The Gawain-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian

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Introduction

When Gawain returns to Camelot wearing his ‘token of vntrawpē’ (G 2509), the green belt that has saved his life at the cost of a nick in the neck, he finds the symbol of his humiliation turned into a badge of honour by a brotherhood of knights pleased by his survival and less scrupulous than he now wishes he had been about how he managed it. Forgiven by everyone, even Bertilak, who pardons him without imposing any further penance (G 2390–94), Gawain’s continuing remorse so closely resembles injured self-esteem as to be hard for most readers to take seriously. After all, while it may be that he has not entirely lived up to the ideals figuratively inscribed on his shield, he has only ‘lakked a lyttel’ (G 2366); if he has lied by omission, he has also heroically resisted sex with Bertilak’s wife. The green belt which Arthur’s company will now wear offers an ironic comment, certainly, on the extent to which the pentangle’s ‘endeles knot’ (G 630) is translatable into reality. But the reconciliation of Christian and chivalric ideals the pentangle represents remains basically unthreatened.¹

From the viewpoint of medieval Christian theology, there is little wrong with the court’s reaction to Gawain’s sin. As ‘active’ rather than ‘contemplative’ Christians — lay people who live ‘in the world,’ rather than being separated from it like monks or hermits — Gawain and his colleagues can never in practice achieve the perfection to which they must aspire, but must expect to live their lives in a cycle of venial sin, repentance and penance, and perhaps spend time in purgatory before finally attaining heaven. Despite his high ideals, Gawain, by the nature of his profession, belongs to a group theologians termed the mediacriter boni, rather than the spiritual elite known as the perfecti.² Indeed, his real error (like that of his more judgmental critics) may be his failure to recognize this fact: to realize that, having confessed his

¹ All citations from the poems are to the edition of Andrew and Waldron (1978).
² For this terminology, which was widespread in Latin discussions of the relative levels of spiritual perfection which were thought to pertain to different states of life, see Watson 1991, 9–15.
sin to Bertilak and been forgiven (in a scene which makes heavy use of the language of sacramental confession), he cannot continue to treat his sin as unforgivable. Yet from the viewpoint of the rest of the *Pearl* manuscript, the ending of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*Gawain*) can seem peculiar in its relative indulgence towards imperfection: an indulgence which seems at odds with the fierce insistence on purity found in *Cleanmess* and *Pearl* itself. If the pearl of salvation is so 'wemlez, clene and clere' that only those who 'forsake þe wored wode' can hope to 'porchace' it (*Pe 737, 744–5*), or if 'On spec of a spote may spede to myssse/ Of þe syghe of þe Souerayn þat syttez so hysë' (*Cl 551–2*), then it seems odd that the court of an earthly sovereign, Arthur, can be represented as making Gawain's sin, however slight, into 'þe renoun of þe Rounde Table' (*G 2519*), without attracting criticism from a poet who is elsewhere so stern. It is not surprising that *Gawain* has sometimes been thought of as so different from the more didactic poems that accompany it as to contradict many of their arguments.

This chapter takes another look at the theology of the *Gawain*-poet, using the topic of purity as the focal point of a broader enquiry into the poet's role as a communicator of religious teaching in the vernacular to an audience of lay (and perhaps primarily male) aristocrats: an audience which saw itself flatteringly embodied, I suggest, in the figure of Gawain himself. By thinking of *Pearl*, *Cleanmess* and *Patience* as written for readers whose ideals were more or less Gawain's, I hope to bring out something both of the theological strangeness of these poems (not only from the viewpoint of most kinds of theological writing in Latin but from that of the most nearly comparable vernacular materials as well) and of the logic underlying that strangeness. The poems do, so I believe, advance a common set of theological positions, which are better adapted for a lay readership than appears if we take their emphasis on radical purity at face value. Indeed, they represent one of the most interesting of all the fourteenth-century attempts to direct religious instruction at the laity in general and the aristocracy in particular. Yet we shall see that both the form and content of this instruction often represent choices on the part of the poet which cannot readily be paralleled elsewhere. An important part of my task here is to describe and, if possible, attempt to account for these choices.

To think of *Pearl*, *Cleanmess* and *Patience* in relation to their theological views is to see them within the larger context of late-medieval English religiosity, and particularly of the rapid development, from 1350 on, of a body of vernacular writing which was more and more aware of, anxious to shape, and in turn shaped by the needs of lay readers: a body of writing which includes pastoral or devotional works (*Pore Caif*, *Dives and Pauper*, Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*), a large and varied body of writings associated with the Lollards, and much else, from Passion meditations, to Lives of Christ, to religious polemic. To the extent that all the poems incorporate biblical paraphrase, they can be situated within a tradition which looks back to narrative
poems like *Cursor Mundi* and the *Northern Homily Cycle* (both written c.1300), and alongside a number of little studied late fourteenth-century expositions of 'God's law': *The Book to A Mother, The Lyfe of Soule*, a work edited as *Fourteenth-Century Biblical Versions* and, longest of all, the enormous paraphrase that forms the prologue to the Wycliffite Bible itself.3 All this religious writing is remarkably diverse and shows the extent to which the simple model of pastoral instruction first derived from the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 – which assumed that the clergy's job was largely to *catechise* the laity – was giving way to more conflicted ideas of what it was appropriate for lay readers to know, and how the relations between such readers and the clerics who wrote for them should be articulated. For reasons I explore in detail elsewhere (Watson 1995), much of the religious writing of the time displays a new respect for the laity (particularly the aristocratic laity), and uses the vernacular not only in the way we would anticipate, as an instrument for conveying already formulated teachings, but also as a tool for exploring Christian truths from the often distinct perspective of the 'mother tongue': increasingly (as the use of French declined) a language of universal access, which also came to *symbolise* such access. From Chaucer's *Parliament of Foules* and *Canterbury Tales*, to Langland's depictions of the 'field full of folk,' Piers's half-acre, and Truth's pardon, the poetry of the period is full of images of communality which can be seen as symbols for fourteenth-century English society, bound together not only by a common (if bitterly contested) faith and social structure but now also (despite dialect differences) a common language. Similar images, implicit or explicit, lie behind much of the religious prose of the period, whatever its theological emphases, and express a major preoccupation of the time. The parable of the vineyard in *Pearl*, the doomed cities of Sodom and Babylon in *Cleanness*, and the pardoned Nineveh in *Patience* are part of a much more extensive body of thinking about communal faith and morality.4

*Pearl, Cleanness* and *Patience* are thus part of a broad contemporary movement in which religious ideas of all kinds were quickly becoming accessible to vernacular readers; and we shall see that all three poems also have a number of more specific points of contact with different parts of that movement. But for every similarity we note between the poems and the larger world of late medieval English religious writing, it is possible to point to an equally suggestive difference – and here I will outline two which are to be of special importance in what follows. First, if the direction of much of the

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3 For these and other vernacular theologies mentioned in this chapter, see the relevant chapters of *The Manual of Writings in Middle English*, especially Talbert and Thomson 1970 ("Wyklif and His Followers"), Raymo 1986 ("Works of Philosophical and Religious Instruction") and Lagorio and Sargent 1993 ("English Mystical Writings"). A list of religious writings in English written between c.1300 and c.1500 is given as the Appendix to Watson 1995.

period's vernacular theology is set towards opening religious thinking up to a wider audience, this is true of these poems (despite their composition in the English vernacular, rather than in French) only in a special sense. When the Wycliffite Bible and its orthodox 'reply,' Nicholas Love's Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ, were copied in the early fifteenth century, the dialect in which copies were made (that of the Central Midlands) was selected to be as widely comprehensible as possible (Sargent 1992, bxiv); when Hilton wrote book II of The Scale, Julian of Norwich the long text of her Revelation of Love, and Langland the B-text of Piers Plowman, each writer showed a similar concern to speak, if they could, to what Julian calls 'al myn even cristen' (Glasscoe 1978, 10.7–8). The Gawain-poet's dialectal and stylistic choices point in the opposite direction, towards establishing close contact with a lay audience able to understand (perhaps even in part constituted around their ability to understand) an ornate, and regionally specific, vocabulary. For all his interest in communality, he writes for a provincial aristocracy: not for the notionally universal audience of 'simple men and wynmen of gode wille' (as the prologue to Pore Caitef has it) addressed by other religious writers of his time but for a small, socially particularised part of that audience. As we shall see, this orientation has clear implications for his theology.

Second, a dominant element in the more sophisticated forms of late medieval English religiosity is the importance given to affective religious experience, the emphasis on the inner life of intentions, feelings and thoughts. English affectivity comes in many guises, from Rolle's famously fervid optimism, to the devout intensity of meditative writings like A Talking of the Love of God or The Prickyng of Love, to the abjection of Henry of Lancaster's Livre de Seyntz Medicines, or the Instructions to A Devot Layman. But even works whose major emphasis is on public practice, not private devotion – as seems the case, for example, with Piers Plowman, Dives and Pauper, and Lollard treatises like The Lantern of Light – tend to acknowledge at some level the primacy of the interior life over the exterior; if the Lollards generated little by way of devotional literature, they had as firm a sense as anyone of the importance of a proper interior disposition. The Gawain-poet, I shall argue, is deeply unusual among the more sophisticated religious writers of the time in his indifference to interiority and his insistence (despite his writing a whole poem on the virtue of patience) on the primacy of word and deed over thought and feeling – of what Gawain says and does with Bertilak's wife as she tries to seduce him over the (wholly undescribed) inner struggles her desirability might be assumed to generate. In this respect, the poet's closest points of contact are less with either the Lollards or with the spiritual traditions represented by the English 'mystics' (with whom he has often been compared in discussions of Pearl) than with the more matter-of-fact religiosity embodied in pastoral works such as those being produced in almost the same part of England, no more than two decades after his time, by John Mirk (the influential Festial and Instructions for Parish Priests). Such a view needs, of
course, to be coordinated with an assessment of the poet's awareness of many different traditions (the theology of virginity and of visions, medieval sign theory, exegetical writings, and so on), and especially, I think, of his striking articulation of the nature of divine power and covenant, whose roots seem to lie as much in fourteenth-century academic theology as in the world of pastoralia. But for all the complexity of his artistry and the sophistication of his personal educational background, the view of the Christian life to which he gives expression is for the most part conscientiously simple.

All this talk of the Gawain-poet as a theologian may seem to be ignoring what most readers find the central fact about his works: their deep self-consciousness as highly wrought aesthetic entities, whose theological and didactic arguments are subordinated (especially in Pearl and Gawain, the poems most modern readers prefer) to a positively obtrusive sense of craft, of verbal 'coyntyse.' But in fact it is this aspect of the poems around which their specifically aristocratic articulation of the Christian life is formed and which must be a major concern of this analysis. Pearl, Cleanness and Patience represent a sustained attempt to translate an ancient tradition of thought concerning the centrality of purity in the Christian life — a tradition going back at least to the virginity literature of the fourth and early fifth centuries — from its old context in monastic and anchoritic writing to address the needs and aspirations of a lay elite. This act of cultural translation has both ethical and metaphysical dimensions. In ethical terms, we shall see that the idea of purity itself is redefined, so that a concept which had long been associated (on the level of the body) with virginity and (on that of the soul) with an attitude of abject humility comes to signify, at least in part, a set of rules for decorous conduct, which fuse Christian and courtly into a self-consistent code whose manifestations are public, not private, and which is designed for socially and sexually active laypeople. In metaphysical terms, we shall see that this redefinition depends on the creation of a structure of associations between the aristocratic society for which the poetry was devised, the complex aesthetic mode in which it was written, and the harmony of the cosmos — crafted, as it is thought to be, by a supremely complex and thus perfect divine creator, a creator who is at once ultimate poet and ultimate ruler. Rather as Hildegard of Bingen viewed both the convent she governed and the synaesthetic visionary works she wrote there as microcosms of heaven, paradieses brought down to earth (Newman 1987), so the Gawain-poet seems to have perceived both his own intricate verbal creations and the self-consciously rarefied court culture within which they position themselves as earthly images of heavenly reality. This perception is not without an ironic sense (one absent in Hildegard) that earthly images are radically imperfect: a sense that often surfaces in these poems, from the jeweller's expulsion from Paradise at the end of Pearl, to the accounts of the pervasiveness of human sin in Cleanness, to the chapter of accidents which besets Jonah in Patience and the final scene of Gawain with which I began. Indeed, we will be seeing in
this irony a quite different view of the relation between a sin-stained earth and heaven, in which the emphasis is on the virtual incommensurability of the two orders of being, which can be brought together only by divine grace or, fictionally, poetic craft. But by focusing as far as possible on the surfaces of things – on the public life of religious and secular observance, rather than the inner world of shifting thoughts and feelings – it does seem that the poet unites earthly and heavenly forms of courtliness in more than an ad hoc way: making the ideals represented by Gawain into a ladder by which readers (in the words of An Ureisun of God Almihty) can ‘stihen [. . .] to þe steorren’ (Thomson 1968, 76–7). In the following sections, which offer readings of Pearl, Cleanness and Patience in turn, I shall attempt to show how each of these poems offers a distinct, but closely related contribution to this over-arching didactic project.

Pearl

To pay þe Prince oper sete saȝte
Hit is ful eȝe to þe god Krystyn;
For I haf founden Hym, boþe day and naȝte,
A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyyn.
Ouer þis hyul þis lote I laȝte,
For pyt of my perle enclyyn,
And syben to God I hit bytaȝte,
In Krystez dere blessyng and myn.
Pat in þe forme of bred and wyn
þe prest þus scheweþ vch a daye.
He gef vus to be His homely hyne
Ande precious perlez vnto His pay.
Amen. Amen. (Pe 1201–12)

There is initially something unexpected about the way that Pearl, the most intricate poem in Middle English, completes its highly symmetrical, indeed notionally spherical, design with a stanza asserting that pleasing God is ‘ful eȝe to þe god Krystyn’: leaving us with a one-line commendation of the pearl to Christ and an equally perfunctory, but apparently confident, gathering in of all the poem’s Christian readers to the household of God. It is not plausible

5 This discussion of Pearl has in part grown out of an attempt to respond to issues raised in David Aers’s fine essay, ‘The Self Mourning: Reflections on The Pearl’ (1993), whose emphasis on the consolatory aspects of the poem provides a counterbalance to the didactic reading offered here. Readers should be aware that my argument differs sharply from most attempts to read the poem theologically, which in general terms assume that it has been heavily influenced by the literature of mysticism, and often take the poem (in my view wrongly, see further note 13) as a fictional account of an itineraiment mentis in deum (a journey of the soul to God). For this scholarly tradition, see, e.g., Blenker 1968; Bogdanos 1985; Astell 1990 (chapter 5).
to assume that we are meant to view the stanza with irony, as giving yet more evidence of the jeweller’s inability to learn. After all, he does here relinquish the pearl at last, transferring his layman’s gaze from the ‘hyul’ which hides his daughter’s rotting body to the hands of a priest as they mysteriously reveal, ‘in þe forme of bred and wyn,’ the resurrected body of her spouse (who now appears as the jeweller’s own ‘frende ful fyn,’ no longer, as before, a pitiless and impersonal ‘Wyrde’ (Pe 249)); and the structural parallel between his submission to God and the poem’s to its own finitude makes it impossible for us not to take his closing words as constituting, in some sense, its moral. Yet it is not immediately obvious how the jeweller can derive so comforting a lesson from his bruising encounter with eternity, nor how the poet can reconcile this picture of the ‘eþe’ of Christian living with his analysis of the profound gap between earth and heaven, which at some points appear as directly opposed orders of reality (see, e.g., the threefold use of ‘kynde’ in Pe 265–76). As a result, there is a temptation to ignore or resist this conclusion: a temptation felt especially strongly by a critical tradition which tends to extremes of interpretative complexity unparalleled in non-Chaucerian Middle English studies. It is admittedly true that an account of the poem that takes its ending seriously fails to support readings of the poem as a mystical journey, a meditation on Christian sign theory, or a study of the process of grieving (see Blenkner 1968; Baldwin 1984; Vance 1991; Aers 1993); and the reading offered here is doubtless in some ways reductive. As we shall see, however, such a reading does have the advantage of making sense both of what we can guess of the poem’s aristocratic context and of the particularity of its theology.

Like most of the poem’s readers, I take it that Pearl was probably occasioned by the death of a young girl, perhaps named Margaret, for whose father the poem was written (see, e.g., E. Wilson 1976, 1). Because I believe that the author of Pearl also wrote Cleanness and Patience, both of which (in view of their status as versified homilies) must surely be the work of a celibate cleric, I doubt the more romantic possibility that the dead girl was the poet’s own daughter. Like those works, we shall see that Pearl makes sense as the product of a relationship between the poet and his first reader in which the latter is both the poet’s patron and his spiritual charge – a relationship consistent with a situation in which the poet was a secular priest or friar working in an aristocratic household, now as secretary, now as confessor. Such a situation is much more complex than Chaucer found himself in when penning Pearl’s closest English analogue, The Book of the Duchess. Involving the poet as it does in a relationship with his audience which is both deferential and authoritative, some such situation may explain the unusual interplay in the poem between its consolatory and instructive functions: an interplay which, whatever its cause, is responsible for some of the most doctrinally idiosyncratic verse in Middle English.

As consolation, the poem (fictionally) works, first, by reassuring the
jeweller that his pearl is not dead but glorified in heaven; second, by forcing him to confront the selfishness of his grief, concerned as it is with his loss, not with his daughter’s gains. The reader is expected to have various attitudes to this process, sometimes identifying with the jeweller, sometimes feeling that sense of superiority to his failings which the Gawain-poet always offers us in our attitudes towards all his main characters (including, in Cleanness, even God; Cl 561–2). Like the narrator in The Book of the Duchess, who fails to understand the man in blank’s densely metaphorical courtly language and so is puzzled as to the cause of his grief, the jeweller at first cannot grasp how the language of heavenly courtesie is meant, making a series of crude assumptions about his daughter’s situation and what he himself can now expect from her. It was often asserted by the more elitist clerical theorists of the religious life that uneducated lay people were incapable of thinking except in this naively ‘carnal’ fashion (Watson 1995, 840–6); and we could see Pearl’s portrayal of the jeweller as invoking such a view only to work against it by holding it up to his lay audience’s scrutiny. If so, however, we must also see the poem as making significant theological concessions to readers whose apprehension of heavenly reality remains dominated by images of social status, and who (despite their social superiority to him) have by no means left all aspects of the jeweller’s point of view behind. For it is just those images, wrapping the pearl maiden as they do in the vague splendour of her role as a debutante heavenly queen, around which both the poem’s consolatory and its instructive functions revolve.

One of the less often noted sources of the poem’s depiction of the pearl maiden is the specialised kind of writing aimed at career virgins (e.g., anchoresses and nuns) known as the virginity treatise, of which the most notable English example is the thirteenth-century West Midlands work Hali Meðhod. At least in general terms, it is from the virginity tradition that Pearl derives its emphases on the relationships between heavenly purity, sexual ‘intactness’ and mystical marriage and to which, I suggest, it owes its deep sense of the beauty of the unsullied and pure. If it is because of her innocence that the pearl maiden is so early crowned a queen in heaven (Pe 613–36), it is because she is ‘coronde clene in vergynite’ (Pe 767, my emphasis) that she becomes not only a queen but a spouse of Christ, one of those select souls ‘to Krystez chambere þat art ichose’ (Pe 904), to whom he says ‘ “Cum hyder to Me, My leman swete,/ For mote ne spot is non in þe” ’ (Pe 763–4; see Canticles 4:7–8). As a good deal of the first part of the jeweller’s dialogue with his daughter is designed to establish (VIII–XI), all the saved are crowned kings and queens ‘of alle þe reme’ of heaven (Pe 446–8), and in that sense are given the equal reward (the ‘peny’) the lord of the vineyard offers his labourers (the ‘homly hyne’ of the poem’s final stanza, Pe 1211). But, as the

6 The best succinct study of the genre is in Millett 1982; for an edition and translation of Hali Meðhod and further bibliography see also Millett and Wogan-Browne 1990.
later phases of that dialogue (XIII–XV) make equally clear, only a perfect soul – one "pate hade neuer teche" – can be not simply a queen but 'a worthy wyf' to the Lamb of God (Pe 845–6, my emphasis): a member of the 144,000 'maydennez,' or God's 'newe fryn,' who alone can sing his 'newe songe' (Pe 869, 894, 882; Rev. 4, 14) because they alone are truly 'lyk to Hymselfe of lote and hwe' (Pe 896). In referring to the martyrs of Revelation as 'maydennez' (a word which in Middle English predominantly refers to women), *Pearl* is clearly (pace Robertson 1950a, b) drawing on the virginity tradition's interpretation of Revelation 14 as referring to female virgins in particular, since it is this group of whom the language of marriage to Christ can be used with special appropriateness. 's[efmioðad] is Godd leof þet is himselfe swa lich, hit nis na wunder, for he is leoflukest þing, ant buten eauereuch bruche, ant wes eauer ant is cleane ouer alle þing, and ouer alle þinge luueð cleanesse' (*Hali Meóðad* 10.10–12). In *Pearl*, as in *Hali Meóðad*, virginity and the absolute purity it symbolizes is more precious to Christ than anything.

Part of *Pearl*’s function as a consolatory poem is thus fulfilled by informing its reader not only that the pearl maiden is in heaven but that the very fact of her early death has caused her to become someone special there, a figure of surpassing power in the eternal courts; and it does this by invoking a tradition of thinking about female virginity in which sexual 'intactness' in this life is given a highly elevated spiritual interpretation in regard to the next. Yet for all the importance this tradition assumes in thus elevating the pearl maiden, the poem’s line of argument about her status also constitutes a major disruption of a millennium of thought about virginity and its rewards. Treatises like *Hali Meóðad* were written to assure career virgins that their heroic, lifelong abstinence is worthwhile, since it earns them a special place at the side of Christ as his spotless spouse. Despite the great importance they attribute to physical virginity in and of itself, such treatises are clear that virgins deserve their reward because they *endure*, living their lives in a state of suffering somewhat akin to martyrdom (Millett and Wogan-Browne 1990, xv–xx). In *Pearl*, however, the whole notion of heroic suffering which is basic to the medieval ideal of virginity has gone, to be replaced by an ideal of innocence which is no more than an extension of the concept of physical 'intactness' to the rest of life. Here, the brides of the lamb are no longer career virgins but children, who are claimed to be superior to everyone precisely because they

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7 I take it that the first stanza of section VIII, in which the jeweller questions the pearl maiden’s claim to be a queen ('Art þou be quene of heuenes biwe?' 423), is intended to initiate one phase of the discussion, to do with equality of reward, while the similar (and apparently repetitive) question at the end of section XIII ('What kyn þyng may be þat Lambe/ Fat þee wolde wedde unto Hys wyf?' 771–2) initiates a separate phase, this one to do with mystical marriage.

8 'If what is so like God is dear to him, it is no wonder, for he is more beautiful than anything, and without any sin, and always was and is pure above all things, and above all things loves purity' (translation in Millett and Wogan-Browne 1990, 11).
have done nothing, and have therefore retained all the pristine integrity with which they came forth from the baptismal font (Pe 657–60): an integrity which everyone else, without exception, is deemed to have lost. This is why the ‘pakke of joly juele,’ Christ’s spouses, among whom the jeweller at last sees his ‘lyttel queene’ (Pe 929, 1147), do not apparently even include career virgins, consisting not partly but solely of baptized infants (Pe 841–52): a group who do not figure in most discussions of virginity. In view of the way these infants replace the career virgins the virginity treatises describe as Christ’s brides, the jeweller’s claim that the pearl maiden has supplaned ‘so mony a comly onvunder cambe,’ religious women who ‘for Kryst han lyued in much stryf’ (Pe 775–6), is less naive than is usually assumed.9

The poet’s version of the mystical marriage of virgins to Christ can be defended in various ways, most convincingly as a consequence of his reading of Revelation 14 in its liturgical context as the epistle for the feast of the Innocents (Hart 1927; Bishop 1968: 104–12). Yet the poem’s deliberate distortion of an ancient and, in the fourteenth century, still established body of thinking about virginity remains extremely unusual. While we, of course, must not assume that something has to be drastically amiss when a literary fiction like Pearl fails to operate according to the logic of a religious treatise, it is proper that we ask what the significance of its treatment of the theological issue of divine reward may be, and particularly what effect it has on the poem’s role not simply as consolation but as a work of religious instruction for secular aristocrats. After all, the specific question over which the poem commits its conscious theological solecism – the question of just which virgins can properly be described as brides of Christ, and why – is a relatively abstruse one to occur in a vernacular work written for laypeople, and might indeed be thought irrelevant to them. That the poem is prepared to ‘speke errore’ (Pe 421) over such a matter at least suggests that something of real importance is at stake.

What I believe the redefinition of mystical marriage in the second half of Pearl does, for reasons I explore below, is to complete the divorce between heavenly reward and human desert which has been a major concern of much of its first half, by redefining not only purity but every aspect of human salvation in essentially formalistic, even ritualistic terms: terms, that is, which have more to do with a person’s external and ‘objective’ state than with her or his internal or moral one. Virginity treatises sometimes put forth a formalistic view of heavenly reward where the states of virginity, widowhood and marriage are seen as by definition meriting variable rewards, which are

9 The jeweller, that is, has a standard late medieval understanding that nuns and anchorites, like monks and hermits, can expect a special reward in heaven. The importance of the poem’s clear reference here to ‘spiritual athletes’ such as anchorites (paralleled by a reference to their male equivalents in 477–8, see below) has not, to my knowledge, been previously noted.
equated with the hundredfold, sixtyfold and thirtyfold fruit brought forth by the ‘good seed’ in the parable of the sower (e.g., Hali Meðhad (Millet 1982) 20.17–21, Matt. 13:23). But by the late middle ages, the dispute which was always latent in the treatises between this view of reward and a growing emphasis on the inner disposition of individuals was well on the way to resolution. Reflecting the increased importance of affective spirituality, which conceptualises reward very differently, Rolle’s Ego Dormio, for example, takes its reader’s virginity as having little inherent significance, and assumes that her state in this life and the next depends entirely on how far she is able to transform her interior self so that she can become Christ’s bride not in a formal but a mystical sense. From here it is but a step to Margery Kempe’s rejection of the very idea that only virgins are eligible to be brides of Christ (Book of Margery Kempe, ch. 21): a development in the theology of spiritual marriage which completes its transformation from an exterior to an interior state.

Pearl, with its insistence that the pearl maiden is Christ’s spouse as an automatic concomitant of her unsullied innocence, represents a reaction against this process of transformation: a reaction which has much to do with the poet’s desire to formulate a version of Christian belief which is applicable not to contemplatives (like Rolle), whose energies are given over to the processes of inner reformation, but to laypeople who continue to be preoccupied with life in the world. In place of the hierarchies of reward which most medieval accounts of heaven assume, and in which different levels of commitment to God receive different rewards, Pearl substitutes a system in which all the saved are divided into two groups:

‘Ryst þus I knaw wel in þis cas
Two men to saue is God – by skylle:
þe rystwys man schal se Hys face,
þe harmlez hapel schal com Hym tylle.’ (Pe 673–6)

This system preserves at least the principle of hierarchy, by distinguishing between those who ‘se Hys face’ (i.e., from afar?) and special souls, the ‘harmlez,’ who ‘com Hym tylle’ as his spouses; as I have implied, the longstanding idea that Pearl presents an egalitarian picture of heaven is wrong.10 But by defining the latter, superior group not as those who have worked hardest to attain salvation but precisely as those who have almost ‘com to late’ to work at all (Pe 615), the poem can do away with the whole concept of Christian living as a spiritual struggle in which people attain

10 For this view, see Robertson 1950a, b; Bogdanos 1983, 91–6. It should be added that the controversy over the orthodoxy of the pearl maiden’s exposition here has tended to cloud what is the most important fact about that exposition: that it is unique in Middle English and runs directly contrary to the particular theological traditions the pearl maiden herself embodies.
different states of blessedness in the next life according to how they live in this: a concept basic to so much fourteenth-century vernacular theology, including theology written for the laity. Here, the heroic Christian (whether monk or hermit) who ‘lyued in penaunce hys lyuez longe/ With bodyly bale hym blysse to byye’ (Pe 477–8) appears to be in just the same situation as the most ordinary laypeople who barely fulfil the minimum requirement for salvation, ‘pat takez not her lyf in vayne:/ Ne glauerez her neizbor wyth no gyle’ (Pe 687–8). Both groups must wash themselves with repentance for the sins they inevitably commit, and can attain salvation only through the surrogate ‘innocens’ provided by Christ’s blood (Pe 697–708). But having performed this sacramental ritual, both can equally enter God’s kingdom in a spiritual state which is a version of their original innocence. Like children, both are ritually pure, ‘harme, trwe, and vndefylde./ Withouten mote oper mascle of sulpande synne’ (Pe 725–6), and are presumably deemed to have forsaken ‘pe worlde wode’ to purchase the pearl of salvation (Pe 743–4).\footnote{Compare the account of how virginity preserves the flesh’s purity given in Hali Meðhad: ‘Bis is ȝet þe ȝeurtu þe hælt ȝe bruchelȝe uæt, ȝet is, ȝe feble flesch, as Seinte Pawel leœrd [I Thess. 4:3–5], in hal halinesse: ant as ȝet swote smiþes and deoerest of opre ȝet is icleopet basme wîþ ȝet deade licome þet is þerwið ðisíret from rotunge, alswa ðeð meidenhæd meidenes cwike flesch wipute wemmunge’ (Milett 1982, 10.31–5).} Thus both, so the poem implies (and despite their functions as different limbs of Christ’s body, Pe 457–68), receive a single reward. (If there is a difference between them, it is that heroic Christians are in more danger of protesting at the arrangement, and thus falling out with Christ at the last; see Pe 553–67).

In the economy of salvation which results from Pearl’s remarkable transformation of the theology of virginity, then, the lifelong commitment to spiritual labour undertaken by hermits, anchoresses, monks and others achieves no more than does the rectitude of the righteous layperson. Indeed, the idea that God’s favour can be earned – an idea at first endorsed by the mercantile jeweller, and which parallels the notion of reward found in the virginity tradition – is revealed as deeply vulgar, lacking in both courtesy and due subservience to a lord of whose power over his servants it can be said:

‘For þouȝ þou daunce as any do,
Braundysch and bray þy bæpe breme,
When þou no fyre may, to ne fro,
þou moste abyde þat He schal deme.’ (Pe 345–8)

The God revealed in Pearl takes no notice of how hard individuals have laboured, only of the ‘ouenaunt’ (Pe 562) he established with them through the sacerdotal machinery of baptism, confession, penance and mass: a covenant by means of which those who live below the sphere of the ‘spotty’ moon, ‘mokke and mul’ though they are (Pe 1070, 905), can attain miraculously to the ‘wemleþ, cleene and cler’ pearl of salvation, so pure and precious that it
resembles ‘prech meyne of heuennesse clere’ (Pe 737, 735). This God does not acknowledge the distinction I described at the outset between contemplative and active Christians, perfecti and mediocriter boni, and takes no more interest in most aspects of the inner lives of his servants than a hunter takes in the death-agony of the deer. When the pearl maiden compliments her father on how well he has rephrased his first outraged questions to her, she does not do so because he shows any signs of profound inner change but because his speech is different, no longer full of ‘maysterful mod and hyȝe pryde’ but now properly imbued with the meekness that God demands appear in the attitude of all his servants: ‘My Lorde þe Lambe louez ay such chere’ (Pe 401, 407). This God is not primarily concerned with inner transformation, but with outer submission. Even at the end of the poem, the jeweller feels none of the joy which might be associated with the achievement of a state of mystical transport, only the resignation which comes from surrendering his daughter to her divine husband. This is, indeed, why he can assert—only a few lines after he has plunged headlong after her, all he had ostensibly learned clean forgotten (Pe 1153–60)—that pleasing God is ‘full epe to þe god Krystyn’ (Pe 1202). Submission to the demands God makes of his ‘homely hyne’ is simple when compared to the arduous journeys to God described by some of the Gawain-poet’s contemporaries. The jeweller does not have to sacrifice his desire for his daughter, or his sorrow at her death. As he has now learned—in a vision which is closer to otherworld visions such as those associated with St Patrick’s Purgatory than it is to the experiences of visionaries of the more mystical sort—\[13\] he has only to submit to what his lord has decreed and follow God’s commands to take his place among the ‘precious perlez vnto His pay’ (Pe 1212).

\[12\] It is here that my reading parts company with that of Aers (1993, 72–3), who argues that the poem is individualistic and indifferent to the community of the Church. While it is true that the jeweller remains an isolated figure at the end of the poem (by contrast, for example, with Will at the end of Piers Plouman B XVIII (Schmidt 1987b), who summons his wife and children to pray after his vision of the Harrowing of Hell), the level of theological argument the poem is deeply and conservatively sacerdotal.

\[13\] Otherworld visions were especially beloved of the medieval English, who made important contributions to the genre: Easting 1991 edits several of these associated with St Patrick’s Purgatory (with an outstandingly useful introduction and apparatus), the latest of which records the experiences of a Durham man (William Stanton) as late as 1406. The vision in Pearl resembles these otherworld journeys inasmuch as the jeweller not only travels to the other world (or at least, to a place from which he can glimpse it) but also learns new information there about the nature of salvation and the eternal state of a particular soul. I suggest, then, that there may be a connection between the singularity of the poem’s theology of salvation and its use of the vision genre. As Aers suggests (1993, 67, n. 50), the fact that in the poem’s visionary climax the jeweller only looks briefly at the Lamb before returning his gaze to his daughter, at whom his plunge into the water is aimed, surely makes nonsense of attempts to read section XIX as an account of mystical union. Otherworld visions, however, do sometimes focus on particular individuals; see, e.g., the vision of a Winchester nun edited by Harley (1985).
Cleanness and Patience

In its extraordinary evocation of the perfect purity of heaven and its embodiment of that purity not in the traditional figure of the adult virgin but in the transfigured innocence of a resurrected child, Pearl is, among other things, a meditation on (as well as, paradoxically, a mediation of) the otherness of God. In Pearl, heavenly reality can to a considerable extent be described in human language; the poem is no fictionalized version of The Cloud of Unknowing. But to describe heaven, human language cannot continue to signify in human terms; confronted with the transcendent versions of earthly phenomena, it has to work in contradictory ways, sometimes affirming, sometimes denying continuity between earth and heaven in its attempt to convey the singular strangeness of the divine nature. (This is why the poem must work so hard, in its highly-wrought formal complexity, to show us fallen language, sullied with earthliness, being made into a fit instrument for the divine by a process of shaping which is an aesthetic equivalent of the sacraments.) Like any powerful lord, God has his idiosyncrasies, which must be carefully kept in mind by those who serve him, since he insists on obedience, tolerates no criticism (e.g., Pe 565–8), and 'tauez Hys gyftez as water of dyche,' whether they be 'nesch oper harde' (Pe 607, 606); to that extent, the gap between humans and God is similar to that between earthly rulers and their subjects. Yet God's otherness is also more alarming, for it consists in part of an absolute sinlessness which humans who are not baptized infants cannot hope to emulate, but which they must overcome if they are to avoid eternal damnation. It is indeed fortunate that, despite the chilling perfection of his nature, God has entered into a covenant with humans which enables them to do by grace (through participation in the sacraments) what they cannot by effort.

The nature of this covenant and of the God who made it forms, in general terms, the subject of the two poems which follow Pearl in Cotton Nero A.x, Cleanness and Patience, which my brief discussion here treats as a lopsided diptych. Cleanness is surely the most frightening poem in Middle English in its evocation of God's anger and of the violent alternation between anger and love in his dealings with humanity. David Wallace (in his fine article, 'Cleanness and the Terms of Terror;' 1991) is correct to see in it a reflection of late medieval scholastic discussion of divine omnipotence (potentia absoluta): the unconstrained power of God to create, destroy, change his mind, and enter into a series of agreements with humanity, is a theme running through all the poem's exempla. But where Wallace treats the poem as an expression of the final unpredictability of God – so that, for all the efforts people make to gain salvation, 'those are righteous whom God deems to be righteous' (100) – I suggest that, on the contrary, Cleanness exists to give its readers the information they need to avail themselves confidently of his mercy. God is presented as unpredictable in the poem only when not operating within a covenant which constrains him to pity for his creation, at which times he is liable to
exhibit a terrifyingly destructive purity. Cleanliness describes parts of the historical process by which God sets such a covenant in place. More important, the poem describes both what it is and why it takes the form it takes, that is, what aspects of the divine ‘personality’ (to use a term which is readily applicable to God in this poem) the covenant expresses. It is to engage the reader more effectively and further his or her salvation that the poem does all this in a narrative context that makes so vividly clear the dire consequences of confronting that personality outside the limits it has set on the expression of its own disapproval.\textsuperscript{14}

The argument of Cleanliness is both simple and coherent if one takes it at face value, and I do not share in the commonly expressed view that there is a disparity between the expository sections of the poem and its exempla, or any other particular structural problem (see, e.g., Davenport 1978). God is ‘scowy and skyg,’ and requires purity in his servants, being unable to tolerate ‘fylpe’ in his vicinity, either in the next life or in this (CI 21, 31). Despite his willingness to welcome all who will come to the eternal banquet, there can be no relaxing of standards for anyone (CI 165–8). Anyone forfeits heaven who commits one of a number of sins: pride, covetousness, lying, treason and so forth (a list is provided, CI 179–88). God dislikes all impurity; but he reserves his anger for one particular sin, ‘fylpe of þe fleisch’ (CI 202), which almost alone of all sins can cause him to destroy what he has created. While Lucifer was only cast down for his pride, life on earth was all but wiped out by the Flood when people ‘controued agayn kynde contrære werke’ (CI 266). Although God promised not to repeat this punishment, foregoing for all time his right to punish fleshly sin by destroying ‘al þat fleisch werez’ (CI 287), readers should still take note. God searches out the ‘reyñyez and hert’ (CI 592), and his promise does not preclude him from destroying those with whom he is angry (CI 570–2), as he did the Sodomites. God’s cleanliness was demonstrated at the incarnation and during Christ’s life, where all he touched became clean (CI 1088–109). How, then, can readers approach him, once baptismal purity is lost? By washing themselves with penance, as a pearl is washed with wine:

\begin{quote}
So if folk be defowled by vnfre chaunce,
Þat he be sulped in sawle, seche to schryfte,
And he may polycye hym at the prest, by penance taken,
Wel bryȝter þen þe beryl øper browden perles. \textsuperscript{5} (CI 1129–32)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} Wallace’s reading of Cleanliness is based largely on the exempla, and draws on the accounts of the late medieval scholastic division between the potentia absoluta and the potentia ordinata developed by Janet Coleman (1981a, 1981b). His analysis may, however, take too radical a view of the theology of divine omnipotence which the potentiae were used to develop. For a more conservative understanding of the potentiae than Coleman’s, see Courtenay 1984, and for references to studies dealing with their dissemination in late medieval vernacular texts, Courtenay 1987, 377, n. 50.
Having done this, though, there must be no repetition of the sin. Backsliding is the other sin that makes God angry; 'entyses Hym to tene more traylly þen euer' (Cl 1137). When what has been purified is soiled again – ‘þat hit be bot a bасэyn, a bolle oper a scole,/ A dysche oper a doler, þat Dryȝtyn onez serued’ (Cl 1145–6) – God considers a covenant broken and punishes as he did Belshazzar for abusing the sacred vessels. People should therefore take care to keep their spiritual clothes clean (Cl 1811).

Cleanliness thus operates at once as a sermon and as a history lesson about how God has evolved a covenant with humankind through a process, remarkably, of trial and error, gradually imposing restraints upon himself while at the same time making ever more specific demands upon his people. The first humans live without either social hierarchy or marriage, constrained only by the law of ‘kynde’ (Cl 252, 263), and this lack of controls gives God an equivalent freedom when punishing them: a freedom he still enjoys more locally when destroying the Sodomites (who disobey the more specific rules) God expounds to Abraham, Cl 697–712 and overthrowing Belshazzar (who defiles him by defiling his vessels). Since the time of Christ, the covenant has changed again, functioning on an individual basis according to yet more specific rules. But God himself is the same as he always was, and readers must therefore also understand the lessons of the past tropologically and analogically, referring them to their own moral condition and the threat that hangs over them if they fail to follow his commands.

The poem’s emphasis upon purity, as pronounced as in Pearl, no doubt has a number of reference points, among them the pastoral writings and legislation concerned with the proper performance and meaning of the Eucharist (see Rubin 1991, 83–107). It is surely to such writings that the poem owes its emphasis on specifically ritual purity, as expressed through the imagery of clean and dirty vessels and the hands that touch them (Cl 1–16, 1089–108, 1143–6ff., see Morse 1971), as well as through the incident in which Lot’s wife is punished for her ritual faux pas in serving salt to angels (Cl 817–28, 996–1000). As has often been remarked, there is influence from the literature of penance too, which supplies, for example, one basis for the interpretation of the parable of the wedding feast, as well as the metaphor of clothing used at beginning and end.\(^{15}\) But much of the poem’s emphasis on purity is again traceable to virginity literature, whose presence is discernible, for example, in the idea that fleshly sin is especially hateful to God – rather than being treated as less serious than sins like pride, as in the scholastic schema familiar to modern readers from the Inferno. Again, the process of daring adaptation of this tradition, which we saw in Pearl, is in evidence here. Virginity treatises prohibit all physical sexual expression, treating sexual sin as a symbol for everything that offends God, and seeing God’s hatred of such sin as

\(^{15}\) Cl, 133–70, 1811; compare, e.g., Piers Plouman B XIII.271–XIV.332 and see Alford 1974.
motivated in part by a lover’s jealousy; the bride of Christ must, above all, avoid making him (to put it bluntly) a cuckold. Despite its moving evocation of the virgin birth of Christ (Cl 1069–77), Cleanness has a very different view of some forms of sexual activity, and recasts the notion of sexual purity for its lay audience to include the ‘kynde crafte’ of heterosexual intercourse (Cl 697), here presented not as a grudging second best to virginity but as fully its equivalent, ‘welnyse pure paradys’ (Cl 704). God’s anger against sexual sin is reserved for sex ‘agayn kynde,’ invented (‘controewed’) by the antediluvians and notoriously practiced by the Sodmites (Cl 266, 694–6; Frantzen 1996). And this anger is not that of a lover but of an artist-father, outraged engenderer of a creation which has perverted itself and so, implicitly, defiled (even unmanned) him (Cl 540–2), destroying the aesthetic unity of the natural order so that the one satisfaction left him is to complete this work of undoing with a finality that has its own terrible beauty: a beauty the poem invites the reader to appreciate. In a move which suggests that Chaucer’s The Parliament of Fowles is not the only Middle English poem to be influenced by Alain of Lisle’s De Planctu Naturae, purity is here made coterminous with the natural order, redeemed as it is by a covenant which, through participation in the sacraments, allows Christians to remain in the world and still remain acceptable to God. For all the language of absolute purity, and the emphasis on how the ‘gropande God’ searches out all humanity’s hidden secrets (Cl 591), this is not a covenant which should be hard for the poem’s readers to keep. Exactly as we found in Pearl, basic moral rules (adapted here for an aristocratic readership; see, e.g., Cl 185–6), an attitude of submission, and the willingness to repent of any sins one may commit, are adequate to render the sacraments efficacious and leave the soul jewel-bright before God.

One of the ways in which both Pearl and Cleanness are able to bring about their striking union of frankly rudimentary spiritual standards with a rhetoric of perfection is by rigorously excluding mention of the saints and martyrs whose heroism is regularly invoked by other religious texts. Apart from Christ, the Virgin Mary and the pearl maiden, the nearest thing to saints in the poems are the figures of Noah and Abraham, both of them comfortably married property-owners, who are not seen as people of exceptional virtue but as dutiful servants of God. Nor does the narrator of Cleanness present himself as speaking from a viewpoint in any sense (either morally or in terms of his formal spiritual authority) above his audience. On the contrary, he is deferential, ‘counselling’ his readers rather than overtly commanding them, and at one point even referring obsequiously to any sin his readers might commit as an ‘vnfere chaunce’ (Cl 1056, 1129), a churlish accident, easily remedied by a prompt application of priestcraft (the penitent can ‘polychym at the prest,’ Cl 1130). The same deference, combined with the same note of anti-heroism, is evident in Patience: a poem whose position in the manuscript seems to be intended to demonstrate that God does, despite Cleanness,
display mercy as well as anger, but which might also have been designed to reassure aristocratic readers that the didactic poetry they are reading has not been written from any position of implied moral superiority. Sent to preach wrath to the secular community of Ninevah, Jonah – a figure who is directly paralleled with the preacher-narrator (Pat 49–56) – fails ludicrously and at every stage to do or think what he should, measuring up as badly as can be against everyone else in the poem, from the sailors who do all they can to avoid throwing him overboard (Pat 215–30), to the king and people of Nineveh who know better than Jonah when God means business (Pat 371–406). Jonah does worse than the jeweller in Pearl and much worse than Gawain. As a figure of the preacher he is wholly unthreatening except in his message; and even this is overtaken by events, since his commission to preach damnation – as the poet has done in much of Cleanness – proves, to his great annoyance, to have been intended by God as a means, rather, of saving the Ninevites. Like its predecessors in the manuscript, Patience shows how easily God forgives those who do penance, how he must be obeyed, and how his ways (like his sense of humour, Pat 443–78) are strange. What it adds to its poetic partners is this implicitly self-deprecating picture of a prophet of wrath, who himself makes as great a demand on the divine patience as anyone because he has failed to learn the simple moral lesson he must preach. Given the parallel the beginning of the poem sets up not only between Jonah and the narrator but also between the narrator’s ‘lege lord’ and God, it is hard not to see Patience as a kind of apology for the position of authority in which the poet, despite his status as a secular lord’s employee, is situated. As David Benson has pointed out (1991), the poem places readers exactly in the position of judge over Jonah, obliging us to exercise the godlike quality of patience towards a figure whose role in the poem is nonetheless that of the mouthpiece of the divine will. From the viewpoint of aristocratic lay readers, who learn here that the spiritual authority of the preacher entails neither special status before God nor any claim to earthly power – Jonah’s direct influence over the lives of the people of Nineveh is shortlived – nothing could be more reassuring.

**Conclusion**

If space permitted, it would be interesting to conclude this discussion of the theology of Cotton Nero A.x with a detailed account of Gawain along the lines I have traced for the other three poems. I would try to show what I can here only state, that Gawain reintroduces on a secular level the sense of both hierarchy and heroic effort which have been kept out of its predecessors, and thus valorizes the difficulty of its hero’s high ideals in a way we do not find elsewhere in the manuscript. On a religious level, there is no sign that Gawain aspires to any spiritual state more elevated than those depicted in Cleanness
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or Patience. But as an aristocrat, the standards of sheer manners (especially in
speech, 'be techeles termes of talkyng noble,' G 917) of this 'fyne fader of
nurture' (G 919) are elevated indeed, bound up as they are in intricate pattern
with a moral system whose absolutism they must seek at all costs to veil.
However one treats Gawain's flawed demonstration of the marriage of
manners and morality, this pattern does help make a larger pattern in the
Gawain-poet's thought and aesthetics as a whole, by completing the triangu-
lar link I mentioned at the outset between poetic craft, the intricate harmony
of heaven and the self-conscious complexities of courtliness. From a religious
point of view, Gawain's sheer well-bred gloss could be seen as a worshipping
attempt to imitate the harmony of heaven. (The fact that this act of imitation,
unlike the efforts of virgins and saints, carries with it, according to Pearl, no
final reward renders it the more praiseworthy in its disinterestedness.) Thus
in Gawain, the graciousness of the life of courtesy is finally allowed to suggest
(in the context of the other poems) the special ties which link the secular
aristocracy with heaven, and to complete what I see as this poet's project: the
displacement of the traditional categories of Christian heroism (embodied in
virgins, martyrs and preachers) to make way for a new set, embodied in a
figure closer to the aspirations and capacities of the poet's audience, Gawain
himself.

Such a reading of Gawain needs, of course, much fuller attention than I can
give it here. Enough has been said, though, to convey a sense of the place the
Gawain-poet holds among vernacular theologians of his era and to suggest
something of what makes him so unusual. Sharing with a number of writers
(the author of Dives and Pauper and the Hilton of the Epistle on Mixed Life
among them) the aim of adapting aspects of Christian belief for an audience
of aristocrats, the Gawain-poet seems partly to have followed (at least, in
Pearl) a traditional route of working outwards from an existing body of
vernacular religious material, including especially the virginity treatise.
Rather as Ancrene Wisse was at about the same time finding its way into the
Vernon manuscript and being adapted for new readerships (Allen 1923, 1929;
Gillespie 1984), or as the two books of The Scale of Perfection move from
addressing a single, anchoritic reader to a broad lay audience, so Pearl can be
seen as an adaptation of the theology of virginity. But where Hilton, the
compilers of Vernon and many others saw what they were doing as seeking
to make available to the laity some of the practices, principles and benefits of
the contemplative life, educating them both intellectually and spiritually to
the point where they could attain at least to its lower rungs, the Gawain-poet
attempted something (from an ecclesiastical viewpoint, if not a theological
one) more radical. Focusing not on his sources' emphasis on the inner life nor
on their devotionalism but on their use of the rhetoric of purity, their spiritu-
alised aestheticism, this writer sought to undo the theological system which
consigned his lay readers to the status of mediocriter boni, and make them
equal to contemplatives in the acceptability of their lives to God. Most
striking, he did this less by trying to change the lives of his readers than by
rethinking the way in which theology perceived them, portraying the experi-
ce of the aristocratic laity as normative for all Christians.

In the process of constructing his aristocratised theology (not only from
virginity treatises but from many other materials whose importance I am
compelled to gloss over here), the Gawain-poet thus showed himself unusu-
ally willing to ignore or challenge what most of his contemporaries would
have regarded as givens: to the point, indeed, where his work would surely
have encountered fierce disapproval if it had been written in a more accessi-
ble style. While the formal orthodoxy of the poetry can no doubt be defended
– if on no other grounds then, at least, by arguing that it is, after all, only
poetry – its view of heavenly reward, its depiction of God (especially in
Clanness) and perhaps (again in Clanness) its vivid descriptions of various
sexual acts are all questionable, even from the relatively tolerant viewpoint
of pre-Lollard English religiosity. Equally startling to some of the poet’s
contemporaries would have been the poetry’s deference to its readers on a
tonal as well as theological level. Offering their instruction in the form of
coterie entertainment, and pressing their claim to homiletic authority only in
the most painfully oblique manner, the poems present a view of the sacra-
mental system they expound as existing purely for the convenience of
aristocrats who employ priests to see to their salvation in much the way they
employ stewards to see to their households. Where religious writings by
fourteenth-century aristocrats and gentry themselves (from Henry of Lan-
caster’s Livre de Seyntz Medicines to Sir John Clanvowe’s The Two Ways) are
full of expressions of unworthiness and pleas for divine mercy, the poems of
Cotton Nero A.x remake the faith in a shape which seems to demand – except
in a purely ritual context, such as when using a priest to polish their souls in
confession – as few as possible of these indignities from its readers.

In his popular theological compendium, the Elucidarium, Honorius of
Autun (a pupil of Anselm of Canterbury, writing in the first half of the twelfth
century) at one point asks whether knights (milites) are virtuous enough to
expect salvation, and answers the question with all the contempt of a profes-
sional contemplative for powerful worldlings: ‘Pauci boni [. . .] de his dictitur,
Defecerunt in vanitate dies eorum [. . .]; ideo igitur deis ascendit super eos (Ps
77:33, 30)’ (II.18: ‘Few of them are any good; of such people it is said “they consume
their days in vanity – and so the anger of God will overwhelm them” ’). While
so severe a view would never have been universal, the works of the Gawain-
poet are among those vernacular theologies which show how much had
changed, two and a half centuries later, in the relationship between the
Church and the aristocratic laity. In their concern for lay readers and their
deferece towards aristocratic power and priorities, these poems are part of
a larger movement of laicization, whose effects can be felt in a multitude of
other works written in the seventy years or so after 1350, and which was
eventually (mutatis mutandis) to lead to the still more thoroughly gentrified
Church of England of the post-Reformation era (Duffy 1992). We could compare the poems not only to the literature of interiority (as has been my practice here) but to different kinds of text in which this development is also felt: the works John Trevisa translated for Thomas of Berkeley (especially the *Dialogus inter Militem et Clericum*; see Edwards 1984), or the moral poetry composed by the Kentishman John Gower, as well as the more explicitly anticlerical polemics produced by the Lollards. Nowhere in medieval English writing, though, do we to my knowledge find a body of work (whether composed by a cleric or a layperson) in which the life of the aristocracy is so thoroughly idealised in quite this way, so carefully presented as coterminous with Christian life in general. Nowhere does a clerical author refashion his role as homilist to the point where his writing is so fully taken over – on a moral, social and aesthetic level – by the mores of his audience.