Conclusion

➡ For additional information about this book

CONCLUSION

❧

However abstract and philosophical some of the late medieval debates surrounding eucharistic transformation may seem, at stake in these debates was the individual believer's hope for redemption. From the Latin language of the liturgy to the infrequency of lay eucharistic reception, the medieval ecclesiastical hierarchy in many ways seems to have designed the Mass to render individual believers impotent before power structures both wordly and divine. Within this social and political context, Middle English eucharistic poetics proved to be a powerful and pervasive discourse because it recognized believers' disempowerment and aimed to transform this alienated experience within the Christian church into a spiritual and poetic asset. Though the diverse authors in this study do not necessarily share the same social and political aims, they do share a belief in the transformative power of the Eucharist that arises from the frustratingly incomplete union with the divine it provides.

As John Lydgate clearly recognized, the eucharistic poetic tradition consistently enables Middle English writers to explore the intersections between the political and poetic. By employing self-consciously literary language that emphasizes communion with and alienation from transcendent meaning, Middle English writings on the Eucharist invite readers to consider the mediating nature of both the institutional church and language itself. For Robert Mannyng and the *Pearl*-poet, a belief in transubstantiation inspires a reflec-

tion on the ways in which lay readers can transform their spiritual states by recognizing that access to the divine is always to some extent figurative. William Langland and Margery Kempe draw on the the Eucharist's imperfect allegorical signification of the Christian community in order to argue that allegorical textual interpretation should cause spiritual and social change. Julian of Norwich and Nicholas Love establish the Eucharist as lying at the heart of lay reading practices: all spiritual meaning to some extent arises from the way in which the church's institution of the Eucharist as a sacrament transformed earthly models of signification. For all the writers in this study, the Eucharist provides a model for devotional reading practices as always predicated on distance and frustrated meaning. And all of them, to greater or lesser extents, invite readers to contemplate and question the necessity of the institutional church as mediator between Christ and humanity.

In this regard, the eucharistic poetic tradition is remarkably consistent across the later Middle Ages even though Middle English texts necessarily shifted their political and theological content in response to the increasingly restrictive political climate of the fifteenth century. As many scholars have demonstrated, the religious writings of the fifteenth century tended to be more strictly devotional rather than theological, with a focus on the production of genres such as hagiography, lives of Christ, pastoralia, and sermons. Despite this political climate, vernacular texts of the fifteenth century continue to investigate the Eucharist in both literal and figurative ways. Though the Ambrosian approach to the Eucharist—with its emphasis on the literal presence of Christ's flesh in the Eucharist—continued to dominate, the Augustinian focus on the Eucharist as an allegorical sign persisted even in such a self-consciously orthodox and Ambrosian text as *The Book of Margery Kempe.* A striking example of the intertwining of Ambrosian and Augustinian approaches throughout the later Middle Ages in England is the consistent use of Aquinas's *Pange Lingua* in Corpus Christi processions.[1] In that hymn, Aquinas specifically celebrates the relationship between linguistic sign and literal flesh: "Verbum caro, panem verum / Verbo carnem efficit" (The Word made flesh transforms true bread into flesh by a word).[2] In these two lines, "verbum" (word) is both subject and agent, and the synonyms "caro" and "carnis" (flesh) are both subject and object; Aquinas confuses the relationship

---

1. Rubin, *Corpus Christi,* 284; 246. It is worth noting that, in his discussion of the possibility of being saved through faith alone, Langland cites *Pangue Lingua,* "As clerkes in Corpus Christi feeste syngen and redden / That *sola fides sufficit* to save with lewed peple." William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman,* XV.387–88.

2. Barbara R. Walters, Vincent Corrigan, and Peter T. Ricketts, eds., *The Feast of Corpus Christi* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2006), 395. Translation is my own.

between "word" and "flesh" both grammatically and logically. He stresses the verbal origin of the Incarnation alongside the verbal origin of the consecration in order to demonstrate that, in both mysteries, words and flesh are mysteriously related and mutually reinforcing. For Aquinas, the figure most closely associated with the highly Ambrosian doctrine of transubstantiation, as for many Middle English writers across the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the power of the Eucharist both maintains and confounds distinctions between figure and truth.

As a final vernacular example that demonstrates the historical and generic reach of eucharistic poetics, I want to turn briefly to a later fifteenth-century text that has primarily political rather than theological ambitions: the grail quest narrative from Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur.* In his narrative, Malory shares many of the same concerns of the other texts in this study, particularly the alienated relationship between the human community, the individual believer, and Christ's body in the Eucharist.[3] In a manner akin to other Middle English texts that depict eucharistic encounters as fundamentally alienating, Malory intently focuses not on the knights who achieve the grail but on Lancelot, the knight who is *not quite* able to find it.[4] More than any of the other knights on the quest, Lancelot becomes increasingly sorrowful at his inability to interpret the allegorical signs immanent in the landscape. The list of Lancelot's misreadings and failures on the grail quest is extensive, including accidentally attacking his own son, being unable to enter a chapel because he cannot find a door, and wrongly attempting to help 250 black knights in battle, not realizing that the knights allegorically represent unconfessed sins. Through his encounter with an array of confusing representations, Lancelot is often uncomfortably caught between feeling that he is enjoying the direct presence of the divine and understanding that he has lost that very presence. Lancelot's frustration lies at the center of Malory's narrative.

When Lancelot finally accepts that he will not achieve the Grail, he is devastated, not because he is utterly barred from understanding holiness, but

---

3. Malory deliberately alters his sources in order to present the grail quest as a quest for Christ's body in the Eucharist. Sandra Ness Ihle, *Malory's Grail Quest: Invention and Adaptation in Medieval Prose Romance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983). On the indeterminacy of Grail symbolism, see Dhira B. Mahoney, "Introduction," *The Grail: A Casebook,* ed. Dhira B. Mahoney (New York: Garland, 2000), 1–100.

4. Scholars have generally agreed that Malory is primarily interested in the figure of Lancelot and encourages readers to empathize with him. See Stephen C. B. Atkinson, "Malory's Lancelot and the Quest of the Grail," in *Studies in Malory,* ed. James W. Spisak (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985), 129–52; Raluca L. Radulescu, "Malory and the Quest for the Holy Grail," in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature,* ed. Helen Fulton (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 326–39.

because he has understood so very much. After he has a limited vision of the grail, Lancelot declares "A, Jesu Cryste, who myght be so blyssed that might se opynly Thy grete mervayles of secretenesse?"[5] Lancelot recognizes that he was able to see the divine, but he was not able to see it "opynly." When Lancelot puts on his hair shirt, he does so because he knows that the divine is not barred from him; he just experiences the divine *as if* it were separate from him. The pain and confusion that Lancelot feels at his apparent failure is because of the pain that there is no separation: truth and figure, body and soul are inextricably linked. The pain is that he has to live in a world in which those terms appear distinct and intelligible. For Malory, the state of isolation and alienation that the individual subject feels when faced with the possibility of transcendent meaning stems not from a lack of belief in the possibility of language to convey meaning; instead it stems from the certain belief that language and signs do connect the human community with the divine.

Like the fictional figure of Lancelot, mainstream believers were presented with a world that seemed constructed to prevent access to the divine. Through a eucharistic poetics that emphasizes both communion with and alienation from Christ's body, Middle English texts seek to empower readers by giving them a language for defining themselves in relation to social, ecclesiastical, and theological power structures. Instead of telling their readers that they will have an ecstatic moment of union with the divine, these texts frequently make meaning out of what was undoubtedly the most common experience of the Mass: listening to a priest speak in a foreign language and watching him lift a piece of bread above his head that never appears to be anything other than a piece of bread. Surprisingly, this potentially distancing liturgical experience becomes an opportunity for individual Christians to reform themselves and their communities. Eucharistic poetics was a discourse that sought to empower readers by inviting them to contemplate their own access to the divine through ritual and through poetic language. For writers of Middle English, the Eucharist and literary language itself provide vital access to transcendence, and that access comes because of, not in spite of, the limitations placed on the reader's experience of the divine.

---

5. Thomas Malory, *Complete Works,* ed. Eugene Vinaver, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), 597.