

Salvation, Damnation, and the Wounded (Corporate) Body of Christ in Late Medieval Culture

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In the late Middle Ages, the image of Christ crucified, as Sarah Beckwith demonstrates in *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings*, transmitted and produced in believers complex meanings and effects. For this reason, according to Beckwith, it is best examined “as a symbol [...] rather than as a theological concept or a trope.”¹ The literary and religious historian must “ask how such an image *makes meaning* for its practitioners and interlocutors,” recognizing all the while that the meanings produced will be multiple, complex, and at times conflicting.² Yet these meanings are of crucial importance to our understanding of late medieval figurations of society, of the individual, and of their relation to each other, given “the centrality of the image of Christ’s body to the political construction of a Christian culture imagined as a unity” but in reality fractured by divisions.³

Much attention has been focused on mystic, ascetic, lay spiritual, and heretical (Lollard) responses to representations of the *corpus christi*, and this attention has produced fascinating and compelling analyses.⁴ Critics have tended to read Christ’s suffering as sign

1 Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, 3.

2 Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, 3.

3 Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, 3.

4 For example, see Aers, “Figuring Forth the Body of Christ”; Biddick, “A Response”; Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption* and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*; Gray, “The Five Wounds of Our Lord” and *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (especially Chapter 7, “The Passion”); Lichtmann, “‘I desyrede a bodylye syght’: Julian of Norwich”; Mazzoni, “Feminism, Abjection, Transgression”; Mortimer, “Reflections in *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*”; Severin, “Union Deferred”; Smith, “The Mystical

of his humanity and divine mercy,⁵ doubtless a consequence of their examination of (largely mystical) texts and images in which Christ's wounded, open body is presented as maternal, nurturing, inclusive, welcoming, something with which to identify and something to enter, metaphorically and literally—actions that produce considerable erotic charge in both the mystic literature itself and in its modern critical analysis.

Yet in other texts and contexts not yet adequately discussed, Christ's wounds functioned very differently, as institutional as well as divine threat, making Christ's body horrific and frightening. As metaphor for the collective, the bleeding *corpus christi* did not function only and always to empower and comfort individual believers by emphasizing their salvic inclusion into a spiritual social body without division and difference. The wounded *corpus mysticum* also presented itself as a community constantly in flux, unstable, Christ's wounds functioning not only as welcoming entryways but also as sites of purgation and excision. Christ's wounded skin, image of the boundary separating the Church from its outside or other, because porous, at times rendered the individual abject, liminal, uncertain of his or her status as object or subject, uncertain of his or her relation to the whole and therefore anxious, afraid, and vulnerable.

Church authorities policed the unstable boundary represented and rendered literal in Christ's wounded, porous, permeable skin, encouraging lay dependence on ecclesiastical declarations about who should be considered inside, and who outside, the body of Christ. Believers experienced inclusion through the rituals of baptism, communion, and last rites, and exclusion through mortal sin and the ritual pronouncements of excommunication and anathema. Excepting the moments at which these rituals were performed, certainty about the individual's status—as part of Christ's body or as expelled and therefore damned object—was delayed, deferred beyond even individual death to the end of history itself at the second coming of Christ. At this time, Christ's body will finally cease to bleed. But prior to the end of history, the open body provokes in the individual believer not only love and desire (as other critics have convincingly argued) but also, as I intend to demonstrate, feelings of fear and horror.

Self"; Sprung, "'We nevyr shall come out of hym': Enclosure and Immanence in Julian of Norwich's *Book of Showings*."

5 The exception is Aers, "Figuring Forth the Body of Christ," who argues instead that images of Christ's suffering functioned as religious and political propaganda, modelling behaviours supportive of Church and state government: deference to authority as well as patient suffering of poverty, pain, even injustice.

The Wounded *Corpus Mysticum*

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. [...] Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.⁶

Paul's first-century discussion of the community as body was by no means new or radical; according to Leonard Barkan in *Nature's Work of Art: The Human Body as Image of the World*, the "analogy between State and body was already a commonplace in Plato's time."⁷ However, his discussion of the Church as a divine, idealized body, as well as his apparent insistence on the equation (not simple comparison) of the two terms—"The body politic [...] is not merely similar, it *is* the body of Christ"—indicates a clear break with previous traditions.⁸ By the twelfth century, Church doctrine on the nature of the congregation as *corpus christi* or *corpus mysticum* became linked with doctrine on the nature of the Eucharist: both community of believers and host were declared the literal body and blood of Christ, the latter transformed by its ingestion of the former. Eamon Duffy notes that "the unitive and corporative dimension of the Blessed Sacrament is [...] repeatedly insisted on in late medieval sources," including the prologue to the 1408 ordinances of the York Corpus Christi Guild.⁹ According to these ordinances, Duffy writes,

The Body of Christ, "beaten and crucified by the Jews", is the true "medium congruentissimum", the instrument of harmony. That Body is made present daily in the Mass, so that "as Christ unites the members to the Head by means of his precious Passion, so we shall be united in faith, hope and charity by the daily celebration of this sacrament of remembrance." The Mass is the sign of unity, the bond of love: whoever desires to live, must be "incorporated" by this food and drink.¹⁰

This representation of the Church as *corpus mysticum* and of the individual's incorporation into that *corpus* through communion remained current in England until the Reformation. A number of sixteenth-century primers written to instruct lay believers on the proper reception of the Eucharist include the prayer "Salve salutaris hostia," which advises the communicant to pray that

6 NRSV 1 Cor. 12:12-13, 27.

7 Barkan, *Nature's Work of Art*, 65.

8 Barkan, *Nature's Work of Art*, 69.

9 Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 92.

10 Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 92.

I may be worthy to be incorporated into Your body, which is the Church. May I be one of Your members, and may You be my head, that I may remain in You, and You in me, so that in the resurrection my lowly body may be conformed to Your glorious body, according to the promise of [St. Paul] the Apostle, and so that I may rejoice in You and Your glory eternally.¹¹

This prayer betrays an interesting desire and anxiety—the desire to remain metaphorically and literally “in” Christ until the Resurrection and the anxiety that maintaining this position will not be possible. Incorporation was seldom easy and not (before Judgment Day) guaranteed to be permanent, a fact that caused little anxiety if incorporation represented only unusual spiritual reward, as it generally did in expressions of affective piety. For example, in *The Prickyng of Love*, the believer enters Christ’s body through His side wound and gestates there. Eventually, as the individual is expelled, the image evoked is that of birth: Christ lovingly suckles the “infant soul” at his breast even as reincorporation and rebirth remain possible. The author of the *Prickyng*, once “born,” consoles himself with the knowledge that Christ’s wounds are perpetually open. Confident of ultimate salvation, he writes, “I wote wel þat his woundes are ai open & þerefore as / ofte as i falle ouȝt als ofte shal i entre in aȝen / vn-tyl þat I be vnpartabelly to hym festened.”¹²

In other texts, incorporation is considered not so much a special privilege as a condition of salvation, in part because Christ’s body offers protection from temptation and from the malevolent forces that threaten the Church from outside. Richard Rolle describes Christ’s wounded body as (among other things) a net in which believers must be caught and held (following Matthew 13:47-50), and a dovehouse into which they might flee from predators:

lord, swet Ihesu, þy body is lyk to þe nette, for as a nette is ful of holys, so is þy body ful of woundes. Here, swet Ihesu, I beseche þe, cache me in to þis net of þy scourgyng, þat al my hert and loue be to þe, and drawe me eyr to þe and with þe as a net draweth fyshe, til hit come to þe bank of deth, þat neyr temptacioun, tribulacioun ne prosperite pul me fro þe, and as a nette draweth fyshe to þe lond, so, swet Ihesu, bryng me to þy blisse. [...] Efte, swet Ihesu, þy body is like to a dufhouse, for a dufhouse is ful of holys: so is þy body ful of woundes. And as a doue pursued of an hauk, yf she mow cache an hool of hir hous she is siker ynowe, so swete Ihesu, in temptacioun þy woundes ben best refuyt to vs.¹³

11 Cited in Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 93.

12 *The Prickyng of Love*, 1: 10, ll. 5-7; passage also quoted in Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*, 58.

13 Rolle, “Meditation B,” in *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse*, 210-16, 221-24.

In the “Fifteen Oes of St Bridget,” according to Eamon Duffy “the most distinctive, and probably the most popular, of all prayers in late medieval England,” the supplicant prays for shelter in Christ’s body not from external enemies but from Christ’s own anger:¹⁴

O Jesus, most profound abyss of mercy: I beseech you by the depth of your wounds, which pierced your flesh to the heart and very marrow of your bones, draw me out from the depths of sin into which I have sunk, and hide me deep in the holes of your wounds from the face of your anger, Lord, until the judgement is past.¹⁵

Outside the body lie temptation and judgement, inside, mercy and forgiveness. The believer’s situation within or without the porous boundaries of Christ’s wounded body determines his or her spiritual condition, though only for the moment: that condition is necessarily temporary and tenuous. As Sarah Beckwith in *Christ’s Body* suggests,

the acknowledgement that Christ’s body is welcomingly open almost immediately sponsors the anxiety that the very openness of the wounds will not allow them to provide a safe harbouring place for the soul. If the wounds are too open they cannot retain and protect the soul they sequester; if they are too closed there would, in this scenario, be no point of entry for the soul in the first place.¹⁶

That the body may not successfully and permanently retain the soul is not the only possible anxiety produced by the image of the wounded Christ. Peter Travis, discussing the confluence of Paul’s bodily metaphor and “late medieval graphic representations of Christ’s body, wounded but physically complete,” suggests that while both visions “privilege the governed totality of Christ’s body,” they also invite consideration of “the violation of that perfection and disclose a concern with interstices and joints, wounds and openings.”¹⁷ Considering Christ’s body as *corpus mysticum* and as bloodied image, the “imagination is attracted to potentially rebellious members, to threats of disharmony, and violation.”¹⁸ The believer is encouraged to envisage the Church bloodied and battered by forces both external and internal and to imagine the active expulsion—exclusion, excision—of members troubling the body and making it suffer.

According to Augustine, the persecutions experienced by the Church since Christ’s Resurrection, specifically those inflicted by external enemies, complement and com-

14 Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 249.

15 Cited in Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 251.

16 Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*, 58.

17 Travis, “The Social Body,” 20, 21.

18 Travis, “The Social Body,” 21.

plete His original Passion. In his exposition of Psalm 61, Augustine informs the “members of Christ” that

whatever you suffer at the hands of those who are not among the members of Christ, was lacking to the sufferings of Christ. It is added precisely because it was lacking. You fill up the measure, you do not cause it to overflow. You will suffer just so much as must be added of your sufferings to the complete passion of Christ, who suffered as our Head and who continues still to suffer in His members, that is, in us. [...] The full measure of the Passion will not be attained until the end of the world.¹⁹

This extension of the Passion to the Second Coming finds popular expression in the ubiquitous late medieval image of the Man of Sorrows as well as in the belief that sins committed after the Crucifixion contributed to Christ’s suffering. Surviving “Christ of the Trades” murals, such as that uncovered on the south wall of the nave at St. Mary’s church in Purton, show images of a bloody Christ surrounded by familiar medieval tools.²⁰ The image seems to imply that the use of these tools on the Sabbath puts Christ to a new passion: at Purton, he stares out accusingly at the congregation, his right hand extended, his wound clearly displayed. A related belief, that to swear by Christ or by any of his limbs was to put him to fresh agony, is expressed in many texts. Most famously, Chaucer’s Parson warns his audience, “For Cristes sake, ne swereth nat so synfully in dismembrynge of Crist by soule, herte, bones, and body,” complaining further, “it semeth that ye thynke that the cursede Jewes ne dismembred nat ynough the preciouise persone of Crist, but ye disembre hym moore.”²¹ The author of *Jacob’s Well* writes that those who “sweryn vyolently, as be god, or be ony of his sayntes, or be his soule, his body, his herte, his flesch, his bonys, his peyne, his deth, his feet, his nayles, or be ony of his oper lymes [...] þei rende god iche lyme fro oper.”²² Christ himself, in a complaint found in Lambeth MS 853, accuses the reader of repeatedly inflicting fresh wounds on his body, generally by committing deadly sins, specifically by swearing:

Man, if þou wolt my mercy gete
 Poru3 my passioun of myche vertu,
 Whi leuest þou not of me to bete?
 Eche day on crosse þou doist me newe

¹⁹ Cited in Mersch, *The Whole Christ*, 425.

²⁰ See, for example, the sketch of the Christ of the Trades painting from St. Breaca, Breage parish church in Cornwall in N. J. G. Pounds, *A History of the English Parish*, 346.

²¹ Chaucer, “Parson’s Tale,” 590.

²² Cited by Lumiansky and Mills, eds. *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, 2: 368, ll. 418-20n.

With deedli synne, at morn, at meete,
 As a turmentour to me vntrewe,
 And nameli, with þin oþis greete,
 To swerë þou wolt not eschewe.

No lyme on me, man, þou forbeerist:
 Whi doist þou yuel aʒens good?
 By my soule þou ofte tyme sweerist,
 Bi my body, and bi my blood.

Wiþ þi tunge þou me al to-teerist
 Whanne þou art wrooþ, as wiʒt moost wood.
 Man, with þin vnkindenes þou more me deerist
 Pan þei þat diden me on þe roode.²³

Why deadly sins and especially the act of swearing caused Christ this additional suffering is an important and difficult question. Swearing isolated the particular body parts referred to—Christ’s literal blood and bones as well as his mystical limbs, his “sayntes”—which explains to some degree the image of Christ dismembered or torn apart. Chaucer’s Parson insists that swearing “bifalleth ofte of anger and of Ire,”²⁴ which suggests that it wounds the *corpus mysticum* as well as the *corpus christi*. The effects displayed on the latter body may in part reflect the effects produced in the former. The Parson instructs his readers,

thow shalt nat swere for envye, ne for favour, ne for meede, but for rightwisnesse, for declaracioun of it, to the worshipe of God and helpyng of thyne evene-Cristene. / And therefore every man that taketh Goddes name in ydel, or falsly swereth with his mouth, or elles taketh on hym the name of Crist, to be called a Cristen man and lyveth agayns Cristes lyvyng and his techynge, alle they taken Goddes name in ydel.²⁵

The explication is twofold. First of all, swearing is a sin against the community because it evinces underlying anger and division, because it facilitates lying, bearing false witness against one’s neighbour. In this way it may be related to work undertaken on the Sabbath, which can be thought of as a crime against one’s fellow Christians as well as against God since potentially it leads to unfair competition and hard feelings between employers and employees. Robert Mannyng’s *Handlyng Synne*, an early fourteenth-century translation of the *Manuel des Pechiez*, contains an *exemplum* that demonstrates the

23 “Goddis Owne Complaynt (Lambeth MS 853),” ll. 517-32.

24 Chaucer, “Parson’s Tale,” 586.

25 Chaucer, “Parson’s Tale,” 594-95.

social, spiritual, and physical danger of working on a “halyday.” Mannyng reports that despite a pledge made by his community (perhaps Venice, the setting of the previous *exemplum*) to leave off work at noon on Saturday in honour of the Virgin, a labourer refused to leave his task and, further, required that others remain with him and continue working: “Al þe werkmen homward zede / But he & hys dede furþ hys dede.”²⁶ The labourer was suddenly struck down and could not speak; the others, on the advice of one of their members, knelt and prayed that the man would recover his voice so that he could confess and “take hys shryfte.”²⁷ The man recovered and thanked those who had prayed for his restoration to the community. He then informed the crowd that a hand had appeared out of nowhere and strangled him because “Oure lady was wyþ me so wroth / Þat y swore by here an oth / Þat y wlde nat leue for here to werche.”²⁸ The labourer’s was a double sin, swearing and working on a holy day, and his punishment was severe. Both sins together divided the community; only the communal act of praying restored the sinner to health.

Second, swearing is a sin against the community because it allows sinful members to masquerade as good Christians, assuming the label of faith but not the “techyng” of Christ. This type of swearing injures the *corpus mysticum* and *corpus christi* in a different way, confusing the categories of good and evil and dangerously blurring the boundaries of Christ’s body. The wicked member’s behaviour could be emulated by others, allowing his or her sin to spread under the appearance of true belief.

This blurring and the threat it posed to both the community and the individual was considered the necessary condition of the temporal *corpus mysticum*. According to Augustine, before the Second Coming, the Church will contain both the saved and the damned, both those who work for its preservation and those who work for its destruction. In his “Tractate 6” on John 1:32-33, Augustine compares the Church to Noah’s ark, noting that the latter contained both a dove and a raven. The two differ in the effects of their “kisses”: “How then are the kisses of ravens distinguished from the kisses of doves? Ravens kiss, but they lacerate; the nature of doves is innocent of laceration. Where, then, there is laceration, there is not true peace in kisses; they have true peace who have not lacerated the Church.”²⁹ The image here is of the raven wounding, even consuming parts of the Church from within, parts that have already begun to rot. “For ravens feed

26 Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, 925-26.

27 Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, 956.

28 Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, 967-69.

29 St. Augustine, “Tractate 6: On John 1.32-33,” in *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 78: 132-33.

on death,” Augustine notes, concluding, “Those who have lacerated the Church feed themselves on the dead.”³⁰ Christ’s extended Passion, experienced within his Church, is in part the product of internal divisions and forces, conflicts between those spiritually alive and those spiritually dead.

Augustine points to a number of gospel passages to illustrate further his point that the Church is a conflicted site. He discusses two parables from Matthew 13: in the first, a landowner chooses not to uproot weeds secretly planted by his enemy, because their removal before the final harvest would harm the wheat growing in his fields (24-30). In the second, “the kingdom of heaven” is compared to a net cast into the sea and drawn to the shore only once full; only then will its contents be sorted, the good fish saved and the bad thrown away (47-50).³¹ Augustine offers Christ’s tolerance of “one ruined man among the twelve” as evidence that the Church “should tolerate the evil and not divide Christ’s body,” leaving that task to God on the day of judgement.³² He acknowledges that, on occasion, the Church may be compelled by “a pressing reason” to separate “some of them [...] even before the harvest,” but he warns that this division “cannot be done without a disturbance of the Church,” both present and future, in the form of schisms and heresies.³³ For this reason, the Church “swims with the bad fishes in the Lord’s net” awaiting “the physical separation on the sea shore, that is, at the end of the world, converting those whom she can, bearing with those whom she cannot convert.”³⁴

Augustine’s reluctance to separate members from the body of the Church was not generally shared by his predecessors, contemporaries, or successors. Many of them represent the excision of troubling members as a temporarily painful but necessary medical procedure that leaves the body of believers in a state of improved health. John Chrysostom, discussing converts to the early Church who continued to observe Jewish rituals, advised in his *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*:

If the sick one be a believer and already initiated, let him be driven from the holy table. For not all sins need exhortation and counsel; some sins, of their very nature, demand cure by a quick and sharp excision. The wounds we can tolerate respond to more gentle cures; those which have festered and cannot be cured, those which are feeding on the rest of the body, need cauterization with a point of steel.³⁵

30 St. Augustine, “Tractate 6: On John 1.32-33,” in *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 78: 133.

31 See St. Augustine’s “Letter 93” to his brother Vincent, in *Saint Augustine: Letters*, 3: 88-90.

32 St. Augustine, “Tractate 50: On John 11.55-12.11,” in *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 78: 266.

33 St. Augustine, “Tractate 61: On John 13.21-26,” in *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 90: 33.

34 St. Augustine, “Letter 93,” in *Saint Augustine: Letters*, 3: 90.

35 Chrysostom, “Discourse 2,” in *Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, 45.

In his *Homilies*, Saint Jerome also advocates the amputation of diseased flesh from the body of the Church as well as from the spiritual “body” of the individual believer. He writes,

If a physician should notice infected and decayed tissue in a body and say, ‘What concern is that of mine?’ you would conclude rightly that he is cruel; but if he should excise the infected tissues and cauterize the wound, he is compassionate, for he is saving the life of a man. [...] If in the body there is a wound that has become infected and cancerous and is filled with pus, unless it is opened, there is no way of removing the pus. Then, when the pus is discharged, unless the wound is cauterized, it fills up again with poisonous matter.³⁶

The fourteenth-century *Prickyng of Love* similarly evokes the gruesome image of spiritual amputation when it compares those who do not feel compassion and sorrow while contemplating the Passion “to stynkand lymes / with-owten lif kit awai fro oure heed ihesu crist.”³⁷ As late as the sixteenth century, Thomas More in his *History of the Passion* advocated the physical “amputation” of heretics from the body of Christ (that is, their execution) as a means of protecting the Church from infection while delivering those heretical sinners to either divine punishment or purgatorial purification and healing. In the person of Christ, he writes,

by that sword [i.e., of execution], whatsoever evil person is once cast out of the Church, that is to be understanden as a rotten member cut off from my mystical body, is delivered sometime to the devil’s hands only to chastise his flesh, to the end his soul may be saved, if so be there remain any hope of amendment in him, and that he may be grafted and knit into my body afresh.³⁸

In this final passage, the sinner or heretic remains strangely abject, neither object nor subject, neither permanently inside nor permanently outside the body, since the possibility remains that, as a limb, he may be reattached.

Sinners and heretics generally occupied a precarious and threatening state somewhere near the margins of the *corpus mysticum*—they were both the other and the same. Like the literary personae of mystical writers such as Julian of Norwich and Richard Rolle, they crossed the boundaries of Christ’s body, but they did so to different effect, not erotic but polluting or purgative. The examples discussed above describe sinners and

³⁶ St. Jerome, Homilies 51 and 41, in *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, 369, 309.

³⁷ *The Prickyng of Love*, 1: 5, ll. 5-6.

³⁸ More, *History of the Passion*, 104.

heretics as disease or infection, a metaphor that became dominant as the image of the Church as *corpus mysticum* became more familiar and important. According to R. I. Moore in “Heresy as Disease,” the word *pestis* is used in descriptions “of almost every significant outbreak of heresy in the twelfth century.”³⁹ In England, the figure remained common for centuries after. A late fourteenth-century poem on the subject of the Lollards laments the nation’s recent infection by sin and error and lists the devastating effects experienced by the state:

O terra jam pestifera,
 Dudum eras puerpera
 Omnis sanae scientiae;
 Haeresis labe libera,
 Omni errore extera,
 Exsors omnis fallaciae.
 Jam schismatis, discordiae,
 Erroris, et insaniae
 Extas noster sceptigera.⁴⁰

[O land newly plague-ridden, a short time ago you were giving birth to healthy knowledge, free from the stain of heresy, from every foreign error, from all deceptions. Now, our kingdom, you move towards schism, discord, error, and madness.]

Once a stronghold of “true” faith and knowledge, England now suffered the double shame of being the birthplace of and only country infected with the new and seemingly incurable disease of Lollardy: according to the poet, “Haec pestis jam in Anglia, / Et nulla gente alia, / Regnat sine remedio” (this disease now in England and in no other nation reigns without remedy).⁴¹ He insists that no previous heresy was ever so dangerous, that “Nam peior pestilentia / Non fuit in ecclesia, / Incedens tam erronee” (no worse disease was ever in the Church, proceeding in such error).⁴² Responding in the sixteenth century to the next significant heresy to trouble the island—continental Protestantism—Sir Thomas More in his *History of the Passion* employs the same language of disease. He complains,

wheresoever this venomous plague reigneth most, it infecteth not all the people at once in one day, but in process of time by little and little increasing more and more, while

39 Moore, “Heresy as Disease,” 2.

40 “Against the Lollards,” in *Political Poems and Songs*, 1: 233.

41 “Against the Lollards,” in *Political Poems and Songs*, 1: 233.

42 “Against the Lollards,” in *Political Poems and Songs*, 1: 232.

such persons as at the first beginning can abide no heresy, afterward being content to hear of it, begin less and less to dislike it, and within a while after can endure to give ear to large lewd talk therein, and at length are quite carried away themselves therewith. This disease, still creeping, as saith the apostle, forth further like a canker doth in conclusion overrun the whole country altogether.⁴³

As discussed above, when such virulent heretical infections spread within the body of believers, spiritual medical intervention, violent and invasive, was often required. However, the *corpus mysticum* had its own natural defenses against the abject sinner or heretic within and its own natural processes of exclusion and expulsion. Honorius in his *Elucidarium* explains that heretics are phlegm, or snot, expelled from the nostrils of the *corpus christi*, while “the wicked, who ‘burden the stomach [*ventrem*] of mother church’ and are devoured by demons through ‘the wasting of death’ [*per mortis egestionem*], are ‘shit for the stomach of pigs.’”⁴⁴ Augustine suggests that the baptized unfaithful, contained in the stomach or bowels of the dove in the Ark or Church, are converted there to excrement and eventually defecated. He offers the example of Simon Magus, who, in Acts 8, attempted to purchase from the apostles the power of laying on hands. “He [Simon] already had baptism,” Augustine writes, “but he did not cling to the dove’s inwardness”—or “bowels, internal organs.”⁴⁵ To explain the physiological processes at work, Augustine first points to “the very words of the Apostle Peter,” who told Simon, “‘You have no part nor lot in this faith; for I see that you are in the gall of bitterness.’” Augustine notes, “The dove does not have gall; Simon did. Therefore he had been separated from the dove’s inwardness [bowels]” despite his baptism.⁴⁶ The implication seems to be that Simon irritated the dove’s digestive system and so was expelled in what appears to be an immune response.

Given the constant flow of blood, pus, mucus, and excrement from the as yet imperfect *corpus mysticum*, the individual believer must have wondered how exactly he or she formed part of Christ’s body, in what capacity, in what space, and for how long. The anxiety produced by this uncertainty would be considerable and could lead to despair; however, according to Augustine, it could alternately benefit the soul. In his exposition of John

43 More, *History of the Passion*, 78.

44 Cited in Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 148.

45 St. Augustine, “Tractate 6: On John 1.32-33,” in *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 78: 146-47. The term translated as “inwardness” (*visceribus*) can also mean “internal organs, bowels.” Given the digestive function of gall (*fel*), the body metaphor is clear and need not be de-emphasized. See *Patrologiae Latinae* vol. 35, col. 1434.

46 St. Augustine, “Tractate 6: On John 1.32-33,” in *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 78: 147.

12:8, Augustine maintains, again, that the Church contains both good and bad, the former this time represented in the person of Peter, the latter in the person of Judas. The current state of the individual within the body, again, provides no guarantee of future and final inclusion or exclusion:

If you are good, if you belong to the body which Peter signifies, you have Christ both in the present and in the future; in the present through faith, in the present through a sign, in the present through the sacrament of baptism, in the present through the food and drink of the altar. You have Christ in the present, but you will have him always. [...] But if you behave evilly, you will seem to have Christ in the present because you enter the Church, you sign yourself with the sign of Christ, you mingle with the members of Christ, you approach the altar of Christ. You have Christ in the present, but by living evilly you will not have him always.⁴⁷

The individual should not despair over the uncertainty of his or her fate since this uncertainty produces a beneficial emotional response: terror. Discussing John 8:35, “the slave does not remain in the house forever,” Augustine writes,

The house is the Church, the slave is the sinner. Many sinners enter the Church. He did not therefore say, “The slave” is not in the house, but “does not remain in the house forever.” If, then, there will be no slave there, who will be there? [...]

He has greatly frightened us, brothers, by saying, “The slave does not remain in the house forever.” But he adds and says, “But the son remains forever.” And so will Christ alone be in his house? Will no people be united with him? For of whom will he be the head if there will be no body? Or is the Son perhaps this whole, head and body? Not without cause has he both frightened and given hope: he frightened that we might not love sin; he gave hope that we might not despair of the removal of sin. “Everyone,” he says, “who commits sin is the slave of sin. But the slave does not remain in the house forever.” What hope, then, is there for us who are not without sin? Hear your hope: “The son remains forever. If therefore the Son shall set you free, then you will really be free.” This is our hope, brothers, that we be set free by the one who is free.⁴⁸

Terror, then, functions to inspire the individual to hope for inclusion even as he or she fears exclusion and damnation.

Unfortunately, sometimes one’s status as either son or slave was not finally determined even at the moment of physical death. According to Augustine, Christ’s net, the Church, will not be pulled to shore and the fish separated until the Day of Judgement.

47 St. Augustine, “Tractate 50: On John 11.55-12.11,” in *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 88: 268-69.

48 St. Augustine, “Tractate 41: On John 8.31-36,” in *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 88: 142-43.

Aquinas believed this deferral to be necessary because perfect judgement remains impossible before the end of human history. Actions and events following an individual's death continue to affect his or her ultimate fate and position within the mystical body:

it must be observed that although man's temporal life in itself ends with death, still it continues dependent in a measure on what comes after it in the future. In one way, as it still lives on in men's memories, in which sometimes, contrary to the truth, good or evil reputations linger on. In another way in a man's children, who are so to speak something of their parent [...]. Thirdly, as to the result of his actions: just as from the deceit of Arius and other false leaders unbelief continues to flourish down to the close of the world; and even until then faith will continue to derive its progress from the preaching of the apostles.⁴⁹

Perfect judgement will take into consideration the consequences of an individual's life and actions. Aquinas explains, "For although in regard to such things a man neither merits nor demerits, still in a measure they accompany his reward or punishment. Consequently, all these things must be weighed in the final judgment."⁵⁰ The boundaries of the *corpus mysticum* remain broken, even wounded, because as yet imperfect, unfinished, incomplete.

Abjection and Authority

Ritual, that sanctioned by the Church and that adopted and/or adapted by the laity, functioned to provide temporary borders for the *corpus mysticum*. Baptism admitted individuals into the body of Christ and into the sacraments that served to bind the *corpus* together. Yearly communion, if taken properly—that is, "in the parish of domicile where people were known and only in a state of reconciliation with the church, and after the proper payment of tithes"⁵¹—guaranteed (as far as was possible) the believer a temporary place inside the body: "For he that takes it worthily," the *Lay Folks' Catechism* advised, "takes his salvation."⁵²

The *Catechism* also warned that "who-so unworthily [takes it], takes his dampnation"⁵³ and consequently places him- or herself in a perilous position on or outside the porous limits of the body. Communicating while in a state of deadly sin, according to

49 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3.59.5, 2340.

50 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3.59.5, 2340.

51 Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist*, 149.

52 *The Lay Folks' Catechism*, 66; quoted in Rubin, 100.

53 *The Lay Folks' Catechism*, 66; quoted in Rubin, 100.

the *Book of Vices and Virtues*, “is a gret despit to God;”⁵⁴ it is for this reason that John Mirk advised parish priests to encourage the individual believer to confess a sin immediately after having committed it, “Leste he for3et by lentenes day, / And oute of mynde hyt go away.”⁵⁵

Certain very serious sins earned individuals excommunication. At once a formal and public pronouncement of a pre-existing division from the body and a performance that actually effected exclusion, excommunication was automatically assigned for all “crimes against the clergy and the faith.”⁵⁶ It was also pronounced in and effected through legal judgements against individuals who refused to submit to the authority of the court. In England, after only forty days, the contumacious criminal could be pronounced excommunicate and placed under either the minor or major “ban.” The former excluded him or her from certain sacraments (including the Eucharist); the latter “separated the excommunicate not only from the Eucharistic Body of Christ but also from the Mystical Body of Christ” and so from all benefits of community, in this life and the next.⁵⁷ The excommunicate “was excluded from entry into church, from the company of the faithful, from pleading in secular and ecclesiastical courts, from the enjoyment of a benefice, and from all legitimate ecclesiastical acts; and after death his body was even denied ecclesiastical burial.”⁵⁸ In a public ceremony, individuals were cursed in a ritual performance intended, Mirk tells us, “to make hertus þe morë grylle,” or frightened.⁵⁹

Two to four times a year, the priest was to read out to his parish the “great sentence” identifying the sins worthy of, even as he performed, excommunication. Specific sinners were not named; individual parishioners were left with the task of positioning themselves within the community that excluded or within the group they condemned.⁶⁰ Among those sinners cursed in Mirk’s sentence are those who break the peace of Holy Church, those who withhold tithes, those who harm the vicar or his proctors, those who burn churches, thieves and robbers, heretics, usurers, those who defame men and women, those who falsify church documents, those who counterfeit or clip money, those who use false weights, traitors, those who steal holy objects, those who kill or abort children, those who spy on others, house-breakers and murderers, those who experiment with

54 *Book of Vices and Virtues*, 16; quoted in Rubin, 101.

55 Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ll. 75-76.

56 Vodola, *Excommunication in the Middle Ages*, 34.

57 Logan, *Excommunication and the Secular Arm*, 14.

58 Logan, *Excommunication and the Secular Arm*, 14.

59 Mirk, “The Points and Articles of Cursing,” in his *Instructions for Parish Priests*, p. 67.

60 For further discussion of the ritual, see Heath, *The English Parish Clergy*, 150.

witchcraft, false executors, and those who abandon their children.⁶¹ The list is long, the ritual intended to inspire fear and encourage believers to submit to Church authority. Only the priest who imposed a curse could lift it, unless a sin was sufficiently great that a bishop, archbishop, or the pope himself was required to pronounce absolution. Even when the ban was pronounced unjustly, the excommunicate was obliged to seek and work for reconciliation. Aquinas' successor, the author who completed the supplement to the *Summa*, recommended that a "person [unfairly] excommunicated should humbly submit (which will be credited to him as a merit), and either seek absolution from the person who has excommunicated him, or appeal to a higher judge. [...] If, however, he were to contemn the sentence," the author cautioned, "he would *ipso facto* sin mortally."⁶²

The fact that excommunication was often imposed for non-spiritual crimes—specifically for failure to pay tithes, which accounted for most proceedings initiated for contumacy in England from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century⁶³—gave rise to a certain cynicism about its use and effect. In Chaucer's General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, the Summoner, whose job it is to call individuals to the ecclesiastical court, is a harsh critic of the ban:

And if he foond owher a good felawe,
He wolde techen him to have noon awe
In swich caas of the ercedekenes curs,
But if a mannes soule were in his purs;
For in his purs he sholde ypunysshed be.
'Purs is the ercedekenes helle,' seyde he.⁶⁴

Chaucer's narrator, having effectively represented a dissenting view, immediately expresses his own (naïve) acceptance of the ritual, its efficacy and effect: "Of cursyng oghte ech gilty man him drede, / For curs wol slee right as assoillyng savith, / And also war hym of a *Significavit*."⁶⁵ Again, the desired response to excommunication, the narrator suggests, is fear, an emotion he experiences, or at least dutifully expresses.⁶⁶

61 Mirk, "The Points and Articles of Cursing," in his *Instructions for Parish Priests*, pp. 65-66.

62 "Supplement," *Summa Theologica*, 21.4, 2643.

63 See *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 823, 662n.: "In the approximately ten thousand writs preserved from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, nonpayment of tithes is the most common offense specified."

64 Chaucer, General Prologue, 653-58.

65 Chaucer, General Prologue, 660-62.

66 Martin Luther leveled much the same criticism of the ban in a sermon delivered in Wittenberg on 17 March 1518. He insisted that those who imposed the ban because of debt did so not seeking the

This fear of exclusion dogged the individual even after death, since excommunication could be pronounced *post mortem* (though the sins that incurred the ban had, obviously, to be committed before death). In such an event, the ban's end could not be restorative: although the state of the soul could alter after death, the individual's last chance to affect his or her own destiny, to repent and amend, was the moment before dying.⁶⁷ For this reason, deathbed confession and absolution were critical to the soul's health, as was the sacrament of extreme unction. So important was this final ritual that John Mirk claimed that "he þat ys in hys wyt, / And [...] despyseþ hyt, / Haue he in herte non oþer mynne, / He schale be dampned for þat synne."⁶⁸

A general desire for the final sacrament and for the presence of a priest at the deathbed is reflected in the abundance of Church sanctioned and popular indulgences and charms designed to ward off sudden death—for example, the promise (attributed to Augustine) that the individual who communicates "Soden deth that ylke day [...] dar not drede wyþowte nay."⁶⁹ Duffy notes that "One of the most consistent features of the many revelations and promises attached to the prayers and devotions of the *Horae* and related manuscript devotional collections was the assurance that the devotee would never die in sin, or 'shall die no sudden death,' or even that the Virgin would appear to them and give them warning of approaching death."⁷⁰

The importance of dying shaven and so in reconciliation with the Church is made clear in the Chester play of "The Last Judgement," an intriguing text which also emphasizes the abject state of both sinner and saved and therefore of the *corpus mysticum*

reconciliation of sinners and general improvement of the community "but rather the fear and false terror of people" (Luther, "A Sermon on the Ban," 16).

67 Others could, of course, arrange for or say prayers and masses for the dead to release them earlier from purgatory—or even, as appears to be the case with Saint Gregory's Trental, from hell. The Trental consisted of thirty masses said on major feast days over the course of a year; the regimen was revealed to the Pope by his mother, who had been condemned to hell because of an unconfessed abortion, a mortal sin (and one subject to excommunication through the "great sentence"). In a verse legend celebrating the Trental, Gregory's mother appears to him and explains that "Who so sayth pese masses without fayle, / For synnfulle sowles þey shalle a-vayle; / All A 3ere, with-ouen trayne, / They delyuere a sowle out of payne" ("Trentale Sancti Gregorii," 119-22). Gregory agrees to say the masses and requests that his mother return in one year, which she does, appearing so radiant and beautiful that Gregory mistakes her for the Virgin Mary. She corrects his mistake: "I am þy modyr þat þe bere, / That here by-fore, þou wystë well, / I was wordy payne yn hell, / And now y am such as þou seest here, / Þorow help of þe vertu of þy prayere" (170-74).

68 Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ll. 1707-10.

69 Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ll. 322-23.

70 Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 310.

before Christ's second coming and which specifically links that abjection to Christ's wounds. In this play, the audience witnesses Christ's open and bleeding body close and seal, and observes the consequences of this hardening of boundaries.

At the beginning of the play, Christ instructs his angels to wake and collect the dead; once they are assembled, Christ informs them (as well as the spectators of the play) that they are about to witness something both amazing and horrifying:

Nowe that you shall appertlye see
freshe blood bleede, man, for thee—
good to joye and full greate lee,
the evyll to damnatyon.
Behould nowe, all men! Looke on mee
and see my blood freshe owt flee
that I bleede on roode-tree
for your salvatyon.

Tunc emittet sanguinem de latere eius.
[Then he emits blood from his side.]⁷¹

Christ's use of the present tense here suggests that he remains (if not visibly, then not entirely metaphorically) hanging on the cross. He repeats this use a few lines later as if in emphasis—"I bleede [not 'bled']," he declares, "to bringe you to blys" (431).⁷²

In many medieval visual and literary representations of the Last Judgement and in most of the extant English Judgement plays, Christ appears wounded; the Chester play is remarkable only in that here Christ gives a careful explanation of the significance of his bleeding. Earlier in the same speech, Christ offers a number of reasons for his continued "fleshliness" and therefore extended suffering. At the end of time, at the Last Judgement, Christ explains, his pitiful state will stand as an awful reminder to the Jews of "howe unkynd they them beare" toward their Saviour (401). At the same time, the sight of his battered body will serve as a reward, a vision of "blys," to all those who successfully "avoyded wyckednes" during their lifetimes (406-07). His wounds will mark and

71 "The Last Judgement," *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ll. 421-28. Subsequent citations refer to this edition, with line references appearing in the text.

72 Readings of this passage differ in the various manuscripts of the cycle. The present tense is used in the Huntington manuscript and perhaps also in Additional 10305 and Harley 2013: the spelling is "blede," which strongly suggests present but could also indicate past tense. The past tense is definitely used in Bodley 175 and Harley 2124, and the Early English Text editors of the cycle, Lumiansky and Mills, take this to be their preferred reading (2: 369, l. 427n., l. 431n). However, they concede that "either tense would give satisfactory sense" (2: 369, l. 431n).

display violations of the second commandment committed by humankind after the Passion: “my bodye ys all torent / with othes false alwayes fervent; / noe lymme on mee but yt is lent [rent?]”⁷³ / from head right to the heele” (417-20). Finally, before the Last Judgement, from the period of time from Christ’s Ascension to the resurrection of the dead, Christ’s suffering, incarnate form serves its most important purpose. Christ explains,

On cause [for continued bleeding] was this, certeynlye,
that to my Father almightie
at my Assentyon offer might I
this blood, prayinge a boone:
that hee of you should have mercye
and more gracyous be therebye
when you had synned horryblie,
not takinge vengeance to soone.

(389-96)

Christ wished to continue bleeding until the Last Judgement in order to prompt God the Father for a time to privilege mercy (and therefore inclusion and incorporation) over justice (and therefore exclusion and final expulsion).

For the most part, in the examples of the saved and damned presented in the play, incorporation into the *corpus mysticum* is the more prevalent and prominent movement crossing the borders of Christ’s body. We witness four individuals enter “heaven-blysse” (459)—a pope, an emperor, a king, and a queen. All have been purified in purgatory, the pope for 303 years (43-44), the emperor for 1000 years (90),⁷⁴ and the king and queen for unspecified but considerable periods of time, the queen confessing that she has suffered “woe and teene / in purgatorye longe” (169-70). All four are paired with sinful, “damned” counterparts who resemble them and even, in the case of the queen and pope, appear almost identically sinful. The saved emperor confesses to covetousness (93-94) while the damned emperor reveals he is guilty of manslaughter (221), gluttony (227), false legal judgements (223-26), lying (231), and shady business deals (233). The saved king, while alive, thought he “had no neede” of God (119) and indulged his flesh (121-23); the damned king failed to pity the poor or sick, put the “poore in payne” for “pennyces,” took money from “Relygion,” and was lecherous and covetous (245-60).

⁷³ The variant in Additional 10305 and Harley 2013 is “rente,” which, according to Lumiansky and Mills, “is to be preferred for meaning to *lent*” (2: 368, l. 419n).

⁷⁴ He claims as well that he has been in purgatory for “more then three hundredth yeares and three” (442). The two characters appear to have been confused at this point.

The saved pope was proud and ambitious, “forthred” his “fleshlye will” and desired “worshipps” (49-63), while the damned pope was covetous and guilty of simony (184-85). The saved queen confesses that she wore expensive clothing, did not pray or fast, and was lecherous (149-53, 161-64); the damned queen admits only a fondness for finery and sex (273-80). What finally establishes these couples as opposites or binaries, as subjects and objects, as individuals inside and outside, in three of the four cases, is last-minute contrition and alms giving. The saved emperor, addressing Christ, professes, “yett at the last contrytion / hath made mee on of thyne” (95-96). The saved king cries, “But, lord, though I were synfull aye, / contrytion yett at my last daye / and almes-deedes that I dyd aye / hath holpen me from hell” (133-36). Praying and fasting, which the saved queen tells us she neglected to do, did not get her into heaven: “Saffe almes-deedes, yf any paste, / and great repentance at the laste / hath gotten me to thy grace” (154-56). Only the saved pope did not win his salvation by placing himself, at the last minute, in the care of Church authorities and their rituals—but then, he *was* the Church authority, the performer of rituals, an individual with recourse to God alone.

The damned differ from the saved only in that at death they remained object or other to the body of Christ. According to the first demon, the damned king and queen while living “would *never* knowe / poore men, them almes to showe” (541-42, emphasis added), while the emperor “held him *ever* in heresy / and leaved not on thy [Christ’s] lore” (535-36, emphasis added). However, one member of the company of the damned, like those who are saved, appears to have changed his state and fate, in his case transforming at the Last Judgement from abject to expelled object: *Papa damnatus*. The first demon says of this fallen pope, “A christen man I wott hee was, / knewe good from evell in eych case, / but my commandment donne hee hase, / and ever forsaken thyne [Christ’s]” (521-24). The demon’s next few lines conjure an image of the pope in vacillating movement over the boundary of Christ’s body. *Demon Primus* tells Christ, “Through mercye hee should be thyne, / but myne through wyckednes and synne; / thyne through passion thou was in, / and myne through temptatyon” (525-28). At the moment of his death, the abject pope came to rest outside of Christ’s body. And from the moment of his death to the Second Coming, he evolved further as object, in accordance with Aquinas’ assertion that judgement can only be perfect at the end of human history. The pope exclaims, “Of all the soules in Christianitie / that damned were while I had degree / nowe gyve accompt behoveth mee, / through my lawes forlorne” (197-200). Lumiansky and Mills note, “It is not clear whether *lawes* implies the actual decrees and decisions of the pope [...] or the way in which the laws were applied during his

papacy.”⁷⁵ Both meanings are likely suggested. The pope must answer eternally for the consequences of legislative and judicial actions taken while he was in office.

With final judgement about to take place, Christ’s wounds heal and seal, signaling the end of mercy and grace and the beginning of perfect justice. Christ’s body becomes impenetrable and no longer capable of purging—the individual finds him- or herself either inside or outside—to the point that Christ himself loses control over his own wounds, orifices, boundaries. He informs the damned that

Rightuouse doome may you not fleene,
for grace ys put awaye.
When tyme of grace was endurynge,
to seeke yt you had no lykinge.
Therefore must I, for anythinge,
doe rightuousenes todaye.

And though my sweete mother deare
and all the sayntes that ever were
prayed for you right nowe here,
all yt were to late.
Noe grace may growe through their prayere.
Then rightuousenes had no powere.
Therefore, goe to the fyre in feere.
There gaynes noe other grace.

(607-20)

Lumiansky and Mills remark that Christ here appears to be “constrained—even perhaps against his merciful instinct [...]—to act justly rather than mercifully.”⁷⁶ Newly and perfectly continent, Christ the omnipotent is unable to admit, readmit, or even expel members from his *corpus*. *Consummatum est*.

This fantasy of completion, of certainty on the part of the individual about his or her relation to the whole, to the body of Christ, of which he or she is, is not, will be, will not be part, is projected into the far distant future. In the present, the *corpus mysticum* remains incomplete, wounded, open, rent by sin, heresy, and political and religious strife. The Church in its ceremonies delineates temporary, shifting borders for Christ’s body, producing an image of a *corpus* “open enough to let in newcomers, closed enough to maintain the integrity of a distinctive group,”⁷⁷ and unstable and inconstant enough

⁷⁵ Lumiansky and Mills, 2: 360, l. 200n.

⁷⁶ Lumiansky and Mills, 2: 374, ll. 609-18n.

⁷⁷ Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*, 63.

to provoke in the individual fear of exclusion, hope for inclusion, and dependence on ecclesiastical sacrament and ritual.

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