy Church refers at the beginning of the poem is sufficient to answer many questions: "It is a kynde knowynge that kenneth in thyn herte / For to loven thi Lord levere than thiselve, / No dedly synne to do" (I.143-44). "Kynde knowing," as Mary Davlin puts it, is "natural knowledge" or "knowledge as if by second nature" ("Kynde Knowyng" 11, 15). On the other hand, a certain amount of learning is necessary to "knowe the false" (II.4), as Will puts it, especially when one has so many spurious readings from which to choose. Ymaginatif, effecting a kind of compromise, says that "clergie [is] to comende, and kynde

wit bothe" (XII.70). A certain suspicion of the vagaries of clerical interpretation, however, balances this reliance on exegetical tradition, for in the end, the individual must respond to Christ's offer of salvation. Scripture's tone suggests such a distrust when he declares that "thise konnynge clerkes that konne manye bokes" are "none sonner saved, ne sadder of bileve / Than plowmen and pastours and povere commune laborers" (XI.455-57).

It is important to note, finally, that the problems of interpretation Will experiences in the poem arise from dialogism in Scripture itself, a dialogism that is mirrored in exegetical tradition as well. Contradictory positions may thus be supported with reference to authorities and still be orthodox. This problematic multiplication of interpretative difficulties, which increase as the poem proceeds, also underscores the necessary mediating role of the Christian's conscience in any reading of the scriptural text. If contradictory interpretations may all be said to be correct and authoritative, the individual must choose according to "kynde knowing". Such is the case, for example, with the problem of almsgiving in Passus VII.59-90, in which Langland opposes Christ's "Quodcumque vultis ut faciant vobis homines, facite eis" (Matthew 7:12)[11] to Cato's teaching that one should be careful to whom one gives alms (VII.72, trans. Schmidt). Saint Gregory's teaching that one should not "choose . . . whom to take mercy upon," for it is possible to "pass over someone who deserves to receive" it (VII.75-76, trans. Schmidt), pre-

sents another option which further complicates matters.

The Meed Allegory

When Will asks Holy Church in Passus I about "the moneie of this molde that men so faste holdeth" (I.44), she answers him with a scriptural text that informs the following Meed episode significantly:

'Go to the gospel,' quod she, 'that God seide

hymselven,

Tho the poeple hym apposede with a peny in the Temple

Wheither thei sholde therwith worshipe the kyng Cesar.

And God asked of hem, of whom spak the lettre,

And the ymage ylike that therinne stondeth?

'"Cesares", thei seiden, "we seen it wel echone."

'"Reddite Cesari," quod God, that Cesari bifalleth,

Et que sunt Dei Deo,[12] or ellis ye don ille.'" (46-54)

Holy Church takes it for granted that "mede" belonging to God may easily be distinguished from the "moneie of this molde," and uses the scriptural passage as a reminder that Reason should govern the Christian's use of material goods. She follows the Reddite Caesari passage in its implicit distinction between earthly and heavenly "tresor," a distinction that Christ makes more explicitly in Matthew 6:19. As Anne Quick notes, the Glossa ordinaria associates "tresor" with wisdom (64), and Holy Church makes use of this association when she says that "kynde wit" must be "tutor" of Will's earthly "tresor" (I.55). Lady Meed, as

earthly "tresor," is the daughter of Fals because she leads
men astray: Griffiths notes, too, that Langland may have had
in mind still another text, the radix omnium malorum text (1
Timothy 6:10) as the basis for Holy Church's reading of Meed
(31):

> For Fals was hire fader that hath a fikel tonge,
>
> And nevere sooth seide sithen he com to erthe;
>
> And Mede is manered after hym, right as asketh kynde:
>
> Qualis pater, talis filius. Bona arbor bonum fructum
>
> facit

(II.25-27).[13]

The subsequent debate over the "maistrye" of Lady
Meed, however, subverts Holy Church's division between
heavenly and earthly treasure, a division which results in
a single negative reading of the Lady. Meed does
not, however, represent merely one thing, or one kind of
'tresor,' but is polyvalent (Griffiths 26). Just as Holy
Church uses a range of scriptural texts and exegetical
commonplaces to define Meed, so too, do Conscience and
Theologie use scriptural texts to expand the reader's sense
of "mede" in dialogic opposition to Holy Church's
definition. "Mede" thus acquires a whole range of
meanings, from gift or benefice to material reward, or
compensation (for work or services), as well as the more
abstract senses of grace or merit (Middle English Dictionary
s.v. mede 1a, 244; 2a, 246). As Theologie and Conscience
demonstrate, the word does not inevitably occur in
pejorative contexts, even in scriptural texts.

The first objection to Holy Church's negative reading of Meed at the beginning of Passus II thus comes from Theologie, who asserts that

> . . . Mede is muliere, of Amendes engendred;
>
> And God graunted to gyve Mede to truthe,
>
> And thow hast gyven hire to a gilour--now God gyve thee
>
> sorwe!
>
> The text telleth thee noght so, Truthe woot the sothe,
>
> For <u>Dignus</u> <u>est</u> <u>operarius</u>[14] his hire to have--
>
> And thow hast fest hire to Fals; fy on thi lawe!
>
> (II.11924).

Theologie's alternative vision of Lady Meed, backed as it is by a scriptural text, shifts Holy Church's polarities by showing that "mede" may belong to another semantic province: it is really those who use "mede" wrongly (like Cyvle) who should be condemned and not the Lady herself, for "mede" may also refer to legitimate monetary reward or compensation (wages or "amendes"). Theologie's definition, too, may be backed up with exegetical tradition, for, as D.W. Robertson notes, the <u>Glossa</u> <u>ordinaria</u> says that "those who labor in the work of God may expect temporal as well as heavenly reward" (<u>Piers</u> <u>Plowman</u> 56).

With the issues of temporal reward and spiritual merit, however, the reader encounters further semantic difficulties. Conscience insists that there are two kinds of "mede," creating a problematic parallel with troubling implications between earthly and heavenly "tresor":

> 'Ther are two manere of medes, my lord, by youre leve.

That oon God of his grace graunteth in his blisse

To tho that wel werchen while thei ben here.

. . . .

Swiche manere men, my lord shul have this firste mede

Of God at grete nede, whan thei gon hennes.'

  'Ther is another mede mesurelees, that maistres

               desireth

To mayntene mysdoers mede thei take[.]' (III.230-
233, 244-247)

Conscience tries to limit the semantic range of "mede" by
saying that "hire" is not really "mede" (i.e. associated
with Lady Meed) but fair exchange. This semantic division
between "mede" that is legitimately obtained for services
rendered and that which is obtained immorally, however, not
as clear cut as it first seems. As John Yunck points out,
the problem goes "well beyond simple venality, the obvious
crimes of bribery and extortion. It involve[s] the question
of how fully the Christian, and especially the clergy,
should accept the support of those not of the City of God"
(28-29).

 Once one introduces the concept of exchange, however,
another difficulty arises: if one can earn spiritual reward
in the same way as "mesurable hire," the idea of spiritual
reward becomes potentially associated with a kind of
heavenly bribery. Langland also uses the term "mede" to
denote salvation itself, developing its association with the
politics of exchange in order to emphasize the necessity of
good works for obtaining, and maintaining, individual

salvation. The possible overtones of bribery remain, however, uncomfortably in the background, for such an ethic becomes inevitably associated with practices like the selling of indulgences--Meed is called a "baude" by Conscience (III.129)--and other more subtle ways of "buying off" God.[15]

Conscience also introduces a certain political dimension to the above questions when he insists that he will not marry Meed, for, as Anna Baldwin asserts

> Meed begins to represent a factor in political (as well as moral) life when she is brought to court as a valuable bride whose marriage the king has in his gift. . . . In this scene she stands for the wealth and patronage which a medieval king could use to reward honesty and loyalty. . . . The political implication of his refusal to marry her is that true counsel is not to be had by a king who offers lavish patronage, which is likely to attract only greedy courtiers to his side (ed. Alford 79-80).

In terms of the <u>Reddite Caesari</u> passage, Langland emphasizes the personal responsibility of the monarch in his social and political dealings with meed: that he embraces the Lady in the poem signifies a less-than-ideal state of contemporary affairs, as Yunck has noted, for the imagery in her portrait suggests links to the Whore of Babylon (289). In a broader way, Langland asks what the Christian (in this case a King) in effect "owes" God and what he "owes" others (the "commune") as far as "tresor" is concerned.

It is Lady Meed herself, however, who provides the most difficult context for the interpretation of the <u>Reddite Caesari</u> passage, for she takes into account political realities that the other two, with their emphasis upon individual morality, do not. She insists upon the inevitable interpenetration of economic and spiritual spheres:

> 'It bicometh to a kyng that kepeth a reaume
>
> To yeve men mede that mekely hym serveth--
>
> To aliens and to alle men, to honouren hem with yiftes;
>
> . . . .
>
> The Pope and alle prelates presents underfongen
>
> And medeth men hemselven to mayntene hir lawes,
>
> Servaunts for hire servyce, we seeth wel the sothe,
>
> Taken mede of hir maistres, as thei mowe acorde.
>
> Beggeres for hir biddynge bidden men mede.
>
> Mynstrales for hir myrthe mede thei aske.
>
> The Kyng hath mede of his men to make pees in londe.
>
> Men that kenne clerkes craven of hem mede.
>
> Preestes that prechen the peple to goode
>
> Asken mede and massepens and hire mete
>
> Alle kyn crafty men craven mede for hir prentices.
>
> Marchaundise and mede mote nede go togideres[.]
>
> (III.209-211, 215-226)

Whatever Lady Meed's status as "the principle of bribery" (Griffiths 32), and whatever her other illicit activities, her point is certainly a valid one, for she makes it clear that "mede" is a semantically ambiguous word serving various

purposes in various contexts. Finally, it is the individual's spiritual state that is of primary importance, for it will govern how he uses meed. To invoke the Reddite Caesari passage again, Langland's assessment of the "mede" problem looks to some extent like Bede's, in which "temporalia are under the command of the secular powers, but . . . God demands the gifts of the spirit; the soul must be filled with light, and the goods of this earth must be so handled that they do not cloud the light of the soul (41). It is not the whole story, however, for Langland urges upon the reader a reconsideration of the individual's responsibility concerning meed by dialogizing scriptural texts that establish a middle ground (sometimes an ambiguous one) between the two extremes Holy Church sets up. While Langland insists, with the episode's satiric purport, upon some measure of amelioration in the corruption of society, he also encourages a re-reading of scriptural texts concerning the ambiguous semantic range of the word "mede." Such inconclusiveness, as we have seen, places the responsibility for the interpretation of the scriptural text in the hands of the reader, and not with authority.

The Dowel Debate

In some ways, the Dowel debate is intimately connected with the Meed episode, for it too tries to determine the relationship between charitable action and heavenly reward through the dialogic opposition of scriptural texts. Will's

search for Dowel through a series of allegorical figures or
faculties creates interpretative challenges for the
reader, for here again each speaker's position has
demonstrable authority from exegetical tradition. It must
be noted, however, that Langland achieves a certain critical
distance from tradition even in his formulation of
Dowel, for, as Robert Adams puts it, he seems "rather
ambivalent--even cautiously unsympathetic toward the
conventional, graded scale of religious obligations(.)"
These were sometimes expressed as a triad in which marriage,
chastity, and virginity signified layfolk, clerics, and
monastics, respectively (ed. Alford 91). Notwithstanding
this critical distance however, it is rather difficult to
evaluate what position Langland himself takes toward the
various definitions of Dowel. The definitions offered by
the allegorized faculties, which Stephen Kruger says
function according to different ways of
"knowing" (77), are, as we have seen, logically
irreconcilable, for each presents a range of contradictory
readings of scriptural texts. Langland in effect leads the
reader on a wild goose chase to make the paradoxical point
that the pursuit of knowledge about Dowel means little when
not combined with charitable action, but the problem of the
dialogism of scriptural tradition still remains largely
unresolved in the poem.

As an example of the evaluative difficulties Langland
sets the reader, we may observe that Thought's definition of
Dowel follows the traditional hierarchical distinction among

what A.V.C. Schmidt calls "the virtuous secular life" and "the life of the devout clergy[,]" with the final step in the hierarchy being "the conscientious episcopacy" (327). Thought maintains that Dowel is associated with the labourer, who "thorugh his land his liflode wynneth," (VIII.82), Dobet is "ronne into Religion, and hath rendred the Bible" (91), and Dobest "is above bothe and bereth a bisshopes croce" (96). In a dialogic framework, Thought's particular point of view is what Bakhtin would call "internally persuasive," or valid in its own terms, but, as we have seen, the poem does not encode an overt standard against which the reader is to judge it (DI 369). When considered in light of the beginning of the poem, where the narrator's emphasis on the virtue of the labourers and his compassion for their suffering set a sympathetic precedent, Thought's orientation may be somewhat deficient. As Pamela Raabe puts it, "material progress does not necessarily reflect spiritual progress . . . the spiritual states of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest are not in every sense a progressive hierarchy" (50). Thought is, however, partially correct in his definitions, based implicitly as they are in scriptural texts: to Dowel, one must be "trewe of ... tunge" (VIII.81), to Dobet "lowe as a lomb and lovelich of speche" (86). These are reminiscent of Holy Church's words at I.88-9, based on Deus caritas.

The quarrel between Wit and Studie provides further conflicting definitions of Dowel by means of scriptural texts. Wit emphasizes the role of the law in the life of

the Christian--"Dowel, my frend, is to doon as law techeth"
(X.200)--with negative _exempla_ drawn from various biblical
episodes. Accordingly, he attributes the state of the world
to original sin, which perpetuates itself from generation to
generation. He disagrees, therefore, with the scriptural
text in Ezekiel 18:20 which says that sons shall not be
responsible for the sins of their fathers, asserting (as
Holy Church does about Meed) instead that "if the fader be
fals and a sherewe / That somdel the sone shal have the
sires tacches" (146-7). "Wastours," he says, "Conceyved ben
in yvel tyme, as Caym was on Eve" (IX.121).

Wit emphasizes adherence to the law, particularly with
regard to sexual conduct: his "Duc" Dowel, Dobet "hire
damyselle," and Dobest the "bisshopes peere" (IX.11-12)
appear as guardian faculties, constables of the Castle _Caro_
(flesh, the body) that ensure the Christian's
obedience. According to Pamela Raabe, the import of this
description is that "God has created in each individual a
certain knowledge of the good to protect the soul from sin;
Dowel as the knowledge of how to do well is apparently an
intuitive, God-given faculty" (73). This faculty is "kynde
knowyng." Wit only mentions in passing, however, a central
scriptural text that holds the clue to the whole Dowel issue
for Langland: "_Qui manet in caritate in Deo manet_"
(IX.64).[16] In such a light, "Dowel . . . is a lesser image
of God in each human being. . . . To do well is not merely
to perform good works but to perform them through love and
faith in Christ" (Raabe 75). The charitable spirit, as the

ultimate meaning of Dowel, is intimately connected with God himself, and central in the Christian's spiritual life.

Dame Studie's challenge to Wit's explanation of Dowel calls attention to his wrong use of scriptural texts.[17] Wit insists upon clarification and analysis (as might be expected), but Studie retorts that "alle that wilneth to wite the whyes of God almyghty," and "useth thise havylons to ablende mennes wittes . . . deef moot . . . worthe" (X.124, 131-32). Although she is associated with learning (X.170-81), she quotes Augustine, warning that too much learning may lead one away from God: Non plus sapere quam oportet" (X.119).[18]

The original question of what constitutes Dowel, a state essentially equated with the attainment of salvation, becomes increasingly difficult to answer as the debate proceeds, for the dialogic interpretations of scriptural texts, like those in the meed episode, are all legitimate. Implicit in this difficulty is the deeper one of explicating contradictory scriptural texts, for the various appropriators of the word cannot agree on the correct way of addressing the problem of Dowel even with the aid of authoritative interpretation. Clergie's assertion "[I]f hevene be on this erthe, and ese to any soule, / It is in cloistre or in scole" (X.297-98), is balanced off by an increasing endorsement of "kynde knowyng." Even Clergie, who represents learning itself, exhibits a certain suspicion of "clerkes" and their answers too. With their lack of faith, they cannot understand, for all their

learning, the mystery of Christ's words: _Ego in patre et pater in me est_ (X.244).[19] Instead, it "bilongeth to bileve to lewed that willen dowel" (246). On one hand, the various answers imply that Dowel, the way to salvation, may be known in a kind of intuitive way: on the other, the attempt to answer the question leads to difficulties in terminology that cannot be addressed without recourse to exegetical tradition. Thus Clergie quotes St. Augustine: _Ecce ipsi idiote rapiunt celum ubi nos sapientes in inferno mergimur_ (X.453).[20]

Ymaginatif provides a dialogic counterpoint to the general suspicion of learning which characterizes the first part of the Dowel debate with the aid of scriptural passages, a counterpoint that is difficult to refute in terms of traditional interpretation. He attributes the acquittal of the woman caught in adultery to the "caracteres" Christ scribbles on the ground, and to his natural "knowing" of the moral failings of the woman's accusers:

> In the Olde lawe, as the lettre telleth, that was the
> > lawe of Jewes,
> That what womman were in avoutrye taken, were she riche
> > or poore,
> With stones men sholde hir strike, and stone hire to
> > dethe.
> A womman, as we fynden, was gilty of that dede;
> Ac Crist of his curteisie thorugh clergie hir saved,
> For thorugh caractes that Crist wroot, the Jewes knewe

hemselve

Giltier as afore God and gretter in synne

Than the womman that there was, and wenten aweye for

shame.

The clergie that there was conforted the womman (XII.73-81).

Ymaginatif's definition of "clergie" emphasizes the power of the sacred word to convict the Jews of their own wrongdoing: "learning" in his sense is not empty debate or disputation, like that upon which Thought and Wit rely, but rather a knowing based on "alle kynnes sightes-- / Of briddes and of beestes, of blisse and of sorwe, / Of tastes of truthe and oft of deceites" (XII.128-130). He advocates a knowledge based in human experience and undergirded with the natural faculty of which Wit has already spoken: Christ's words are powerful because they move the conscience to knowledge of sin. "I counseille thee for Cristes sake," he says, "clergie that thow lovye, / For kynde wit is of his kyn and neighe cosynes bothe / To Oure Lord, leve me--forthi love hem, I rede. / For bothe ben as mirours to amenden oure defautes, / And lederes for lewed men and for lettred bothe" (XII.92-96).

It is hard to reconcile, however, Ymaginatif's endorsement of clerkly disputation with his definition of "kynde knowyng." Forthi I conseille alle creatures no clergie to dispise," he says, and "Take we hir wordes at worth, for hire witnesses be trewe, / And medle we noght muche with hem to meven any wrathe. . . . Nolite tangere

Christos meos" (XII.121-126).[21] He thus uses a scriptural
text to emphasize the sacred nature of biblical exegesis and
the status of the exegete as God's anointed servant.

The Dowel debate is never explicitly resolved: rather,
there is an increasing emphasis upon the specific nature of
charity, defined, for example, by Anima as a tree in Passus
XV, and an increasing association of charity with
Christ. Although the various speakers of the debate are
partly correct in their various definitions of Dowel, their
answers finally prove inadequate. Similarly, exegetical
tradition cannot serve as a way to "treuthe" for the "lewed"
plowmen who cannot read. Accordingly, the poem moves
finally into a reenactment of Christ's Passion and the
Harrowing of Hell. These "historical" events evidence the
truth of Deus Caritas, the central text in Holy Church's
speech to Will at the beginning of the poem. Even in the
reenactment, however, the monologic presentation of
liturgical material seems to generate a set of questions
attributable to the dialogism of scriptural texts.

The Harrowing of Hell and the Debate of the Four Daughters

Langland's version of the Debate of the Four
Daughters, while drawing heavily on others like that in the
highly popular Gospel of Nicodemus, is somewhat different in
its implications from the traditional version. Malcolm
Godden writes that the debate of the Four Daughters

figured so prominently in theology and religious

literature because it played an important part in explaining and dramatising the later medieval theory of the Redemption, as an allegory of what might be presumed to have taken place in God's mind. . . . According to the allegory of the four daughters, God's truth and righteousness required him to condemn man to Hell for his disobedience and leave him there for ever, while his mercy and concern for peace urged him on the other hand to pardon man and be reconciled to him. The impasse was resolved by the offer of God's Son to pay the penalty himself, satisfying the demands of strict justice and truth on the one hand and of mercy and peace on the other (Godden 144).

In a dialogic framework, the allegorical representation of the Four Daughters of God and their argument about the Harrowing become a kind of opposition between two kinds of readers of the scriptural text, an opposition which Mary Davlin also mentions (A Game, 98). The somewhat unbecoming quarrel of the Four Daughters also suggests that even at the highest level, the exegetical endeavour may degenerate into literal-minded hair-splitting. The faintly ludicrous fictional situation, which presents the Four Daughters squabbling over technicalities when Christ is about to bring the singular miracle of redemption to the patriarchs in Hell, represents more strongly than all the other episodes in the poem the futility of "jangling" about interpretation. Nevertheless, Truthe, Rightwisnesse, Mercy,

and Pees each rely on a part of exegetical tradition that is orthodox and correct in its own terms. Although of course the central point of the episode is that Christ's death fulfills the letter of the Old Law, to which Truthe and Rightwisnesse scrupulously adhere, the quarrel foregrounds, too, the multiplicity of ways in which Scripture may be interpreted. The harrowing episode still resolves, however, into a dramatic but monologic affirmation of Christ's redemption even as it introduces a note of uncertainty about the exegetical endeavour as a whole: there are, after all, other mysterious texts whose meaning is yet to be revealed.

The first two daughters, Mercy and Truthe, each try to explain the meaning of the Light that is Christ about to harrow hell in terms of scriptural texts. Mercy emphasizes the story of the nativity and the Light of the World, which "shal Lucifer ablende" (137), as well as the human nature of Christ: "man shal man save thorugh a maydenes helpe, / And that was tynt thorugh tree, tree shall it wynne, / And that Deeth down broughte, deeth shal releve" (XVIII.139-141). She emphasizes, as Truthe subsequently does, the nature of the Old Law, which demands a penalty to be paid for the sin of Adam. Truthe, on the other hand, reading more directly from the Old Testament, declares that what Mercy says is a "tale of waltrot!" (a term unique in Middle English Literature) and counsels her, "Leve thow nevere that yon light hem aloft brynge, / Ne have hem out of helle--hold thy tonge, Mercy! / It is but trufle that thow

tellest--I, Truthe, woot the sothe" (XVIII.145-147). That Truthe herself adheres so literally to the scriptural letter, saying that "Job the prophete patriark repreveth thi sawes!: / _Quia in inferno nulla est redempcio_" (XVIII.148-49),[22] is, of course ironic, and seems to enforce the necessity of "kynde knowing" over interpretative disputation, for Truthe misses the real meaning of the scriptural texts that Mercy quotes. Truthe is right, however, in her emphasis on God's justice, and in her insistence that God must remain true to his word. Her use of scriptural texts to support her point, leaves the reader with the impression that "reading" God's nature from contradictory scriptural texts is no easy task.

Pees and Rightwisnesse engage in a similar debate, and Rightwisnesse, like Truthe, upbraids Pees for believing that Christ will open hell. Her language reveals her literal-mindedness: "What, ravestow? . . . or thow art right dronke!" she exclaims. "Levestow that yond light unlouke might helle / And save mannes soule? Suster, wene it nevere! / At the begynnyng God gaf the doom hymselve" (XVIII.187-90). This is, of course, precisely what Christ does. In Bakhtinian terms, Langland's version of the harrowing debate suggests a certain dialogic openendedness for the interpretation of scriptural texts even as the Daughters' squabble makes them look a little silly. Although some critics have maintained that the Harrowing of Hell is the "culmination of the poem" (Bloomfield 127), the real ending, in which Conscience goes

on pilgrimage to find Piers, introduces a problematic inconclusiveness: the monologic weight of the Harrowing does not quite balance the poem's tendency to break up seemingly stable interpretations into dialogic components. Once more, it is Conscience which must judge what constitutes "right" interpretation.

Chapter 4

The Wife of Bath's Dialogue with St. Jerome

The Wife of Bath's appropriation of scriptural texts, as well as her reading of Jerome's anti-feminist commentary, become particularly rich when considered in light of Bakhtin's formulation of the dialogic. With such an approach, we may locate the Wife of Bath's Prologue at the center of the confrontation between what Bakhtin calls "socio-linguistic points of view" (DI 273) in the collected Canterbury Tales, for her discussion provokes many responses, and itself responds to many of the issues raised in the other tales of the collection. Like Langland, Chaucer sets interpretations and authorities "jangling" against one another.

Although the Wife's discourse is based heavily in other anti-feminist literary contexts, like those of La Vieille in The Romance of the Rose, and those of medieval estates satire (Mann, Medieval Estates 126), the literary space she occupies is to some extent uniquely hers (or Chaucer's), and thus, as Bakhtin would put it, her appropriation of Jerome and scriptural texts "lives . . . on the boundary between its own context[s] and another alien context" (DI 284). In other words, Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath as a single locus for dialogizing a number of contradictory authorities: as a speaking subject, however, she verbally refutes those very authorities. Alisoun's Prologue is thus "'ideologically

saturated' with hints of many social dialects[,]" as Peggy Knapp notes. "She is both a weaver of cloth in a place beside Bath and the weaver of a fascinating text about her life and imagination, a text which combines strands from several contending discourses" (114).[23]

Arguably, this dialogic combination of discourses allows the Wife to escape the harsh moral censure that has for some critics invalidated her re-reading of scriptural tradition. D.W. Robertson, Jr. finds, for example, that the Wife "afford[s] a humorous example of carnal understanding and its consequences, which is, at the same time, a scathing denunciation of such understanding" (A Preface 330). In Bakhtinian terms, however, her critique of Jerome's interpretations, and of the biases of traditional exegesis in general, become valid in their own right. Indeed, the Wife's confrontation with Jerome serves to some extent to make him her equal, for his exegesis becomes part of her fiction and takes place on her linguistic "turf," so to speak. She confronts Jerome's readings of scriptural texts in her own terms, and redefines the issues these texts raise in a language which valorizes the body and sexuality. In Bakhtinian terms, the use of this earthy language itself constitutes a new dialogic reading of scriptural texts, for it introduces semantic contours decidedly absent from Jerome's exegesis. The Wife's reading of Solomon "refresshed" with "wyves mo than oon" (III.38, 36), for example, makes him like a character from the fabliaux because of the possible sexual connotations of the word

"refresshed" in Middle English (MED s.v. refreshen 1c-f). Her reading of the term "marriage debt"--like the various readings of "mede" in Piers--also expands the semantic range of the expression so that it suggests sexual relationships rather different from the mutual one St. Paul envisioned. The Wife turns her right to the marriage debt into a kind of economic blackmail.

Many recent critics have remained dubious about the efficacy of the Wife's challenge to Jerome's anti-feminist interpretations, contending that she is really "the would-be subversive subverted" (Delany 113) because she fulfills, and even rejoices in, the very stereotype to which she objects in Jankyn's book. She is, for these critics, a creation stemming from a certain anti-female bias on Chaucer's part. The issues of gender and gender-biased interpretation are also important, however, in the dialogic relationships Chaucer establishes among the pilgrims as interpreters of the scriptural text, for one of the Wife's complaints is that male interpreters have an unfair bias against women: "The clerk, whan he is oold, and may noght do / Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho, / Thanne sit he doun, and writ in his dotage / That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariage!" (III.707-710).

The Wife demonstrates that "textual production and interpretation [are] deeply aligned with institutional interests . . . and with personal intentions" (Knapp 116). Although her exegetical methods do backfire ironically to some degree, as they cannot on Jerome, her own ironic

critique of him and those like him stands nevertheless: the irony in her parody, as Hutcheon would put it, "cuts both ways" (33).

The _Prologue_ begins with an invocation of the battle between authority and experience. In a Bakhtinian formulation, we may see it as a battle between various monologic readings of scriptural texts and a set of individual interpretations of those same texts based on "personal" experience. Such a division does not necessarily mean that Alisoun's _Prologue_ can be said to reproduce in any direct representational way her own experience, or even that of woman _per se_, although the issues of gender and interpretation are, as we have seen, important. The Wife's words do, however, serve to locate or articulate a subject position associated with a certain class or economic outlook: when scriptural texts are translated into her language, permeated as it is with entrepreneurial metaphor and sexual euphemism, readings emerge that are decidedly antithetical to those of monologic antifeminist exegesis. The battle is therefore partly a textual (and linguistic) one, a confrontation between the monologizing tendencies of official culture and the individual marginal languages it tries to suppress. Paradoxically, however, the Wife's _Prologue_ also foregrounds, like _Piers Plowman_, the real dialogism of Scripture and of exegetical tradition.

Having established her own experience as ground for her attack, the Wife begins her re-reading of scriptural tradition with the problem of how many husbands a widowed

woman might marry. Her first tactic, which lends weight to her arguments, and deprivileges Jerome to some extent, is to omit mentioning that it is his reading of scriptural texts that she specifically wants to address. She says instead that she "was toold" that since "Crist ne wente nevere but onis / To weddyng in the Cane of Galilee," she too "ne sholde wedded be but ones" (III.9-13). She then retells the story of the Samaritan woman, significantly adopting Jerome's reading of the passage, which suggests too that Christ is rebuking not the number of husbands the Samaritan has but the fact that she is not married to the sixth (Miller 425). Unlike Jerome, however, the Wife is not interested in the allegorical meaning of the passage put forth in traditional exegesis, or in its larger implications, as Robertson has also noted (A Preface, 321). Instead, she uses the passage to ask another question about the number of husbands the Samaritan woman is really permitted under the law. The Wife here rereads the passage in literal terms, recasting it so that the issues it raises have some significance for her, for of course she too has had five husbands. Her focus on the letter, however, need not be used to condemn her, for the spirit of her critique is not entirely selfish. She demonstrates that exegetical tradition may be used to justify having any number of husbands or wives.

Moreover, the Wife draws attention to the arbitrary way in which exegetes decide which passages constitute support for their various positions. Exegetical tradition, as we

have seen, "excuses" certain biblical figures their transgressions of the law and holds others up as examples of wisdom and virtue:

>Lo, heere the wise kyng, daun Salomon;
>
>I trowe he hadde wyves mo than oon.
>
>As wolde God it leveful were unto me
>
>To be refresshed half so ofte as he!
>
>. . . . .
>
>What rekketh me, thogh folk seye vileynye
>
>Of shrewed Lameth and his bigamye?
>
>I woot wel Abraham was an hooly man,
>
>And Jacob eek, as ferforth as I kan;
>
>And ech of hem hadde wyves mo than two,
>
>And many another holy man also. (III.35-38, 53-58)

Alisoun's speculation about Solomon's sexual pleasure evinces a mode of exegesis that makes Jerome's exclusive concern with allegorical interpretations look faintly ludicrous--he argues, for example, that "blear-eyed Leah, ugly and prolific, was a type of the synagogue, but that Rachel, beautiful and long barren, indicated the mystery of the Church (qtd. in Miller 426).[24] Like Noah's wife, Alisoun concerns herself with the domestic and material: her language reflects these concerns, as do her readings of scriptural texts, and even her paraphrases of them. Accordingly, she valorizes the "wexe and multiplye" text in Genesis, calling it "gentil," and thus demonstrates that scriptural texts do not inevitably support Jerome's idea that marriage is merely a secondary good for the

Christian: for the Wife, Scripture is emphatically dialogic.

With her valorization of the flesh, the Wife parodically inverts the implicit hierarchical relationship between the flesh and the spirit. Bakhtin might say that the Wife's inversion of this longstanding traditional hierarchy is a dialogic response to official culture's devalorization of women and of the flesh, a response that cannot be understood in the language of official culture. Tradition symbolically equates the relationship between Christ and the Church with the relationship between husbands and wives, a relationship that in turn comes to represent that between the flesh and the spirit (Robertson, A Preface 319). The Wife in essence takes the whole of exegetical tradition to task over this series of hierarchical divisions. Accordingly, and with characteristic practicality, she undermines the ideal of virginity, which traditionally represents Christian perfection, by asserting that "Crist, that of perfeccion is welle, / Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle / Al that he hadde, and gyve it to the poore, / And in swich wise folwe hym and his foore. / He spak to hem that wolde lyve parfitly" (107-111). The pursuit of perfection becomes a choice; like the decision to sell all for the kingdom of heaven, virginity is recommended only to those who have it as "a propre yifte" (104). She dismantles the progressive hierarchy of Christian virtue, around which, as we have seen, Langland constructs the Dowel debate.

The Wife also uses St. Paul's comparison of the body to

various kinds of vessels to justify her particular gifts (not the kind St. Paul had in mind) and declares that she still may "[do] hir lord servyse" with vessels that "been of tree" (101). It is difficult to decide whether this rather outrageous humility is culpable, for the Wife has a practicality that is its own defense.

As Russell Peck notes, however, scriptural terms like "vessel" and "instrument" begin to take on what he calls a "rather salacious configuration" in Alisoun's language, for Paul referred to himself as "God's chosen vessel (vas electionis), filled with the Holy Spirit, God's 'sely instrument'" (161). Her seemingly innocent conjunction of scriptural texts, too, carries interpretative possibilities rather different from the traditional ones, for the implication is that the Wife's sexual "servyse" is economically motivated. Her reading of the term "marriage debt," in which she seeks to overturn St. Paul's notion of the husband's "maistrye" over his wife, reinforces this impression, for like Lady Meed, she introduces problematic semantic contours to the term, and proves once more that Scripture and exegetical tradition are dialogic.

Alisoun explains St. Paul's vision of the marriage debt in literal and bodily language, making his vision of mutuality in sexual relationships sound like an economic transaction: "Why sholde men elles in hir bookes sette[,]" she asks, "That man shal yelde to his wife hire dette? / Now wherewith sholde he make his paiement / If he ne used his sely instrument?" (124-132). Sexual organs, she says, were

made "for office and for ese / of engendrure, ther we nat
God displese" (127-128). Alisoun's translation and re-
contextualization of the marriage debt text also
foregrounds, with its sexual euphemisms, correspondingly
different issues. Where Jerome had used the passage to
assert that marriage is only a secondary good for the
Christian (417), the Wife uses it to support her position in
favour of marriage (at least ideally) in general. St.
Paul, in Jerome's translation, wrote: "Let the husband
render unto the wife her due: and likewise also the wife
unto the husband. The wife hath not power over her own
body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath
not power over his own body but the wife" (qtd. in
Miller 417). Alisoun energetically translates this, and
more, effectually reversing the traditional power hierarchy
and altering somewhat Paul's vision of mutuality in marital
relationships:

> In wyfhod I wold use myn instrument
>
> As frely as my Makere hath it sent.
>
> If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!
>
> Myn housbonde shal it have bothe eve and morwe,
>
> Whan that hym list come forth and paye his dette,
>
> An housbonde I wold have--I wol nat lette--
>
> Which shall be bothe my dettour and my thral,
>
> . . . .
>
> I have the power durynge al my lyf
>
> Upon his propre body and noght he.
>
> Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me,

And bad oure housbondes for to love us weel. (149-154,

158-161)

Following the procedures of traditional exegesis, in which one scriptural text may be used to explain another (Alford, "Role" 82) Alisoun reformulates the second half of the marriage debt (that the wife's body is not her own either) in terms of another scriptural text (that the husband should love his wife) and asserts her right to a certain authority in marriage. She turns the notion of the marriage debt into a kind of marital blackmail, which, she implies, cuts both ways: Jankyn is never so adept at "glosyng" as when "he wolde han [her] bele chose" (509-10). Even more radically, the Wife is, as R.A. Shoaf notes (174), herself a sexual commodity, and characterizes herself quite openly as such: "The flour is goon; ther is namoore to telle; / The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle" (477-78).

Despite the Wife's initial insistence upon "maistrye," however, both her Prologue and Tale end with a vision of mutuality, that, although unorthodox, escapes the confining versions of male-female relationships that we find in her literary sources (Mann, Geoffrey Chaucer 86, 93). The Wife's central point in addressing these issues is finally that Jerome's very arguments (and perhaps the whole allegorical approach to scriptural texts) are impractical and little apply to her particular brand of experience, excluding as they do women's interpretations of scriptural texts. She therefore displaces the polarities set forth by

Jerome and discards his pejorative "reading" of the flesh and sexuality.

It is important to note, finally, that the Wife's interpretative efforts are not entirely out of keeping with those of exegetes who take a position less extreme than Jerome's.[25] St. Augustine, for example, did not insist upon an allegorical interpretation of marriage as it was ordained in the Garden, but he admitted that "all these things may not unsuitably be interpreted in a spiritual sense" (qtd. in Miller, 371). Nevertheless, he continues, "it is quite clear that [Adam and Eve] were created male and female, with bodies of different sexes, for the very purpose of begetting offspring, and it is great folly to oppose so plain a fact." He goes on to explain that marriage need not always be explained allegorically, as for example the headship of the rational soul over the irrational desire, or as "contemplative virtue which is supreme and the active which is subject, nor of the understanding of the mind and the sense of the body" (qtd. in Miller, 371). The devaluation of the body that we find in Jerome is not nearly as extreme here.

How we read the Wife of Bath and her Prologue depends upon how we interpret the relationship between fiction and "the world" in the Tales as a whole. As we have seen, the medieval work that incorporates scriptural texts tends to encode with those texts certain standards for the reading of the work. If we read the Wife of Bath's Prologue (and the Wife herself) according to the dictates of

the Parson's Tale, for example, in which widows are told to "eschue the embracyngs of man, and desiren the embracyngs of Jhesu Crist" (X.940), the Wife's exegesis becomes morally suspect. If, on the other hand, we accord the dialogic structure of the Tales the "relativizing and deprivileging" (Hutcheon 69) power that it has in Bakhtin's formulation, these potentially harsh moral judgements of the Wife's textual manipulations need not invalidate her critique of monologic readings of Scripture. Nor need they be entirely inconsistent with the Retraction and its condemnation of tales that "sownen into synne" (X.1089), against which the narrator insists that the whole of the Tales be read.[26]

Once more we may observe that traditional exegesis, as part of official culture, is problematically dialogic, and Chaucer is deliberately setting up rather extreme examples of monologic interpretation in order to underscore what these interpretations have suppressed, and to expose at the same time the institutional and individual biases that inform traditional (even all) interpretation. As Lisa J. Kiser puts it, "Perhaps more than any other pilgrim, [the Wife] raises the issue that "truth" is positional, that all narratives, whether drawn form life or openly regarded as fictional, are purposeful rhetorical acts created to advance the ideological positions of their speakers" (137).

It may be that Alisoun is only partly serious in her (literal) anatomizing of the issues we have discussed. As we have already seen with the other works in this study, the

larger implications of this dialogic (albeit temporary) levelling are difficult to assess. The Wife's "challenge to authority," as R.A. Shoaf points out, "is not that she will replace it. Rather, it is that her position is just as authoritative as authority's" (175). Alisoun may be compared to Cain in the <u>Mactacio Abel</u>, and the jangling wastour in <u>Piers Plowman</u>: all are characters whose speech contains what Peggy Knapp calls "inescapable markers" to a monologically conceived code, a code that judges individual behaviour and ideas according to "the moral perspective of the learning of the Fathers" (120-121). Nevertheless, from a different point of view, Cain's complaint about the parish priests, the "wastour's" about harsh laws, and the Wife's about the biased exegesis of Jerome are all valid. These characters, then, are negative <u>exempla</u> at the same time that they challenge respectively "official culture's" concept of financial responsibility to the church, established social hierarchy, and conceptions of women respectively. That they can be both at the same time enforces our sense that these medieval writers were deeply aware of the contradictions in official culture.

Conclusion

Mikhail Bakhtin provides an illuminating framework for discussing the various ways in which medieval writers recontextualize Scripture and scriptural tradition. Some works tend to suppress the real dialogism that characterizes exegetical writings and Scripture itself, while others exploit this dialogism in their fictional contexts, thus raising questions about the monologic interpretations of official culture.

Those works that raise problematic questions about scriptural interpretation sometimes have larger implications, if only at the textual level, for political and social reform, because they implicitly question scriptural interpretations that lead to the oppression of marginal groups in society. All of the works in this study, however, once having raised tantalizing questions, subsume them in a monologic framework that tends to invalidate the asking of certain questions in the first place. On one hand, this resumption of a monologic framework may serve the rhetorical aims of the author, who may want to move his audience to a reconsideration of things spiritual. On the other hand, however, what Bakhtin would call the double-voiced quality of these particular works shows their writers to be very much aware of the contradictory nature of official culture.

Notes

[1] The formulation of this problem is from A.J. Minnis, who discusses more specific forms of the connection in Medieval Literary Theory, particularly 197-212 and 439-58. "To have 'intrinsic worth,'" he notes in Medieval Theory of Authorship, "a literary work had to conform, in one way or another, with Christian truth; an auctor had to say the right things" (10). Beryl Smalley puts the subordination of literary studies, especially pagan ones, to sacred study in absolute terms: "[t]he sciences and liberal arts are necessary in so far as they contribute to an understanding of Scripture" (26). The classification of poetry is problematic; of the seven arts, poetry is sometimes related to grammar, sometimes to rhetoric (Minnis, MLT 161, 279).

[2] All quotations from the Canterbury Tales are from Geoffrey Chaucer, The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed (Boston: Houghton, 1987).

[3] These vernacular versions of scriptural and liturgical texts are mentioned in Anne Quick, "Langland's Learning: The Direct Sources of Piers Plowman" (Ph.D. diss., U of Toronto, 1982).

[4] All quotations from Piers Plowman are from William Langland, The Vision of Piers Plowman, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1978). English translations of Latin quotations are from the same edition.

[5] The medieval conception of "fiction" was somewhat different from the modern one, as were other categories for

literary works. Fiction was often synonymous with poetry, and with fables, which were made of "untrue events [or] . . . things which neither happened nor could have happened" (Minnis, MLT 113). As Ruth Morse puts it, "There was rhetorical organization of different kinds of writing for different purposes. . . . The parlous relationship of composition to some kind of truth, some representation of reality, was further confused by the need to defend anything which did not redound to the teaching of moral wisdom. . . . '[P]oetry,' which was something rhetoricians discussed, maintained uneasy relations with its associate, 'fiction.'" (80-81).

[6] This quotation from Cleanness, as well as all following quotations from Patience, are from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

[7] All quotations from the Mactacio Abel, as well as following quotations from the Wakefield Noah Play, the Processus Noe cum filiis, are from George England, ed., The Towneley Plays, EETS Extra Series 71 (London: Oxford UP, 1897). The Noah play is called Wakefield rather than Towneley because it was part of an earlier cycle of plays revised by the "Wakefield Master" in the fifteenth century (Gash 76).

[8] All quotations from the Bible are from the Douay-Rheims Version (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1977) unless otherwise noted.

[9] In Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition, D.W.

Robertson, Jr. and Bernard Huppé write: "[W]e shall attempt
to show that throughout the poem, even in passages
unsupported by direct quotation from the Bible, the author
had the <u>sentence</u> of Scripture constantly in mind. This
<u>sentence</u> as it appears in traditional exegesis forms a
completely objective test of the meaning of the allegory of
the poem" (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1951, 3).

[10] "[R]emember to bear patiently the burden of poverty"
(Schmidt 77).

[11] "All things (therefore) whatsoever you would that
men should do to you, do you also to them" (80).

[12] "'Render to Caesar,' said God, 'the things that are
Caesar's, and to God, the things that are God's'" (11).

[13] "Like father like son; (Every) good tree bringeth
forth good fruit (Mt 7:17)" (17).

[14] "For the labourer is worthy (of his hire)" (20).

[15] Robert Adams notes, "Absolutely speaking, (<u>de
potentia absoluta</u>), God owes no one anything, and good
deeds, of themselves, have no salvific value. Nevertheless,
God is under a self-imposed obligation (<u>de potentia
ordinata</u>) in that he has freely agreed to honor good deeds
as though they had either full merit (<u>meritum de condigno</u>)
or half merit (<u>meritum de congruo</u>), depending on the
spiritual condition of the one who performs them. Hence God
has mercifully created a system whereby a sinner may 'earn'
his favor. . . . The same theology seems implicit in the
Meed episode, where Langland appears to distinguish
salvation from earthly bribery (both of which are rewards or

medes) solely on the basis of their mesure or lack of mesure. . . . Though this description might suggest that God's mede is indistinguishable from mere permutatio or hire, salvation remains a gift--because God need not have saved anyone. Thus what one receives from him is not something on which one has unconditional claims" (ed. Alford 97).

[16] "Who abideth in charity abideth in God" (93).

[17] Philomena O'Driscoll notes that "Wit would be a dangerous guide if taken to be in possession of the full truth" (25).

[18] ". . . not to be more wise than it behoveth to be wise (Rom 12:3)" (103).

[19] "I am in the Father and the Father in me (Jn 14:10 or 11) . . . he that seeth me seeth the Father also (Jn 14:9)" (108).

[20] "Lo, the unlearned themselves take heaven by force while we wise ones are drowned in hell" (116).

[21] "Touch ye not my anointed (Ps 104:15)" (139).

[22] "For in hell there is no salvation" (224).

[23] Peggy Knapp, in Chaucer and the Social Contest (New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, Inc., 1990), also uses Bakhtin's formulation of the dialogic in her analysis of the Wife of Bath, but she focuses in a more general way on the Wife's exegesis and upon the meaning of "glosyng" in her Prologue. She posits "four persuasive" but "quite different readings . . . of the Wife's prologue, each claiming to discern the social dialect which reveals the "real" Alisoun

(116-17). My analysis differs from Knapp's however, in its focus on the Wife as a partly textual creation, in its specific concentration on Jerome's text, and in the larger implications it draws from the Wife's speech.

[24] All quotations from Jerome's The Epistle against Jovinian are from Robert P. Miller, ed., Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 415-436. The translation itself is from W.H. Fremantle, The Principle Works of St. Jerome (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1893).

[25] In a more negative vein, David Aers writes: "there is no essential difference between the Wife of Bath's manipulation of 'auctoritees' and that of the clerics she attacks; 'the standard practices of medieval exegesis included the sustained pulverization and fragmentation of Biblical texts, the utter dissolution of their existential and historical meanings, and the imposition of pre-determined dogmatic positions" (qtd. in Mann, Geoffrey Chaucer 72).

[26] George Kane, in Chaucer and Langland (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989), notes that the "standard doctrinal explanation" for the Retraction would be that works like the Wife of Bath's Prologue "could for the spiritually less developed reader be 'dangerous' in that their external worldliness, the magnificently represented beauty of the false good . . . in them, might distract him from their essential morality. . . . Moreover, the poet was in moral danger himself simply in the execution of his art, the

entertainment of the multiplicity of pleasurable technical considerations which in sum constitute literary activity. . . . And there was the overriding question whether the composition of poetry on profane subjects was morally justifiable at all: the discussion, from early Christian times to Chaucer's own day had not produced a generally accepted affirmative answer" (61).

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