

DEPLOYMENTS OF WHITENESS: AFFECT, MATERIALITY, AND
THE SOCIAL IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE

BY
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Abstract

Deployments of Whiteness: Affect, Materiality, and the Social in Late Medieval English Literature

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This dissertation examines select medieval discourses of whiteness, both somatic and non-somatic, and their imbrications with the affective, the material, and the social registers of late medieval culture. Contemporary critical whiteness studies remains heavily invested in whiteness as a dermal phenomenon and as a racial marker. But medieval deployments of whiteness, in the absence of a rigid association between racial discourses and color, do not simply denote or connote skin tone. Rather, whiteness as a representational trope makes visible normative cultural ideals such as courtly beauty, Christian salvation, chivalric prowess, or European identity. At the same time, however, whiteness marks the limits of ruling ideologies by registering specific ruptures and ambiguities within the values it signifies. Affectively, as in The Book of the Duchess and in Pearl, whiteness is a figuration of the state of mourning and the workings of desire; it signifies not only the lost body of a feminine Lady but also an international, continental-inspired culture of courtliness in which Chaucer and the Pearl-poet actively participate. Materially, whiteness is an embodiment of cultural refinement and salvific value. Thus, in Pearl, the representation of whiteness as a valuable object highlights its function as a commodity fetish that simultaneously inscribes and erases its history of material labor. Or in late medieval representations of the Passion in Piers Plowman and in mystery plays, the white leather body suit

worn by actors playing Christ is literally the material skin of an animal but nonetheless represents the humanity of God, whose suffering flesh stands for the entire body politic of Christendom. Socially, in the cross-cultural encounters between Mongol East and European West, whiteness is a sign of the West's anxious appropriations of the Mongol Khan's superior chivalric prowess and courtliness; the Khan frequently appears white and European in medieval travelogues and in visual art. However much it may be in the nature of whiteness to disguise its working as a universalizing agent in such examples, whiteness is always in play with the affective, material, and social modalities of cultural values in the late Middle Ages. And in the act of play, affective markers of white do become discourses of Whiteness, technologies of performative social negotiations with real material effects.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Table of Contents	xi
List of Illustrations	xiii
Introduction: Whiteness in Play	1
Notes	20
Chapter 1. Memorialization in White: The “Elsewhere” of Subjectivity and the “Here” of Property in <u>The Book of the Duchess</u>	21
Mapping the Toponymic Chain of Whiteness	25
Writing the Self Elsewhere	37
Male Parturition in White	44
Originary Copies in English	50
Locating the Unlost Proper Here	55
Notes	63
Chapter 2. Whiteness, Affected: The Object of Distance and the <i>Punctum</i> of Mourning in <u>Pearl</u>	69
The Spectral Body and the Object Biography of Whiteness	72
The Affective Time of the Vineyard	78
The Distance of Desire	86
Whiteness, Pricked: Into the (Vanishing) Point	100
The History of Labor as Whiteness	117
Notes	125
Chapter 3. The Enigma of Arrival: Black Mouth, White Voice, and the Kiss of Tartary	132
The Ocular and the Oracular	136
The Idol and the Fetish	144
Origin-Heterogeneous	152
Marco Polo’s Buddha	158
Idolatrous Orality	165
Cookbooks and Kisses	168
Late, Styled: Aristophilic Arrivals	177
Notes	188

Chapter 4. Whiteness on Sufferance: Blindness, Drama, and the Skin of Salvation in <u>Piers Plowman</u> and Late Medieval Drama	196
Body Pier(s)ing	200
Black Mask, White Skin	214
Leather Incarnate	227
Integumental Sufferance	235
Willfully Gray	247
Notes	253
Epilogue: The Whiteness Confound	258
Notes	264
Bibliography	265

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: London, British Library, MS. Royal 19 D. I, f. 78v	9
Figure 2: London, British Library, MS. Royal 19 D. I, f. 88	11
Figure 3: London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A. XII, f. 64r	28
Figure 4: London, British Library, MS Harley 4972, f. 2	94
Figure 5: London, British Library, MS. Harley 3954, f. 24v	138
Figure 6: London, British Library, MS. Royal 19 D. I, f. 76r	141
Figure 7: London, British Library MS. Add. 27695, f. 13r	178
Figure 8: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 264, f. 130r	211
Figure 9: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 264, f. 130v	211
Figure 10: Blackburn, Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, MS Hart 20960, f. 3v	218
Figure 11: London, British Library, MS. Add. 37049, f. 23r	231

Introduction: Whiteness in Play

“Ho couthe kyndeliche whit colour descreve / Yf alle þe world were whit
or swan-whit alle thynges?” — William Langland¹

“What then is the essential nature of *cloudiness*? For red or yellow transparent
things are not cloudy; white is cloudy.” — Ludwig Wittgenstein²

What is whiteness? Is it a color? Or an absence of color? Does it mark a biological fact? Or is it more than a marker of strictly physical attributes? In the fourteenth-century Middle English romance the King of Tars, the Sultan of Damascus experiences a physical transformation after his conversion to Christianity: “His hide, þat blac and lobely was, / Al white bicom, þurth Godes gras / & clere wiþouten blame” (928-30). The whitening of his skin visibly marks the Sultan’s new social identity as a Christian convert. And the metamorphosis of his material body further registers a shift in his affective potential: in the state of grace, the Sultan’s flesh no longer incites loathing but inspires “ioie” (941). As Geraldine Heng points out, the religious and biological discourses in the King of Tars presuppose “the normativity of whiteness, and of the white racial body, as the guarantor of normalcy” (231). But even in this romance, whiteness is more than a simple dermal phenomenon, as the Oriental princess dreams of a black hound that changes into “manhede, / In white clopes, als a kniȝt” (450-51). For as Susan Crane has recently noted, “clothing, not skin, is the frontier of the self” (6). Here, as a visual and rhetorical display of identity the medieval knight is marked not by the whiteness of his skin tone but by that of his garment.

We see this more clearly in another fourteenth-century text, Mandeville’s Travels, in which the image of a knight clad in white is pivotal to the West’s perception and representation of the Tartars. In a chapter on the history of Genghis Khan, Mandeville’s Travels depicts how as the Great Khan lay in bed one night, “he sawgh in a visioun þat þere cam before [him] a knyght

Armed all in white and he satt vpon a white hors” (Hamelius 147), a knight who foretold of the Mongols’ global empire. The account is based on a French text by the Cilician Armenian Hetoum, itself allegedly drawn from a native source, The Secret History of Mongols. In the Eastern original, a shaman rode a horse into the skies to talk with the spirits and uttered the prophecy. Hetoum, in his rendition of the legend, displaces the shaman with “a knyght in armour upon a white horse” (3.18) who appeared in a dream vision. By the time of Mandeville’s Travels, the knight is emphatically imaged as “Armed all in white” (147). Even more than in the King of Tars, a process of whitening that occurs here takes place at the level of the social and the affective rather than the simply biological. Whiteness, as figured in the Mandeville-author’s account of Genghis Khan’s two dreams, is not primarily concerned with dermal pigmentation or signs of religious conversion. Rather, in the substitution of a tribal shaman with a white knight on a white horse, whiteness becomes a fetish of European chivalric masculinity, an ideal that presents itself as ostensibly normative and universal. In fact, whiteness enfolds the material fetish of the armored male body on a horse within the broader socio-historical context of the encounter between East and West: a seemingly imminent conquest of Christendom by the Tartars.

Contemporary critical whiteness studies often construct whiteness as “a distinct and relatively recent historical fiction” (Hill 2). Because whiteness studies grew out of critical race theory, it remains heavily invested in whiteness as a dermal phenomenon and as a racial marker. For instance, Theodore W. Allen argues that the “white race” was invented in the seventeenth century as a social control to maintain an economic system of bonded servitude (24). But in linking the emergence of whiteness to modernity, Allen constructs a historical teleology in which the Middle Ages implicitly functions as the precursor to some real birth of modern whiteness. Anthologies, such as Critical Whiteness Studies, The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness, and Whiteness: A Critical Reader, as well as individual studies, such as Richard Dyer’s White and Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, have limited

whiteness studies temporally to (post-)modernity and spatially to the West. Premodern whiteness, whether addressed or not in these works, is denied the conceptual space to exist.

In the past two decades, medieval studies, through the intervention of postcolonial theory, has actively examined medieval constructions of the Other *vis-à-vis* Western Christendom.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's The Postcolonial Middle Ages and the special "race" issue of the Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies in 2001, for example, have exposed the processes of differentiation and identity formation that engage with overtly locatable and visible others such as Saracens, Jews, or imaginary monstrous races on the edge of the world. Yet medieval scholarship has continued to revolve around critical deployments of terms like "race" and "ethnicity."

Whereas William Chester Jordan eschews "race" in favor of "ethnicity" in medieval studies, Robert Bartlett argues that the medieval conception of "race" embraces individual and collective markers of descent, custom, language, and law. Thomas Hahn, taking a different view, suggests that medieval representations of colors are never innocent or neutral but constitutive of "racial" differences that seek to universalize Western values. Other scholars, such as Cohen, Heng, and Steven F. Kruger, have made further important interventions by arguing for the interpellations of medieval "race" and "ethnicity" through other categorical differences such as medieval "nationalism," religion, body, sexuality, gender, class, and other cross-cultural and cross-spatial encounters.

Such analyses, though crucial to medieval studies of race, have left whiteness mostly unexamined and treated as a monolithic sameness defined against the Other, and as a strictly corporeal signifier—whether indicative of spiritual, sexual, or economic status. The dearth of whiteness critique in medieval studies leaves unchallenged the assumed clarity and knowledge of what whiteness is and means. And the dangers of not critically engaging whiteness, as Ruth Frankenberg contends, include "a continued failure to displace the 'unmarked marker' status of whiteness" and a perpetuation of "a kind of asymmetry that has marred even many critical analyses" (1). More important, medieval studies' engagements with whiteness, thus far, have

largely replicated and left intact contemporary whiteness studies' emphases on whiteness as primarily a phenomenon of skin color and racialization.

The modern concept of "race," Cohen points out, "has no exact medieval equivalent" (517). Similarly, Hahn argues that in the Middle Ages, there was a greater "disconnect between dominant medieval racial discourses . . . and the common assumption that *color* constitutes the default category of difference" (8, original emphasis). In the absence of a rigid association between racial discourses and color, medieval whiteness does not simply denote or connote skin tone alone. There is, in fact, "an inherent definitional slipperiness and instability to whiteness" (Rasmussen 8) as it is manifest within the complexity of the medieval social world. In the Great Khan's dreams of the white knight, whiteness points to an objectified fetish; in Chaucer's Book of the Duchess, "White" functions as both the proper name of a woman and a descriptor of her body; in Pearl, whiteness marks a precious jewel and the divine Lamb of God; and in Piers Plowman and late medieval Passion plays, whiteness names a leather skin suit that signifies the suffering body of Christ. Although in these medieval representations there might be overlaps between color and questions of the "racial" other, as in the case of the Tartars in Mandeville's Travels, race itself is not necessarily at the forefront of concern in many medieval deployments of whiteness. What the Middle Ages offers is a rich site of critical inquiry to explore whiteness not only as a somatic marker of racial differences, but also as a dynamic agent in its imbrications with objects and other markings of cultural values: a critical site that broadens, disrupts, and questions a seemingly transparent and monolithic medieval whiteness.

This dissertation, however, is not a history of whiteness. I in no way claim to write the kinds of cultural histories or surveys of colors as found in Michel Pastoureau's two recent works on blue and black, in Herman Pleij's Colors Demonic and Divine: Shades of Meaning in the Middle Ages and After, or in the multi-volume The Image of the Black in Western Art by Jean Devisse, Michel Mollat, *et al.* My interest lies not in cataloguing every possible allusion to whiteness in late medieval West: a monumental task well beyond the scope of the present study.

Geographically and temporally, this dissertation focuses primarily on England in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when socio-economic changes after the Black Death ushered in profound changes in social configurations and religious practices. But England, though located at the periphery of the medieval West, was self-consciously engaged with the Continent culturally, economically, and politically. Of particular importance to my study are French court poetry, Dante's Divine Comedy, and medieval Latin and vernacular travel writings by Marco Polo and the Franciscan missionaries to the East. And while my examination is biased towards textual representations, it also necessarily considers whiteness's presence in late medieval visual art, philosophy, theology, science, performance practice, and material culture.

Cultural values, according to A. J. Greimas, are "modalities" rather than absolutes. And if culture is best understood as a "symbol-system" (Geertz 5), then cultural modalities require the semiotic power of symbols in order to operate. Whiteness, I contend, is precisely a sign—though not the only one—that enables various medieval modalities to cohere and function. Hence, whiteness marks the ideal beauty of the courtly heroine in the Book of the Duchess, the chivalric prowess of the Mongols in Mandeville's Travels, the concrete manifestation of Christian salvation in Pearl, and the crucified body of Christ in Piers Plowman. Resisting any inflexible critical paradigm of what medieval whiteness is, I argue that it might be more useful to examine the various ways and contexts in which whiteness functions in specific late medieval cultural moments. That is, the critical task is not to uncover what whiteness is but to what ends whiteness *as a figure* serves. My dissertation considers several medieval discourses, both somatic and non-somatic, in which whiteness is deployed as a representational trope to make (ruling) cultural ideals visible and even normative, as well as the processes through which whiteness reveals the limits of ideologies by registering the specific gaps and disjunctures within the seeming universality of the values it signifies. But while professing not to write a history of whiteness, I also do not wish merely to present isolated case studies of medieval figurations of whiteness. The medieval moments that I discuss in this study are connected by their shared deployment of

whiteness within three cultural registers or modalities: the affective, the material, and the social. And these three modalities, filtered through the trope of whiteness, are manifest as texts, images, and material objects.

The color white, of course, is not strictly speaking an affect. Yet the perception of color always already involves the body of the perceiver. In other words, the body in the state of perception is the body in affection; perception is not divorced from affection. In my dissertation, the specific affects that I examine are the interrelated emotional states of mourning and desiring. In the Book of the Duchess and in Pearl, whiteness represents a lost feminine body that is fragmented and objectified. The male mourner, in each poem, both conjures up and quests after a lost whiteness, and in the process constructs his courtly subjectivity in space and time. More than the literal body of the feminine Lady-Object, whiteness signifies an international, French-inspired culture of courtliness in which Chaucer and the Pearl-poet actively participate.

Mourning and desire, as forms of affective labor, are also the labor of memory. In ancient and medieval theories of memory, “white” (*albus*) is an exemplary image within the Aristotelian chain of mnemonic association. Aristotle states that, in the act of recollection, “people go quickly from one thing to another, for example, from milk to white, from white to air, and from this to fluid” (Sorabji 56). This associational nature of whiteness, as conceived by ancient and medieval thinkers, is useful in analyzing whiteness as a trope that sets in motion, provides the nexuses for, and actualizes modes of cultural values. In addition to its function as a signifying image in theories of memory, *albus* is also a term used by medieval philosophers to discuss the nature of language and of signification. Peter Travis has noted the prevalence of the trope of “white” in late medieval philosophy and its connections to vernacular literature. For instance, the eleventh-century Anselm of Canterbury set up a hypothetical dialogue between a master and his student regarding the nature of signification:

M. Si est in domo aliqua albus equus te nesciente inclusus, et aliquis tibi dicit: in hac domo est album sive albus; an scis per hoc ibi esse equum?

D. Non. Sive enim dicat album albedinem, sive in quo est albedo; nullius certae rei mente

concupio essentiam nisi huius coloris. (4.4210)

[Master: Suppose that unknown to you a white horse were enclosed in some building or other, and someone told you, “A white is in this building”; would that inform you that the horse was inside?

Student: No; for whether they speak of a white, or of whiteness, or of that within which the whiteness is enclosed, no definite thing is brought to my mind apart from the essence of this colour.] (Henry 69)

As a paronym and not a proper name, *albus* (white) is not necessary a predication of any “thing” in particular; that is, it “fail[s] to name the being, or essence, of any subject” (Travis, “White” 15). Anselm points out that the statement, “A white is in this building [*in hac domo est album*]” is insufficient in itself to identify precisely what the “white thing [*album*]” is. Whiteness, as figured in one tradition of medieval philosophy, marks the equivocal and unfixed distance between the signifier and the signified, or, in Derrida’s term, *différance*.

But aside from being a sign of courtly affections, an imagistic link in the Aristotelian chain of memory, or a figure of the ambiguity of language, whiteness is frequently experienced primarily as the color of certain material objects. Steven Connor has recently remarked on people’s natural tendency to identify colors with the particular objects they characterize. In the process, a particular color “moves from being a synecdoche or associated feature of the object to becoming the object’s name” (Connor 149). Wittgenstein similarly observes that when asked what particular color words mean, people immediately point to things that have these colors” (I.68). Anselm of Canterbury, continuing the dialogue between the master and his student on signs and signification, points out that the word *album* brings to mind a material body or surface, however indefinite it may be:

Nam etsi occurrat animo corpus aut superficies, quod non ob aliud fit nisi quia expertus sum in his solere esse albedinem. (4.4211)

[True, that name brings to mind a body or a surface, but this is simply because experience has shown me that whiteness is usually found in *such things*.] (Henry 69, my emphases)

The association between whiteness and “such things” (*his*) is a product of experience, Anselm suggests. And such an experience further gestures toward the intersection of whiteness and

materiality in medieval culture, one in which the reality of premodern hygiene was largely responsible for the physical fragility of whiteness, that is, the difficulty of achieving and maintaining whiteness in any material object. More often than not, the color white marks an object as precious, be it a garment or a jewel. Pearl, from which the Middle English poem takes its name, is the cynosure whose whiteness designates not only spiritual purity but also the social status of the pearl's owner. Yet what is often neglected in discussions of the valuation of whiteness is the fact that whiteness, as found in many material objects, is something that is artificially produced. Most pearls are not naturally white but are whitened through labor-intensive processes. Whiteness as a thing is therefore a product of a history of material labor; its "thingness" bespeaks an object biography. But simultaneously, whiteness as a thing also figures an erasure of its history of labor and production. The Dreamer-narrator of Pearl, in spite of his effusive extolling of the pearl's ravishing whiteness, speaks not a single word on the messiness, or even the pain, of labor that produces the whiteness he so desires.

The issue of human fabrication and artifice point to another major concern of my dissertation: whiteness and its imbrications with idolatry and fetishism. In his Travels, Marco Polo describes a peculiar practice of Eastern idolatry in which the Mongols would smear the mouth of their idol Natigai with a lump of fat before every meal. In one medieval illumination of the scene, on folio 78v of British Library, MS Royal 19 D.I (fig. 1), the Mongols are portrayed as barefooted, dark-skinned, turbaned Saracens. The act of feeding Natigai both marks the seemingly inanimate body of the idol as one in need of nourishment and identifies the body of its worshipper as that of an idolater. The Tartars, of course, did not look or dress like dark-skinned Saracens or Sub-Saharan Africans. But the visual mode in this illustration suggests the ideological nature of Western representations of the Mongols. Art historian Madeline Caviness recently points to the emergence of a historically contingent "white identity" in visual representations of Europeans—whose flesh tone shifted from a pinkish-brown to pasty white—during the high and late Middle Ages (1). Caviness traces this change to the Crusades and the



Fig. 1. Tartars smearing the mouth of their idol Natigay. The Travels of Marco Polo. London, British Library, MS. Royal 19 D. I, f. 78v.
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increased contacts with brownish infidels and sub-Saharan Africans. The lighter complexion used to portray European women, developed at the end of the twelfth century, was appropriated by European men for all Europeans in the 1350s. By the fourteenth century, devils were colored, and Christ and saints had bodies of pure white that glowed like the Eucharistic wafer.

Furthermore, this chromatic shift in the visual representations of Europeans dovetailed with the ancient and medieval humoral theory that attempted to explain biological differences, such as skin tone and physique, in terms of climatic and geographical influences. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, a thirteenth-century Franciscan scholastic scholar, superimposed human taxonomy on the map of the world; here is John Trevisa's fourteenth-century translation of his theory:

[T]he sonne abideth longe over the Affers, men of Affrica, and brennen and wasten

humours and maken ham short of body, black of face, with crispe here. And for her spirites passe outte atte pores that ben open, so they be more cowardes of herte. An the cuntrarye is of men of the northe londe: for coldenes that is withuote stoppeth the pores and breedeth humours of the bodye maketh men more ful and huge; and coolde that is modir of whitenesse maketh hem more white in face and in skynne, and vapoures and spirites ben ysmyten inwarde and maken hatter withinne and so the more bolde and hardy. An the men of Asia ben meneliche disposed in that, and here firste londe is by eeste. (15.50; pp. 752-53)

What the humoral theory achieved was a mapping of racial stereotypes and moral attributes onto the known regions of the medieval world. The colder climate of the North engenders not only white skin but also a temperament “more bolde and hardy”; in contrast, the warm sun in the South produces dark skin and “cowardes of herte.”³ Within this particular strand of medieval visual tradition, whiteness did participate in the coalescence of European identity around the somatic marker of skin complexion. In the visualization of the Tartars, however, there is a problem. In the same manuscript that depicts idolatrous Tartars as dark-skinned Saracens, on folio 88 of British Library, MS Royal 19 D.I (fig. 2) is an image of the Great Khan with three other Tartars depicted as white Europeans with blonde hair, fully clothed, and they appear to be engaged in a pleasant dinner conversation at a table covered in food, drink and utensils. As either black Saracens or white Europeans, the Tartars in these images are anything but the Asians whom Bartholomaeus Anglicus describes as “meneliche disposed.” Does the Great Khan, who is emphatically not a Christian, become a fair-skinned European simply by virtue of his courtliness and chivalric prowess? Whiteness as deployed here slips out of its traditional secure location within Europe and Christianity and becomes a labile and wandering signifier.

Despite its frequent associations with the normative, the Christian, and the European, whiteness, I argue, could also signify negatively in late medieval culture. If whiteness is a link in the Aristotelian chain of memory, then one’s inability to move beyond white to something else signals a psychic and emotional paralysis. Figuratively, one is stalled and stuck in whiteness as a state of mental stupefaction. In Pearl and the Book of the Duchess, the Dreamer and the Man in Black cannot move past their obsession with whiteness in the form of the Pearl-Maiden or the



Fig. 2. The Khan with companions at a table covered in food, drink and utensils. The Travels of Marco Polo. London, British Library, MS. Royal 19 D. I, f. 88. © The British Library Board. By permission.

lady White. Consolation, if ever in sight, is continuously deferred; whiteness will not let go of the lover-mourner. In addition to affective blockage, whiteness in medieval figurations of the non-Christian Other sometimes signifies the nonbeliever's state of spiritual darkness. It could represent the white film of ignorance covering the eyes of Jews, the blindfold over the allegorical figure Synagoga. As phenomenologists medieval and modern alike have observed, white is an opaque color.⁴ Its opacity renders whiteness more like a veil that actively conceals than a *tabula rasa* passively awaiting an impression from elsewhere.

Symbols, Mary Carruthers remarks, "are matters of relationships which . . . are not absolute, but function entirely within social life" (260), for it is within a cultural economy that symbols are publicly recognized and their currency accrued. Whiteness is one such symbol that facilitates a rethinking of the body in the body politic, the myriad flesh of imagined communities. In my examination of the intersection of whiteness and the social, I want to draw attention to

whiteness not only as a somatic marker of a social taxonomy delineated by medieval humoral-racial theory, but also, in the white leather body suit worn by actors playing Christ in late medieval Passion dramas, as a material skin of an animal that can nonetheless represent the human body of the divine God. On the white skin of this leather costume, the affective, the material, and the social registers converge. Christ's body, whose suffering is signified by a material skin, stands for the entire social body of Christendom.

But whiteness figured as a performative leather costume for Christ is limiting in any critical thinking about the imbrications of whiteness and the social. In my dissertation, I argue that contemporary theories of biopolitics offer a useful alternative lens through which to consider the flesh of the multitude that includes, but is not limited to, medieval Christians in the West. Modern biopolitics, Roberto Esposito contends, originated in the taxonomy of political categories. In its coupling of sovereign powers and technologies of life, biopolitics began as a sorting out of the politically useful and healthy bodies—bodies worthy of protection—from the politically useless and diseased bodies—bodies worthy of destruction. A life-affirming biopolitics, therefore, exists always in tandem with its negative counterpart, or thanatopolitics. In the extreme form of twentieth-century Nazism, for example, the politically useless and diseased bodies included those of Jews, homosexuals, and Gypsies.⁵ For a political subject under a biocratic regime, the experience of power is indistinct from the experience of life. Biopolitics has as its goal the management not of the individual subjectivity but of life itself.

In medieval biopolitics, if I may call it that, the categorical discrimination of the useful, healthy body *vis-à-vis* the useless, diseased body was inseparable from geo-religious differentiation. When Bartholomaeus Anglicus speculates that the colder climate of the North produces brave and virile men, he really means Christians in the West as white Europeans. The black African pagans, in contrast, have their humors burned and wasted away by the warmth of the sun, and are cowards as a result. The ancient and medieval humoral theory, therefore, could be understood as a premodern manifestation of, though not necessarily a precursor to, modern

biopolitics. Moreover, humoral theory points to the medieval enmeshment of socio-political discourses with those of science and medicine. Esposito further argues that the formation of a biopolitical community is simultaneously an immunization of the body politic from threats within and without. For the medieval West, the imagined geo-political entity of Christendom can be read as an (auto)immune response to religious Others. But if the Eucharistic wafer is the body of Christ, is not a pagan idol more than an insentient object? If modern biopolitics, as conceived by Foucault, is fundamentally the management of life, then in the premodern religious encounters between East and West, the category of “life” itself is already in question. For an idolater in need of a spiritual cure, conversion is an immunization of the body of the believer. And if a nascent European identity began to coalesce around color difference in the late Middle Ages, the visualized black skin of the Mongol idolaters smearing the mouth of their idol Natigai with fat points to whiteness as a biopolitical category always already interpellated by and immunized against religious difference.

Yet once again, the image of a white-skinned Tartar Khan complicates any attempt at neat theorization of whiteness and the Other in late medieval culture. Rather than delimiting itself strictly on the basis of religious difference, the biopolitical community of the late medieval West was also largely constructed on and informed by secular concerns, especially those centered on ideals of courtliness. Thus, the late medieval biopolitical body was not only marked by differences of religion, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, but also by behavioral and sartorial markers of class and courtliness. Of course, these categories sometimes overlap, and I do not wish to set up a rigid social taxonomy of my own. My point is that the medieval social body is as much a religious community as a courtly one—even if only imagined or imaged in literature and art. The question, then, is not simply whether a body is Christian or not, but whether the body is courtly or uncourtly. For Chaucer’s Squire, Cambyuskan is the epitome of the courtly ideal, both chivalric and *gentil* (V.19-24). And Marco Polo’s Kubilai Khan has a complexion that is “fair and ruddy like a rose” (122). Here, the affective, material, and social

modalities of whiteness meet in the courtly body of the Great Khan. If whiteness as a figure of the social is a skin that enfolds the multitude, then it is a skin punctuated by pores across which things pass in and out. This white biopolitical skin is immunized against the uncourtly, and under the signs of the courtly, the Great Khan slips in and becomes white.

Whiteness is not everywhere. Nor is whiteness studies some critical panacea that is the theory of everything. In fact, as this dissertation shows, sometimes whiteness plays an ancillary, though important, role in larger cultural concerns. In specific medieval moments, whiteness appears to be in danger of becoming prosaic and unremarkable, even generic. Replicated and disseminated through cultural artifacts, both the whiteness of the courtly heroine in the Book of the Duchess and the whiteness of the maiden in Pearl, for instance, might easily be glossed over as mere conventions of their respective genres. Similarly, the notion that whiteness constitutes the normative and the hegemonic in the West might seem, to some, an academic truism that is by now blandly predictable. However, does not “bland” already conjure up whiteness, the absence of colors and flavors? If white is the color of critical blandness, does it not signify some a priori epistemology of whiteness as we know it? But has there ever been any whiteness, medieval or (post-)modern, as we know it? I want to return to the opacity of whiteness once again. If whiteness seems bland, it shows only how deeply entrenched whiteness has become, in the words of Alfred J. López, the “tacit norm” and the “cultural imperative” (156) within certain academic discourses. Too often, a reading *of* whiteness becomes a reading *as* whiteness, that is, a reading blindfolded by a white opaqueness that veils critical inquiry. But in my figuration of whiteness as a veil, I caution against a faith that this white integument of blindness would necessarily lead to, as Paul de Man might put it, insight through its hermeneutics of unveiling, or as medieval thinkers would put it differently, through allegoresis that uncovers the meaning within allegory. And if whiteness fades into the unremarkable, it, in the words of Mike Hill, always “comes back, but in ways that are unwanted or unexpected” (2). Whiteness is never absolute, singular, or static; and it emerges in play with the affective, material, and social modalities of cultural values,

as in the medieval actor's putting on of the white leather body suit that signifies the body of Christ in suffering. But in the act of play, markers of white do become discourses of Whiteness, technologies of performative social negotiations with real material effects.

My first chapter, "Memorialization in White: The 'Elsewhere' of Subjectivity and the 'Here' of Property," begins by looking at whiteness as a dermal pigmentation characterizing the ideal courtly heroine. In The Book of the Duchess, the Man in Black offers an extended blazon of his deceased lover's body that details her "white handes" (955) and her neck that is "whit [and] smothe" (942). Yet "White" in the poem is both a physical attribute and the literal name of the lady. And as a proper name that "maps" the topological spaces of a courtly heroine's body, "White" also functions as a toponym (place-name) and must be understood in relation to other toponyms articulated by Chaucer in the poem. The Man in Black recalls that White would not send her suitors to "Walakye, / To Pruyse, and into Tartarye" (1024-25). As Christian Jacob argues, toponymy engages with an individual's emotions and memory. And Mary Carruthers notes that medieval memory schemes often involve the "tagging" of materials both schematically and emotionally (60). Toponymy, therefore, becomes a device for tagging the memory of the Man in Black. Whiteness, too, is deployed as a trope for medieval memorial practices in the Book of the Duchess: the "whit wal or a table" (780) of the Man in Black in his early youth conjures up the traditional metaphor of memory as a writing surface, and the "long castel, with walles white" (1318) at the end of the dream invokes the architectural model of memory theorized by Cicero. Ultimately, it is White herself who functions as a stabilizing proper name and as an Aristotelian signifying image that seems to anchor memory; this is the hope of the Man in Black. But if in recollecting, one might move along the Aristotelian chain of associations from milk to white to air, then the recollection of White, as performed by the Man in Black, is fundamentally problematic. For all his remembering, the Man in Black is unable to move beyond "white" towards a potential consolation. Endlessly recalling White, he engages in what Anne

Carson calls the “economy of the unlost,” an enterprise of temporal and spatial pointing, of “bring[ing] the absent into the present” (38). Ostensibly, the Book of the Duchess both points to and quests after an unlost “White-ness” that can map not only a woman’s body but “courtliness” itself, an international French-inspired high culture exemplified in writers such as Machaut and Froissart. As Chaucer’s first major poem, the Book of the Duchess is a hybrid work steeped in the French tradition yet also grounded in its “Englishness.” If the Book of the Duchess begins with a map of courtliness defined through French-inspired cultural artifacts, such as the Romance of the Rose or White herself, it ends up going to the “elsewhere” of a white castle “on a ryche hil” (1319) that cryptically gestures towards the “home” that is England. While the paralyzed Man in Black continues his associational chain-like mapping of a universalizing courtliness, the mobile Dreamer anticipates a newer, proto-capitalist, and proto-national mapping of reality, one in which whiteness marks the cultural identity of English vernacularity as distinct from, yet potentially equal to, the French.

The second chapter, “Whiteness, Affected: The Object of Distance and the *Punctum* of Mourning,” opens with a look at Pearl’s persistent blurring of the Pearl-Maiden’s body and the material pearl as an object. Resisting reading the Maiden solely in terms of religious and psychic metaphors, I argue that the material status of the “perle” is key to understanding the poem’s engagement with socio-economic changes in the late Middle Ages. Whiteness, as materialized in the Maiden’s body and clothes, signifies not only the divine purity and virginity of the Maiden, but also, in its mixing of costly materiality and moral purity, the emerging spirituality of the urban middling classes, exemplified in the figure of the Dreamer-jeweler. Next, I draw on the psychoanalytic works of Lacan and Žižek to examine the play of distance between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden. The Maiden, in her function as the Lady-Object, or the Lacanian *object a*, simultaneously attracts the Dreamer and keeps him at a distance across the stream. But if distance is crucial to the poem’s affective labor of mourning, then the presence of whiteness complicates desire’s play of proximity. Like the shimmering whiteness of the Pearl-Maiden,

consolation is offered yet denied to the Dreamer. Kept at a distance, the Dreamer is doomed endlessly to encircle not only the Maiden but the Lamb of God at the heart of the New Jerusalem, whose whiteness is marred by a bleeding wound. As such, the *punctum* at the center of whiteness is a sign of the Dreamer's trauma and of the woundedness of desire itself. And the Pearl-Maiden, as a literal and figurative object filled with affect, is emblematic of the pearl's concealment of the history of material labor that has produced its whiteness. Pearl's whiteness, therefore, is both a marker of human artifice and an erasure of its history of production. And this temporal erasure precipitates the Dreamer's inability to move beyond mourning; like the Knight in Black, he is stalled and stalling within whiteness.

In the third chapter, "The Enigma of Arrival: Black Mouth, White Voice, and the Kiss of Tartary," I use the Great Khan's dreams of the white knight as the starting point to examine other problematic figurations of the Tartars in relation to questions of origin, orality, idolatry, fetishism, courtliness and color. Seemingly unrelated among themselves or to whiteness, these issues nevertheless intersect in important ways in medieval perceptions and representations of the Tartar, both in visual art and in literary texts. Marco Polo, in his Travels, observes a peculiar oral ritual of Tartar idolaters, which is illustrated in a manuscript containing Polo's text. In these manuscript illuminations, the Tartars are depicted as both dark-skinned idolaters and white courtiers. Idolatry and courtliness appear to be the identity markers that dictate the chromatic visualization of the Tartars. This split in visual vocabulary mirrors a persistent ambivalence in the West's perception of the Tartars in the late Middle Ages. And just as Hetoum and the Mandeville-author locate the origin of the Tartar empire in Genghis Khan's dreams, Marco Polo is also interested in the quests for origins; in his narrative, he traces the origin of idolatry to the life and death of Buddha but ends up recounting a kind of commodity fetish economy of relics that the Great Khan seeks to command and incorporate into his court. Lastly, in the Squire's Tale, Chaucer moves away from issues of idolatry and color in his portrayal of the Tartars. The origin that he seeks is that of fetishized magical objects and mechanical marvels found in

Cambyuskan's court. In Chaucer's tale, whiteness, if tacitly normative and culturally imperative, seems to disappear into fetishes of courtliness; the Squire's Tartars behave as (white) European courtly subjects. Moreover, whiteness in Mandeville's Travels marks a curious temporal arrival in the late fourteenth century of the already-departed, now non-threatening Mongols at approximating whiteness. With the defunct global empire of the Mongols becoming intelligible to the West through the cultural fantasy of romance, the Mongols can now function as a fourth term beyond the conventional triangulation of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in late medieval constructions of difference.

The last chapter, "Whiteness on Sufferance: Blindness, Labor, and the Skin of Salvation," begins with Langland's intense focus, in Passus XX of Piers Plowman, on the Passion and especially on the figure of Longinus, who is both Jewish and blind. For the recalcitrant Jews, whiteness signifies their veil of spiritual blindness. In addition, I argue that Langland directly engages with late medieval theatrical practices in Passus XX, especially through his characterizations of Christ and the devils in the Harrowing of Hell episode that resonate with those in medieval French and English Passion cycles. Of particular interest is the use of masks and leather costumes in the performance of these plays; the devils were in blackface and black masks, and Christ in a white leather body suit. This self-conscious putting on and displaying of identity through clothing signals the enmeshment of the material and the social in late medieval performances of identity. The white leather skin of the Christ costume, even when functioning as a literal garment, exhibits and reasserts the body's power to configure, mark, or even essentialize an individual identity. Literally and figuratively, the actor embodies Christ's physicality, masculinity, and erotic potential. The white leather suit is a pure sign, and not a disguise, of Christ's suffering. Representing Christ's body as a skin also has important implications for (re)thinking the social in the late Middle Ages. If Christ's body signifies the whole of Christian society, then Langland, by alluding to the material and devotional practices of white skins in Passus XX, steps outside of an imagined community organized on the basis of medieval clothing

alone. What the social skin embraces in Passus XX, and in Piers Plowman as a whole, is not only Christians, but a multitude of problematic bodies—Christians or otherwise—that resist a simple social taxonomy. And this flesh of the multitude, I argue, is necessarily covered in skin. If whiteness as a skin can be worn, then it can only be worn diversely, but always opaquely.

Notes

¹ William Langland, Piers Plowman, Passus XX, lines 212-13. The lines are spoken by the personified Peace during the Debate of the Four Daughters of God.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, Remarks on Colour, sec. II.4 (Anscombe 15).

³ Consider an Islamic counterexample on the medieval association of humors, climates, and racial attributes. The tenth-century Abbasid historian and geographer Al-Mas'udi wrote:

As regards the people of the northern quadrant, they are the ones for whom the sun is distant from the zenith, those who penetrate to the North, such as the Slavs, the Franks, and those nations that are their neighbors. The power of the sun is weak among them because of their distance from it; cold and damp prevail in their regions, and snow and ice follow one another in endless succession. The warm humor is lacking among them; their bodies are large, their natures gross, their manners harsh, their understanding dull, and their tongues heavy. Their color is so excessively white that it passes from white to blue; their skin is thin and their flesh thick. Their eyes are also blue, matching the character of their coloring; their hair is lank and reddish because of the prevalence of damp mists. Their religious beliefs lack solidity, and this is because of the nature of cold and the lack of warmth. (qtd. in Hillenbrand 270)

Rather than a mark of valor and endurance, the whiteness (“excessively white”) of the Europeans, at least from one medieval Islamic perspective, signifies their physiological, intellectual, and moral depravities.

⁴ On the opacity of whiteness, see Wittgenstein, Remarks on Colour, sec. I.17-31 (Anscombe 4-6). In Latin, the distinction between *candidus* and *albus*, both of which denote the color white, reflects the difference in the luminosity or opacity of whiteness under varying conditions. Whereas *candidus* means dazzling white, *albus* denotes white without luster.

⁵ Roberto Esposito, in Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy, gives as examples of modern thanato-biopolitical management of life what he calls the three Nazi *dispositifs*: “the absolute normativization of life, the double enclosure of the body, and the anticipatory suppression of birth” (11). From these biological imperatives the Nazi political categorization of life would emerge.

**Memorialization in White: The “Elsewhere” of Subjectivity
and the “Here” of Property in The Book of the Duchess**

“E ‘Ov’è ella?’ súbito diss’io.” [And “Where is she?” I said at once.]

— Dante¹

“Subjection exploits the desire for existence, where existence is always conferred from elsewhere.”

— Judith Butler²

In Chaucer’s rendition of the myth of Alcyone and Ceyx in the Book of the Duchess, Alcyone is spatially linked to the couple’s “home” (77, 79). In contrast, Ceyx chooses to leave their home and go elsewhere, for “This king wol wenden over see” (67). This “sea,” as Juno soon makes clear, is the “Grete Se [the Mediterranean]” (140) in which the doomed Ceyx meets his death. Desiring news of Ceyx’s fate, Alcyone soon “sent bothe eest and west / To seke him” (88-89). And when “no man myghte fynd hir lord” (102), she sinks into an inconsolable grief.

I would like to suggest that what is central in the Book of the Duchess is not only the work of mourning and consolation but also space, as indicated by the tale’s articulations of directional and spatial markers—“the Great Sea,” the East and the West. More precisely, “Where is he?” is the central question that consumes Alcyone, just as the Dreamer will later ask of the Man in Black “where” the deceased White is (1298). Imploring Juno’s mercy, Alcyone asks for grace to “wite wher-so he be” (112) and for a dream to know whether Ceyx “be quyk or ded” (121). But as she searches everywhere and nowhere, Alcyone is frustrated by her inability to locate Ceyx, and her trauma suggests a link between acts of memorialization and spatialization; proper mourning presupposes the necessary localization of the dead in space and time. Ceyx, whose body is later inhabited and voiced by the god of sleep Morpheus, urges Alcyone: “But, goode swete herte, that ye / Bury my body, for such a tyde / Ye mowe hyt fynde the see besyde” (206-08). The possession of the corpse would allow the proper unfolding of mourning. And

more than the localization of the body, what is at stake in the Book of the Duchess is the localization of subjectivity, for without space, the embodied subject cannot exist to mourn or to move beyond loss. As feminist geographers Liz Bondi and Joyce Davidson suggest, “to *be* is to be *somewhere*” (338, original emphases).

Within the critical tradition of the Book of the Duchess, space has never been considered an important key to the poem’s commemorative function. Readers of the poem have often drawn parallels between the Alcyone episode and the dream of the Man in Black when discussing the problematics of consolation in the Book of the Duchess. Written between 1369 and 1372, the poem is, on one level, a commemoration of the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster and wife of John of Gaunt, who had died in the plague of 1368. The Book of the Duchess therefore stands as a “poetic monument” to John of Gaunt’s grief (Lawton 56), or perhaps it functions as “a verbal equivalent” of the tomb erected by Gaunt as a memorial to Blanche (Hardman 191). Some readers have focused on the poem’s allusions to Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy to identify it as “a Boethian Apocalypse” (Cherniss 169) that advocates the recognition of Fortune’s unpredictability and virtue’s immortality, or to classify it as a “philosophical vision” that engages the faculties of reasoning and imaging (Lynch, Chaucer’s 35). Bernard F. Huppé and D. W. Robertson, Jr., in contrast, argue for the Book of the Duchess’s message of Christian consolation, the key to which is the “emperour Octovyen” (368) who, for them, symbolizes the resurrected Christ (140).

Still other critics eschew any explicitly religious or philosophical readings of the poem and instead emphasize Chaucer’s use of art as a strategy of consolation. A. C. Spearing suggests that the Book of the Duchess’s rhetorical figuration, which he identifies as “beautification,” “is itself a necessary part of the process of coming to terms with experience” (“Literal” 171). And Joerg O. Fichte, explicitly rejecting any possibility of a Christian or Boethian consolation in the poem, argues that “if consolation is possible at all, then it can only be achieved by artistic sublimation. The poet can create a poetic monument in honor of Blanche, which will preserve

and keep alive in the minds of people the memory of this truly angelic creature” (67). But “the activity of aesthetic objectification,” according to David Aers, though holding out “the promise of consolation,” ultimately fails to console effectively and only dissociates the mourner further from himself (“Chaucer’s” 201).

Avoiding the interpretive lenses of philosophy, religion, or art, George L. Kittredge advocates a reading of the Book of the Duchess as psychotherapy: “The Dreamer knows that the lady is dead, but he wishes to learn more not from idle curiosity, but out of sympathetic [*sic*] eagerness to afford the knight the only help in his power—the comfort of pouring his sad story into compassionate ears” (56). Bertrand Bronson, likewise, notes that “[t]he modern analyst, indeed, would instantly recognize the therapeutic function of this dream as an effort of the psyche to resolve an intolerable emotional situation by repudiating it through this disguise” (871). For Alastair J. Minnis, “the text itself seems to function in some measure as a cure for melancholy, in a manner which is resolutely secular rather than religious” (Shorter 145). And whereas John Lawlor sees the poem’s last “pattern of consolation” as the recognition of the finality of loss (642), Derek Pearsall contends that the beauty of the Book of the Duchess is “the curve of consolation that it shapes, beginning in the unbearable numbing misery and ending in the return to life” (Life 87).

In the last few decades, the emergence of feminist studies and queer studies have both broadened and complicated readings of the Book of the Duchess. Steven F. Kruger, while acknowledging the poem’s promise of remedy for illness and its therapeutic movement from reading to sleep (“Medical” 69), argues that the therapy staged by the poem is really a moral correction of the Dreamer’s gender and sexual perversion (“Medical” 77-79). Elaine Tuttle Hansen, examining the gendering of male subjectivity, suggests that the poem works to restore proper gender difference, for while “the bereaved woman simply dies, alone and in silence, the bereaved man lives on to enter into conversation with another man, and on the basis of their interaction in the dream world, he moves at least tentatively back into the world outside the

poem” (72). For Hansen, consolation in the poem is “at best partial and temporary” (68). L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, in her psychoanalytically inflected reading, traces a movement in the poem that replaces the ideal of courtly love, marked by the heterosexual couple and reproduction, by the ideal of courtier love, marked by male homosocial friendship and replication (Sacrifice 100). And Susan Schibanoff, attempting to “queer” Chaucer’s dream-visions, argues that “the eulogistic strategy of the Book of the Duchess casts the narrator in the passive role of the queer other in order to praise White and simultaneously to enhance his social superior, the Black Knight, as well as to elevate him to the pre-eminent position of courtly *maker* in the poem” (66).³

I begin this chapter with a look at whiteness as a dermal pigmentation characterizing the ideal courtly heroine. In the poem, the Man in Black offers an extended blazon of his deceased lover’s body that details her “white handes” (955) and her neck that is “whit [and] smothe” (942). Yet “White” in the poem is both a physical attribute and the literal name of the lady. And as a proper name that “maps” the topological spaces of a courtly heroine’s body, “White” also functions as a toponym (place-name) and must be understood in relation to other toponyms articulated by Chaucer in the poem. The Man in Black recalls that White would not send her suitors to “Walakye, / To Pruyse, and into Tartarye” (1024-25). As Christian Jacob argues, toponymy engages with an individual’s emotions and memory. And Mary Carruthers notes that medieval memory schemes often involve the “tagging” of materials both schematically and emotionally (60). Toponymy, therefore, becomes a device for tagging the memory of the Man in Black. Whiteness, too, is deployed as a trope for medieval memorial practices in the Book of the Duchess: the “whit wal or a table” (780) of the Man in Black in his early youth conjures up the traditional metaphor of memory as a writing surface, and the “long castel, with walles white” (1318) at the end of the dream invokes the architectural model of memory theorized by Cicero. Ultimately, it is White herself that functions as a stabilizing proper name and as an Aristotelian signifying image that seems to anchor memory; this is the hope of the Man in Black. But if in recollecting, one might move along the Aristotelian chain of associations from milk to white to

air, then the recollection of White, as performed by the Man in Black, is fundamentally problematic. For all his remembering, the Man in Black is unable to move beyond “white” towards a potential consolation. Endlessly recalling White, he engages in what Anne Carson calls the “economy of the unlost,” an enterprise of temporal and spatial pointing, of “bring[ing] the absent into the present” (38). Ostensibly, the Book of the Duchess both points to and quests after an unlost “White-ness” that can map not only a woman’s body but “courtliness” itself, an international French-inspired high culture exemplified in writers such as Machaut and Froissart. As Chaucer’s first major poem, the Book of the Duchess is a hybrid work steeped in the French tradition yet also grounded in its “Englishness.” If the Book of the Duchess begins with a map of courtliness defined through French-inspired cultural artifacts, such as the Romance of the Rose or White herself, it ends up going to the “elsewhere” of a white castle “on a ryche hil” (1319) that cryptically gestures towards the “home” that is England. While the paralyzed Man in Black continues his associational chain-like mapping of a universalizing courtliness, the mobile Dreamer anticipates a newer, proto-capitalist, and proto-national mapping of reality, one in which whiteness marks the cultural identity of English vernacularity as distinct from, yet potentially equal to, the French.

Mapping the Toponymic Chain of Whiteness

Central to the work of memorialization in the Book of the Duchess is the figure of White. Peter Travis, in his reading of the poem, has focused on the problematic status of “White” as a narrative trope, a linguistic sign, and a proper noun.⁴ Looking at what he identifies as the “controlling metalinguistic program” (“White” 2), Travis draws attention to three interrelated moments of linguistic confusion in the poem: the incomprehension of the Chaucerian “I,” the fluid polysemy of the Middle-English “fers,” and the *méconnaissance* of the paronymic “white.” Medieval philosophy and linguistic theories, Travis argues, form the necessary intellectual

contexts for understanding the status of “being white” in Chaucer’s elegy. The works of Duns Scotus, William Ockham, and Jean Buridan provide the medieval continuation and further elaboration of classical discourses on linguistic signification through the various verbal configurations of the word “white” (*albus*). Chaucer’s evocation of “white,” as a result, conjures the philosophical debate over the essence and efficacy of signs as the nexus of the signifier and the signified. And superimposed on the discourse of “white” is the metalinguistic game of chess, itself a trope for engagement with the philosophical “game” of signification. Travis, utilizing contemporary psychoanalysis, further contends that the semiotic game in the Book of the Duchess can be understood through psychoanalysis’s theorization of desires and drives. The subjectivity of the speaking Chaucerian “I”—variously configured and articulated by both the Dreamer and the Man in Black throughout the poem—constitutes the sublimely absent “nothing.” And this lack, for Travis, is embodied and emplaced in the figure “white” that functions as *l’objet petit* of Lacan. Ultimately, the very negation, lack, indeterminacy, and failure in the Book of the Duchess constitute Chaucer’s own acknowledgement of the strategy of consolation inherent in the elegy. Rather than immersing in the realm of the abject, subjectivity, through its failure to fully name or know with certainty, finds an instructive path towards the possibility of consolation.

While Travis’s important study investigates the philosophical and linguistic contexts behind Chaucer’s maneuvers of “white” in the Book of the Duchess, I would like to extend the examination of “proper naming” to other proper nouns in the text. Specifically, I would like to look at Chaucer’s articulations of toponyms, or place-names. As Christian Jacob, a French theorist of cartography, notes, toponymy is always already “a forging of proper names” (210). The Book of the Duchess exhibits a self-conscious impulse towards the mapping and naming of spaces, as well as the localizing of bodies and memories. To dream, or to “go” to sleep in this poem, is itself a spatializing act. The Middle English “gon (to) slepen,” “wenden to (for to) slepen,” and “yeden to slepen” all denote the act of going to sleep.⁵

As he enters his dream, the Dreamer is busily “mapping out” the bedchamber, the forest, and the location of the Man in Black (445-47). And though stationed at a tree, the Man in Black is nonetheless engaged in his own production of spatial expansion through the practice of toponymy. In his portrayal of his lady, he notes that she would not give her suitors false hope,

Ne sende men into Walakye,
To Pruyse, and into Tartarye,
To Alysaundre, ne into Turkye,
And byd hym faste anoon that he
Goo hoodless into the Drye Se
And come hom by the Carrenar. (1024-29)

Later, the Man in Black proclaims that his love for White is above “al the rychesse / That ever was in Babyloyne, / In Cartage, or in Macedoyne, / Or in Rome, or in Nynyve” (1060-63).⁶ The Man in Black’s litanies of toponyms are not only rhetorical flourishes but cartographical renderings as well. As Evelyn Edson points out, early medieval maps, such as the one on folio 64r of British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A. XII containing Isidore’s *De natura rerum* from tenth-century England (fig. 3), sometimes take the form of what she terms the “list map” (*Mapping* 5). The list map has the basic T-O cartographic frame, and it groups toponyms in “a geographically suggestive way” (Edson, *Mapping* 5). On the map in Cotton MS Vitellius A. XII., the names of the provinces or countries in each continent are listed. In addition, the diagram within the list map “might have served as a memory aid, the visible form helping the student to sort out and recall the list of names” (Edson, *Mapping* 6). Jacob also observes that the medieval *mappaemundi*, up to the twelfth century, are frequently “a simple graphic equivalent of a list of countries, just as the list can be a substitute for the map” (207). In his listing of toponyms that create a “virtual map” within the poem, the Man in Black turns himself, the Dreamer, and his audience into “map readers” whose eyes are “guided by memory and habit” (Jacob 209).

The practice of toponymy in the *Book of the Duchess* is intimately linked to the poem’s practices of memory. Mary Carruthers has noted that the poem is “a memory poem requiring memory-work on the part of all its participants—dreamer, characters, and audiences within and

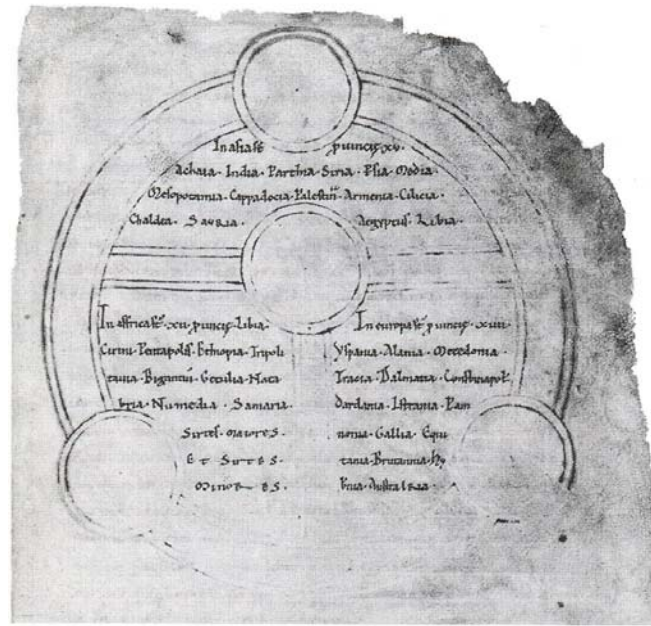


Fig. 3. A “list map.” Isidore’s *De natura rerum*. London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A. XII, f. 64r.
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without the poem” (“Mnemotechnique” 68). Tracing the history of medieval practices of memory, Carruthers notes that medieval memory schemes involve the “tagging” of materials: “Successful memory schemes all acknowledge the importance of tagging material emotionally as well as schematically, making each memory as much as possible into a personal occasion by imprinting emotional associations” (Book 60). Toponymy, as figured in the *Book of the Duchess*, becomes a device for the Man in Black to “tag” his memory of White.

As Jacob argues, toponymy engages with both collective memory and the individual’s “emotional landscape and biographical memory” (234). In other words, the toponym invites the individual “reactivation” of memories that have been associated with it. For the Man in Black, Alexandria and Tartary are not empty place-names but names that are linked directly to his memory of his lady’s virtues.⁷ And for the audience of the poem, these toponyms allude to the conventions of courtly love. Scott Westrem argues that this particular list of toponyms uttered by the Man in Black “refers to a convention of the courtly love tradition in which a woman explicitly

or implicitly makes her favour contingent on a knight's valiant chivalric service" (212).

Toponymy thus effects a "virtual mapping" of the courtly, an international French-inspired high culture—exemplified in the writings of poets such as Jean Froissart and Guillaume de Machaut—to which Chaucer responds. Rather than constructing a list map for the mind's eye, the Man in Black is more interested in plotting a "map" of courtliness within which he could locate himself. Specifically, the Man in Black's allusions to Prussia and Tartary echo these lines from Machaut's Le Dit dou Lyon: "But among the true lovers are those who fight abroad for their lady's honour from Cyprus to Alexandria . . . to the Dry Tree . . . to Prussia . . . to Tartary, among very many other places" (69). Another late medieval analogue can be found in Book 4 of John Gower's Confessio Amantis: "So that be londe and ek be schipe / He mot travaille for worschipe / And make manye hastyf rodes, / Sometimes in Prus, sometime in Rhodes, / And sometime into Tartarie" (1625-29).

Central to the memory-work of the Book of the Duchess are not only toponymic tags but images. For Aristotle, and many later thinkers, memory requires the production and retention of "images" (Carruthers, Book 51). Memory images, produced in the emotional (sensitive) part of the soul, then "impress" on the surface of the receiving organ (Carruthers, Book 49). Hugh of St. Victor, in the twelfth century, theorizes:

It is a great value for fixing a memory-image that when we read books, we study to impress on our memory . . . the color, shape, position, and placement of the letters . . . in what location (at the top, the middle or bottom) we saw [something] positioned . . . Indeed I consider nothing so useful for stimulating memory as this.
(qtd. in Carruthers, Book 9)

In the Book of the Duchess, White functions as the signifying image that anchors memory; this is the hope of the Man in Black.

And more than a proper name that imagistically signifies the work of memory, "White," I would argue, is also a toponym that names a woman's body that exists, or rather, existed, in space. The Man in Black offers an extended blazon of White's body that details her "white handes" (955), her neck that is white and smooth (942), and other parts of her well-proportioned

body.⁸ “White,” through the virtue of its proper name, signifies both a spatialized body and a map of that body. The practice of superimposing the map and the body, blurring the boundaries between the two, was common in medieval cartography. On many medieval *mappaemundi*, such as the mid-thirteenth-century Ebstorf Map and the early fourteenth-century Lambeth Map from Nennius’ Historia Britonum, maps of the known world are depicted with the body of Christ superimposed—Jesus’ head is oriented to the east, his hands to the north and south, his feet to the west, and his navel signifies the city of Jerusalem. Another medieval example, perhaps an extreme case, are the works of Opicinus de Canistris (1296-1355), a scribe who worked at the papal court at Avignon. Fusing the new portolan charts of the fourteenth century and the older T-O *mappaemundi*, Opicinus drew a series of “maps” in which Europe and North Africa literally become the figures and features of men’s and women’s bodies. For Opicinus, the body is simultaneously a schema of the cosmos, the physical landscape, and the self.⁹

Matthew H. Edney, in his discussion of maps and the female body, argues that the female body can be treated and manipulated like a map (86). It is thus possible in the Book of the Duchess to read White’s body cartographically. Each of her body parts, exquisitely and fetishistically described by the Man in Black, can be read as a “textual chorography” that mirrors chorography’s techniques of illustrating and describing particular regions or districts on a visual map.¹⁰ And like that of toponyms, the mapping in the Book of the Duchess is not simply of the topological spaces of a woman’s body, but of the larger French style that provides a codified “map” of universal courtliness.¹¹ Chaucer’s blazon of White draws heavily on Machaut’s depiction of the ideal courtly heroine in Le Jugement du Roy de Behaigne:

Car si chevel resembloient fil d’or
 Et n’estoient ne trop blond ne trop sor;
 Son front estoit
 Blanc et poli, ne fronce n’y avoit,
 Sanz vice nul compassé si a droit
 Que trop large n’estoit, ne trop estroit. (302-07)

[Her hair was like strands of gold, neither too blond nor too brown; her forehead was white and smooth, unwrinkled, perfectly formed without fault, so that it was neither too

broad nor too narrow.] (Wimsatt and Kibler 74)

* * * * *

Et a briefs mos,
Blanche com noif, polie, de beau gros
Fu sa gorge, n'y ot fronce nē os;
Et s'ot beau col don't je la prise et los.

Aussi est drois
Que je parle de ses bras loncz et drois
Qui estoient bien fais en tous endrois,
Et si avoit blanches mains et longs dois.

A mon devis
Avoit let saim blanc, dur, et haut assis,
Poignant, rondet, et si estoit petiz,
Selon le corps, gracieux et faitiz. (360-71)

[To speak briefly, her throat was white as snow, smooth, of pleasing shape, without prominent bone or wrinkle, and she had a lovely neck for which I prized and esteemed her. It's also proper that I speak of her long, straight arms, which were shapely in every part; and she had white hands with slender fingers. Her breasts were just to my liking: white, firm, and high set, pointed, rounded, and small, in perfect accord with her body, graceful and proportioned.] (Wimsatt and Kibler 78)

* * * * *

Delié cuirien
Blanc et souëf avoit, sur tout rient
Resplendissant, si c'on s'y mirast bien. (388-90)

[She had white, soft, and delicate skin, outshining everything, so that one marvelled at it.] (Wimsatt and Kibler 78)

Helen Phillips has observed that in the Man in Black's blazon of White, Chaucer's "reliance on art rather than nature gives the portrait a fixity . . . which here create[s] an image of perfection, an icon of beauty, goodness and graciousness" (33). The iconic quality of the courtly heroine can be traced back to Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova*, in which he delineates the proper progression of describing a woman's body in writing that follows a geometric order: "Let the compass of Nature first fashion a sphere for her head; let colour of gold give a glow to her hair, and lilies bloom high on her brow. Let her eyebrows resemble in a dark beauty the blackberry, and a lovely and milk-white path separate their twin arches" (36). In another medieval example, the blazon of Helen of Troy by Joseph of Exeter, a similar rhetorical device is used: "Her forehead shines with

the whiteness of pure ivory. Her blonde hair is evenly arranged on her head. Her white cheek is like fine linen, her hands like snow, her teeth like lilies, and her neck like the white privet plant” (qtd. in Miller 378). As found in the literary blazons of Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Joseph of Exeter, and Machaut, whiteness as a somatic marker of a woman’s ideal beauty is a standard trope whose invocation signals a writer’s participation in universal courtliness.¹²

As a spatially demarcated body, the fictional White participates in the poem’s larger project of memorializing the death of the historical Blanche. In James Miller’s reading, the Man in Black’s unveiling of “his intimate memories of Blanche’s body . . . [is] for therapeutic reasons connected with the platonic eroticism of Alan of Lille” (387). Maud Ellmann, in a different vein, argues that “Blanche’s body is a map on which the Black Knight plots his grief, the outer image of the inner ‘topography’ of melancholia” (105), thereby linking the body, the map, the subject’s interiority, and melancholy. For ancient and medieval theoreticians of memory, memory-images are marked by their “spatial, somatic nature” (Carruthers, Book 63). Cicero suggests that “[i]mages are retained more easily than abstract thoughts, but they ‘require an abode,’ for ‘the embodied cannot be known without a place [*corpus intelligi sine loco no potest*]” (qtd. in Carruthers, Book 73).¹³

Each of White’s bodily spaces, like a toponym, evokes memories of her previous existence for the Man in Black. On the *descriptio* of White, Pearsall notes that “the dismembering which was the character of conventional medieval descriptions of women, as they inventoried each feature and limb, here gives way to a re-membering” (89). Kathleen Biddick has suggested that memory is “spatial, something that can be cut into smaller and smaller pieces” (Shock 171). The divisions of White’s body, hence, reflect the medieval mnemonic technique of dividing the material to be memorized into codified “bits” of information (Carruthers 7). And more than a body, whiteness itself is more broadly elaborated as a trope for memorial practices throughout the poem: the “whit wal or a table” (780) of the Man in Black in his early youth

conjures up the traditional metaphor of memory as a writing surface. The Pseudo-Cicero, in Rhetorica ad Herennium, claims that

those who have learned mnemonics can set in backgrounds what they have heard, and from these backgrounds deliver it by memory. For the backgrounds are very much like wax tablets or papyrus, the images like the letters, the arrangement and disposition of images like the script, and the delivery is like the reading. (qtd. in Carruthers, Book 28)

In addition to the tablet imagery, the “long castel, with walles white” (1318) at the end of the poem evokes the architectural model of memory theorized by ancients who conceived of architectural mnemonic as “a classical house: *vestibulum*, *atrium*, *thalamus*, and *cubile*” (Carruthers, Book 38).

Another key aspect of ancient and medieval theories of memory involves its associational nature. Aristotle, in De Memoria et Reminiscentia, postulates that in the act of recollection “people go quickly from one thing to another, e.g., from milk to white, from white to air, and from this to fluid, from which one remembers autumn, the season one is seeking” (Sorabji 56).¹⁴ Recollection becomes a movement along a series of imagistic associations. Carruthers notes that in the Middle Ages, “a common image for items associatively grouped in memory is that of *catena* or “‘chain’” (Book 62). Albertus Magnus, in his commentary on Aristotle’s De Memoria, defines reminiscence or recollection as “the ‘tracking-down’ (*investigatio*) of what has been ‘set aside’ (*obliti*) through and by means of the memory” (Carruthers, Book 20). The word *investigatio*, as Carruthers points out, is related to *vestigia*, “tracks” or “footprints” (20). And in the broader intellectual context, the *catena* is an old medieval genre of scholarly commentary that was used by monastic scholars as part of *lectio divina* (Carruthers, Book 5). For example, Thomas Aquinas’s compilation of patristic texts on the Gospels (1263) is titled the Catena aurea.

For Aristotle, the movement along the chain of memory is necessarily causal in nature, as one image leads to another. Here, I would like to borrow the term “ideoscape,” coined by the contemporary critic Arjun Appadurai, to further the discussion on the workings of the chain of memory-images in the Book of the Duchess. Though Appadurai is discussing the spatialities of

contemporary globalization, his notion of “ideoscapes” as “concatenations of images” (331) is useful for thinking about medieval practices of space and memory. In Appadurai’s formulation, an ideoscape is composed of “a concatenation of ideas, terms and images” (331). Ideoscapes are first and foremost political in nature, and they function as “landscapes of images” (330) directly conveying state ideologies and/or subversive counter-ideologies. One example of an ideoscape would be a museum dedicated to a political philosophy or national heritage, in which all the works would serve as vehicles for particular ideologies. In terms of the Book of the Duchess, the list of toponyms from Walakye to Carrenar (1024-29) created by the Man in Black not only maps a virtual courtly culture but also, as Westrem argues, come from “the political and mercantile affairs of [Chaucer’s] own day” (212). Just as Prussia at the time was under the control of the Teutonic Knights, the outpost Carrenar in Outer Mongolia signaled the need for protection while crossing the desert due to the dangers on the Silk Road (Westrem 212). What the Man in Black also maps is a series of late medieval political ideoscapes in East and West. Moreover, since memory-images are conceived of as essentially visual and spatial in nature by ancient and medieval thinkers, recollection can therefore be viewed as a journey through ideoscapes.

And toponyms, like the female body parts listed in a blazon and the images in a concatenation of memory, also forge a spatialized “list” that is a linguistic and visual chain. The drawing of a map, Jacob suggests, is “a constant movement between lists of proper names and numerical indications furnishing all the necessary points for the outline of the geometrical form and the localization of places” (231). And on nautical charts, toponyms are “only links of a chain, a list that acquires meaning only in the network of directions defined by the rhumb lines and is to be read according to the order of the coastal voyage that flicks names away one at a time or that will isolate a place, the destination, the point of departure, the stopover” (Jacob 224). Within the Book of the Duchess, this is the effect of toponymy: from Walakye to Pruyse to Tartary, from white walls to bodily spaces to White. The rhetorical technologies of lists create an

interlocking “network of directions” that moves back and forth from the ends of the known world to White, the sign of courtliness *par excellence*.

Chaucer’s use of the trope of whiteness in the Book of the Duchess, therefore, invokes not only the medieval philosophical debates concerning the nature of language and signification, as Travis argues, but also the ideoscapes of the Aristotelian chain of memory. But if in recollecting one might move from milk to white to air, then the recollection of White, as performed by the Man in Black, is fundamentally problematic. For all his “making” of texts, the Man in Black is unable to move beyond “white” along the associational path of memory that could potentially lead to consolation. Westrem observes that the Man in Black’s list of toponyms from Walakye to Pruyse to Tartary “lacks spatial or chronological order” (212) and exhibits “frenetic order” (212). The Man in Black, of course, is not literally creating a coherent visual map for the Dreamer’s mental eye. And spatially, the Man in Black is stalling and is stuck at a point, “an ook, an huge tree” (447) that is not his home. Immobilized in a forest, he shows no indication that he knows exactly where his home might be. In his earlier discussion of Fortune’s game of chess, the Man in Black depicts his loss of White as an erroneous spatial movement on a chessboard: “But through that draughte I have lorn / My blysse” (685-86). Having lost his lady to death, here figured through a spatialized chess move, the Man in Black no longer dares to move anywhere and clings to his spot at the tree. Figuratively and literally, he has nowhere to go.

But whereas the Man in Black is paralyzed by recollection, the Dreamer exhibits an incredible degree of mobility. Kruger notes that while the almost paralyzed Dreamer remains enclosed within his bedchamber in the poem’s opening, “in the dream he quickly abandons his room, moving out into the world to participate in its activity” (“Medical” 72).¹⁵ In fact, the Dreamer is marked by an impatient eagerness to quickly move on, both spatially and narratively. Early in the poem, he refuses to divulge more of his own illness and mental state but quickens his narrative pace: “Passe we over until eft; / That wil not be mot nede be left; / Our first mater is good to kepe” (41-43). If the Man in Black is characterized by his three-time refrain of “thow

nost what thow menest; / I have lost more than thou wenest” (1137-38), then the Dreamer’s refrain might be that of the word “doon.” When he first meets the Man in Black, the Dreamer reports that “this game is doon. / I holde that this hert be goon; / These huntres konne hym nowher see” (539-41). And in the final moment of his dream, he notes the hunters “gan to strake forth; al was doon, / Fro that tyme, the hert-huntyng” (1311-13). The Dreamer, once again rushing to the next ideoscape within his own narrative, ends with a brusque and almost perfunctory, if not banal, closure: “This was my sweven; now hit ys doon” (1334)

While moving through his own dreamscape in the early part of the dream sequence, the Dreamer displays a grid-oriented spatialization. As he enters the forest, he notes the evenly spaced trees: “And every tree stood by hymselfe / Fro other wel ten foot or twelve” (419-20). Although even spacing does not necessarily make a modern Cartesian grid, the Dreamer’s description here nevertheless reveals his proclivity towards geometric spatial order. And while he observes the hunt “closing in” on its quarry, the Dreamer himself closes in on the Man in Black, as he “stalked even unto hys bak” (458) and “stood ryght at his fet” (502). In contrast to the Dreamer’s occupation with the “here” and “now,” the Man in Black, fixed at the oak tree, exhibits a tendency towards the “there” and “then” as he engages in both the micro-mapping of White’s body and the macro-mapping of global spaces that exist only in a memorializing past. The Dreamer and the Man in Black ultimately inhabit two divergent spatial and temporal systems, and this difference ultimately ends in their failure to connect.¹⁶ For despite the Man in Black’s elaborate map-making, the Dreamer, in the end, does not know “where” White is. Moreover, in response to the Dreamer’s “Where is she now?” (1298), the Man in Black can offer only a surprised “She ys ded!” (1309) For the Man in Black, trapped within whiteness, can never answer the question of precisely where White is, but instead can only engage in reiterations of his solipsistic teleology, his endless divisions of “White,” and his invocations of toponyms.

Writing the Self Elsewhere

Jacob argues that the toponym is inherently subjective because it is the product of a particular view on space shaped by a particular position of the body and the gaze (204). In fact, it is “the mark of a subject of enunciation” (212). He asks: “What or who is this enunciator?” (212). I would also add: *where* is the enunciating subject, the mapmaker? As Robyn Longhurst argues, “[n]ot only is subjectivity always emplaced; it is also always embodied” (285). In the act of toponymic enunciation, the subject seeks to locate its self. “Where am I?” is the first question a map viewer asks of a map (Jacob 338). There is a fundamental paradox in the act of viewing a map, for the viewer is simultaneously “*outside* the map, in a real site of the world . . . but also *inside* the image” (337-38, original emphases). If the self is the assumed center of subjectivity, this center is never a discernible point on the map (Jacob 338). Confronted with the map’s image, the individual dissolves within his or her gaze and stands detached. Yet, as Jacob notes, it is only in gazing upon “a place where I am not, that I can become conscious of my position” (339). This is the paradox of the strange utterance by the map viewer: “I am here” (340-41). But conversely, the many figures of bodies and structures that dot the surface of maps also mark the spaces they occupy and announce the multiple locations of “here.”

“I am here,” the subject enunciates in the presence of the map. “Here” is a deictic word that points to the subject’s position in time and space. Historians and theorists of cartography have pointed to the shaping of the individual and collective subjectivity by particular spatial and mapping practices. Edney suggests that for the map viewer “to fashion a sense of Self, the emotion of the reading [is] not outward, through the map to the territory, but inward, through the map to the self” (98). And as Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift point out, “If ways are to be found to map the subject, then it is clear that many things have to be kept in mind In order to find our path through the forests, we have started with ‘the map.’ In this sense, the map is clearly a metaphor for ‘the subject’” (13).

In the Book of the Duchess, maps embody diverse forms. In front of the “map” of courtliness represented by the “walles with colours fyne / [that] Were peynted, bothe text and glose, / Of al the Romaunce of the Rose” (332-34), the Dreamer situates himself, as well his dream, securely within the realm of the courtly. In the forest, he asks a hunter “who shal hunte here” (366) to ascertain his own social position, “here,” in relation to the “emperour Octovyen” (368). And the space of “here” also defines the temporality of the present, as the Man in Black affirms his loyalty to the memory of White: “Nay, while I am alyve her, / I nyl foryete hir never moo” (1124-25). I do not wish to suggest that Chaucer, in the Book of the Duchess, is deliberately constructing a cartographic sensibility that is anachronistically Cartesian or mono-perspectival in nature. The medieval *mappaemundi*, embodying simultaneously human and salvation histories, geographical information and moral indoctrination, are not modern Cartesian maps. The Man in Black is not literally plotting his or the Dreamer’s coordinates in space. But as Victoria Morse points out, the late Middle Ages was a time of transition and growing sophistication in European map culture; a variety of map types and hybrids coexisted. In addition to the T-O *mappaemundi*, portolan charts, which were fairly accurate and used for route finding, and regional maps—in the forms of itinerary maps, city plans, and maps of properties—were gaining in popularity and authority (30-37). What I want to argue is that in a poem saturated with myriad manifestations of the first-person “I,” such as the Book of the Duchess, questions of subjectivity are always already questions of spatiality—both psychically and bodily. Confronted with artifacts and fragments of the courtly, the Man in Black and the Dreamer both seek to know and locate where each of them is in relation to a virtual ideoscape of international courtliness. “I am here” in a recognizable spatial and temporal relationship with my deceased lady, the Man in Black seems to profess.

On the localization of the subjective “I” in the presence of the map, Jacob observes: “But no sooner than I have been assured of my position than another question emerges: what do I *do* in order to *go elsewhere*?” (343, my emphases). James R. Akerman similarly postulates that the

map viewer wishes to answer not only the question of “Where am I?” but also the questions of “Where do I want to go?” and “How do I get there?” (26) In his discussion of Lacan’s theory of subject formation, Travis highlights Lacan’s notion that “the ego’s *méconnaissance* is a mistaken form of self-knowledge—a misrecognition of the symbolic determinants of subjectivity that are to be found *elsewhere*, namely, in the discourse of the Other and in the unconscious” (40, my emphasis). In Lacanian terms, Jacob’s “going elsewhere” is a move into the space of the Other that symbolically determines and constitutes subjectivity and its place “here.” That is, “[t]he subject is a subject only by virtue of his subjection to the field of the Other” (*Ego* 188). Lacan famously depicts the position of the subject “I”: “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think” (*Écrits* 166). In other words, “I think where I am not” is another name for the signifier that occupies the place above the signified, “I am where I do not think.” And if, for Lacan, “language is a presence made of absence” (Travis, “White” 40), then toponymy also operates in a similar fashion, for it is a fiction that gives names to places “whose existence must really be imagined outside language” (Jacob 210). Or, in terms of mapping, the map operates as the signifier that indicates “where I am” yet does not necessarily occupy the same space as “I am.”

For theorists of subjectivity, the figural and literal importance of space in subject formation demonstrates what Elspeth Probyn calls the “spatial imperative” of subjectivity (290). Judith Butler, in *The Psychic Life of Power*, theorizes that subjection is paradoxically both the domination by power and the formation of the subject. Working from Althusser’s notion of the subject’s interpellation through language and from Foucault’s analysis of discursive productivity, Butler argues that subjection “signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (2). In my reading of the *Book of the Duchess*, what is important is Butler’s examination of the “turn” of the subject, in which the subject in formation experiences “a turning back upon oneself or even a turning *on* oneself” (3) that “inaugurat[es] a social subject (*Psychic* 5).¹⁷ This turning of the subject is the mark of subjection when it

“exploits the desire for existence, where existence is always conferred from *elsewhere*” (Butler, Psychic 21, my emphasis).¹⁸ In terms of psychoanalysis, Butler contends that melancholia, which concomitantly gives rise to an interiority against the exterior world, produces “psychic topographies that are clearly tropological” (4). Here, the metaphor of mapping intrudes upon figurations of the social and the individual psyche.¹⁹ Turning now to the act of viewing or reading a map, what else does it mean to stand in the presence of the map except to subject oneself to its power? Indeed, it is only in *my* submitting to the logic of the map that the map, “a stable reference that grounds my identity, can show me my anchoring point in space” (Jacob 339). The subject, in all its spatial figurations, “ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation. Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a ‘site’), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language” (Butler, Psychic 10-11). If, as Minnis suggests, in the Book of the Duchess, “[t]he grief of Chaucer’s narrator is subordinated to the greater grief of his interlocutor” (Shorter 134), is not the subordination of grief also the subordination of the Dreamer to the socially superior Man in Black, a turning that preserves his subjectivity intact?

On the formation and the function of subjectivity in the Book of the Duchess, Minnis sees the Dreamer as “a cohesive device in the poem” (Shorter 113). In addition, the “I-persona . . . maintains a remarkable degree of consistency throughout the poem, and . . . may therefore be regarded as a source of its unity” (Minnis, Shorter 117). On the other hand, Spearing reads the Chaucerian “I” as providing “a point of view only intermittently, and that there are times when [Chaucer] employs the ambiguity or instability of his ‘I’ to allow the Dreamer as such to fade away” (Dream Poetry 71). Fradenburg, examining subjectivity in the broader socio-political contexts of the late Middle Ages, views the secular discourse of courtly love as instrumental in beginning “to formalize and groupify an amorous experience that would dignify aristocratic subjectivity” (80); the courtly subject is essentially the aristocratic subject. Glenn Burger, in a different critical contextualization of the Book of the Duchess, also argues that “what constitutes

this self is the acceptance of a codified and pre-existent discourse of courtly love which confers ‘original’ status and authorizes the myth of an intersubjective communication capable of endless repetition without change or diminution” (“Reading” 333-34).

Some critics, approaching the Book of the Duchess through the critical lenses of feminism and queer studies, have read the formation of (male) subjectivity in the poem as working precariously under the threat of feminization. Kruger has pointed to the striking “absence of explicit references to [the Dreamer’s] gender and sexuality” (“Medical” 75); in fact, the Dreamer is initially marked by a “non-normative, non-procreative, ‘perverse’ sexuality” (“Medical” 77). Moreover, Kruger notes that “melancholic illness, for the male subject, threatens feminization” (“Medical” 75). For Hansen, this threat of feminization is largely due to the discourse of courtly love, and the Dreamer and the Man in Black, “[e]ach in his own way, is feminized—shown or said to be like actual women, with womanly characteristics, or put in positions defined by the poem and by other discourses of the period as feminine positions, ones that women are said to occupy or told to occupy” (61). Alcyone is analogous to the Man in Black (Hansen 63), who “resents himself as rendered passive and imprisoned by love and the lady” (Hansen 62). And for Cyndy Hendershot, the feminization of the Man in Black is caused by both courtly love (1) and melancholia: “The Man in Black’s danger of being feminized is compounded by his psychic condition of melancholia which causes him to identify with White and hence subverts the conventional means of resolving the tensions between the discourse of *fin amor* and the role of traditional male subject” (3). In Hendershot’s reading, the Man in Black “literally inhabit[s] White, the feminine subject position produced by melancholia” (16) and refuses the therapy of the narrator’s talking cure.

Closely linked to the issue of the feminization of the Dreamer and the Man in Black are the forms in which their male-male homosociality is manifest. Minnis reads their relationship as largely determined by their respective social ranks, which in turn dictate a hierarchy of dominance and submission. The Dreamer is “an attendant lord, a role which is subordinate

without being servile” (126). For Minnis, the Dreamer’s function is “essentially passive; he is the receiver and transmitter of the Man in Black’s rhymes and rhetoric and, more generally, of the ‘queynt sweven’” (133). Fradenburg, avoiding Minnis’ model of male domination and subordination, reads the Man in Black and the Dreamer as a “male-male couple” (94) structured on the model of friendship. The two male protagonists “are enough alike that they can perform for each other the role of the other through whom one can recognize oneself” (Fradenburg 99). And Hansen argues that what is memorable and significant for the two men is not necessarily White herself or her death; rather, it is their own interaction (59). Yet, for Hansen, the work of homosociality performed by the Dreamer and the Man in Black ultimately does not secure their traditional male subjectivity in the face of their feminization. Male subjectivity, “like the hunt (which serves as one of its signifiers) in the poem, fails” (Hansen 16).

While I concur with critics who see a danger of feminization at work in the Book of the Duchess, I resist any rigid and exclusive identification of the figure of Alcyone, or even White, with either the Dreamer or the Man in Black on the basis of their shared experiences of melancholy and mourning. Instead of forming cross-identifications between characters through the categories of loss and grief, I would like to look at the “material remains” scattered within the poem. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian have theorized that the notion of remains is inextricably linked to the notion of loss:

We might say that as soon as the question “What is lost?” is posed, it invariably slips into the question “What remains?” That is, loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained. (2)

While loss and death constitute the foundational structure of the Book of the Duchess, it is the bodily remains of the dead that will not go away in the narrative: Ceyx’s corpse and that of Alcyone, and even the “virtual” yet already-deceased body of White. It is, after all, a woman’s dead body that is “a site of both conversation and contestation between two men” (Hansen 59). Fradenburg aptly observes that “Chaucer’s point seems to be that dazzling technologies of

transmission are always going to bring back the corpse they are supposed to talk our way out of” (Sacrifice 94). Poetry, Fradenburg seems to suggest, does not efface but resurrect the very material remainders/reminders of absence, loss and death that bring about the emergence of poetry in the first place.

The originary intertwinement between death and the work of art is deeply imbricated with the Book of the Duchess; the poem, after all, is a memorialization that does not move away from the corpse. The cadaver, for Maurice Blanchot, is the emblematic metaphor for the work of art, what he calls “the image.” Blanchot argues that within the uncanny relationship between the two, “the cadaver’s strangeness is perhaps also that of the image” (256). Spatially, the corpse, as the figure of the image (the work of art), exists in a nebulous space between the “here” and the “nowhere”:

To be precise, this basis lacks, the place is missing, the corpse is not in its place. Where is it? It is not here, and yet it is not anywhere else. Nowhere? But then nowhere is here. The cadaverous presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere. (Blanchot 256).

In the bedchamber of Alcyone, the corpse of Ceyx, animated by Morpheus, is paradoxically “here” in the room with her and yet forever “nowhere” in the realm of the living. And Ceyx’s corpse haunts the Book of the Duchess, foreshadowing the cadaver-like body of the Man in Black whose “spirites wexen dede” (489) and who “wax as ded as stoon” (1300). Unlike critics who have identified Alcyone with the Man in Black or the Dreamer, I would like to suggest a realignment that draws a parallel between Ceyx and the Man in Black. Just as the corpse of Ceyx, who calls Alcyone “ryght as she het” (200) and addresses her as his “swete wyf” (201), the Man in Black also names White (948) and calls her a “swete wif” (1037). Furthermore, while Morpheus literally inhabits and speaks through Ceyx’s corpse “as hyt was woned to do” (150), the Dreamer draws forth speech from the Man in Black. Within the poem’s homosocial milieu, the male-male speaking selves verbalize collectively in pairs, whether in the forms of a voice and a mouthpiece or those of an elicitor and a speaker; one man necessarily (re)animates another.

What thus emerge in the Book of the Duchess are various male-male couples: Morpheus and Ceyx, the Dreamer and the Man in the Black, and Ovid and the Dreamer. The Dreamer too resembles a corpse, as he confesses in the poem's opening section that he has "lost al lustyhede" (27). And it is in the Dreamer's reading and retelling of the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone that Ovid "speaks through" him. Finally, in the enmeshed and opaque relationship between the remains of death and the spaces of art, "[t]he corpse is here, but here in its turn becomes a corpse" (Blanchot 256). In this circular economy of the cadaver and the space of "here"—mutually convertible—there are bodies animating other bodies, voices behind skins. And in this matrix of detachable and gatherable voices and bodies, there are only floating, but never fully proper or adequate, identifications of subjectivities and their associative chains.

Male Parturition in White

Within the critical tradition of the Book of the Duchess, many readers have tried to pinpoint, or match up, the precise identifications of the Dreamer and the Man in Black, both with each other and with the historical John of Gaunt or Chaucer the poet. Michael D. Cherniss sees the Man in Black as "a surrogate for the waking narrator only in that they share a particular, debilitating state of mind and, consequently, have the same 'cure' available to them" (190). Minnis reads the Dreamer as "a foil against which the Man in Black will soon show to best advantage" (117). And Bronson and Helen Cooper argue that the Man in Black is a projection of the Dreamer's own grieving self (Bronson 871; Cooper, "Self-Fashioning" 62). For Spearing, the Man in Black has "a double significance. From an external point of view, he stands for John of Gaunt; but from an internal point of view he is a projection of the narrator himself, though of course on a far grander and more aristocratic scale" (Dream Poetry 59). Pearsall, too, reads the Man in Black as John of Gaunt's "poetic representative" (Life 84), what Minnis labels as "the Gaunt persona" (Shorter 131). As for the figure of the Dreamer, Kittredge notes that he "speaks

in the first person. One might infer, therefore, that he is Geoffrey Chaucer, but that would be an error: he is a purely imaginary figure, to whom certain purely imaginary things happen, in a purely imaginary dream” (48). But in contradistinction to Kittredge, Pearsall strongly argues that within the Book of the Duchess, Chaucer the poet “is not someone *somewhere else* manipulating the ‘I’ for rationally explicable strategic purposes; he *is* the dreamer, as much and as fully as he *is* Chaucer” (Life 87, my emphases).

Running through many of the recent readings is the perception of an elusive and fragmented subjectivity at the center of the Book of the Duchess. Cooper suggests that the figure of Chaucer the poet “metamorphoses, changes shape and identity, every time you think you have got him in focus” (“Self-Fashioning” 58); the poet figure, indeed, is Morpheus who speaks through the dead body of Ceyx. For Travis, the Man in Black and the Dreamer are both “‘barred,’ shifting, and at times interchangeable signifiers of the dreamer’s multiple and subjective *personae*” (“White” 45-46); the Chaucerian “I” is “the sign of a fissured subject whose incomplete identity is fashioned in large part by the incomplete identity of that sublime object which it desires” (Travis, “White” 36). In terms of gender, Hansen contends that the “internally divided, double self is specifically perceived and described in the poem as a masculine consciousness, at once defined and recuperated by its difference and separation from the feminine and imperiled by both the woman outside and the woman inside” (82).

Hansen’s stress on the particular “maleness” of the subjective “I” in the Book of the Duchess has broader implications for the fractured gender identity of the presumably male poet. For Hansen,

[t]he (medieval) poet is inevitably a figure divided against himself, unsure of his gender and how to avail himself of the putative privileges of masculinity, uncertain of the grounds of his authority, engaged in an activity that promises no certainty and no actual escape from time and loss, from history and death, from ideology and theology. (84)

And the divided masculinity of the poet that Hansen observes, I argue, can be further examined within another male-gendered representation of the relationship between the poet and his work:

male parturition. Commenting on the idea of male parturition in writing, Roland Barthes notes that “[t]he Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child” (“Death” 145). In the Book of the Duchess, the Dreamer, who self-consciously marks himself as the one “that made this book” (96), implicitly identifies with the role of a father-maker.

Male parturition posits the work of art as the “child,” and the author as the father. Yet the figure of the child/book often signifies more than just the work of literature itself, but the author’s own self-conscious figurations of his “younger” writing selves as well. Rather than engaging in another attempt to properly identify the Dreamer and the Man in Black as projections, alter-egos, or foils of each other and/or of historical figures, I would like to suggest that it might be more critically useful to consider the multiple and divided subjectivities in the Book of the Duchess as various inscribed “writing selves.” Here, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s reading of Henry James’s deliberate staging of his various writing selves provides a productive theoretical approach. For Sedgwick,

James’s most unusual gesture in the Prefaces is to figure his relation to the past as the intensely charged relationship between the author of the Prefaces and the often much younger man who wrote the novels and stories to which the Prefaces are appended—or between either of these men and a yet younger figure who represents the fiction itself. (“Queer” 7)

Uncannily, the older writer separates from and becomes in retrospect a “father” to his younger self, thereby disrupting the temporal logic of aging in which the older author is presumed to maintain the same identifiable, stable, unified, and cohesive self as the younger man from his past.²⁰

Barthes, theorizing the “death” of the Author, points to Proust’s technique of “making of the narrator not he who has seen and felt nor even he who is writing, but he who *is going to write* (the young man in the novel—but, in fact, how old is he and who is he?—wants to write but cannot; the novel ends when writing at last becomes possible)” (“Death” 144). When the Dreamer awakes at the end of the Book of the Duchess, he promises to write down his dream:

“Thys ys so queynt a sweven / That I wol, be processe of tyme, / Fonde to put this sweven in ryme / As I kan best, and that anoon” (1330-33). Yet paradoxically, the Dreamer who is going to write has always already written his work. The poem opens in the present tense in which the Dreamer describes his melancholic insomnia, but it quickly and without any explicit signal shifts to the past tense from line 45 onward, during which the Dreamer retells the story of Alcyone and Ceyx, as well as his dream of the Man in Black. It is not until the very last line of the poem that the tense shifts unexpectedly back to the present, as the Dreamer proclaims: “This was my sweven; now hit ys doon” (1334).

But what precisely “ys doon”? The word “doon” recalls the Dreamer’s persistent impatience. The very “doing” of writing has ironically already been done at the beginning of the poem; the dream proper, in fact, is presented as having already happened, as a historical artifact. Barthes adds that “[t]he Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*.” (“Death” 145). Yet in the Book of the Duchess, Chaucer muddles such clear linear distinction or progression. There is, in the end, not a clear writing subjectivity that is temporally unambiguous and locatable. For the Dreamer persona, there are only his various writing selves that are scattered in time. If one takes seriously the shifts of tenses in the poem, then there is a circling back to the “present” consciousness of the Dreamer at the end. Neither the reading of Ovid nor the writing of the dream has relieved his insomnia. Disturbingly, the lingering image of the Dreamer, after the last line of the poem, is that of one who is still unable to sleep or lessen his suffering.²¹

And just as the Dreamer divides his authorial persona into various temporal writing selves, so is the Man in Black in his recollection of White consciously (re)creating and (re)meeting earlier versions of himself. He, though still a young man “Of the age of foure and twenty” (455), is quick to refer to his “firste youth” (799) that is marked by his incompetence as both a writer and a lover, and to his “yonge childly wyt” (1095). The Man in Black confesses:

“For hyt was in my firste youthe, / And thoo ful lytel good y couthe, / For al my werkes were flyttinge / That tyme, and al my thought varyinge” (799-802). Meeting White has been the formative experience in his life as an artist-lover, as he “made songes thus a gret del, / Although [he] koude not make so wel / Songes, ne knewe the art al” (1159-61). The results of his endeavors in love and writing, each trope standing in for the other, are his “firste song” (1182) that he proudly recites to the Dreamer (1175-80) and the complaint that the Dreamer overhears upon first encountering him in the forest (475-86).

One of the most striking figurations of the Man in Black’s earlier writing selves, however, is imaged through the trope of the blank tablet:

Paraunter I was therto most able,
As a whit wal or a table,
For hit ys redy to cacche and take
Al that men wil theryn make,
Whethir so men wil portreye or peynte,
Be the werkes never so queynte. (779-84)

Chaucer’s depiction alludes to medieval mnemonic theories, as well as more immediately to the works of Machaut. In Remede de Fortune, Machaut compares the innocence of a young lover to a white tablet:

Et l’entreprene en joene aage,
Ains qu’en malice son courage
Mue par trop grant cognoissance;
Car le droit estat d’innocence
Resamble proprement la table
Blanche, polie, qui est able
A recevoir, sans nul contraire;
Et es aussi comme la cire
Qui sueffre dedens li escrire,
Ou qui retient forme ou empreinte,
Si com on l’a en li empreinte. (23-34)

[And he should seek it at an early age, before his heart turns to wickedness through too much experience; for the true state of innocence is like the white and polished tablet that is ready to receive the exact image of whatever one wishes to portray or paint upon it. And it is also like wax that can be written upon, and which retains the form and imprint exactly as one has imprinted it.] (Wimsatt and Kibler 168)

By figuring himself as “a whit wal or a table” (780), the Man in Black takes on the feminized position of the work of art, while White becomes Pygmalion the artist. Even White, though absent in death, can be conceived of as another “writing self” in the poem who has created her work in the form of a male lover. “White” is not only a proper name for the deceased lady, but might also be an appropriate name for the Man in Black. Both he and the Dreamer embody multiple “I’s” that exist in different temporal and spatial loci within the poem. Yet these writing selves also function collectively under the sign of the singular first person “I,” what Fradenburg calls “a group of one” (101). Chaucer’s strategy in the Book of the Duchess thus anticipates his later techniques of marking his earlier writing personae and works: in the Introduction to the Man of Law’s Tale, he is the Chaucer who “In youth made of Ceys and Alcione” (II.57); in the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women, he is the author of “the Deeth of Blaunche the Duchesse” (F.418); and in the Retraction, he revokes “the book of the Duchesse” (1085).

Cooper argues that the attempt to follow Chaucer’s “tracks to see where he is going is no better, for he does not follow a single definable path. Whenever Chaucer comes to a fork in the road, he has a disconcerting habit of going both ways; and moreover, whenever he comes to a corner in the road, he meets a different version of himself coming round it” (“Self-Fashioning” 58). Might not Cooper’s point be precisely that Chaucer resists representations of a single, unified writing self and insists on the confrontations between different writing selves, variously aged, who in the course of attempting to write necessarily cross one another’s paths, haunt one another’s words? In the Book of the Duchess, this is further complicated by Chaucer’s citations and appropriations of other writers’ works. The Dreamer, reading a book that contains Ovid’s tale of Ceyx and Alcyone, notes that “in this bok were written fables / That clerkes had in olde tyme, / And other poetes, put in rime / To rede and for to be in minde” (52-55). Indeed, the Book of the Duchess is “the story of generative collaborations between men: between Chaucer and Ovid, between Chaucer and the French courtly poets, and between the poem’s narrator and the Black Knight” (Margherita 122). Behind the myth of a single Father-writer exists a proliferating

network of male writing selves busily performing the homosocial work of writing, a writing that ostensibly claims the Woman in the figure of White. There is no unified Father-writer, and Chaucer shows his hand. Or, perhaps, he has never intended to hide it.

Originary Copies in English

The collision between the Man in Black and the Dreamer, at the end of the poem, moves the Dreamer out of a mode of spatialization that seeks to pinpoint exactly “where” anything is. And it also allows him finally to locate himself as outside of the Man in Black and his toponymic maps, outside of the hunt, and outside of whiteness. While the Man in Black remains stalled and stuck, the Dreamer attempts to (re)connect with the larger social world outside of the Man in Black’s solipsism. Upon the Dreamer’s realization of his “outsideness” as a subject, he must “go elsewhere,” and the dream-vision ends in a flurry of abrupt movements. The hunt is over, the “kyng / Gan homwarde for to ryde” (1314-15). But while the emperor returns to his castle of white walls, his home, the Man in Black goes nowhere; he’s unable to move “elsewhere” beyond whiteness. Earlier in his long disquisition on White, the Man in Black claims that “To gete her love no ner nas he / That woned at hom than he in Ynde; / The formest was alway behynde” (888-90). Here, he gestures towards a potential breakdown of toponymy’s usefulness and its promised appropriation of space. Whether one is at “hom” or in “Ynde,” the ends of the world, one could never reach White; White is beyond cartographical control. In the end, “White” fails to anchor space, memory, or any stable reference of “I” because as a proper name, as a toponym, “White” generates only separation and a “network of difference” (Jacob 203). No exact identification is possible; White cannot be the home of the Man in Black.

Though the Man in Black remains within his circular economy of White, the Dreamer does return “home.” He awakes to find himself in bed with his book (1324-26). More important, he is back at the scene of writing and speaks of his desire “to put this sweven in ryme” (1331).

What does this gesture of “going elsewhere” but ending up in the scene of writing signify for Chaucer the poet, the mapmaker? Geographer Doreen Massey argues that a map allows for the retracing of footsteps, but the “place of origin will no longer be the same” (125). As Chaucer’s first major poem, the Book of the Duchess is a hybrid work steeped in the French tradition yet also grounded in its “Englishness.” Commenting on the English geographical practices in the Middle Ages, Morse notes Britain’s “awkward position at the margins of Europe in the narrow encircling ocean typical of the *mappaemundi*” (40). Literally a fragment, an island, England exists cartographically like one of the body parts of the blazoned woman. But in spite of England’s existence on the fringe, Kathy Lavezzo contends that in medieval England’s preoccupations with its own existence as a “global borderland” (7), marginality still conferred “a certain social authority” (7) and a distinct national identity. In the Book of the Duchess, Chaucer enacts a parallel construction of the poem’s “Englishness” as paradoxically the “elsewhere” that is simultaneously “home.” What the poem ultimately asks is not “Where is Ceyx?” or “Where is White?” but “Where is the poetic ‘I’?” Or perhaps, “Where is England?” Or, more precisely, “Where is Englishness”?

The question of Chaucer’s “Englishness” and the Book of the Duchess is fraught with critical anxiety and burden. In her recent study of Chaucer’s dream-visions, Schibanoff identifies what she terms “the escape” or “liberation” narrative that has dictated one dominant strand of Chaucer criticism since the nineteenth century. Within this critical paradigm, Chaucer’s career is divided into tripartite periods of French, Italian, and English, a temporal series of cultural-linguistic ideoscapes through which he progresses naturally in his works. Coupled with this positivist teleology, according to Schibanoff, is a gendered and sexualized language of culture and geopolitics, one that has a “deep-rooted heterosexism of our most basic modern thinking about Chaucer’s art” (13). French “was a coded term for precious, weak, effeminate—in a word, queer” (3), while English “meant virile, healthy, wholesome—in another word, natural, that is, presumptively heterosexual” (3). Between the two geo-cultural categories, the Italian poets are

conceived as “liberators” of Chaucer’s poetry (9), which would culminate in his supreme accomplishment in the Canterbury Tales.

Reading within the escapist paradigm, John Manly sees only “thin prettiness” in the Book of the Duchess (qtd. in Schibanoff 10), and Kittredge views the Chaucer of the poem as enslaved by the French tradition (Schibanoff 10). For other critics, the Book of the Duchess is not so much marked by inferiority and effeminacy as by Chaucer’s movement away from French courtliness and towards a more “proper” English heritage. Lawton reads the poems’ narrator-dreamer as progressing from a “closed persona” to an “open persona”:

The poetic initiation which the Book of the Duchess celebrates leads to an open narratorial *persona*: hereafter, as in the last line of this poem, his voice will be that of a poet. The writing of the Book of the Duchess enables Chaucer to come into his poetic heritage. (56)

Robert Edwards, likewise, sees the poem standing “at the threshold of Chaucer’s career as a narrative poet; it is at once example and paradigm—his first long poem and his first treatment of the aesthetic problems of writing narrative” (189). And for Barbara Nolan, “Chaucer’s particular methods of translation, allusion, and adaptation represent a decisive break with contemporary French practice” (203). For some readers, the poem is already looking toward Italian influences. Edwards argues that “[w]hile the man in black holds a steady gaze backwards, Chaucer brings his project of defining a narrative structure into general accord with Dante’s” (202). Similarly, Cooper suggests that while French poetry “carried the higher cultural capital” (“Chaucerian Poetics” 31), Chaucer’s invocation of Octavian as the stand in for John of Gaunt works strategically to cast himself “in a role analogous to Virgil’s” (“Self-Fashioning” 63), thereby setting up a comparison to the Classical poets.

And despite the obvious “Frenchness” in its borrowing of source materials, the Book of the Duchess, as many readers have pointed out, has an unmistakable “Englishness” to it. Cooper observes that Chaucer is “going both ways: fashioning himself as a poet in the central French courtly tradition, but doing it in English and with a commitment to English poetic traditions”

(“Self-Fashioning” 61). Lee Patterson, citing the change in literature of fashion and the rise of *dits amoureux* in the late fourteenth century, notes that the Book of the Duchess is “the first poem to transfer this form into English” (57), an observation with which Spearing concurs (168). I would contend that if the Book of the Duchess succeeds in forming an “English” literary identity, its ability to do so rests largely on its engagement with memorialization. As Carruthers points out, “all memorials are social in their function” and “grief and remembrance work together to make this elegy into a commemoration—a social remembering via literature—of the noble lady, Blanche” (“Mnemotechnique” 67). Fradenburg extends this reading further, and borrowing Laurence Rickel’s term, “groupifying,” argues that “[a]t a time when political communities were groupifying—one might say ‘nationalizing’—queens, as ‘outsiders,’ could represent unities transcending the realm’s internal divisions” (109). For the Chaucerian Dreamer-author, White, as a stand-in for the historical Blanche, could possibly function as a cohesive device, one of the sublime objects of love for, if not the proto-nation of England at large, then an emphatically English engagement with international courtliness.

Many readings under the rubric of the “escape” or “liberation” paradigm assume that the temporal “development” of Chaucer the poet necessarily embodies a maturation process that emancipates the always newer writing selves of the poet from his older writing selves that have accumulate behind him. Yet I contend that the movement of “going elsewhere” is not the same as the act of escape; that is, the localization of subjectivity in the space of the Other is not necessarily or exclusively the equivalent of the liberation from cultural bondage. Rather than a positivist teleology that separates Chaucer’s corpus into naturally divisible phases of French, Italian, and English, a reading that rejects such neat compartmentalizations of Chaucer’s works is needed. Schibanoff remarks: “In fact, Chaucer wrote England in one way or another throughout his career” (308), for “the supposedly Gallic Book of the Duchess, localized at the end at ‘ryche hil’ . . . is far purer in its English geography than is the majority of itinerant Tales” (306).²²

Already at the outset of Chaucer's poetic career, he is doing as much English as French, or as Italian, in the Book of the Duchess.

Or, better yet, Chaucer is perhaps more interested in staging his various "writing selves" than any distinct or identifiable national-cultural phases. Gayle Margherita argues that the Book of the Duchess "concerns itself explicitly with the problematics of literary origins . . . [that are] constantly receding, 'always already' not there" (119). If Margherita's reading is persuasive, how can one know whether or not Chaucer self-consciously conceives of the Book of the Duchess as an "early" work if, already in the poem, he enacts numerous spatial and temporal differentiations of various past and present writing selves through the figures of the Dreamer and the Man in Black?

In thinking about the relationships between the various writing selves in the Book of the Duchess, I argue that Butler's work on gender performance provides a useful theoretical tool. As Butler points out, gender is a performance, a "copy of a copy," and the faith in a natural origin is only a normalizing myth (Gender Trouble 41). If this pattern of replicating imitations could be surmised about gender, might not one also attempt a similar theoretical reading of subjectivity, culture, nation, language, or writing selves? In other words, there is no essential, retrievable, or originary "Frenchness" or "Englishness." The blazon of White, after all, is a "copy" of various French poetic "copies." As it is, White is precisely the trope of the Butlerian "copy of a copy" at work in the Book of the Duchess.

The writing selves' attempts at finding the "origin"/"original" of writing, therefore, are ultimately foredoomed to futility and failure because such an origin does not exist. White is not the only "white" subject in the poem. In his youth, the Man in Black too resembled a white tablet or wall. Instead of "White she het" (948), perhaps it would be more apt to say "White *he* het," or, more precisely in terms of the writing subject, "White *I* het." As the copies of copies navigate through discourses in time and space, they form a chain of signifiers. The subject, always sliding from one signifier to another in its constitution by the Other, is "forever condemned to move

along a metonymic chain of linguistic names, ignoring the ‘lack-of-being’ in each, unwilling to acknowledge language’s inability to arrive at the real, fantasizing that somewhere in the symbolic order there may be an ideal object that will fit that inner void of ‘nothing’” (Travis, “White” 51). Here, in the poem, the idea of the chain of signifiers also conjures up the chain of toponyms. In the absence of a visual map, a “list” of toponyms becomes “places reduced to a name and deprived of space, having meaning only in the chain that connects them and in a context that is verbal rather than spatial” (Jacob 230). And the act of recollection, activated through toponyms or not, is itself a chain of signifying images.

Locating the Unlost Proper Here

The Man in Black, endlessly recollecting White, engages in what Anne Carson calls the “economy of the unlost,” an enterprise of temporal and spatial pointing, of “bring[ing] the absent into the present, connect[ing] what is lost to what is here” (38). Ostensibly, the Book of the Duchess both points to and quests after an unlost “White.” The Man in Black confesses: “while I am alyve her / I nyl foryete hir never moo” (1124-25). But as a proper name, “White” is also deeply implicated, according to Burger, in an interplay between “proper naming” and “deictic pronominal reference” in the poem (“Reading” 334n19); that is, the Dreamer and the Man in Black can constitute their subjectivity only in terms of “I” and “you,” in an exchange mediated by the seeming stability of “White” as a proper name. And this “I,” sharing the deictic nature of the adverb “here,” is itself unstable yet ineradicable. More than “White,” what both the Man in Black and the Dreamer try to remember is their respective self, their “I”: this is what’s truly unlost in the Book of the Duchess. The Dreamer’s final question—“Where is she?”—might really be masking the true question to which he seeks the answer: “Where am I?” Or, the question of how to locate and reach White is the question of how to locate and reach the self.

Ultimately, the Book of the Duchess does locate “White,” not as a proper name embodied in a person, but as property, “a long castel with walles white, / Be Seynt Johan, on a ryche hil” (1318-19). Margaret Gelling, in her study of personal names in English toponyms, notes that the list of feminine uncompounded names in Old English include *Hwīte* (163). Moreover, “[t]he stock of words used in Old English personal names includes adjectives, like *hēah* ‘high’ and *hwīt* ‘white’; and this also makes for ambiguity in place-names, as many of these adjectives could be applied to topographical features, and some, like *hwīt*, to buildings” (165). I argue that White, in her embodiment of the enigmatic nature of the proper name, also exhibits a similar spatial and architectural ambiguity.²³ Ellmann observes that “[t]he puns on Lancaster and Richmond have already shown how closely proper names ally themselves to place and property. Blanche’s name is built into the very walls that define the limits of her family’s property” (105). Chaucer’s move from the naming of proper names to the naming of properties enacts the propensity of the toponym to occupy “a portion—even if infinitesimal—of the space that it claims to name” (Jacob 202); the toponym is “a signature, a claim of precedence and of symbolic ownership” (Jacob 205). “White,” the quintessential proper name that is also a toponym, signifies the poem’s strategy of appropriating territories.²⁴

The Man in Black recalls that White “loved so well hir owne name” (1018). While alive, she was marked by a nominal narcissism that is a figure “for the propriety of discourse: the name’s love of its referent, and the referent’s chastity to its name” (Ellmann 105).²⁵ Ellmann further elaborates on White’s relationship to proper names, propriety, and properties:

In loving her own name, Blanche logically must love her namelessness, her own blancheur: it is as if the name must be erased in the perfection of its own propriety. But is it not through *whiting out* the name of woman that patrilineal properties must always institute themselves? Namelessness enables women to circulate between the names and properties of men. Blanche herself, as her name implies, has no intrinsic properties: she represents the currency through which names, places and properties are realigned. (105, my emphases)

Ellmann’s reading draws on Gayle Rubin’s theory of the traffic in women, and she contends that “White” is a feminine sign which reveals that “[w]oman’s place is to be out of place, perpetually

displaced by a discourse that depends on her effacement” (100). It is through her death, her literal disappearance, that White enables the displacements of proper names with properties. Moreover, “White,” as a proper name, exposes the homosocial competition between men over proprietary possessions. Ironically, neither the Dreamer nor the Man in Black is finally able to claim possession of the “long castel with walles white” (1318); the Dreamer awakes upon the vision of the castle, while the Man in Black simply vanishes from the narrative. It is “this kyng” (1314)—perhaps a reference to Octavian, who in turn might stand in for the historical John of Gaunt—who “Gan homwarde for to ryde” (1315) toward the castle.²⁶

Extending the poem’s play of the proper to its broader engagement with language and signification, Ellmann suggests that White’s nominal narcissism emblemizes “a different and related form of regulating property,” and that White represents “the proper meaning of words, the identity between the name and what it names” (105). This is possible because of White’s original and originary effacement. Jacques Derrida, whom Ellmann channels, contends that “proper names are already no longer proper names, because their production is their obliteration, because the erasure and the imposition of the letter are originary, because they do not supervene upon a proper inscription” (“Violence” 109). And more generally, “[f]or writing, obliteration of the proper classed in the play of difference, is the originary violence itself” (Derrida, “Violence” 110). Situating the simultaneous production and destruction of the proper in writing, Derrida’s argument is a direct response to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism, as well as to Rousseau to whom Lévi-Strauss traces his lineage, that posits a seemingly universal and recoverable structure of the proper, what Derrida calls Rousseau’s “eschatology of the *proper* (*prope*, *propius*, self-proximity, self-presence, property, own-ness)” (“Violence” 107, original emphases).²⁷

But while Derrida’s deconstruction of the structuralist theory of the proper remains a powerful reading, his notion that writing is the paradoxical production and obliteration of the proper might not fit so easily or comfortably within medieval practices of writing and spatializing of identities and properties. Daniel Lord Smail has shown that, in the Middle Ages, records of

landed properties almost never included visual or graphic means that produced what would be recognized today as “maps” of properties or estates. Instead of obliterating the proper, medieval writing constituted the sole production of the proper both as a form of identity and as a place of possession. The “mapping” of the proper, for the Middle Ages, was accomplished almost entirely through written language. Smail notes: “every one of the hundreds of thousands of property conveyances extant from medieval Europe included a clause identifying the location of the property by means of *words alone*” (6, my emphases).²⁸ Morse, similarly, observes that “many functions accomplished in other periods by means of maps (the description of landed possessions, for example) were most often handled in the Middle Ages through written lists and descriptions” (38).²⁹ And within the broader cultural context of medieval cartography, P. D. A. Harvey has remarked that in the Middle Ages, “the normal way of setting out and recording topographical relationships was in writing, so in place of maps we have written descriptions: itineraries, urban surveys, field terriers, and so on” (464). More so than modern practices, medieval linguistic mappings of properties and identities demonstrate Sylvia Tomasch’s notion of “the reciprocal process of textualization and territorialization” (Text 5).

Smail argues for the examination of the linguistic mappings of both property and people together “because the technologies used to map the one are readily available for the mapping of the other” (8). Within what Smail identifies as “vernacular linguistic cartography,” the medieval city was “made of people and the landmarks that impinged on [the] consciousness . . . [and residents] used both people and landmarks in their navigational conventions” (14). I would argue that the medieval spatial imaginary of people and landmarks, as well as the fluid mapping of both, is evident in Chaucer’s Book of the Duchess. While the Man in Black maps White as a collective assemblage of body parts and attributes that constitute a whole person, the Dreamer points to a landmark, the “long castel with walles white” (1318) that looms within his dreamscape.

Critics, such as Helge Kökeritz and Walter W. Skeat, have identified “walles white” (1318) as an oblique reference to the historical Blanche, “Seyn Johan” (1319) as John of Gaunt’s

name-saint, and “ryche hil” (1319) as a reference to Gaunt as the earl of Richmond in Yorkshire. Skeat notes that the “long castel” (1318) is Windsor Castle (191), whereas Frederick Tupper suggests that it could also allude to Yorkshire Richmond (or “Richemont”) that Chaucer might have visited in his life (251).³⁰ What is significant here is Chaucer’s representation of this architectural landmark as a walled castle, reflecting medieval cartography’s practice of representing cities “schematically by their walls and towers or in profile views with buildings shown in elevation” (Smail 2). Harvey calls the image of the city wall on maps with a bird’s-eye view as “the city ideogram of ancient origin” (476).³¹

If Chaucer’s mapping of the white castle reflects the medieval representational devices of vernacular linguistic cartography and of the city ideogram, his strategy is an act of “archiving” both the proper name of “White” and the property of the castle within the memorial project of the Book of the Duchess. Medieval archives, Smail contends, “were first and foremost the archives of social memory” (26). In the absence of a universal, official, Cartesian standard of mapping properties, late medieval agents of record often used verbal descriptions “to jog their memory” (Smail xii). Individual identity or entity, as Smail suggests, “was still signified more by social memory than by verbal devices” (9). This human reliance on social memory points to the very “constructedness” of maps, visual or linguistic, that underlies all spatial endeavors—be they concerned with subjectivity or property. Tomasch notes that “[m]aps are similarly rule-bound fictions through which we read the worlds they present. Symbol becomes fact, ideology becomes axiom, and maps not only define the landscape but become their own visible interpreters” (*Mappae Mundi* 214). But if symbols become facts, and maps become their own interpreters, then what Chaucer stages in the Book of the Duchess is the process through which proper names become identified as properties that retrospectively emerge in turn as the key to the social memories of individual proper names.

The play of the proper within the Book of the Duchess circles back to the diverging temporal and spatial frameworks of the Dreamer and the Man in Black. Throughout the poem,

the Dreamer is busy naming properties—the bedchamber, the forest, the castle, the rich hill—without engaging in too much naming of specific proper names (toponyms or not). On the other hand, the Man in Black is busy naming proper names, especially toponyms, without too much interest in the naming of properties. Whereas the Dreamer is the self-declared “I, that made this book” (96), the Man in Black confesses that he “lakketh both Englyssh and wit” (898).³² And while the Dreamer maps local English landed properties (Richmond, Windsor Castle), the Man in Black charts out the globalizing French courtly culture. The two men, as writing selves, are namers of the proper, mapmakers, subject enunciators, and memory archivists. Yet curiously, the Dreamer and the Man in Black do not name themselves, nor do they ask of each other’s proper names. They can name only others in the chain of proper names: Ovid, Pythagoras, Socrates, and so on and so forth.

On the deictic gestures of proper naming, Derrida notes: “[I]t should perhaps be asked if it is any longer legitimate to refer to the pre-nominal ‘property’ of pure ‘monstration’—pointing at—if pure indication, as the zero degree of language, as ‘sensible certitude,’ is not a myth always already effaced by the play of difference” (*Grammatology* 336n6). The “here” of proper pointing, Derrida exposes, is only an illusion; there is, Butler might add, no original essence behind the proper name: pointing only keeps on pointing. For Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “[t]he proper name does not indicate a subject; nor does a noun take on the value of a proper name as a function of a form or a species” (264).³³ Through its status as a proper name, “White,” as Burger points out, is initially conceived by the Man in Black as embodying the “stabilizing power of ‘proper’ naming” (“Reading” 334). But within the poem’s game of naming and namelessness, what precisely is being pointed at behind “White”? A tablet? A body? A wall? A woman’s cadaver? Caught as the Dreamer and the Man in Black are in the endlessly deictic textual mirrors, one senses that it might be safer to remain nameless, or at the very least, coy about revealing too many exact names.³⁴ At the opening of the poem, the Dreamer’s illness remains unnamed and unnamable: “Myselven can not telle why / The sothe” (34-35); and his

“phisicien but oon” (39) is unnamed. The Dreamer is known simply as the “I, that made this book” (96): a bookmaker becomes his chosen “proper” identification. Barthes, reflecting on the nature of the writing subject, suggests that “[w]riting is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away” (142), and that “the author is never more than the instance of writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance of saying *I*” (145). If memory informs the poetic endeavor in the Book of the Duchess, then poetic continuity is “always in danger of disappearing” (Margherita 121). Obsessed with textual production, both the Man in Black and the Dreamer can only hope that by remaining stubbornly nameless, their “I” will last so long without slipping into the all-signifying yet all-effacing “White.”

Judith Halberstam remarks that “to be unlost is to exist in that space between retrieval and obliteration where erasure waits on one side and something well short of salvation waits on the other side” (47). In the Book of the Duchess, the Chaucerian “I,” remembering, surviving, and writing however mournfully, must wander to an “ideoscape of elsewhere” constituted by a vernacular spatiality that is nonetheless internationally inflected—distinct from, yet potentially equal to, the French. If the poem begins with a “map” of courtliness defined through French-inspired cultural artifacts, such as the Romance of the Rose or White herself, it ends up going to the elsewhere of a white castle “on a ryche hil” (1319) that cryptically gestures towards the home that is England. While the Man in Black continues his associational chain-like mapping of a universalizing French style, the grid-oriented Dreamer anticipates a newer proto-national mapping of reality.

And if, as Ardis Butterfield argues, “English” is an unstable and capacious category (63-64), it nevertheless remains unlost, for in the Book of the Duchess, “English” is still in process, in the present subjective exploration of the “I” that moves towards its own localization and also beyond to an elsewhere. When the Man in Black confesses that he “lakketh both Englyssh and wit” (898), what he truly lacks is a proper language, just as he is defined by his irreversible lack of White. Despite all his mapping of spaces, the Man in Black, haunted by memory, can only

claims: “I was *here*,” in an ideally courtly union of love with White. In contrast, the Dreamer-poet unabashedly points towards his own writing and his word play with proper names and toponyms—the “Seynt Johan” (1319) that is John of Gaunt and the “ryche hil” that is Richmond. Yet in the poem, “White” is never explicitly identified by Chaucer as the proper sign of “Englishness” or “England.” There is only an uncanny concatenation of the proper: from proper names to properties. “I am here,” the Dreamer-poet seems to proclaim, and “now hit ys doon” (1334).

Notes

¹ Dante, Paradiso (31.64).

² Judith Butler, The Psychic Life of Power, p. 21.

³ Paul Strohm, using theories of communication, suggests that “the dream is not only a consolation to John of Gaunt for his loss of Duchess Blanche, but an exploration of Chaucer’s own existing and potential relations with Gaunt, in a form at once tactful and quietly self-promotional” (52).

⁴ For studies of medieval onomastics, see David Postles and Joel T. Rosenthal. Postles argues that “names particularly, but not exclusively, in the medieval period thus belonged partly to the symbolic field (the cultural world) and partly to the social order (through their meanings for kinship and spiritual kinship” (Naming the People 5). Moreover, by around 1350, the stabilization of bynames into hereditary surnames (family names) in England began to take place (Naming the People 7).

⁵ See MED, s.v. “slepen,” 2(b).

⁶ For classic studies of Chaucer’s toponyms in the Book of the Duchess, see John Livingston Lowes and Francis P. Morgan.

⁷ Hugh of St. Victor’s “*De arca Noe mystica* is a cosmography—a combination of *mappa mundi* and *genealogia*, together with mnemonics for the vices and virtues (including the monastic virtues), the books of the Bible, a calendar, and other assorted categories of information—all put together as an elaborate set of schematics imposed upon the Genesis description of Noah’s Ark. Hugh had likened the building of the Ark to the building of a medieval education, all tucked away in its various compartments with the pathways between them clearly marked—this treatise is a kind of demonstration of this governing figure, the archetypal memorial *arca*. Hugh himself calls it a ‘machina universitatis’ . . . containing both a ‘mappa mundi’ and a ‘linea generationis.’” (Carruthers, Book 232). Naomi Reed Kline notes that “[m]emory systems and memory diagrams

were an important aspect of medieval learning” (18). See also Edson’s Mapping Time and Space (159-63) for another discussion of Hugh of St-Victor.

⁸ For classic studies of Petrarchan blazons in the Early Modern period, see the seminal works of Nancy J. Vickers. Vickers argues that “the ‘I’ speaks his anxiety in the hope of finding repose through enunciation, of re-membling the lost body, of effecting an inverse incarnation—her flesh made word. At the level of the fictive experience which he describes, successes are ephemeral, and failures become a way of life” (“Diana” 275). See also Hillman and Mazzio.

⁹ For studies of Opicinus de Canistris, see Richard Salomon and Catherine Harding.

¹⁰ For studies of medieval symbolic cartography, see Marcia Kupfer, Joëlle Rollo-Koster, Keith D. Lilley, and David C. Harvey.

¹¹ See Carolyn Walker Bynum’s work on the fragmentations of the body in medieval religious discourses.

¹² For an early study of whiteness as an attribute of the ideal women in medieval literature, see Walter Clyde Curry.

¹³ Carruthers notes that “[t]he words *topos*, *sedes*, and *locus*, used in writings on logic and rhetoric as well as on mnemonics, refer fundamentally to physical locations in the brain, which are made accessible by means of an ordering system that functions somewhat like a cross between the routing systems used by programs to store, retrieve, merge, and distinguish the information in a computer’s ‘memory,’ and postal addresses or library shelf-marks” (Book 29).

¹⁴ Compare Aristotle to his later medieval commentators, Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus. Both Aquinas and Albertus appropriate Aristotle’s exemplary chain of memory but reach very different conclusions. Aquinas’s gloss follows more or less the text of Aristotle: “For instance, if we think or speak of milk, we easily pass to white on account of the whiteness of milk; and from white to air on account of the clarity of the transparent medium of light which causes whiteness; and from air to moisture, because air is moist; and from moisture we arrive at a recollection of autumn, which we come upon by reason of contrariety, because the season is cold

and dry” (qtd. Carruthers and Ziolkowski 179). In contrast, Albertus charts a different chain of associations: “The reason is that when recollecting, those who recollect come passing rapidly from one thing to another. It is as when from the memory of milk one recollects the white that is like milk in color. By white one is led to air, for the reason that white and air are in part alike, because white is a clearness that is limited and air a clearness that is unlimited. By air one is led to the moist, for the reason that the natural quality of air is moistness. By the moist one is reminded of spring, which is a warm and moist season” (qtd. Carruthers and Ziolkowski 144).

¹⁵ The Dreamer’s action is typical of medieval dream visions. See, for example, Pearl and William Langland’s Piers Plowman in which the dreamer, Will, falls asleep and dreams multiple times throughout the poem.

¹⁶ For studies of medieval cartographical practices, see P. D. A. Harvey, Tony Campbell, David Woodward, Victoria Morse, Evelyn Edson and Naomi Reed Kline. For the merging of Portolan charts and *mappaemundi* in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, see especially Morse.

¹⁷ Butler adds: “Bound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making, the subject seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent” (Psychic 20).

¹⁸ Ellmann, in her essay, provocatively asks: “Is there somewhere—always elsewhere—another Blanche, consuming the white walls of propriety in the flames of woman’s *jouissance*?” (109).

¹⁹ Gaston Bachelard relates the oneiric experience of immensity to the place of elsewhere: “Far from the immensities of sea and land, merely through memory, we can recapture, by means of mediation, the resonances of this contemplation of grandeur. But is this really memory? Isn’t imagination alone able to enlarge indefinitely the images of immensity? In point of fact, daydreaming, from the very first second, is an entirely constituted state. We do not see it start, and yet it always starts the same way, that is, it flees the object nearby and right away it is far off, elsewhere, in the space of *elsewhere*” (183-84).

²⁰ Sedgwick also points to subjectivity's spatialization in James's writings: "The writing subject's seductive bond with the unmerged but unrepudiated 'inner child' seems, indeed, to be the condition of that subject's having an interiority at all, a spatialized subjectivity that can be characterized by absorption. Or perhaps I should say: it is a condition of his *displaying* the spatialized subjectivity that can be characterized by absorption" ('Queer' 11).

²¹ Patterson conceives of Chaucer's writing subjectivity as a marginal one: "Surely this sense of marginality, of participating in various groupings but being fully absorbed by none, is related to the sense of subjectivity, the sense of a selfhood that stands apart from *all* community, that we recognize throughout his writing and especially in the Canterbury Tales" (39).

²² Schibanoff remarks that "the range of geographic reference in the Tales is vast and spills over well beyond contemporary English towns and cities to faraway European and Asian nations and back to ancient lands and kingdoms, real and imagined" (306). In fact, Schibanoff argues that "[e]ven if it was home to Chaucer, England, after all, was no more 'natural' an entity than Dante's heaven was" (307).

²³ Gelling adds that the "'adjectives in place-names may be personal names or may be descriptive of the place. These factors produce nothing worse than ambiguity" (166).

²⁴ On the relationship between the naming of women and landed properties in the Middle Ages, David Postles observes that "[i]n the changing formulations of women's *nomina* are contained the variety of cultural influences on female naming over this long term. Transitions in descriptions of women attest to the diversity of influences, and to the increasing importance of patriarchal values associated not only with males but with land and lineage" (Naming the People 125-40, 142).

²⁵ Jean Froissart, in his memorial poem to Blanche, *Le joli buisson de jonece*, specifically alludes to "La bonne dame ot à nom Blanche" (250); he also identifies her as "sa fille de Lancastre" (241). Minnis (79) notes that Chaucer's encoding of Blanche's name follows closely Guillaume de Machaut's Remede de Fortune, in which the daughter of King Jean of Bohemia is named "Bonne": "ma dame, qui est clamee / De tous sur toutes belle et bonne. / Chascun par droit ce non li donne" (54-56).

²⁶ One can also connect property to questions of inheritance. Margherita notes, “In keeping with the generic preoccupations of elegy, it also deals with the question of literary inheritance: the right to mourn, as Peter Sacks points out, implies the right to inherit” (119).

²⁷ See Derrida’s “The Violence of the Letter: From Lévi-Strauss to Rousseau.”

²⁸ Smail postulates that “linguistic maps” are “informed both by cartographic lexicons and cartographic grammars. A cartographic lexicon consists of all the toponyms or place names that speakers of a shared language attach to their landscape. These languages, in turn, configure toponyms according to a cartographic grammar, a linguistic or cognitive framework that I shall call a template. Together, toponym and template constitute a cartographic science, or a way of knowing and classifying space” (xi).

²⁹ Catherine Delano-Smith adds that in the Middle Ages “a property map [was] commonly associated with a written document” (112), and there were written descriptions of urban landscapes (24, 181).

³⁰ Skeat cites the occurrence of “long castel” for “Lancaster” in two passages of the Bruce by Barbour, Chaucer’s contemporary (Book XVII, ll.285, 852). For a discussion of the history of medieval English vernacular maps, see Daniel Birkholz.

³¹ For other discussions of the city ideogram on medieval maps, see Catherine Delano-Smith and Roger J. P. Kain (181), Thomas Frangenberg, Juergen Schulz, as well as Morse (42-43).

³² Chaucer’s Squire also confesses his lack of English: “Myn Englissh eek is insufficient” (V.37).

³³ Deleuze and Guattari theorize that “[t]he proper name can be nothing more than an extreme case of the common noun, containing its already domesticated multiplicity within itself and linking it to a being or object posited as unique” (27). Furthermore, the proper name “does not designate an individual: it is on the contrary when the individual opens up to the multiplicities

pervading him or her, at the outcome of the most severe operation of depersonalization, that he or she acquires his or her true proper name” (37).

³⁴ Burger notes: “Many readers have also tried to name the knight ‘properly’: as the Black Knight, or even more specifically and extra-narratively as the mourning John of Gaunt. Yet the dreamer cannot recognize him as anything more specific than ‘man’ or ‘knight’; this contrasts with his earlier naming of the Roman de la rose in his bedchamber or his conversation in the garden when he learned that the Emperor Octavian would be leading the hunt” (“Reading” 334n19).

Whiteness, Affected: The Object of Distance and the *Punctum* of Mourning in Pearl

“Compassion, in this respect not unlike love, abolishes the distance, the in-between which always exists in human intercourse.” — Hannah Arendt¹

“They say also concerning the whiteness of spoiled pearl that it should be cast into sharp vinegar with a carat of sal-amoniack and a grain of borax (tankār) and a grain of nitre (būrāq) and three grains of powdered Kalī, then boiled gently in an iron ladle. Then the ladle should be lifted of the fire and (the pearls) plunged into cold water and rubbed with Andarānī salt and afterwards thoroughly washed with water. This is on the assumption that it peels off the upper layer of its face.” — Al-Biruni²

In the Middle English poem Pearl, the narrator, overcome by grief over the loss of a precious possession, falls asleep in a garden. As he enters his dream, the Dreamer self-consciously observes a separation of his physical body and spirit. As he describes it: “Fro spot my spyryt then sprang in space— / My body on balke ther bod in sweven” [From that spot my spirit sprang into space / My body remained on the mound in a dream] (61-62). Here, the Dreamer’s description of the apparent division of body and spirit curiously mirrors Brian Massumi’s recent account of the embodied experience of affect. Massumi argues that “the body, when impinged upon . . . [is in a] state of passionate suspension in which it exists more outside of itself, more in the abstracted action of the impinging thing and the abstracted context of that action, than within itself” (31). The poem’s conjuration of the Dreamer’s body-spirit divide, therefore, is precisely a temporal figuration of a body affected. The dream vision, in a sense, is a passionate state of suspension.

For as much as it is a dream vision of a bereaved narrator attempting to come to terms with his loss, Pearl is also heavily invested in portraying the dynamics of affect in the temporal and psychic worlds of the Dreamer. Rather than simply accepting the literal binarism of the body/spirit divide, it might be productive to read the Dreamer’s “spirit” as what Patricia Ticineto Clough terms a “ghosted body” (3)—one that retains all of the body’s capacities for affection—for within his dream, the Dreamer persistently marks his affective conditions, such as desire,

longing, pain, anger, and awe. Many critics, reading the poem through psychoanalysis, have pointed to the centrality of the work of mourning in understanding the Dreamer's journey. George Edmondson, for instance, recently argues that mourning is the "most affecting" feature of Pearl (30), and that the poem "mourns, awkwardly, movingly, the trauma of being in language" (40). I would further add that the work of mourning in Pearl, haunted by both loss and desire, is figured as a form of affective labor that the poem engages in, so that mourning in the poem registers as an affective impingement upon the body that works productively to stall time. Thus, as the Dreamer laments the loss of his pearl (53), his "wretched will in woe always struggled" (56). In fact, the work of mourning becomes a condition of narcissism in which the Dreamer-mourner, unable to move beyond the lost object of desire and refusing consolation, perpetuates a seemingly endless replay of loss and denial.

This chapter opens with a look at Pearl's persistent blurring of the Pearl-Maiden's body and the material pearl as an object. Resisting reading the Maiden solely in terms of religious and psychic metaphors, I argue that the material status of the "perle"—white, luminous, costly, even exotic—is key to understanding the poem's engagement with the socio-economic changes in the late Middle Ages. Whiteness, as materialized in the Maiden's body and clothes, signifies not only the divine purity and virginity of the Maiden, but also, in its mixing of costly materiality and moral purity, the emerging spirituality of the urban middling classes, exemplified in the figure of the Dreamer-jeweler. I next examine Pearl's retelling of the Parable of the Vineyard within the context of the changes in late medieval time-schemes ushered in by the invention of the mechanical clock and the rise of proto-capitalism. The Parable, I contend, is crucial not only because of its religious message but because of the affective parallels that the Pearl-poet establishes between the complaint of the laborers and the mourning of the Dreamer. Both complaint and mourning are forms of affective labor that engage the body which necessarily "works" in time. Moreover, the parable exposes the Dreamer's anxiety over the precise value of his work of mourning, a labor that resists easy quantification and valuation.

Affective labor takes place in both time and space. In the next section, I draw on the psychoanalytic works of Lacan and Žižek, as well as on Edmondson's psychoanalytic reading of the poem, to examine the play of distance between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden. The Maiden, in her function as the Lady-Object, or the Lacanian *object a*, simultaneously attracts the Dreamer and keeps him at a distance across the stream. As a dividing line, the stream in Pearl also serves to frame the visual center of the dream vision: the New Jerusalem. Using Derrida's notion of the *parergon* and *ergon* in a work of art, I argue that the poem effectively maintains but also blurs the distinction between the frame and the center. The necessity of a moderate distance between the desiring subject and the desired object can be found, in parallel forms, among modern psychoanalysis, medieval religious and optical theories, and early modern theories of linear perspective in painting—all of which, I contend, are at work in Pearl. But if distance is crucial to the poem's affective labor of mourning, then the presence of whiteness complicates desire's play of proximity. In whiteness, the distinctions between the *parergon* and the *ergon* do not exist; yet paradoxically, whiteness also marks the simultaneity of the spatial and temporal binaries at work in the poem. Like the shimmering whiteness of the Pearl-Maiden, consolation is offered yet denied to the Dreamer, who must once again enter mourning.

Kept at a distance, the Dreamer is doomed endlessly to circle around what Edmondson calls the “traumatic *punctum*” in Pearl. I next examine the concept of the point in late medieval philosophical, literary, and mystical traditions. At the heart of the New Jerusalem that the Dreamer witnesses is the white Lamb of God, which, in terms of linear perspective, is the visual “centric” point within the poem. And at the center of the Lamb's whiteness is a bleeding wound, from which the stream in the dream vision originates. As such, the *punctum* at the center of whiteness is a sign of the Dreamer's trauma and of the woundedness of desire itself. The point—as a prick, a puncture—remains intertwined with the materiality of the object, manifested here as the fleshy residue of desire's wound. In the last section, I return to the Pearl-Maiden and read the Dreamer's mourning as a work of memory. As a literal and figurative object filled with affect,

the Maiden embodies the object's concealment of its history of labor. This concealment is mirrored in the poem's repression of the material production of pearls, which are almost never naturally white but are instead whitened through chemical processes. Pearl's whiteness, therefore, is both a marker of human artifice and an erasure of its history of production. And this temporal erasure precipitates the Dreamer's inability to move beyond mourning; like the Knight in Black in Chaucer's Book of the Duchess, he is stalled and stalling within whiteness.

The Spectral Body and the Object Biography of Whiteness

Pearl's affective labor of mourning is also a labor of conjuration, for the Pearl-Maiden appears, ghost-like, in the Dreamer's vision. As the Dreamer discovers the Pearl-Maiden at the foot of a cliff, he expresses his astonishment at the apparition before him: "Thenne veres ho up her fayre frount, / Hyr vysage whyt as playn yvore, / That stonge myn hert ful stray astoung" [Then raises she her fair forehead, / Her visage white as polished ivory, / That my heart is dazed in bewilderment] (177-79). Yet like the Dreamer's "goste" (63), the Maiden too is no mere phantom; within the dream vision, she is both literally and figuratively an embodied loss, a "melancholic materialization" (Eng and Kazanjian 5). And what is important here, in terms of body and affect, is the poem's persistent blurring of the Maiden's body and the material pearl as an object, a thing. While the Dreamer addresses the Maiden as "that worthy creature" (494), he also refers to her as "that precious thing" (14), his "precious pyece" (192), and the "spotless pearl" (745). The very ambiguity over the nature and significance of the "perle" has lent itself to metaphoric or metonymic readings of the Maiden as an allegorical symbol and a linguistic sign.³ While the poem does engage in plays of signification, of *différance*, the significance of the Pearl-Maiden resides not only in her status as a metaphor. One must also take seriously the poem's stubborn assertion that the pearl is both the object/thing and the Maiden. As Sarah Stanbury

points out, “the pearl lends the poem a peculiar materiality and presence; it is not just a point of departure” (Introduction 5). Or put another way, “the pearl is a pearl” (Stanbury, Introduction 6).

The recent critical turn to “things” and “thingness” provides a useful theoretical starting point for reading the poem’s play of affects through the body.⁴ This turn to materialism examines not only seemingly inanimate objects, but also seemingly animate bodies. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has pointed out that “the body is a thing among things” (163). In my reading of *Pearl*, I would like to examine the very nexus of the body, “thingness,” and Derrida’s notion of spectrality. Things, as Bill Brown argues, possess a “spectral power” (*Sense* 12), a potency, that is, the power of things to “organize our private and public affection[s]” (Brown, “Thing Theory” 7). Indeed, the lost pearl, through its temporal haunting of the Dreamer’s body and consciousness, exhibits such powers of affective control as it creates in the Dreamer “A deuely dele” [a desolating grief] (51).

Derrida, in his reading of the work of spectral conjurations in both Marx and contemporary studies of Marxism, argues that the production of a ghost is a “paradoxical incorporation” (*Specters* 159). For Derrida, the ghost has a body, though a more abstract one than that of flesh. In the production of a ghost, incorporation occurs “not by returning to the living body . . . [but] by incarnating . . . in another artifactual body, prosthetic body” (*Specters* 158). The artifactual body of the ghost is a “second ghost” (*Specters* 158). It is therefore not surprising that, in the poem, the Pearl-Maiden is characterized by an ontological ambiguity and complexity that insists on merging the body with the thing. Put another way, the Maiden (along with all her luxurious accoutrements of fancy clothes and pearls), like Marx’s famous wooden table, functions literally as a talking commodity-thing. Derrida, speaking of the transfiguration of Marx’s table from wood to table, to commodity fetish, contends that the table “becomes someone, it assumes a figure” (*Specters* 188). Does not the Pearl-Maiden also undergo a transfiguration from the material pearl to a talking woman, what Žižek would call a Lady-Object? As the

Dreamer describes, the Maiden “profered [him] speche” (235) “in wommon lore” [in woman’s counsel] (236), “And jueles wern hyr gentyl sawes” [and her gentle words were jewels] (278).

I will return to Žižek’s theory of the Lady-Object later in the chapter. For now, it suffices to note that the most visible characterization of the Pearl-Maiden is her whiteness. The Dreamer speaks of “Her ble more blaght then whalles bon” [her complexion that was whiter than whale’s bone] (212), “Hyr vysage whyt as playn yvore” [her visage white as polished ivory] (178), and that “Al blysnande whyt was hir beau biys” [all gleaming white was her beautiful garment] (197). Moreover, whiteness in the poem is frequently negatively marked: the pearl and the Maiden are “moteless” [spotless] (961). Many critics, in their interpretations of Pearl’s whiteness, have pointed to hagiographic iconography and theological tradition.⁵ The white pearl symbolizes virginity, purity, and spiritual salvation. Kevin Marti, for instance, has argued that “the shining whiteness that characterizes both the flesh and its clothing is a standard feature of the glorified appearance of believers after the resurrection” (110).⁶ And Felicity Riddy suggests that in the poem, the whiteness of the pearl signifies virginity, while the pearl’s smallness represents the virtue of humility (145). Furthermore, James W. Earl has pointed out that the Pearl-Maiden is possibly modeled after St. Margaret; in French, the word for pearl is *marguerite*. In her hagiographical tradition, St. Margaret is emphatically characterized by her whiteness and virginity, as well as her affinity to the pearl. In Caxton’s translation of Jacopo de Voragine’s Legenda Aurea,

Margarete is sayd of a precyous gemme or ouche that is named margaryte, whyche gemme is whyte, lytyll, & vertuous. So the blessyd margarete was whithe by virgynite, lytyll by humylyte, & vertuous by operacyon of myracles. The vertu of thys stone is sayd to be ayenst theffusyon of blood, ayenst passyon of the heart, and to confortacyon of the spyryte. In lyke wyse the blessyd margarete had vertue ayenste sheding of her blood by constance, for in her marterdom she was moost constante, and also ayenst the passyon of the hert, that is saye temptacyon of the deuyll, for she ouercam the deuyll by victorie, & to the confortacyon of the spyryte by doctryne, for by her doctryne she comforted moche people and conuerted to the faith of cryst. (qtd. in Luttrell 194-65)

Just as St. Margaret is “whithe by virgynite [*candida per virginitatem*],”⁷ the Pearl-Maiden, in all her white splendor, is one of the heavenly queens “coronde clene in vergynté” (767) and the bride of Christ.

Whiteness in Pearl also marks the time of Apocalypse, as manifest in the Dreamer’s vision of the Lamb of God and the New Jerusalem, which I will discuss in greater detail in a later section.⁸ What is important here is my contention that Pearl, beyond its engagement with eschatological time, is deeply concerned with the secular time of commerce and the notional value of whiteness. Not only is whiteness a symbolic embodiment of Christian salvation, it is also materialized in objects that can be appraised, exchanged, and circulated. Susan Crane, in her study of the material culture of medieval clothing during the Hundred Years War, asserts the importance of objects, especially clothing, in the formation of individual and collective identities. As Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall argue, “objects do not just provide a stage setting to human action; they are integral to it” (169). Speaking of the functions of clothing in culture, Peter Corrigan theorizes that clothing is simultaneously a public thing, an object to which things happen, and an object that provokes things to happen (435). More recently, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has examined temporality not as an abstract concept but as a material agent that attaches to and transforms objects. In Cohen’s formulation, temporality and materiality are mutually constitutive:

Like the molecules that in their aggregation give an object its heft, time is a substance. It accretes unevenly to objects, clings, seeps and penetrates, abrades. As duration and as drag, as a chain that pulls backwards and as an unceasing impetus toward futurity, time is essential to an object’s materiality. Yet just as friction or chemical reaction may erode an object’s features, may alter its substance and form, temporality can be lost as an object mutates, headed either towards an oblivion of insubstantiality or a renaissance of new use that obscures its elder lives. Time can in fact be best described as the infinite history of an object’s materialization, of an identity in ceaseless motion. Thickness of temporality, combined with the potentialities imbued by physical composition and form, ensures that an object asserts what amounts to a will as it moves through and is moved by the world. (“Intertemporality” 296-97)

Willfully moving through space and time—producing histories—objects, like people with whom they come into contact, are transformed in their changing localities and temporalities. Indeed,

there is a process of mutual transformations between objects and people (Gosden and Marshall 169). These transformations usher in the emergence of meaning. In tracing and documenting the spatial and temporal changes, a biography is written.

Janet Hoskins has observed that “people and things they [value are] so complexly intertwined they could not be disentangled” (2). And because of their intimate intertwinement, objects, like people, are inscribed with and inscribing their own biographies. In the words of Gosden and Marshall: “people and things have mutual biographies which unfold in culturally specific ways” (173). Objects are rich with “biographical possibilities,” as Igor Kopytoff observes (66). Kopytoff further argues that different kinds of object biography are possible. One could, for example, investigate the history of the production of a particular object. This biography would then be a technical one. But what Kopytoff is especially interested in is what he calls the “cultural biography” of a thing (68). A cultural biography of a thing recognizes that the object is a “culturally constructed entity,” invested with “culturally specific meanings,” and is “classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories” (Kopytoff 68). Or, put in the more Foucauldian terminology of Cohen, an object is “a temporal archive, a repository for multiple pasts and a trigger for unanticipated futures” (“Intertemporality” 197).

The figure of the pearl, as the embodied thickness of temporality of which Cohen speaks, is the temporal archive that documents not only the Dreamer’s past and present engagements with a lost object and/or person, but also the broader socio-cultural milieu of the late Middle Ages. The central image of the poem, the pearl, as Stanbury observes, “keeps the poem firmly grounded in a world of money and exchange” (Introduction 11), in which objects are subject to speculation and valuation. As a temporal archive, Pearl is an object biography of whiteness that inscribes the changing spiritual and economic culture of the late Middle Ages. Historian Lester Little has noted the shift from gift economy to profit economy and the emergence of a medieval urban culture. Concomitant with these changes was “the problem of the spiritual crisis . . . in terms of a disjuncture between socio-economic change and resistance to adaptation” (Little xi). In Pearl, the

Dreamer is identified as a jeweler whose “loss” of a priceless gem is emblematic of this historical spiritual crisis.⁹ Little also notes that as a response, the medieval Church formulated an urban spirituality, a Christian ethic that justified the activities of merchants and other urban professionals. This new theology is at work in *Pearl*, as the poet both stresses the maiden’s value as a “precious pyece” (192) who has earned her penny (614) in heaven, and uses a mercantile language to highlight the necessity of “buying” spiritual pearls, hence conflating the spiritual with the marketplace.

In her historicist reading of the poem, Felicity Riddy argues that jewels in the Middle Ages were “indicators of aristocratic taste, standing and wealth” (150). As both literal and symbolic forms of currency, jewels were not merely aesthetic but functional “objects of exchange, part of the elaborate system of gift-giving and receiving through which networks of power, reciprocity and obligation were maintained” (Riddy 150). Within the poem, the dazzling clothing and jewelry of the Pearl-Maiden mark not only the Maiden’s spiritual purity but the Dreamer’s self-conscious trafficking in material markers of class and power. As María Bullón-Fernández remarks, the Pearl-Maiden’s “dress and adornments are those of a courtly lady” (39). The Pearl-Maiden is adorned “Wyth lappes large . . . / dubbed with double perle and dyghte, / Her cortel of self sute schene / Wyth precios perles al umbepyghte” [With hanging sleeves . . . / Adorned with double pearl and trimmed, / Her kirtle of matching sheen / With precious pearls all arrayed around] (201-04). Riddy explicates that the Maiden’s “bleaunt” (163) of shimmering white “biys” (197) is a “luxury cloth worn by people of high status, edged with the most beautiful pearls the dreamer has ever seen. The white kirtle she wears underneath it has a double trimming of pearls, while on her head is a pinnacled crown adorned with pearls in the shape of exquisite flowers (208)” (144). The Dreamer, indeed, spends the greater part of his energy and speech describing not so much the Pearl-Maiden’s inner beauty as the intricate details of the Pearl-Maiden’s outer appearance. He has, Riddy wryly notes, “a fine late-fourteenth-century eye for social caste” (211). But if the Pearl-Maiden is unmistakably aristocratic in her appearance and

demeanor, then the Dreamer's precise social standing is more difficult to recognize or ascertain. If one were to read the Dreamer as a literal jeweler, as Riddy does, then he occupies a markedly lower social position than the Pearl-Maiden.¹⁰ Historically, jewelers were urban by nature of their profession because they were allied to goldsmiths and depended on their wealthy clientèle (Riddy 149). They were, in fact, part of the emerging "middling sorts" in the proto-capitalist economy of the late Middle Ages. The whiteness of the Pearl-Maiden, of both her body and accoutrement, signifies the Dreamer's social middleness and ambitions, as well as his participation in the network of material and immaterial cultural capitals. Whiteness, as produced and circulated in Pearl, is both a symbolic medium of personal salvation and a concrete object that emblemizes and normalizes the emerging proto-capitalist spirituality of the medieval city.¹¹

The Affective Time of the Vineyard

At the heart of Pearl is the Parable of the Vineyard. In the context of late medieval economic changes, the poem's retelling of the Parable further alludes to the late medieval secularization and organization of work time into fixed hours and measured units of the day, as the laborers in the parable agree to the wages of "a pené on a day" (510). In his pioneering work on the historical changes in late medieval conceptions of time, Jacques Le Goff broadly conceives of three systems of temporality prevalent in the Middle Ages: Church time, merchant time, and labor time. "Church time," for Le Goff, denotes the time of Christian salvation history as it unfolds teleologically from Creation to Christ's Second Coming. "Labor time" Le Goff explicates, depended on nature's temporal cycles to demarcate duration of labor:

The unit of labor time in the medieval West was the day. At first, this meant the rural work day, which one finds reflected also in metrological terminology, for example, the *journal* (a French dialect word for the amount of land that can be plowed in one day, or *jour*). Analogously, the urban working day was defined with reference to variable natural time, from sunrise to sunset, which was marked off in an approximate way by religious time, the *horae canonicae*, borrowed from Roman antiquity. (44)

The advent of rapid urbanization and trade in the late Middle Ages, however, ushered in what Le Goff calls “merchant time.” In contradistinction to both Church time and labor time, merchant time demanded a new relationship to the work day, one premised fundamentally on the notion that “profit implied a mortgage on time” (Le Goff 29). Time was no longer a spiritual construct or a measure of labor; now, time, like material objects, was capable of being borrowed, exchanged, bought, and sold. Put differently, time became “a prime opportunity for profit since whoever has money counts on being able to profit from the expectation of reimbursement by someone who has none immediately available” (Le Goff 30).¹² Furthermore, Le Goff points out that the new idea of temporal credit and profit necessitated an abstract, exact, and secular division and measurement of time: “Once commercial networks were organized . . . time became an object of measurement” (35). The cultural move towards secularized temporal measurement coincided with the invention and spread of the mechanical clock in the fourteenth century in the West. As Le Goff observes, the mechanical clock was “an object of amusement as well as a symbol of power for lords and princes” (49). And for medieval artisans and merchants, the clock allowed them to replace Church time with a more accurately measured and useful system of time (Le Goff 36).¹³

As influential as Le Goff’s theorization has been on medieval studies, however, recent scholars have begun to challenge and refine Le Goff’s temporal schemas.¹⁴ Chris Humphrey, for example, has argued that Le Goff’s formulations are too simplistic, contending that in the late Middle Ages, “the situation on the ground was a good deal more complex than terms like ‘Church time’ or ‘merchant’s time,’ as popularized by Le Goff, may suggest” (106). For Humphrey, time-schemes are more than mere abstract systems of temporal measurement; rather, in his Geertzian reading of culture and history, Humphrey argues that time-schemes are “narratives or ways of ordering experience that are of shared significance to a group or culture” (106). And instead of Le Goff’s supersessionist model of the history of time-schemes, Humphrey contends that the late Middle Ages witnessed the simultaneous existence of a diverse range of time schemes, such as

the length of sunlight, the time it takes to walk a particular distance, the liturgical calendar, and the mechanical clock. Moreover, in place of Le Goff's tripartite temporal system that loosely mirrors the construct of the three estates, Humphrey divides the various medieval time-schemes into the "temporal hours system," in which the length of the day varies, and the "equal-hours system," in which units of time are all of the same length (106). The widespread introduction of mechanical clocks in Europe in the late Middle Ages signaled the increasing dominance, though not full displacement, of the equal-hours system as the medium of daily time in medieval urban centers (106). Yet the cultural shift, Humphrey further argues, was not due primarily to the invention of the clock per se or to its abstraction of time. In fifteenth-century York, for instance, the civic clock provided a new method for its class-conscious and socially aspiring citizens "to organize their social life in terms of a distinctive daily programme" (Humphrey 105). At stake were not simply the practical uses to which the clock was put but "the kinds of identity that a new temporal scheme for dividing up the day could create" (Humphrey 109). How one keeps time, it turns out, defines one's standing within the social hierarchy; identity is interpellated by time.

Historically, the late Middle Ages witnessed growing attempts—stipulated in parliamentary statutes and guild regulations, as well as allegorized in literary works such as Piers Plowman—to structure the working day for artisans and laborers. As Humphrey observes, "the complaint was that these groups [artisans and labourers] wasted much of their day and did not deserve their wages, because they were late to work, went home early, took a long time at breakfast and dinner, and slept too much in the afternoon" (108). In 1495, then in the 1510s, England enacted statutes attempting to regulate work time. Here is a city ordinance on the work time and the conduct of masons in York:

It is ordained by the chapter of the church of St Peter of York that all the masons that shall work on the works of the same church of St Peters shall from Michaelmas Day unto the first Sunday of Lent be each day in the morning at their work, in the lodge that is ordained to the masons to work in with the close beside the aforesaid church, as early as they may see skilfully by daylight for to work. And they shall stand there truly working at their work all the day after, as long as they may see skilfully to work, if it be all workday; otherwise till it be high noon smitten by the clock when holy day falls at noon,

so that it be within the aforesaid time between Michaelmas and Lent, and in all other time of the year they may dine before noon, if they will, and also eat at noon when they wish, so that they shall not stray from their works in the aforesaid lodge at any time of the year at dinner time, but such a short time that no skilful man shall find fault in their absence. And at time of meal, at noon, they shall, at no time of the year, stray from the lodge nor from the work aforesaid, more than the space of the time of an hour, and after noon they may drink in the lodge. And for their drinking time between Michaelmas and Lent they shall not cease nor leave their work passing the time of half a mile away. (Adapted by Humphrey 106-07)

The York ordinance is rich in the sheer diversity of time-schemes that Humphrey underscores, and it represents the official attempt to structure, regulate, and discipline both the body in labor (“they shall stand there”) and the labor performed (“truly working”). But more important, the micromanagement of time in fifteenth-century York mirrored the broader cultural impulse towards quantitative measurement in the late Middle Ages. Joel Kaye, in his study of late medieval economic systems and intellectual thought, contends that scholasticism and the emerging money economy both contributed to the drive to quantification: “the passion to measure and quantify that characterized the proto-science of *calculaciones* quickly invaded every realm of scholastic thought, including theology, . . . not only entities that had never been measured before, but also those that have never been measured since, were subjected to a kind of quantitative analysis” (3).

Reading Pearl in the context of medieval time-schemes, it is not difficult to see in both the Parable of the Vineyard and in the larger poem the workings of Le Goff’s three temporal schemas. The Dreamer’s grief over his loss—his “doel dystresse” [grief-sorrow] (337)—is really his frustration at the impossibility of converting time into profit (symbolic or monetary) when the object charged with his temporal investment is forever lost to him. Stuck in “merchant time,” the Dreamer is “a joyles jueler” (252) bewailing his inability to recuperate his lost “perle”: “My precios perle dos me gret pyne. / What serves tresor bot gares men grete / When he hit schal efte wyth tenes tyne” [My precious pearl does me great pain. / What does treasure serve except to make men weep when he shall lose it again with pain?] (330-32) The Pearl-Maiden, as the spiritual embodiment of “church time,” rebukes the Dreamer’s secular perception of time. In

response to the Dreamer's puzzlement over her rapid yet mysterious transformation from a mere child into a nubile and saved virgin and queen, the Pearl-Maiden claims:

Thou wost wel when thy perle con scheded
 I was ful yong and tender of age,
 bot my Lorde the Lombe, thurgh Hys Godhede
 He toke myself to Hys maryage,
 Corounde me quene in blysse to brede
 In lenghe of dayes that ever schal wage. (411-16)

[You know well that when your pearl fell,
 I was very young and tender of age,
 But my Lord the Lamb, through his Godhead,
 He took me to His marriage,
 Crowned me queen in bliss to dwell
 In length of days that ever shall continue.]

Whereas Christ is able to circumvent the limitations of human time and claim the Pearl-Maiden as his bride in the eternal heaven, the Dreamer is left jewel-less, banished from merchant time, and cast into nature's time, which is also labor time, "In Augoste in a hygh seysoun / Quen corne is corven wyth crokes kene" [In August in harvest season / When corn is cut with sickles sharp] (39-40).

Helen Barr, in her reading of the Parable of the Vineyard, is heavily influenced by Le Goff's notions of labor time, merchant time, and Church time (71-72). Barr suggests that the parable exhibits three intersecting time-schemes: seasonal, liturgical, and commercial. The parable takes place "Of tyme of yere the terme was tyght / To labor vyne was dere the date" [In the time of year the season arrived, / The season which was good to cultivate vine] (503-04). And when the landlord in the parable goes to the market to look for workers "About under" (the third hour, 9 a.m.), he gestures to the importance of liturgical time in his work day. Lastly, "At the date of day of evensonge, / On oure byfore the sonne go doun" [At the time of the day of evensong, / One hour before the sun goes down] (529-30), the time-scheme is a mixture of commercial and liturgical times. In her socioeconomic reading of the poem, Barr contends that "the narrative strategies and verbal texture of Pearl are embedded in late fourteenth-century social concerns and practices" (59). For John Bowers and John Watkins, the Parable of the Vineyard is

the Pearl-poet's direct response to the problem of labor conditions in late fourteenth-century England, specifically in the context of the 1388 labor statute that sought to regulate the legitimate wages that laborers could earn. The poem's rendering of the parable, Bowers argues, "centers specifically upon the lord's right to enforce his contract with the workers" (45). In contrast to Bowers's strictly top-down hierarchical reading of the parable, Jim Rhodes, while insisting that the socioeconomic significance of the parable lies within the context of late medieval history, offers a radically different interpretation. For Rhodes, the parable does not expose any rigid disciplinary social structure that might exist between laborers and their employers. Rather, the vineyard is "the mutual ground that unites the workers and householder together" (137); growth and sustenance are dependent on the "economic salvation" of both the landlord and his laborers (138).

The agricultural context of the parable might seem an odd one for instructing the presumably urban Dreamer-jeweler. Yet what is important here is the parable's primary focus on labor and sociality. The spectralization of the commodity-thing, Derrida argues, always reveals a "double social bond" that marks both the relation among commodity-things themselves, and, more importantly, the association of men to each other, men who are associated with "the time or the duration of labor" (Specters 193). Therefore, the parable is significant not only because of issues of physical labor and fair wages, or of contracts and the lord's rights, or of spiritual labor and heavenly rewards. Rather, I would argue, the significance of the parable lies in its marking of the centrality of affective labor, that is, the fact that the body's engagement in labor is always affective and temporal in nature. What the parable highlights is not simply idle bodies versus laboring bodies, but affect-filled bodies that also expend energy to complain about their treatment. When, for example, the landlord pays all laborers "a penny for a day," those who have worked the longest "bygonne to pleny" [began to complain] (549) over the perceived discrepancy between the work performed and the time expended:

These bot on our hem con streny!

Uus thynk uus oghe to take more.
 More haf we served, uus thynk so,
 That suffred han the dayes hete
 Thenn thyse that wroght not houres two—
 And thou dos hem uus to counterfete. (551-56)

[These worked but a single hour!
 We think we ought to take more.
 More have we deserved, we think so,
 Who had suffered the day's heat
 Than these who worked not two hours—
 And you do make them equal to us.]

In his reading of the laborers' discontent, A. C. Spearing suggests that their complaint of an inequitable wage system seems "to catch the authentic note of the 14th century equivalent of the trade unionist: the journeyman protesting, let us say, against an over-strict interpretation of the Statute of Labourers" ("Gawain"-Poet 102). Bowers, however, contends that in the parable, "the relations between laborer and landlord have been rendered almost entirely unproblematic. Complaints from the field-workers are set aside. The standardized wage of a penny per day is rigorously enforced. And the landlord has the last word in commanding submission from his harvesters" (48). Again, in contrast to Bowers, Rhodes argues that the Dreamer identifies with the perspective of the laborers and refuses to regard them or their grievances as mere allegorical abstractions of spiritual truth (139).

While I have no quarrel with critics who read the parable's significance in historicist and socioeconomic terms, I would like to suggest that the parable establishes an intensely affective resonance between the laborers and the Dreamer. That is, the Parable of the Vineyard works to establish parallels between the workers' affective labor of complaint and the Dreamer's affective work of mourning. But while both mourning and complaint expend energy, their temporalities remain different in structure and function. If the Dreamer, stalled within the time of mourning, yearns for a consolation that is constantly deferred and rejected by him, the laborers, on the other hand, assume that their work time is fundamentally linear and productive in nature: X hours generates Y wages. The laborers' perception of time, of course, recalls Le Goff's notions of labor

time, whose unit of work is the length of daylight, and of merchant time, in which time is an abstract measurement of credit and profit. But within the temporal categories of labor time, merchant time, and Church time, I ask, where does mourning fit in? Is the work of mourning capable of being measured, divided, and rarefied into abstract, uniform equal-hour time? What does mourning produce besides itself? Can consolation be valued in terms of wages? And more important, is the mourner “truly working,” as fifteenth-century masons in York were stipulated to do, in the time of mourning?

The very resistance of mourning to precise quantification renders it suspect as a productive activity that yields any true value. The questions of labor and worth directly challenge and potentially undermine the Dreamer’s whole affective project. This is precisely why the Dreamer reacts so hostilely to the Pearl-Maiden’s telling of the parable. He lashes out at her:

Me thynk thy tale unresounable.
 Goddes ryght is redy and evermore rert
 Other Holy Wryt is bot a fable.
 In Sauter is sayd a verce overte
 That spekes a poynt determynable:
 “Thou quytes uchon as hys desserte,
 Thou hyghe kyng ay pertermynable.”
 Now he that stod the long day stable
 And thou to payment com hym byfore—
 Thenne the lasse in werke to take more able,
 And ever the lenger the lasse, the more. (589-600)

[I think your tale is unreasonable.
 God’s righteousness is prompt and evermore supreme
 Otherwise Holy Writ is but a fable.
 In Psalter is a verse plain
 That speaks a definite point:
 “Thou reward each according to his desert,
 Thou high king supreme in judgment.”
 Now he that stood the whole long day
 And thou were paid before him—
 Then the less in work is able to take more,
 And ever the longer the less they do, the more they get.]

If the wage structure in the parable offends the Dreamer’s rational sensibility, is his mourning similarly “unresounable”? Like Will in Piers Plowman, the Dreamer is asked to justify his visible disengagement from more productive forms of labor, as he continues to wallow in self-pity and

misery. The Dreamer's greatest fear is that his seemingly inexorable mourning, which appears unquantifiable temporally or monetarily, would generate no tangible returns; and maybe it is true that "the lasse in werke to take more able" (599). As a result, the Dreamer's overemphasis on the descriptive beauty of the Pearl-Maiden's whiteness—as sign of more tangible forms of value, be they markers of religious or spiritual capital—is an attempt to overcompensate for the inherent lack and apparent futility in mourning. In setting up questions of affection and labor, the Pearl-poet seems to gesture towards an affective economy that asserts a temporal and monetary affinity, if not exact equivalence, between the work of mourning—here literalized as a work of poetry—and the market forces of production, valuation, and consumption. And the poet further points to the body, whether the laborer's or the Dreamer's, as a site of affective potential. Bodies inhabiting time—idling, laboring, complaining, and mourning—*are* the signifiers and media through which affects move and accrue value.

The Distance of Desire

In Pearl, the affective labor of complaint and mourning involves not only measurement of time but that of space as well. According to Michael Hardt, affective labor is "the production and manipulation of affects [that] requires (virtual or actual) human contact and proximity" (97-98). Throughout Pearl, this play with human contact and literal and figurative distance is foregrounded, with the staging of the river that both tantalizingly provokes and permanently divides the Dreamer from his desire, as well as the Dreamer's constant awareness of distance and perspective. Pearl, Edmondson observes, displays a "paradoxical combination of affinity and remoteness" (35). In his initial encounter with the Pearl-Maiden, the Dreamer observes that "At the fote therof there sete a faunt, / A mayden of menske ful debonere" [a child sat at the foot of the cliff, / A maid of courtesy full gracious] (161-62). And as the Maiden draws close to him "doun the schore" (230), the Dreamer becomes ravished by the sight of his lost object.

The physical, psychological, and allegorical distance between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden, several critics have argued, is something built into the very relationship between the Dreamer and the Maiden—one that borrows heavily from the language and convention of courtly love. Bullón-Fernández notes that Pearl fuses the literary traditions of both religious and courtly visions (37), and Edmondson contends that “it is hardly surprising that [the Pearl-Maiden’s] relationship to the dreamer should be constructed in the conventional terms of courtly love” (51). The medieval discourse of courtly love, Erin Felicia Labbie recently argues, constructs the object of one’s desire as always already lying elsewhere: anywhere but “here” with the lover. Obstacles of temporal and spatial distance are coextensive with promises of fulfillment. With obstacles embedded within, courtly love insists on the ultimate unobtainability of the object. Itself a form of affective labor, courtly love is the labor of mourning, relishing, and perpetuating the unobtainable. Courtly desire, in fact, is the desire to economize desire—quantifying, speculating, and protracting it—into a seemingly endless deferral of consummation. As Labbie argues, longing is a projection of desire and a spatialization of psyche.

The complexity of the Pearl-Maiden resides not simply in her status as the lost object or being, which is of great importance to the Dreamer, but in her function as the Žižekian Lady-Object. As the Lady-Object, the Pearl-Maiden is not strictly or necessarily the lost object itself but has assumed its place; a substitution has taken place within the psyche of the Dreamer. In her interactions with the Dreamer, the Maiden functions as what Lacan terms the *object a*, whose relationship to the mourning subject alters with changes in the distance between them. At a remote distance, the *object a* appears as something missing in the subject; but up close, it functions as something that covers up the originary trauma which had engendered subjectivity in the first place. This covering up of trauma is the subject’s affective labor of desire. As Joan Copjec trenchantly states,

When we are at some remove from it, the . . . *object a* appears as a lost part of ourselves, whose absence prevents us from becoming whole; it is then that it functions as the object-cause of our desire. But when our distance from it is reduced, it no longer appears as a

partial object, but—on the contrary—as a complete body, an almost exact double of our own, except for the fact that this double is endowed with the object that we sacrificed in order to become a subject. (129)

When the Dreamer first encounters the Pearl-Maiden from afar, his confidence that the figure before him is the very thing that he has lost overwhelms him. He cries out: “I knew hyr wel, I hade sen hyr ere . . . On lenghe I loked to hyr there, / The lenger, I knew hyr more and more” [I knew her well, I had seen her before . . . For a long time I looked at her, / The longer, the more I knew her] (164-68). The Pearl-Maiden, whose presence holds forth the promise of the Dreamer’s becoming whole, becomes the object-cause of his desire.

As Edmondson argues, the symbolic order in which the Dreamer operates is identified with the pleasure principle, whose function is “to maintain the subject at *a certain distance* from the traumatic *jouissance* of the lost, impossible, material Thing” (39, my emphasis). According to Lacan,

the pleasure principle governs the search for the object and imposes the detours which maintain the distance in relation to its end. . . . The transference of the quantity from *Vorstellung* to *Vorstellung* always maintains the search at a certain distance from that which it gravitates around. The object to be found confers on the search its invisible law; but it is not that, on the other hand, which controls its movements. The element that fixes these movements, that models the return—and this return itself is maintained at a distance—is the pleasure principle. It is the pleasure principle which, when all is said and done, subjects the search to encountering nothing but the satisfaction of the *Not des Lebens*” (Ethics 58).

To the Dreamer, the Pearl-Maiden is the traumatic *jouissance* materialized and personified. And if she has a labor to perform, it is that of engendering pleasure in the Dreamer while keeping him at a safe distance from ever reaching her.

However, when the necessary distance maintained by the pleasure principle breaks down, both Copjec and Edmondson argue, the *object a* no longer appears to the subject as his lost object but as his uncanny double. Edmondson explains: “But should that distance collapse, then one experiences the unsettling feeling that someone very near, but strange—a double, a neighbor—possesses that most intimate part of oneself, one’s *jouissance*, which every subject must sacrifice in order to assume a place in symbolic order” (50). When the Pearl-Maiden moves closer to the

edge of the river that divides her from the Dreamer, the Dreamer's certitude gives way to doubt. A moment ago, he has just claimed that "Ho was me nerre then aunte or nece" [She was nearer to me than aunt or niece] (233). Now he tentatively inquires of the Maiden: "Art thou my perle that I haf playned, / Regretted by myn one on nyghte?" [Art thou my pearl that I have mourned, / Grieved by me alone on night?] (242-43) While Edmondson is careful to point out that the Pearl-Maiden, as emblem of the very *jouissance* sacrificed by the Dreamer, is strictly speaking not the Dreamer's exact double, he does emphasize the transformation in the Dreamer's perception of the Maiden's function as the psychic and physical distance between them narrows. If, from afar, the Maiden appears as an embodied being of the enigmatic object lost by the Dreamer, then up close, she is quickly (re)converted through the collapse of distance back into a metonymic object.

As the separation between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden shrinks, he is no longer interested in her as merely a fully embodied, speaking being, but as the bearer of a large white pearl upon her breast:

a wonder perle wythouten wemme
 Inmyddes hyr breste was sette so sure,
 A mannes dom moght druyly demme
 Er mynde moght malte in hit mesure. (221-24)

[a wondrous pearl without blemish
 Within the middle of her breast was set so sure,
 A man's judgment might be utterly baffled
 Before his mind might take its measure.]

The Pearl-Maiden's being thus vacillates between a figurative persona and a material object. Moreover, her vacillation is mirrored in the psychic functions of her being as the Lady-Object. Edmondson further contends that the Maiden, as the Lady-Object, both stands *in the place of* the desired thing, as evident in her continuous gesturing towards *jouissance*, and stands *in the way of* the thing, as shown in her endless deferring of the Dreamer's ever encountering *jouissance* (51). Yet as a courtly lady, the Maiden nonetheless allows for the double fantasy in which the Dreamer-lover does find the lost thing and access it (Edmondson 51). Illusion emerges as the effect of desire's spatial differentiations. Or, as Edmondson puts it, desire is structured as "a

restless movement from signifier to signifier . . . in avoidance of any traumatic confrontation with lack” (41). And in Pearl, desire’s traffic in signifiers necessarily entails the play of distance among signs. Specifically, Edmondson reads the “perle” as Lacan’s S (Ø), “a symbol pronounced as ‘S, barred-O’ and variously interpreted to read ‘the signifier of the Other’s desire’ or, alternatively, ‘the signifier of the lack in the Other’” (46).¹⁵ I would further suggest that if “perle” is the Lacanian S (Ø), then the whiteness of “perle” is the sign that allows for its marking of *jouissance*; it is the “wythouten wemme” [without blemish] attribute of the pearl that “Inmyddes hyr breste was sette so sure” [Within the middle of her breast was set so sure] (221-22). Whiteness is the lack, the (Ø), within the Maiden as the Other.

Several critics, such as Michael D. Cherniss and V. E. Watts, have argued that Pearl is modeled after Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy. In their readings, the Pearl-poet self-consciously participates in a medieval literary tradition that actively responds to and freely appropriates Boethius’s text. The influence of the Boethian dialogue form and the trope of gendered personification can be detected in the poem: the Dreamer is a Boethius-figure in need of consolation, whereas the Pearl-Maiden plays the role of Lady Philosophy, the consoler. As Catherine E. Léglu and Stephen J. Milner have remarked, Boethian consolation as a genre was popular among vernacular writers in the late Middle Ages.¹⁶ The late medieval reception of the Consolation of Philosophy in vernacular literature is marked by the genre’s absorption into aristocratic lay culture, its insistence on a rigid gendered divide between a feminine consoler and a masculine subject in need of consolation, and its thinly disguised eroticism. The Boethian consolation becomes “an object of elegant display for courtly prehumanists” and a means of reassessing the self and its beliefs and values (Léglu and Milner 6). In the Consolation of Philosophy, Boethius combines Stoicism, Platonism, and Christianity (Léglu and Milner 12). Of particular interest here is the importance of spatial relations, especially distance, in Boethius’s work. Specifically, in the discourse of consolation, Stoicism provides a recovery program that requires

the distancing of the “victim” from the cause of the upset as a necessary prequel to reestablishing their psychological well-being. . . . A change of scene [is] the first step in Philosophy’s cognitive remapping of the suffering subject. Any encounter with the cause of their suffering would only serve to undermine the curative ministrations of Philosophy and rekindle the affective associations and reconnect the memory to the present. . . . Stoicism, therefore, [is] premised upon a clear understanding of the relationship of place to mind, and of material to mental worlds. Excessive emotion could only be replaced if the suffering subject [were] displaced and the affective stimuli removed. It [is] distance that enable[s] the subject to get things into perspective. (Léglu and Milner 11)

In contrast to the dejected subject’s initial isolation and confinement, the feminine consoler’s offer of proper perspective, through dialogue, is in essence a mental remapping and a spatial shifting of the consoled’s subject position.

The necessary maintenance of a proper distance for consolation, as prescribed by Boethius’s Platonized Christian Stoicism, would find its scientific and theological parallel in the works of the thirteenth-century Franciscan Roger Bacon. Bacon, in his Perspectiva, constructs a perceptual analogy between physical vision and spiritual vision:

Et sicut distantia corporis temperata requiritur ad visionem corporis, ut nec ex superflua distantia videatur nec ex nimia appropinquatione, sic spiritualiter exigitur in hac parte, nam elongatio a Deo per infidelitatem et multitudinem peccatorum tollit visionem spiritualem, et nichilominus presumptio nimie familiaritatis divine et perscrutatio maiestatis. (Lindberg, Bacon 326)

[And just as moderate distance of the [visible] object is required for vision of that object (thus the object must be viewed neither from an excessive nor from an insufficient distance), so the same thing is required spiritually, for remoteness from God through infidelity and a multitude of sins destroys spiritual vision, as do the presumption of excessive familiarity with the divine and the [overly bold] investigation of divine majesty.](Lindberg, Bacon 327)

While Bacon is not immediately concerned with the possibility of consolation for the Christian subject, he insists that without “moderate distance” (*distantia temperata*), human perception of the natural and the spiritual worlds cannot take place. And without proper perception, Bacon implicitly argues, consolation is impossible.

In Pearl, the volatile and vacillating distance between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden continuously thwarts any attempt by the Dreamer to delimit and anchor any stable perception of the Maiden. What or who is she? Could she not settle into a single, immutable “thing” or

“person” for his sake? The Dreamer’s failure to maintain a moderate distance necessary to perception, therefore, precipitates his persistent failure to understand the Pearl-Maiden’s spiritual guidance and direction towards God. She sharply admonishes his stagnation in mourning and his perceptual limitation: “Stynst of thy strot and fyne to flyte / And sech Hys blythe, ful swefte and swythe; / Thy prayer may Hys pyté byte / That mercy schal hyr craftes kythe” [Stop thy complaining and quit wrangling / And seek His mercy swiftly and earnestly; / Thy prayer may penetrate His pity / So that mercy shall show her powers] (353-56). The literal and figurative divide between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden is marked by both an excessive distance (*superflua distantia*) and an insufficient distance (*nimia appropinquatione*). But in the poem, there is a Lacanian inversion of the correspondence between distance and familiarity espoused by Bacon. It is from afar that the Dreamer presumes an excessive familiarity (*nimie familiaritatis*) with the divine Maiden, while up-close, he suffers a cognitive remoteness (*elongatio*) from her. Reaching or maintaining a proper distance is elusive and phantasmagorical, or frankly, impossible to realize at all. Even at the very end of the poem, the Dreamer’s perceptual wobbling keeps him in the affective state of mourning; consolation forever eludes him.

In Pearl, the moderate distance (*distantia temperata*) indispensable to physical and spiritual vision that Bacon advocates is not only necessary to the unbridgeable cleavage between Dreamer and Maiden; it is also critical in the Dreamer’s visual-spatial relationship to the New Jerusalem in the last third of the poem. Distance no longer functions to demarcate the psychic divide between the Pearl-Maiden and the Dreamer; distance now serves as the necessary frame to perspectival vision. While he walks alongside the Maiden towards the Heavenly City, the Dreamer’s “emotional and visual frameworks immediately appear to be radically altered. [And as] he describes the City, not only are his physical senses suspended, at least at first, but he is also bodily *at a remove* from the object of vision” (Stanbury, Seeing 21, my emphases). After much anticipation and delay, the New Jerusalem finally makes its first appearance in the poem as the Dreamer climbs “on a hyl” (979) and sees the heavenly sight (988). It is only then that the

Dreamer realizes that the splendors of the Earthly Paradise find their source in the Heavenly City (Field 9). The Pearl-poet, through his lengthy focus on the New Jerusalem, reiterates the centrality of the Heavenly City as a “theological concept, poetic topos, and artistic image” in late medieval consciousness (Stanbury, “*Pearl*” 117). But despite the wide currency of the New Jerusalem as a multivalent sign in culture, there was no systematic convention for the physical description of the Heavenly City in medieval narratives, exegesis, and mystical texts. Most medieval poetry offers only allusive commentaries on or descriptions of the New Jerusalem. In terms of the City’s physical structure, there are but few textual descriptions (Stanbury, “*Pearl*” 118). The majority of texts treat the New Jerusalem as an incorporeal and spiritual idea.¹⁷ And it is this incorporeal idea of the New Jerusalem that the Maiden has described to the Dreamer.

For the Dreamer, however, the physical City is not a point of departure for spiritual contemplation but an observable fact. The Dreamer seeks to move away from a purely exegetical reading of space, one favored by the Maiden, and attempts a physical experience of space. To him, the vision of the New Jerusalem is a vision of a City as a solid structure with walls and foundations (991-93).¹⁸ Furthermore, this concrete narrative topography is marked by two clearly demarcated regions separated by the stream. While the Dreamer is confined within the Earthly Paradise, the Maiden and the New Jerusalem occupy the space “byyonde that myry mere” [beyond that pleasant water] (158). The stream is the symbol of the separation between them. Spatially, the visual center of the last third of Pearl is dominated by the Maiden and the New Jerusalem; the Dreamer, on the other hand, is relegated to the marginal zone defined by the stream. Even while she is mediating the vision of the Heavenly City for the Dreamer, the Maiden is simultaneously marginalizing him: “Vtwyth to se that clene cloystor / Thou may, bot inwyth not a fote” [You may see that pure City from without, but you may not enter within] (969-70). And as the Dreamer follows the stream to its source, she walks opposite him on the other side of the bank (975), thereby reinforcing the boundaries between the center and the margin.



Fig. 4. London, British Library, MS Harley 4972, f. 2.
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The marginality of the Dreamer in *Pearl* has a visual resonance in the spatialization of the figure of St. John in many illustrated Apocalypses from the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries. In some manuscripts, John is placed on one side of the page and is associated with the frame. For instance, on folio 25v of Cambridge, MS R.16.2 (the “Trinity Apocalypse”), St. John stands at the lower left corner of the margin, far away from the central square which contains images of God, the Lamb, and the River of Life. In part, the visualization marks St. John’s status as a dreamer-visionary/author. And on folio 2 of British Library, MS Harley 4972 (fig. 4), a maiden with a white dress and a golden crown faces John across a stream-like cloud, she at the top center of the picture, John in the left margin. Here, the stream-like cloud functions as an internal boundary within the picture, effectively separating John from the maiden.

This visual motif of the stream as a frame in fact occurs in several illustrated Apocalypses, such as Cambridge, MS R.16.2. In some illuminations, the river flows out through the ever-open gate of the Heavenly City and into the surrounding landscape. In others, the river

flows into a moat around the City's walls. And in a few of them, the river flows past the hill where John stands, cutting him off from the City.¹⁹ When the stream in Pearl is first introduced, it is like a "fyldor fyn" [gold thread] (106) with swirling waves of streams (111). The Dreamer comes to the water's edge (107) and locates it as a boundary when he says: "I hoped the water were a devyse / Bytwene myrthes by meres made; / Byyonde the broke, by slente other slade, / I hope that mote merked wore" [I thought the water was a division / Between joys, made by bodies of water; / Beyond the brook, by slope or valley, / I believed the walled city was situated] (139-42).

As a marginalizing border to the vision of the New Jerusalem at the center, the stream can be understood as what Derrida calls a *parergon*, a frame to a "picture" at the center.²⁰ Arguably the decorative, the ornamental, the external and extrinsic edge, the marginalia, the encircling frame, for Derrida, "the *parergon* inscribes something which comes as an extra, exterior to the proper field" (Parergon 56). It is the Other to the main work, the *ergon* (the self), and what the *ergon* must not become (Parergon 54). In contradistinction, the *parergon* serves as a means of self-demarcation and self-definition by the *ergon*. In Pearl, the stream separating the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden can be read as the *parergon* to the *ergon*, the vision of the New Jerusalem. Psychoanalytically, the stream is the image of the taboo (Law) against access to the *jouissance* of the Thing (Edmondson 53). Put differently, the stream as the *parergon*—like the whiteness of the pearl—is the (Ø), the lack in the Other; the New Jerusalem, the Lacanian S. From the vantage point of the Dreamer, the stream and the City, substituting for "perle," are now the S (Ø). Moreover, the Dreamer's association with the stream renders him a part of the periphery. Though confronted by the center in all its power and glory, the Dreamer remains locked within the margin. He, *parergonally* speaking, is an element of the marginalia.²¹ But significantly, his position of marginality also allows for a new kind of vision, one in which the frame makes the picture.

In medieval art, the margin is often the realm of fantasy and subversion. In her study of the connection between the visual and verbal arts in the Middle Ages, Elizabeth Salter comments that fourteenth-century illuminators often utilized the margin as a place of artistic experimentation (29) and that the border was frequently given a greater focus denied to the picture at the center (28). But this contrast between the margin/*parergon* and the center/*ergon* often creates problems of spatial and visual unity (Salter 28). As Salter observes, “it is not uncommon to find sharp differences of viewpoint, scale and perspective, with margin and main subject unrelated, in spatial terms, to each other, and to the flat surface of the page of text” (28).²²

Although for Salter, the margin is distinctively separate from the center, for Derrida, the center depends on the margin existentially and epistemologically; the margin is the very source of the center’s seemingly natural independence and completeness. And not only are the *parergon* and the *ergon* intimately linked, they are also difficult to distinguish from each another (Derrida, *Parergon* 59). Because Derrida recognizes the sometimes impossible task of separating what is essential from what is merely accessory, he conceives of the *parergon* as “a hybrid of outside and inside” (*Parergon* 63).²³ And it is this hybridity of the *parergon* that is exhibited by the stream in *Pearl*. The stream, appearing as a spatial frame surrounding the vision of the New Jerusalem, is integrally connected to the center of the vision. Its source is located within the Heavenly City, at the center of which the wound of the Lamb pours forth an endless torrent of blood (1135-37). I will analyze the figure of the Lamb in the next section. The key point here is that the stream in *Pearl* necessarily exists both within and without the New Jerusalem.

The blurring of the boundary between the *parergon* and the *ergon* further suggests a process of contamination of the *parergon* by the *ergon*, and vice versa. Or, as Derrida puts it, there is a process of parasitization from the outside to the inside, and from the inside to the outside (*Parergon* 7). What exists then is a simultaneous presence of both spaces. The slippage, or better yet, seepage, between the *ergon* and the *parergon* exposes a fundamental spatial paradox at work in *Pearl*. If the place of the *parergon* contains attributes of the *ergon*, and if the *ergon*,

those of the *parergon*, then what are the criteria for determining or measuring direction, proximity or remoteness? If desire, as a form of affective labor, is a play of distance, then how far is far enough? How close, close enough? And which way is which? Perhaps it is more accurate to describe the Dreamer's shifting, unsteady perceptions of the Pearl-Maiden as the disorientating effects of desire itself; the Dreamer himself is forever uncertain of his own coordinates. Just when he thinks the Pearl-Maiden is too far, she looms right in front of him; and when he believes he can finally access her, she disappears into a "prosessyoun" (1096) of virgins.

The *parergon*, in its function as the frame around the *ergon*, is a barrier to those who seek direct access to the *ergon*. As such, the *parergon* is the obstacle which is also paradoxically the path. The way into the center of desire is through the necessary path of the frame: the detour. Žižek has argued that the Lady-Object "functions as a kind of 'black hole' around which the subject's desire is structured. The space of desire is bent like space in the theory of relativity; the only way to reach the Object-Lady is indirectly, in a devious, meandering way" ("Courtly Love" 94).²⁴ On the circumlocution of desire's movement, Lacan theorizes:

The detour in the psyche isn't always designed to regulate the commerce between whatever is organized in the domain of the pleasure principle and whatever presents itself as the structure of reality. There are also detours and obstacles which are organized so as to make the domain of the vacuole stand out as such... The techniques involved in courtly love ... are techniques of holding back, of suspension, of *amor interruptus*. (Ethics 152)

The lover's necessary holding back preserves the proper distance between him and the *object a*, allowing it to continue to function as the cause of his desire. Or, in Bacon's terms, the "moderate distance" necessary to vision here also sustains the *object a*'s "proximate inaccessibility" (Edmondson 49). As Peter Travis explicates, "the *objet a* sets into motion those drives which seek it but which never quite wish to attain it (attainment equaling annihilation), preferring rather to circle around, never getting too close nor too far away" (52). The movement of the detour, it turns out, traces out a circle.

In their elucidation of the distancing effect of Boethian Stoicism, Léglu and Milner also draw attention to the circular movement of consolatory narratives. Léglu and Milner cite a *rondeau* by Charles d'Orléans as example:

Ou puis parfont de ma merencolie
L'eaue d'espoir, que ne cesse tirer
Soif de confort la me fait desirer,
Quoy que souvent je la treuve tarie.

Necte la voy ung temps et esclercie,
Et puis après troubler et empirer
Ou puis etc.

D'elle trempe mon encre d'estudie,
Quant j'en escrips, mais pour mon cuer irer

Fortune vient mon pappier desirer,
Et tout gecte par sa grant felonnie
Ou puis etc. (qtd. in Léglu and Milner 8-9)

[I do not cease to draw the water of Hope from the deep well of my Melancholy. Thirst for Consolation makes me desire it, even / though I often find it is dry. It looks clear and brighter for a while, / and then it grows clouded and bad (I do not...). The water dilutes the / ink of my studying when I write about it, but to anger my heart, / Fortune comes and tears up the paper and throws everything out with / great malice (I do not...)] (Léglu and Milner 9)²⁵

While the narrator seeks consolation and writes in hope of alleviating his suffering, Fortune intervenes, and he must start the process again ((Léglu and Milner 8 – 9). In *Pearl*, while the Pearl-Maiden ostensibly functions as Lady Philosophy, is she not also Lady Fortune who relentlessly interrupts the Dreamer and forbids his direct perception of and access to her? What the Pearl-Maiden allows is only an oblique glance from the *parergon*, effecting what Lacan analyzes as the anamorphosis of courtly love. In Žižek's reading of Lacan, the spatial anamorphosis indulges the Object to be viewed only "from the side, in a partial, distorted form, as its own shadow" ("Courtly Love" 95). And extending Lacan's argument, Žižek's argues for an analogous anamorphosis of time, in which "the Object is attainable only by way of an incessant postponement, as its absent point of reference. The Object, therefore, is literally something that is created – whose place is encircled – through a network of detours, approximations and near-

misses” (“Courtly Love” 95). In Pearl, the endless encircling around the prohibited yet desired object dictates the Dreamer’s movement “among signifiers, around the traumatic *punctum* of the Other’s desire” (Edmondson 61), which he can neither relinquish fully nor attain directly. Just as the Dreamer remains uncertain of the quantifiability of mourning in time, he is unsure of the proper distance between himself and the Pearl-Maiden, thereby hovering and suspended in-between nearness and farness, between the *parergon* and the *ergon*.

Finally, in all this play in distance, what of whiteness? Is there a difference in the Pearl-Maiden’s whiteness when viewed up-close compared to it when seen from afar? Or, is it possible to differentiate spatial distance in whiteness (a distant whiteness versus a nearby whiteness)? And can whiteness itself be conceived of *as* distance? I want to return now to the Dreamer’s contentious response to the Parable of the Vineyard, when he objects to a wage system in which “the lasse in werke to take more able, / And ever the lenger the lasse, the more” [the less in work is able to take more, / And ever the longer the less they do, the more they get] (599-600). The Maiden, in answer to the Dreamer’s protestation, affirms that notions of “more” or “less” have no place in heaven: “Of more and lasse in Godes ryche . . . lys no joparde, / For ther is such mon payed inlyche / Whether lyttle other much be hys rewarde” [Of more and less in God’s kingdom . . . lies no uncertainty, / For there is each man paid fully / Whether little or much be his reward] (601-04). In Pearl, whiteness is the symbol *par excellence* because in it, the distinctions between farness and nearness, between less and more, and between the *parergon* and the *ergon* do not exist. Whiteness collapses and subsumes all; or, whiteness marks the simultaneity of all the spatial and temporal binaries. When Lacan depicts the techniques of courtly love as those of holding back, suspension, and *amor interruptus*, he has in mind the psychology of obstacle that is built into the very discourse of courtly love. In the context of Pearl, such courtly techniques take shape through signs of whiteness; the endless circling of desire moves around the vortex of whiteness. Bedazzled by the shining whiteness of the Pearl-Maiden and of the New Jerusalem, is not the Dreamer suspended, held back, in whiteness?

Whiteness, Pricked: Into the (Vanishing) Point

When Edmondson refers to the Dreamer's restless circling around the "traumatic *punctum* of the Other's desire" (61), he also alludes to the long history of the point (*punctum*) in Western thought. Before I discuss the workings of the point in Pearl, I would like to briefly survey some of the philosophical and theological discussions of the point in the Middle Ages. According to the MED, *poynnt* referred to a "small dot marked on a surface"; to a "small amount, the smallest part; the least bit"; to "a point in space, a place, spot, location"; and to "a brief period of time, an instant, a moment." As such, the point encompasses spatial and temporal dimensions, and it is both a unit of measurement and a physical mark impressed on the material world. The point signifies and quantifies. Augustine, in his De Quantitate Animae, offers a theory of beauty based on geometric regularity. Whereas equilateral triangles are more beautiful than scalene triangles because of their evenness, squares are even more beautiful. As Umberto Eco explains, for Augustine, the circle is the most beautiful because it "has no angles to disrupt the continuous equality of its circumference. Above all of these, however, is the point— indivisible, centre and beginning and end of itself, the generating point of the circle, the most beautiful of all figures" (43). God, Augustine theorizes, is the generating center of all things; and because God, and nothing else, possesses the highest beauty in the world, the point is the most beautiful.

Bonaventure, in his Collationes in Hexaemeron, continues Augustine's theological thinking and argues that Christ, the Son of God, is the center of all things. Jane Tolimier, in her study of medieval time schemes, observes that, for Bonaventure, Christ is central in "a seven-fold sense, in the orders of Essence, Nature, Distance, Doctrine, Moderation, Justice, and Concord" (38). As Bonaventure states, "A beginning should be made from the center, that is from Christ. For He Himself is the Mediator between God and men, holding the central position in all things, as shall be seen. Hence it is necessary to start from Him if a man wants to reach Christian wisdom" (qtd. in Tolimieri 38). Moreover, Christ Himself is "the central point of all

understanding . . . [and] this Center is Truth . . . nor can any truth be known in any way whatsoever except through this Truth” (qtd. in Tolimieri 38). And beyond the seven-fold sense in which Christ is the center, He is also central in time, “between the animated beings that preceded Him and those that followed Him” (qtd. in Tolimieri 38), and central in distance, being on earth midway between Heaven and Hell (Tolimieri 38-39).

In late medieval Christian mystical literature, the concept of the point also plays a crucial role in the mystics’ ecstatic moment of union with the divine. Richard Rolle refers to “a lityll poynt of . . . joy” of his mystical experience, the point of “infenit swetnes” so vast that to speak of it would be like taking “þe see be drope and spar it all in a lityll hole of þe erth” [the sea drop by drop and squeezing it all into a little hole in the earth] (Fire 2.4.75: 28-32). And the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, urging his reader to heed time carefully, invokes the “athomus,” the smallest unit of time in medieval thought (Davis 131). The work of spiritual labor, the Cloud-author explains,

askep no longer tyme er it be ones treulich done, as sum men wenen; For it is þe schortest werke of alle þat man may ymagyn. It is neiþer lenger ne schoter þen is an athomus; þe whiche athomus, by þe diffinicion of trewe philosphres in þe sciens of astronomye, is þe leest partie of tyme. & it is so litil þat, for þe littilnes of it, it is undepartable & neizhonde incomprehensible. (4.17: 15-20)

[does not require a long time to be well done, as some men think. In fact, it is the shortest work that man can imagine. It is no shorter or longer than one athomus; which, as defined by real philosophers in the science of astronomy, is the smallest division of time. And it is so small that it is indivisible and almost incomprehensible.] (Davis 131)²⁶

For the Cloud-author, when self-awareness has been erased and the individual reduced to a point, then it is within that very indivisible and incomprehensible point of time, neither short nor long, that spiritual transcendence is possible.

Julian of Norwich, similarly, professes to have seen God in a point: “I saw god in a poynte, that is to say in my vnderstandyng, by which syght I saw that he is in althyng” (Long Text. II.336:3-4). Julian’s “poynte” is dimensionless yet pan-dimensional, as God reveals

Himself in “alhyng” and in a “poynte.” But elsewhere in her writing, Julian uses “poynte” more in the temporal sense as “an instant” or “the brink” of an event:

This is a greate profyte, for yf man knew hys tyme, he shulde nott haue pacience ovyr that tyme. And also god wylle that whyle the soule is in the body, it seem to itself þat it is evyr at þe poynte to be takyn. For alle this lyfe and thys longyng that we haue here is but a poynt, and when we be takyn sodenly out of payne in to blesse, than payn shall be nought. (Long Text. 64.622: 25-30)

As a visionary mode and the center of reality, the point represents the smallest unit of time and space, while effecting an erasure of all dividing space or mediating time. As Carmel Bendon Davis argues, “Julian not only sees God in a point but experiences his love in the smallest, most condensed part of space to the extent that ‘thare be ryght nought that is made betwyxe [them]’” (135). To see God in a point is to experience the divine love without mediation.

But before Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle, and the Cloud-author, it was Dante who set forth the vernacular theological tradition of the *punctum* in late medieval literature. In the Paradiso, Dante places great emphasis on the act of vision. More specifically, there are more instances of sustained gazing at a point. Beatrice is continually looking at the sun and the heavenly spheres, as Dante observes: “Beatrice tutta ne l’etterne rote / fissa con li occhi stava; e io in lei / le luci fissi, di là sù rimote” [Beatrice was standing with her eyes all fixed upon the eternal wheels, and I fix mine on her, withdrawn from there above] (1.64-66).²⁷ As Dante reaches the end of his pilgrimage, he too looks into the center of the divine circle:

E com’ io mi rivolsi e furon tocchi
li miei da ciò che pare in quel volume,
quandunque nel suo giro ben s’adocchi,
un punto vidi che raggiava lume
acuto sì, che ’l viso ch’elli affoca
chiuder conviensi per lo forte acume;
e quale stella par quinci più poca,
parrebbe luna, locata con esso
come stella con stella si collòca. (28.13-21)

[And when I turned and my own were met by what appears in that revolving sphere whenever one gazes intently on its circling, I saw a point which radiated a light so keen that the eye on which it blazes needs must close because of its great keenness; and whatever star seems smallest from here would seem a moon if placed beside it like a star with neighboring star.] (Singleton 313)

This turning towards the point, manifested in the Paradiso as a form of heliotropism, explains the dominant presence of the archery imagery in the canticle. Regarding human reason, Dante perceives that “ch’a questo segno / molto si mira e poco si discerne” [at this mark [understanding] there is much aiming and little discernment] (7.61-62). In contrast, the divine Mind never misses, “per che quantunque quest’ arco saetta / disposto cade a proveduto fine, / sì come oca in suo segno diretta” [so that whatever this bow shoots falls disposed to a foreseen end, even as a shaft directed to its mark] (8.103-05). Therefore, Dante’s entire endeavor in The Divine Comedy, his attempt to see God face to face, can be summed up in the image of his aiming, shooting, and hitting the *punto*.

In the Paradiso, the *punto* is both the end goal and the origin. Concerning the Primum Mobile, Beatrice claims in Canto 27 that it is the starting-point of all the motions within the universe: “La natura del mondo, che quieta / il mezzo e tutto l’altro intorno move, / quinci comincia come da sua meta” [The nature of the universe which holds the center quiet and moves all the rest around it begins here as from its starting point] (27.106-08). And again, in Canto 28, Beatrice instructs Dante:

. Da quel punto
 dipende il cielo e tutta la natura.
 Mira quel cerchio che più li è congiunto;
 e sappi che ’l suo muovere è sì tosto
 per l’affocato amore ond’ elli è punto (28.40-45).

[On that point the heavens and all nature are dependent. Look on that circle which is most conjoined to it, and know that its motion is so swift because of the burning love whereby it is spurred.] (Singleton 315)

The point becomes philosophical and non-material, a purely geometric abstraction. There is an apotheosis of the point, which has shed its flesh and become a manifestation of God. Here, Dante reaffirms Augustine’s conception of God as the generating point of all things.

When he reaches the sphere of the sun, Dante is bedazzled by the souls of the wise as points of light that make up two spinning circles (11.13-21). Later, in the Primum Mobile, he sees a radiating point and nine circles of fire whirling rapidly around it:

Forse cotanto quanto pare appresso
 alo cigner la luce che 'l dipigne
 quando 'l vapor che 'l porta più è spesso,
 distante intorno al punto un cerchio d'igne
 si girava sì ratto, ch'avria vinto
 quel moto che più tosto il mondo cigne;
 e questo era d'un altro circumcinto,
 e quel dal terzo, e 'l terzo poi dal quarto,
 dal quinto il quarto, e poi dal sesto it quinto. (28.22-30)

[Perhaps as near as a halo seems to girdle the light which paints it, when the vapor that bears it is most dense, at such distance around the point a circle of fire was whirling so rapidly that it would have surpassed that motion which most swiftly girds the universe; and this was girt around by another, and that by a third, and the third by a fourth, by a fifth the fourth, then by a sixth the fifth.] (Singleton 315)

In Dante's cosmos, is not the nine spheres' eternal whirling around the *punto* precisely the endless encircling of the *object a* that Lacan describes? And at the point is the divine mind (*la mente divina*) that is surrounded by love and light: "Luce e amor d'un cerchio lui comprende" [light and love enclose it in a circle] (27.112). This point, Beatrice further reveals, is the origin of time: "e come il tempo tegna in cotal testo / le sue radici e ne li altri le fronde" [And how time should have its roots in such a flower-pot, and in the others its leaves] (27.117-18). In other words, the divine point in the Paradiso is the *athomus* alluded to by the Cloud-author.

The point and the rings of fire around it constitute a vision of "l'esempio / e l'esemplare" [the model and the copy] (28.55-56) of the universe and of God's creative process. Beatrice stresses the principle of correspondence between the angels and their separate spheres, as well as between God and the created universe. The concept of correspondence in the Paradiso both echoes and contrasts with Dante's strategies of containment and compartmentalization in the Inferno. Furthermore, correspondence, as exemplified in the vision of the model and the copy, touches upon the issue of representation. Each ring corresponds to the point, the center, and thus becomes its figuration. In addition, the metaphor of imprinting, occurring throughout the Paradiso, is intrinsically concerned with the nature of representation. As Beatrice points out, "'l ciel cui tanti lumi fanno bello, / de la mente profonda che lui volve / prende l'image e fassene suggello" [the heaven which so many lights make beautiful takes its stamp from the profound

mind that turns it, and of that stamp makes itself the seal] (2.130-32). And it is love that “la chiara vista / de la prima virtù dispone e segna” [disposes and imprints the clear Vision of the primal Power] (13.79-80). In a cyclical fashion, human reason aims to return to the divine point like an arrow, as the divine center imprints itself upon all creation.

Unlike in the Inferno, where Dante travels towards a single point (the center of Hell and Satan’s body), in the Paradiso, there is the paradoxical movement of Dante’s approaching simultaneously the divine point and the Empyrean. Dante moves towards both a single point and a vast abstract space. And the circumference and the point become blurred, as Dante observes: “il trïunfo che lude / sempre dintorno al punto che mi vinse, / parendo inchiuso da quel ch’elli ‘nchiude” [the triumph that plays forever round the Point which overcame me seeming enclosed by that which it encloses] (30.10-12). The merging of the point and the circumference here resonates with the mutual parasitization of the *ergon* and the *parergon* that Derrida theorizes. Though the Paradiso celebrates geometric regularity, it ultimately admits the breakdown of geometry and the limitation of the point. In a moment of rapture, Dante sees a rapid succession of geometric figures towards the end of The Divine Comedy: a river of light, a circle, a rose which is the City of God, a Book, and three circles representing the Trinity. In a language charged with eroticism, Dante speaks of being overcome by the divine point: “[el] punto che m’avëa vinto” [the point which had overcome me] (39.9). The point coheres but also collapses, signifying the heart of Christian mystery and faith. Just as the griffin, on the top of Mount Purgatory, “la cosa in sé star queta, / e ne l’idolo suo si trasmutava” [stand[s] still in itself, and in its image changing] (Purgatorio 31.125-26), Christ’s image conforms to the circle yet defies it (Paradiso 33.133-38). Language fails where geometry collapses. At the moment Dante reaches the divine *punto*, he returns to his originary point.

As several critics have noted, Pearl may be read in the tradition of Dante’s Divine Comedy, and in particular the Paradiso.²⁸ The Pearl-Maiden functions as the Beatrice figure who guides the frequently obtuse Dreamer towards a vision of the Heavenly City and his personal

salvation, thereby mirroring Dante's journey toward and beyond the nine spheres. However, in Pearl, the word "poynt" actually appears only three times; and when it does, it is used not in its primary meanings of quantification of space or time, but in its secondary meanings. When the Pearl-Maiden rebukes the jeweler who trust his mortal eyes, she uses the "poynt" to mean "an instance"; the jeweler thus exemplifies "a poynt o sorquydrye" [an instance of pride] (309). In the word's second appearance, "poynt" denotes "a principle or central theme." As the Dreamer protests the unequal wage system in the Parable of the Vineyard, he argues that "In Sauter is sayd a verce overte / That spekes a poynt determynable" [In Psalter is a verse plain / That speaks a definite point] (593-94). And in the third and final appearance of "poynt," the word refers to "a note or phrase of music." The Dreamer, as he gazes at the procession of virgins in the New Jerusalem, proclaims that none can match their gift of songs: "Nowthelese, non was never so quoynt / For alle the craftes that ever thay knewe, / That of that songe myght synge a poynt / Bot that meyny the Lombe that swe" [Nonetheless, none was never so skillful / For all the crafts that ever they knew, / That of that song might sing a phrase / Except for the retinue that follow the Lamb] (889-91).

But despite the paucity of the word's appearance in Pearl, I would argue that the point as a trope is key to understanding mourning's affective labor, desire's play of spatial and temporal distance, and the theology of color in the poem. More important, the point in Pearl is marked by its whiteness. From the poem's outset, the sphericity of the pearl is foregrounded by the Pearl-poet: "So rounde, so reken in uche araye, / so smal, so smothe her sydes were" [So round, so lovely in each setting, / so small, so smooth her sides were] (5-6). Whatever else it may signify, the pearl, as the originary source of the Dreamer's desire, is a point, the "traumatic *punctum* of the Other's desire" of which Edmondson speaks (61). The Pearl-Maiden, as both body and object, is a figurative and literal point. Moreover, the Dreamer's encircling of the Maiden and his later gravitation towards the center of the New Jerusalem, the Lamb of God, parallel Dante's journey to the divine *punto* in the Paradiso.²⁹

The sense of space, throughout Pearl, is frequently constituted by the mapping of points. As Stanbury remarks, in the poem's first set of stanzas, the word "spot" "recurs in ways that force associative relationships between location and absence, between the set of compass points that places him physically and the negativity that marks the pearl as both without stain (without 'spot') and without a place (without 'spot') in his world" (Introduction 4). In the Pearl-poet's game of signification, "spot" simultaneously denotes "without stain" and "without place"; both meanings play on the signification of the point. A point, as a small dot marked on a surface, is a stain, a spot. And as a spatial marker, a point marks the spot. The Dreamer's physical body, grieving, sleeping and dreaming, remains paralyzed at the very spot where he claims to have lost his "perle": "in that spote hit fro me sprange" [it sprang from me in that spot] (13). Points, or what the Pearl-poet prefers to call "spots," hence establish a proto-Cartesian space—be it physical, psychic, or spiritual—within which the Dreamer navigates. And the Dreamer's plotting of points continues throughout the poem. After a lengthy vision of the New Jerusalem, during which the Maiden seems to have disappeared into the divine space at the center, the Dreamer once more spots the Maiden among the procession of virgins; she now appears as one white point among many. The sight of her, however, rekindles the Dreamer's memory of his experience in the valley of the Earthly Paradise, as well as of the time he has spent with the Maiden. He states: "Then saw I ther my lyttel quene / That I wende had standen by me in sclade" [Then I saw there my little queen / Who I believed had stood by me in the valley] (1147-48). Vision, here, becomes the key that unlocks memory.

The Dreamer's visual desire, in Pearl, is fundamentally perspectival in nature. Anchored at the vantage point on the hill bounded by the *parergonal* stream, the Dreamer's vision that converges upon the New Jerusalem partakes of the characteristics of the theory of linear perspective that was used to create illusionistic three-dimensional space in the pictorial art of the early Renaissance and subsequent periods. Of course, such a theory was unknown to the Pearl-poet, but I want to suggest that the poem's visuality displays attributes that would later be

characterized as both perspectival and linear in art. As a theory, linear perspective is premised on the assumption that “visual space is ordered a priori by an abstract, uniform system of linear coordinates” (Edgerton 7). Furthermore, in looking at a linear perspectival painting, the focus of the viewer’s gaze is directed towards a single point on the picture plane. This point dictates the spatial arrangement within the pictorial frame, allowing the illusion of proper size and distance.

In the history of the development of linear perspective, the term “vanishing point,” commonly used to denote the centric point and to express the convergence of parallel lines in a perspectival painting, did not exist in the Renaissance but made its first appearance in the eighteenth century (Edgerton 200). Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), who wrote the first book on the rules of linear perspective, referred to this point simply as *punto centrico* (“centric point”) and said it was to be placed at the center of the drawing plane as the single locus for all other elements in the picture (Edgerton 42-44).³⁰ In some way, the vanishing point is a misnomer that does not accurately describe the perception of objects in perspectival vision or painting. The illusion of depth does not necessarily imply any loss of the object’s materiality; rather, the added dimension of depth enhances the solidity of the object. Material objects do not simply vanish along the converging lines of vision but maintain their “thingness” everywhere, even at the *punto centrico*. At the moderate distance that Bacon insists is necessary for visual perception, and in the midst of the encircling of desire around the traumatic *punctum*, the *object a* cannot be the empty place of a lack but must assume the material body of the lost object: such is the hope of the lover who mourns and longs. Therefore, it might be more accurate to note that what the Dreamer looks for is not a vanishing but a *non-vanishing* point. And what does not vanish is the body. He, like an observer gazing at a perspectival painting, is drawn to the Lamb of God at the center of the New Jerusalem (1135-37).

As it progresses, Pearl effects a torsion from an object biography of whiteness, as embodied in the Pearl-Maiden, to an encirclement of a traumatic point of whiteness, as figured in the Lamb of God. Like the Pearl-Maiden, the Lamb too is a “gay juelle” (1124). And just as the

Maiden is physically and spiritually enveloped in white, so “Thys Jerusalem Lombe hade never pechche / Of other huee bot quyt jolyf / That mot ne masklle moght on streche, / For wolfe quyte so ronk and ryf.” [This Jerusalem’s Lamb never had patch / Of other hue but bright white / To which neither spot nor stain might adhere, / For white wool so luxuriant and abundant] (841-44). When the Dreamer finally sees the Lamb, he reiterates the fact that “So worthly whyt wern wedes Hys, / His lokes symple, Hymself so gent” [So courteously white were His clothes, / His looks simple, Himself so gentle] (1133-34). Tison Pugh has recently argued that Pearl deliberately asks its reader “to see the Lamb as the physical embodiment of an earthly animal” (32), and that the Lamb’s “iconic physicality” confuses the “divine erotic triangle” between God, the Dreamer, and the Pearl-Maiden (32). However, most critics have tended to read the figure of the Lamb in Pearl in more traditional terms of medieval Christian iconography, especially those of illuminated Apocalypses from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Suzanne Lewis, for instance, contends that the representation of the Marriage of the Lamb and the Soul in late medieval illustrated Apocalypses is a creation of the thirteenth century (173). Furthermore, the image of the apocalyptic Marriage of the Lamb is the “universal image of eternal life” (176). And Muriel A. Whitaker, in her study of illuminated Apocalypses, points to the Book of Revelation as the source of the feminized Soul’s white array. According to Revelation 19.7-8: “The marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.” As the bride of Christ, the Pearl-Maiden has no other choice of color except white.

The Book of Revelation, however, makes no direct mention of the gaping wound so vividly described by the Dreamer in Pearl: “a wounde ful wyde and weete con wyse / Anende Hys hert thugh hyde torente. / Of His quyte syde his blod outsprent” [a wound full wide and wet did show / Near His heart His skin was torn. / His blood gushed out of his white side] (1135-37). Earlier, the Pearl-Maiden has described Christ’s bleeding wounds at the Crucifixion: “Innoghe ther wax out of that welle, / Blod and water of brode wounde; / The blod uus boght fro bale of

helle, / And delyvered uus of deth secounde” [Enough flowed out of that well, / Blood and water out of the broad wound; / The blood redeemed us from the pain of hell, / And delivered us from a second death] (649-52). Rosalind Field notes that most late medieval illustrated Apocalypses showing the Lamb in triumph do not show the Lamb’s wound (12-13). But when the wound is depicted, it appears “as a cut throat or wounded side, sometimes with blood flowing into a Eucharistic chalice” (13). In Field’s reading, the Pearl-poet’s representation of a wounded Lamb in triumph is therefore unusual, and he “has deliberately held back, indeed he has denied, the description of the Lamb’s wound until the climactic point of the Dreamer’s vision” (14).

The existence of the wound on the Lamb, moreover, creates a visual paradox in Pearl. Field has pointed out that while the Pearl-Maiden depicts a spotless Lamb (841-44), the Dreamer, in contrast, sees a bleeding Lamb (1135-37). Regarding this visual discrepancy, Field concludes that “[e]ither the Lamb is spotless or the Maiden is wrong: the Maiden, bride of the Lamb, cannot be wrong, and therefore it is the perception which sees a mortal wound as a blemish that is at fault” (15). In Field’s reading, the vision of a pierced and bleeding Lamb marks the Dreamer’s perception as faulty and base. The poem thus shifts from “an image of Heavenly Lamb clad in pure white fleece, spotless of all stain . . . [to] an ugly wound in that very fleece” (11). For Stanbury, the Lamb’s ugly open wound is the mark of the feminine; the bleeding lamb is metonymically allied to the (menstruating) female body (“Feminist” 101). That is, the Lamb’s wound “evokes the female wound of the castration plot [and] is perceived as an image of desire” (“Feminist” 107). Ultimately, in Stanbury’s reading, it is “a displaced self-wound . . . that is male Christologically, but female imagistically” (“Feminist” 102). I would add that the Lamb with the wound is *jouissance*, the S (Ø), and the divine *punctum* around which desire inexorably encircles. In Pearl, the source of the stream’s water turns out to be divine blood. In the affective loop that converts blood into water, and water back into blood, the Lamb’s wound signifies the originary trauma of the Dreamer’s subjectivity.

Like that of the stream, the Dreamer's motion in Pearl is continuously determined by the centric point towards which he moves in both "centripetal" and "centrifugal" fashions. He is centripetally drawn to the spot where the pearl lies buried, the center of his grief within the *erber* (37-38). But later when he is in the Earthly Paradise, the Dreamer moves centripetally across space to a desired *punctum*; he longs to join the Maiden—the center of his desire—on the other side of the stream (1155-56). But he also moves centrifugally as his "ghosted body" rises from the spot in the *erber* and moves outward: "Fro spot my spyryt ther sprang in space" (61). And in moving away from the center of his loss in the *erber*, the Dreamer, paradoxically, finds the center of the Christian mystery as he follows the Maiden's urging to "Bow up towarde thys bornes heved" [go up towards this stream's source] (974).³¹ Jerusalem, the center of the medieval world, is the visual centric point towards which the Dreamer moves centripetally and fixes his gaze.

Linear perspective, in Panofsky's view, is "a two-edged sword" (67). While creating room for bodies to gesture and expand, linear perspective also enables light to spread out into space and somehow "dissolve the bodies" (Panofsky 67). And while creating an illusion of distance, it also abolishes distance by drawing the world of images into the eye (Panofsky 67). For Linda Tarte Holley, linear perspective deepens the canvas of a painting and allows for the viewer's fantasy of stepping through the frame into a virtual realm (38).³² Indeed, linear perspective represents the "triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real" (Panofsky 67), as well as the "triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control" (67). Panofsky's observation of the "distance-denying" aspect of linear perspective describes precisely the convergent characteristic of Derrida's *parergon*.³³ Hence, the Dreamer's desire of crossing is the desire to draw the image—of the New Jerusalem in all its splendors—into his eyes, to deny the distance between him and the image before him, and to step through the frame, the stream of many waves.

The visual basis of the Dreamer's desire of crossing is also intimately linked to his inclination to aestheticize all his sensory impressions, especially visual ones. What truly attracts

him is not so much the spiritual meaning of a thing but the intensity of pleasure it brings to him. Like his visuality, the Dreamer's sense of delight is also tied to the *parergonal* space defined by the stream. Just as he has responded in the Earthly Paradise, the Dreamer now responds with an equal sense of wonder to the vision of the New Jerusalem. A deep appreciation of beauty is evident in his description of the City under moonlight: "Anvnder mone so gret merwayle / No fleschly hert ne myght endeure / As quen I blusched upon that blay, / So ferly therof was the fasure" [Under the moon so great a marvel / No fleshly heart might endure / As when I gazed upon that outer wall of the castle, / So marvelous is the appearance] (1081-84). The image is a source of delight for the intromissive Dreamer. The Dreamer specifically focuses on the *merwayle* and the *fasure* of the viewed object. A frenzy of "I see" permeates his description of the New Jerusalem (986, 1021, 1033, 1083). The visions of the procession of virgins (1125-28) and of the Lamb (1129-30) are a great pleasure to him.

For Derrida, the aesthetic experience, the experience of pleasure, is not just a mental process; it is also a spatialized motion. He states: "I do not interest myself, especially not in myself insofar as I exist: I-please-myself-in. Not in any thing that exists, not in doing something or other. *I-please-myself-in pleasing-myself-in*—that which is beautiful" (*Parergon* 47, original emphases). In other words, there is an element of narcissistic self-referentiality in the aesthetic experience, what Derrida terms "autoaffection" (*Parergon* 47). Moreover, the "in" in Derrida's "pleasing-myself-in" implies a spatialized realm of "inside" of the self-referential aesthetic experience that is distinct from an "outside." The aesthetic experience becomes an inward motion of the observer, an advance of the *parergon* towards the *ergon*, the work that gives pleasure. *Parergonally*, the Dreamer's desire to cross the stream is indicative of the frame's never-ending desire to contaminate and take over the picture at the center.³⁴

But the inward motion of the aesthetic experience is also an outward motion. Derrida defines the nature of the motion of the aesthetic experience only to immediately present its opposite:

And yet the *pleasing-oneself-in*, the *in* of the *pleasing-oneself* also indicates that this autoaffection immediately goes outside its inside; it is a pure heteroaffection. The purely subjective affect is provoked by what is called the beautiful, that which is said to be beautiful; *outside*, in the object and independently of its existence. (*Parergon* 47, original emphases)

In *Pearl*, while the Dreamer is enjoying the sight of the New Jerusalem, he is also pleasing himself into the vision. But in so doing, he immediately goes outside the vision, the *ergon*. Paradoxically, the closer he advances towards the center, the farther he moves towards the outside. Throughout the poem, the Dreamer's experience of the pleasure principle takes the form of his perpetual encircling around the traumatic *punctum*. In other words, desire's circling of the point (the *object a*) can be read as an aesthetic motion that is both centripetal and centrifugal in nature; the lover-mourner is simultaneously drawn toward and kept at a distance by the center (his *jouissance*). Furthermore, I want to return now to Massumi's notion of the state of affection as a "passionate suspension in which [the body] exists more outside of itself, more in the abstracted action of the impinging thing and the abstracted context of that action, than within itself" (31). Is not the body's existential abstraction outside of itself Derrida's heteroaffection, or, autoaffection's going outside of its inside? The mutual impingement of autoaffection and heteroaffection, of the *ergon* and the *parergon*, is the dialectic of mourning. The centric point and the circumference, Dante observes, grade into one another.

As the poem progresses, the Dreamer's appetite for sensory experience also grows, and his desire to cross the stream remains fundamentally a visual desire. At the end of the poem, his turning of his gaze from the Lamb to the Maiden (1141-48) signifies his attachment to the corporeal world and his inability to fully grasp the spiritual truth of the vision he is witnessing. In Field's reading, the Dreamer is evidently distracted by the sight of the Maiden (Field 16); but for Stanbury, "he yearns to join not the Lamb, not Christ, but his Pearl" ("Vision" 134). Image, in fact, induces "the ultimate scopophilia" (Hahn, "Visio Dei" 183) within him. For the Dreamer, image is inseparable from desire. And this is not the first time in which a sight beyond the stream causes a desire to cross. When he sees the stream in the Earthly Paradise by himself, the Dreamer

expresses how he desires “to se the broke byyonde” (146). And later when he first catches sight of the Maiden across the stream, he hints at his longing to be on her side (287).

Now, towards the end of his dream vision, the sight of the Maiden once again triggers the Dreamer’s desire (1151), and he expresses his propensity to move from image to desire: “Quen I sey my frely, I wolde be there, / Byyonde the water” [When I saw my noble one, I would be there / Beyond the water] (1155-56). And for the third and final time, the Dreamer longs “to start in the strem” [to plunge into the stream] (1159). Seeing becomes desiring becomes moving. More important here, it is the Maiden’s very whiteness that provides the necessary catalyst to the Dreamer’s final resolution to cross the stream. He cries out: “Lorde, much of mirthe was that ho made / Among her feres that was so quyt! / That syght me gart to thenk to wade / For luf longyng in gret delyt” [Lord, much mirth did she make / Among her companions that was so white! / That sight made me to think to wade / For love-longing in great delight!] (1149-51). However, the Dreamer, with his expanding visual appetite, is the unframable excess that is barely contained by the *parergon*. When he finally attempts to cross the stream, he is literally pleasing himself into the *ergon*. The Dreamer becomes the excess of the frame breaking into the center, attempting to collapse the distance between him and the Lady-Object. Yet he is never allowed to fully realize his desire, as Christ stops him in his track. The Dreamer laments: “Of raas, thagh I were rasch and ronk, / Yet rapely therinne I was restayed. / For ryght as I sparred unto the bonc, / That brathe out of my dreame me brayed” [In rushing headlong, though I was rash and impetuous, / Yet quickly therein I was checked. / For just as I sprang onto the bank, / That violence yanked me out of my dream] (1167-70). He awakes at the very “spot” where his “perle to grounde strayed” [pearl to the ground had strayed] (1173). The promise of consolation feeds back into the state of mourning.

Regarding geometric points, Panofsky argues that the concept of homogenous space is premised on the idea that all geometric points “are devoid of all content, because they have become mere expressions of ideal relations” (30). Therefore, he continues, “from every point in

space it must be possible to draw similar figures in all directions and magnitudes” (30). But Panofsky then immediately proceeds to dismiss his own speculation, insisting that “nowhere in the space of immediate perception can this postulate be fulfilled” (30). The “vanishing point,” Panofsky remarks, simply cannot be anywhere or everywhere. In fact, the crucial question to be asked is precisely “where on the picture field is the central vanishing point best placed, how close or how far the perpendicular distance ought to be measured, and whether and to what extent an oblique view of the entire space seems admissible” (68). Psychoanalytically, the issues of distance (“how close or how far”) and perspective (“to what extent an oblique view seems admissible”) resonate with Lacan’s spatial anamorphosis of desire. For Panofsky, homogeneity of space is an impossibility because “the ‘claim’ of the object . . . confronts the ambition of the subject. The object *intends to remain distanced* from the spectator (precisely as something ‘objective’); it wants to bring to bear, unimpeded, its own formal lawfulness” (68, my emphasis).³⁵ In speaking of the object’s intention, Panofsky here uncannily mirrors Cohen’s concept of the object’s willful movement through the thickness of time and space. And the confrontation between the object’s claim and the subject’s ambition to which Panofsky refers results only in the refusal of the object to coincide or be identified with the centric point, thereby maintaining its removedness, its obliqueness, from the subject. In Pearl, the Dreamer never confuses the Pearl-Maiden—whatever or whoever she may be or signify—with Christ the Lamb.

But if the object refuses to coincide with the point, there nevertheless remain some material traces of the object in the space of the point. At the white *punctum* of Pearl, at least from the perspective of the Dreamer if not the Maiden, Christ the Lamb bleeds red. Therefore, at the center of whiteness is not whiteness itself but a wound. What the Dreamer sees is not whiteness absolute but whiteness “plus” something else: an excess that breaks through the white surface. And unlike the Pearl-Maiden, who in her capacity as the Lady-Object covers up the traumatic *jouissance* of the Dreamer, the bleeding Lamb—at the centric point of Pearl’s whiteness—does not cover up its own woundedness. As such, Pearl’s bleeding whiteness alludes to another

meaning of the Middle English “poynt” as “a small hole; prick, puncture.”³⁶ This meaning of the point is precisely what the semiotician Roland Barthes refers to when he theorizes on the effects of photography upon the viewer. In a photograph, Barthes argues, there exist simultaneously the *studium*, which for Barthes denotes elements of general taste and expected convention, and the *punctum*, which “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, [and] pierces [the viewer]” (Camera 26). Barthes continues:

A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive *points*. This second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). (Camera 26-27)

What Barthes is talking about, without his explicitly saying so, is of course the techniques of the work of art as desire—or rather, the parallel mechanisms of art and of desire. Desire, in all its punctuative woundedness and wounding powers, is not simply the geometric point or the photographic pixel but the trace of uncanniness that neither fully coincides with nor is neatly covered over by the point. In his theory of the *punctum*, Barthes therefore echoes Alberti’s understanding of the (centric) point as simply a sign, like any other.

Alberti, as Nicholas Temple recently suggests, conceives of the dual meaning of the point, to which he “attributes qualitative (mathematical) and quantitative (numerical/visual) value” (127). A point, Alberti writes, is “a sign because the painter perceives it as if it were rather like something between a mathematical point and a quantity that can be classified by number, as perhaps atoms can be” (qtd. in Temple 127). In Pearl, the Dreamer self-consciously shifts his gaze from the Lamb to the Pearl-Maiden. Rather than the Pearl-Maiden being a mere visual distraction, perhaps it might be more accurate to read the Dreamer’s shifting of his gaze as the result of the unbearable woundedness of the Lamb’s whiteness; whiteness bruises him. As Dante already found out, staring into the center is an overwhelming experience. And if the Lamb’s blood is the rem(a)inder of the material object, then what Pearl maps out is not simply the

object biography of whiteness but the object biography of the *punctum*, or, better yet, the affective biography of woundedness. The Dreamer, in readjusting his visual focus from the Lamb to the Pearl-Maiden, reveals his preference for an all-consuming whiteness into which desire's prickliness vanishes.

The History of Labor as Whiteness

As Temple observes, Alberti's conception of the point, to which he attributes both qualitative and quantitative values, finds a comparable treatment in the works of the fifteenth-century polymath Nicholas of Cusa, Bishop of Brixen. In his *De Beryllo*, Nicholas notes:

In the indivisibility of a point are enfolded all the foregoing indivisibilities. Therefore, in those indivisibilities there is found nothing except the unfolding of the indivisibility of a point. Therefore, all that is present in a material object is only the point, i.e., is only a likeness of the one. Moreover, a point does not exist as free from a material object. (45)

The intrinsic imbrications of the material object with the point, what Nicholas Cusa terms their "indivisibility," posit the necessary existence of the point-object within time and space. The Pearl-Maiden, insofar as she is the traumatic *punctum* for the Dreamer, remains bound to the material world of bodies and objects—at least from his point of view. Yet psychoanalytically, the significance of the Maiden's materiality resides not only in her object-hood as a pearl, but also in her role as the Lady-Object.

I want to return now to Žižek's reading of the Lady-Object as the radical Other. As Žižek contends, the courtly Lady, rather than being a signifier of some transcendent spiritual love, is "as far as possible from any kind of purified spirituality" ("Courtly Love" 90). Instead, the Lady "functions as an inhuman partner in the sense of a radical Otherness which is wholly incommensurable with our needs and desires, [and] as such, she is simultaneously a kind of automaton, a machine which utters meaningless demands at random" (Žižek, "Courtly Love" 90). And more than an automaton, the Lady as the "traumatic Otherness is what Lacan designates by

means of the Freudian term *das Ding*, the Thing – the Real that ‘always returns to its place’, the hard kernel that resists symbolization” (Žižek, “Courtly Love” 90).³⁷ In her interactions with the lover-mourner, the Lady-Object, as the Thing, appears as an “empty surface . . . [a] cold, neutral screen” onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies (Žižek, “Courtly Love” 91). A flattening effect of the material has taken place. Hence, it is not that the Lady-Object as the lack (the lost object) within the subject is without materiality, but that she can only be approached as purely a surface phenomenon, Lacan’s anamorphic spatialization of the subject’s desire. And while Žižek sees the “mute mirror-surface” of the Lady-Object functioning “as a kind of ‘black hole’ in reality, as a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible” (“Courtly Love” 91), the Pearl-poet envelopes his Pearl-Maiden in a radiant whiteness on whose surface the Dreamer sees himself. His narcissistic projection is his affective labor of mourning.

Affective economy, as Sara Ahmed theorizes, always involves both a sideways movement “between signs, figures, and objects” and a backward movement that conjures its own specters of historicity (120). This backward temporal movement of the affected object renders the object “a temporal archive, a repository for multiple pasts and a trigger for unanticipated futures” (Cohen, “Intertemporality” 197). In my reading of Pearl, I would argue that whiteness, as manifest in the poem, is itself a temporal archive, a memorial to the Dreamer’s loss. And if Pearl is a work of mourning, this mourning is very much a work of memory. As I have outlined in the previous chapter’s discussion on the Book of the Duchess, the act of recollection in ancient and medieval theories of memory is frequently conceived as a movement along a series of imagistic associations (Carruthers, Book 62). Aristotle remarked that in the act of recollection, “people go quickly from one thing to another, for example, from milk to white, from white to air, and from this to fluid, from which one remembers autumn” (Sorabji 56). Mary Carruthers notes that in the Middle Ages, “a common image for items associatively grouped in memory is that of *catena* or ‘chain’” (Book 62). In Pearl, the work of memory, too, takes the form of concatenation, as the poem moves from the material pearl to the Maiden, to the Dreamer’s

deceased daughter, to the New Jerusalem, and to Christ the Lamb.³⁸ The work of memory thereby creates an affective economy that attempts to align the Dreamer to the Pearl-Maiden, and later to Christ and the New Jerusalem.

Pearl's concatenation in white also marks the Dreamer's impulse to bestow both significance and interiority on things, what Bill Brown calls the impossibility of granting things only "superficiality and opacity" (Sense 7). Moreover, the memorial *catena* in Pearl dramatizes the Dreamer's frustration and failure at trying to pinpoint the exact significance of the pearl/Maiden, hence his stalling and circling within the affective feedback loop of mourning. Throughout the imagistic concatenation from pearl to the Lamb of God, whiteness remains constant in the affective mnemonic chain; there is no real movement beyond whiteness, only its permutations. Whiteness, like the river that divides the Dreamer from the Maiden, marks the limit of the Dreamer's affective labor. His memory, at best, is what Clough would designate as traumatized; the body in trauma becomes "a surfacing of a difficulty in remembering or in being certain about the truth of memory" (7). As I have pointed out in an earlier section, when the Dreamer first sees the Maiden, he confidently declares that he knows her well (164); but then, he quickly descends into doubt and timorously inquires of her if she really were his lost "perle" (242). The Dreamer's oscillation between historical certitude and present uncertainty exposes his temporal and epistemological confusions. He insists that the Maiden died at two years of age (483), refuses to accept her transformation into a heavenly queen (492), and wonders about the nature of her "life" (392). In other words, the Dreamer refuses consolation; he remains inconsolable. One of the ironies foregrounded in Pearl is the fact that, throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages, pearls were valued for their alleged curative powers over illnesses, one of which is lovesickness. As noted in an English medieval lapidary:

Margarita is chef of al stons þat ben wyzt & preciose, as Ised seyþ . . . [A]nd somme seyne þat þey comforten lymes & lymnes & membris, for it clenseþ him of superfluite of humours & fasten þe lymes, & helpen azen þe cordiaclie passioun & agens swonyng of hert. (Evans and Serjeantson 107-08)

[Pearl is chief of all stones that are white and precious, as Isidore says . . . [A]nd some say that they comfort limbs and members, for it cleanses them of the superfluity of humors and [they] strengthen the limbs, and help against cardiac pain [or disease] and against heart failure.] (Maring 8-9)

If whiteness signifies pearls' restorative virtue, then the Dreamer, like the Knight in Black in the Book of the Duchess, remains stuck in whiteness and in the state of lovesickness. Whiteness becomes the limit of mourning. Unable to move beyond whiteness or to any sense of stable meaning, the dreamer and the Maiden continue the affective game of substitutions in white.

Throughout Pearl, there is a deliberate coyness and silence about the material production of pearls, as if the poem is content with the myth of the pearl's seemingly natural whiteness. Pearls, of course, have always been produced through a time-consuming process by either natural or cultured oysters. Valerie Allen has recently pointed out that a pearl begins as "an irritant, a piece of grit inside a shellfish, which then coats the grit in calceous matter called nacre that would ordinarily go into lining its shell. . . . A pearl then is something valuable one extracts with difficulty from a receptacle of much lesser value" (5).³⁹ In Allen's reading, the material production of pearls is figurative of "a hermeneutic process that turns dross words into *sentence*"; and as an act of distillation and refinement, pearl production resembles "the transformative possibilities of the alchemical and the metallic" (6).

Whereas Allen stresses the broader resemblance between pearl production and literary labor, here, I would like to focus specifically on the conscious material production of pearls' whiteness. As many historians past and present have observed, most pearls harvested naturally in the medieval West were small, deformed, colored, and/or diseased. Commenting on the poor quality of British pearls, Pliny observes that whereas the best pearls originate in the East, those harvested in Britain are "parvos atque decolores" [small and discolored] (qtd. in Allen 3). And Tacitus concurs by describing British pearls as "subfusc ac liventia" [brownish or bluish] (qtd. in Allen 3). In the Middle Ages, as R. A. Donkin points out, pearls were frequently whitened using

compounds of potassium (potash, alum, tartar), vinegar and lemon juice (261). As the eleventh-century Persian scholar Al-Biruni documents,

If the blackness is in the skin, it [the pearl] is plunged into the mil of figs for forty days, then changed into a vessel in which is Mahlab, Khirwa and camphor, one part of each ingredient, and placed over charcoal-fire for two hours without fanning the fire, then it is taken off. If (however) the blackness is in the interior it is smeared with bees-wax and placed in a vessel with the sour juice of lemons and is shaken continually; the sour juice is renewed every three days till it whitens. (Krenkow 31)⁴⁰

Other medieval techniques of pearl whitening included polishing a lusterless pearl with rice flour or dust, or the use of the juice of watermelons, cucumbers and pumpkins, and that of bone marrow (Donkin 261). In one extraordinary method, Donkin notes, a domestic bird—usually a pigeon, dove, or hen—was induced to swallow a pearl and pass it through the intestines (261). The bird thus became a quasi-, surrogate oyster. In addition to the techniques of whitening natural pearls, and centuries before Mikimoto’s pearl culture, the ancient and medieval worlds already possessed the knowledge of fabricating artificial pearls. Donkin documents sources and records from Egypt, Greece, India, Persia, and China (261). Later in the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci wrote a recipe for making artificial pearls out of the paste of small pearls or mother-of-pearl, lemon juice, and egg white (Donkin 263).

In light of the wealth of historical documentation of the harvesting and processing of pearls, the silence over the material production of pearls in Pearl seems most surprising. Could it be that such knowledge was so widespread and ordinary that the Pearl-poet deemed it unremarkable and unnecessary to include in his poem? Perhaps. But in the face of the Dreamer’s seemingly endless narrativization of his lost object and his grief, I find the silence unsettling and troubling. I would argue that the suppression of the history of material labor in Pearl, exemplified in the naturalized whiteness of the pearl, uncannily parallels the deceptive relationship between affects and objects. As Ahmed argues, affects “appear in objects, or indeed as objects with a life of their own, only by the concealment of how they are shaped by histories, including histories of

production (labor and labor time), as well as circulation or exchange” (121). Commodity fetishism, according to W. J. T. Mitchell, is a kind of double forgetting:

first the capitalist forgets that it is he and his tribe who have projected life and value into commodities in the ritual of exchange But then, a second phase of amnesia sets in that is quite unknown to primitive fetishism. The commodity veils itself in familiarity and triviality, in the rationality of purely quantitative relations The deepest magic of the commodity fetish is its denial that there is anything magical about it. (193)

If “perle” is a commodity fetish, then whiteness figures as its veil of forgetting. The Dreamer-capitalist first “forgets” his projection of narcissistic longing and mourning onto the commodified Lady-Object, thereby refusing to concede that the courtly ritual between him and the Pearl-Maiden is simply a self-perpetuating exchange that endlessly defers consummation. The Lady-Object then veils herself in a whiteness that denies her own status as a product of labor and conceals the Dreamer’s affective investment in her. “Perle,” whitened, is but one of the “inert things with a mystified aura” (Stanbury, Visual Object 19).

Stanbury contends that “if the poem’s visible surface is constructed of precious objects, from the pearl to the gem-encrusted and gilded New Jerusalem, those surfaces are also repeatedly subjected to speculation about their value and operate in the poem within a complex commentary on measure, merit, quantification and valuation” (Introduction 13). I would add that Pearl’s surfaces are subject not only to quantitative and qualitative speculation, but more important, to whitening. In Pearl, whiteness, like Žižek’s Lady-Object, emerges as purely a surface phenomenon. It is that “cold, neutral screen” of the Lady-Object onto which the lover projects his fantasy. If whitening as a material process is an effect of chemical reactions, then as a psychological process, whitening is the narcissistic projection of desire. The whiteness of “perle” is the end result of the object’s mutation—be it through chemicals or desire. The Pearl-Maiden, Riddy remarks, “with her ‘bornyste quyte’ (220) clothing adorned with pearls and her elaborate crown, seems to emanate from the aristocratic taste for white enamelling *en ronde bosse* which is such a striking new feature of the *de luxe* works of art of the end of the fourteenth century” (148). As Riddy explains, enamelling *en ronde basse* is a method, developed in the second half of the

fourteenth century, in which enamel is applied to the surface of a three-dimensional figure (148n18). Ultimately, Pearl's whiteness is a sign of desire's artifice that has been thickened and enamelled.

And what precisely does the whiteness of Pearl conceal? For Ahmed, affect appears in an object only through the concealment of its own historicity. Ahmed's notion of affective concealment resonates with the workings Lacan's *object a*. As Edmondson argues, the *object a*, when viewed up close, appears as something that covers up the subject's trauma. Therefore, the Lady-Object, by standing both in the way of and in the place of the lost object, effectively covers up the subject's traumatic *jouissance*. The whitening of the physical and the spiritual "perle" becomes the figure of the poem's covering up of trauma; mourning qua whitening is another form of the Dreamer's affective labor. Whiteness is simultaneously the product of labor and the erasure of the history of labor. Just as the Lamb's whiteness is punctuated by a bleeding wound, so too is the pearl's whiteness only surface deep. In the middle of the pearl remains that original grain of sand, that irritant, the *punctum* around which the whiteness of the nacre circles. Pearl is the symbol *par excellence* of physical and psychic woundedness. If the Dreamer shifts his gaze from the bleeding Lamb to the Pearl-Maiden because of his inability to bear the full brunt of desire's wounding power, then the Pearl-poet, in his avoidance of labor's history and pain behind the whitening of the pearl, enacts a similar psychic displacement. He, too, cannot bear to look at the wound within whiteness. Pearl might very well be "a kind of precious object" (Stanbury, Introduction 6) or a "jewel" (Riddy 147). But in his selective silence, the Pearl-poet nevertheless draws attention to the poem's own woundedness.

Whiteness, while connected to historicity and materialized as objects in Pearl, ultimately prefers to figure itself as a historical erasure: the buried and seemingly unrecoverable origin of mourning itself. In his historicist reading of the poem, Bowers has argued that Pearl might have alluded to Richard II's extravagant mourning for the death of Anne of Bohemia, his queen who died in 1394 (156).⁴¹ But if mourning, as affective labor in time, is an extravagant commodity,

then what is its value? Like trauma, which is “a surfacing of a difficulty in remembering” (Clough 7), whiteness in Pearl is a surfacing of a difficulty in desiring. In psychoanalysis, the work of mourning is part and parcel of the subject’s constitution and emergence. But if mourning has a value, then it lies in the individual and collective investment in how affective value “shapes the surface of bodies and worlds” (Ahmed 121). Here in Pearl, this affective shaping conjures up both a past historicized by experiential loss and a future envisioned as apocalyptic timelessness (956), to which the Dreamer is denied access. If, as Derrida contends, the proclamation of an end is always a wishful movement that cannot conjure away the *telos*, then the Pearl-Maiden that the Dreamer conjures up is the artifactual body of affective sociality whose whiteness both embodies time as salvific and mercantile property, and signals the necessary erasure of material labor that history, and implicitly, the work of mourning, demands. “So rounde . . . So small, so smothe” (5-6) is the “perle.”

Notes

¹ Hannah Arendt, On Revolution, p. 86.

² In F. Krenkow, trans., “The Chapter on Pearls in The Book on Precious Stones by Al-Beruni,” p. 31.

³ For metonymic readings of Pearl, see Alan J. Fletcher, who argues that metonymy “offers a unique point of access to the understanding of the poem’s aesthetic and cultural dynamics” (47); and Teresa P. Reed, for whom the poem’s “metonymic logic” connects heaven “fluidly to human desires and bodies” (135). See also Felicity Riddy (152) and Heather Maring (2).

⁴ See, for example, Bill Brown’s A Sense of Things: the Object Matter of American Literature, Brown’s edited anthology Things, and the special “Things” issue of Critical Inquiry 28.1 (2001).

⁵ For the topos and archetype of the pearl-child, see Robert Levine; for the medieval tradition of pearl virginity, see C. A. Luttrell; and for a comparison of St Margaret and the Pearl-Maiden, see James W. Earl.

⁶ Marti reads Pearl through the metaphor of enclosure, which “bases itself on the relationship of the body to its containers dictated by the theology of the vessel” (104).

⁷ The Latin is quoted in Earl, p.3.

⁸ Michael D. Cherniss reads Pearl as a Boethian apocalypse. Also see V. E. Watts for the tradition of *consolatio* in Pearl. Cynthia Kraman argues that Pearl uses “the double frame of Romance time (repetition and cycles) and Apocalyptic time (eternity)” (357); the poem is “not an eschatology but a vision of both time and eternity” (357).

⁹ Riddy identifies the Dreamer with the jeweler and notes that the word “jeweler” is “first recorded in English in the early fourteenth century, and is used of one who works with or trades in gems and precious stones” (149).

¹⁰ Tony Davenport rejects reading the Dreamer as a literal jeweler in the poem.

¹¹ Heather Maring reads the poem’s traffic in objects in religious terms. Maring contends that “objects that move between two or more beings (as in gift-exchange) continue to bear significance, a significance that, following the chain of associations in Pearl, ultimately derives from the deity. Once drawn outside of this ‘loop,’ objects begin to lose their connection to the ultimate font of meaningfulness” (10).

¹² Le Goff further argues that time is foundational to the merchant’s activity, and mercantile knowledge “implies the existence of an information network and the employment of couriers” (30).

¹³ Yet Le Goff also observes that while the merchant’s time “was measurable, and even mechanized, it was nevertheless also discontinuous, punctuated by halts and periods of inactivity, subject to quickenings and slowings of its pace” (37).

¹⁴ For example, Carolyn P. Collette and Nancy Mason Bradbury have recently argued that late medieval writers displayed “both a receptive interest in the clock’s proto-scientific potential to produce more exact quantifications of time, and, at the same time, a spirited and mocking resistance to the idea that the new *quantitative* time offered by clocks can possibly displace the richly *qualitative* time that had always shaped human lives in innumerable and profound ways” (351-52, original emphases).

¹⁵ Edmondson notes that pearls were “already objects of the greatest cultural desire in the later Middle Ages, objects privileged by symbolic order not only for their physical beauty, but for their power to represent” (42n37).

¹⁶ For other studies of the medieval engagements with the Boethian consolation, see Léglu and Milner's edited collection, The Erotics of Consolation: Desire and Distance in the Late Middle Ages.

¹⁷ For the history of ocular skepticism in the West, see Stanbury, "Pearl," pp. 119-22.

¹⁸ E.V. Gordon has noted that the Dreamer visualizes the Heavenly City as a typical medieval town; see his Pearl, p.77, n. 917.

¹⁹ See Field, p.8, n.6.

²⁰ As Kant defines in his third Critique, *parerga* are "those things which do not belong to the complete representation of the object internally as elements, but only externally as complements" (qtd. in Harvey, "Derrida" 59).

²¹ The narrative structure of Pearl can also be viewed *parergonally*. The parable of the vineyard is located at the very structural center of Pearl, starting from the second half of the fourth stanza group and extending to the end of the first half of the fifth stanza group (497-572). Thus, the space at the center of Pearl, the *ergon*, is flat. And this flatness "spreads" from the center towards both the beginning and the end of the poem, as the parable is "framed" from each end by the Maiden's verbal discourse. It is only at the "borders," at the initial and the final portions of the poem—the *parergon*—that the Dreamer occupies the far less flat spaces of the *erber* and the Earthly Paradise. Pearl, therefore, is structured like an illustrated manuscript, with a flat central space of text and allegorical spaces, the *ergon*, and a much more intriguing and depth-provoking border, the *parergon*, around it.

²² For another study on marginalia in medieval art, see Michael Camille's Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art.

²³ The difficulty in distinguishing the *ergon* from the *parergon* is especially true in much of medieval art, where figures were deliberately placed within and beyond the frame. It was only

from the latter half of the fourteenth century and onward that the frame became less intruded on by the picture at the center and began to appear more as a separate entity.

²⁴ Žižek continues: “When, in his seminar Encore, Lacan provides the most succinct formulation of the paradox of courtly love, he says something that is apparently similar, yet fundamentally different: ‘A very refined manner to supplant the absence of the sexual relationship is by feigning that it is us who put the obstacle in its way.’ The point, therefore, is not simply that we set up additional conventional hindrances in order to heighten the value of the object: *external hindrances that thwart our access to the object are there precisely to create the illusion that without them, the object would be directly accessible* – what such hindrances thereby conceal is the inherent impossibility of attaining the object” (“Courtly Love” 94).

²⁵ The translation is that of Léglu and Milner.

²⁶ The modern English translation is that of Davis.

²⁷ All translations of Dante’s Divine Comedy are those of Charles S. Singleton.

²⁸ See, for example, María Bullón-Fernández, who reads Pearl in the tradition of Roman de la Rose and Dante’s Divine Comedy.

²⁹ Maring observes that “A pearl ‘so rounde’ may point, by its humble material existence, to the perfect unbounded atemporality of God” (8).

³⁰ Alberti writes: “First of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen; and I decide how large I wish the human figures in the painting to be. I divide the height of this man into three parts, which will be proportional to the measure commonly called a *braccio*; for as may be seen from the relationship of his limbs, three *bracci* is just about the average height of a man’s body. With this measure I divide the bottom line of my rectangle into as many parts as it will hold; and this bottom line of the rectangle is for me proportional to the next transverse equidistant wherever I wish and [as] it occupies the place where the centric

ray strikes, I shall call this the centric point. The suitable position for this centric point is no higher from the base line than the height of the man to be represented in the painting, for in this way both the viewers and the objects in the painting will seem to be on the same plane. Having placed the centric point, I draw lines from it to each of the divisions of the base line. These lines show me how successive transverse quantities visually change to an almost infinite distance” (54-55).

³¹ The linkage between swirling clouds, waving streams, and ornate borders in medieval art is an interesting one that keeps recurring in the visual and the verbal arts. The anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing states that “seeing” God is an oxymoron, a “paradox of blind vision” (Stanbury, Seeing 132). There is a cloud standing between humanity and God, and it is only in the cloud that we can find God. The divine, the author seems to imply, is to be found in the marginal zone. Camille, in his study of Gothic art, points to the Gothic obsession with pleats, folds, and waves. On folio 21r of Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 524, and illuminated English Apocalypse produced around 1250, an angel with “undulating arcs of drapery and criss-crossed arms” directs John’s gaze towards God (Gothic Art 15). Furthermore, Camille cites the example of the “crazy vault” of St. Hugh’s Choir at the Lincoln cathedral, in which ribs stretch out in a “syncopated asymmetry” (Gothic Art 16). One medieval commentator compared the pleat-like patterns to “a bird stretching out her broad wings to fly” (qtd. in Camille, Gothic Art 16). The pleats’ “movement not only conforms to an underlying order, but takes place in a single direction. It has an aim”; truly, the “waves” lead to God “through a restless path of line, light and shadow” (Camille, Gothic Art 15).

³² The word *perspectiva* comes from the Latin *perspicere*, meaning “to see through.” From this definition, Panofsky argues that a true perspectival view of space occurs “only when the entire picture has been transformed into a ‘window,’ and we are meant to believe we are looking through this window into a space” (27).

³³ For Derrida, *parerga* verge upon the *ergon*: “they touch it, push it, press it, press against it, seek contact, exert a pressure at the frontier” (Parergon 55).

³⁴ As Derrida suggests, the *parergon* “does not stop disturbing the *internal* order of discourse on painting, its works, its commerce, its evaluations, its surplus-values, its speculation, its law, and its hierarchies” (*Parergon* 9).

³⁵ Panofsky continues: “It [the object] does not want to be referred to an eccentric vanishing point, nor certainly, as in the oblique view, governed by a coordinate system whose axes no longer even appear objectively in the work, but rather exist only in the imagination of the beholder” (68, my emphasis).

³⁶ See *MED*, s.v. “pointe,” 1(b).

³⁷ On *das Ding*, Lacan theorizes: “The Thing is that which in the real suffers from this fundamental, initial relation, which commits man to the ways of the signifier by reason of the fact that he is subjected to what Freud calls the pleasure principle, and which, I hope it is clear in your minds, is nothing else than the dominance of the signifier” (*Ethics* 134).

³⁸ Maring remarks that “the Dreamer follows a chain of ‘pearls,’ from least true (that is, real, eternal) to most, from a figure of speech signifying his daughter to the spotless Lamb” (10).

³⁹ I would like to thank Valerie Allen for sharing her work with me.

⁴⁰ Al-Biruni conceives of the pearl as an organism capable of becoming diseased: “Now the pearl is part of an animal and has a resemblance to the bones (of an animal) and length of time acting upon it changes it from its (original) colour and brings it to blood and slaughter and there is no cure of the accidental happening in the very material except from the direction of its origin from the commencement. Then it may be possible to bring it back to what it was originally” (Krenkow 29). Therefore, it is possible to engage a materialist reading of *Pearl* that takes into consideration of natural pearls’ fragility and life cycle. In such a reading, the pearl is no longer the talismanic symbol of the Pearl-Maiden’s divinity, but like the Dreamer who is stricken with grief and lovesickness, is a sign of the human capacity for illness and death.

⁴¹ Edmondson suggests that “the image of a prince enthralled with an enclosed pearl leads us . . . to ask questions of real urgency to Richard’s court: Will the king ever end his extravagant mourning for his queen? When will he marry again, produce an heir, and restore a sense of wholeness to the realm?” (44)

The Enigma of Arrival: Black Mouth, White Voice, and the Kiss of Tartary

“The wolves were quite white . . . In great terror, evidently of being eaten up by the wolves, I screamed and woke up.” — The Wolfman¹

“You come too late, much too late. There will always be a world—a white world—between you and us.” — Frantz Fanon²

In Mandeville’s Travels, Genghis Khan twice saw “in a vision a knight armed all in white and on a white horse” (Moseley 146). To the Khan, the white knight foretold the Mongols’ global empire and, implicitly, their arrival in Western Christendom:

Almighty God has sent me to show you His will. His will is that you tell the seven tribes that you will be their Emperor. And you will conquer and win all the lands about you, and they shall be subject to you as you have been to them. This is the will of Almighty God. (Moseley 146)

The Mandeville-author’s account is based on an early fourteenth-century text, La Fleur des histoires de la terre d’Orient by the Cilician Armenian Hetoum, which is itself drawn from a native Mongol source, The Secret History of the Mongols. In one version of the Eastern legends, a shaman rides a horse into the skies to talk with the spirits and utters the prophecy. Hetoum, in his rendition of the legend, both replaces the shaman with “a knyght in armour upon a white horse” (3. 18) who appears in a dream vision, and identifies the knight’s utterance as the word of Christ. By the time of Mandeville’s Travels, the knight is more emphatically imagined as “Armed all in white” (Moseley 147).³ As the Mongols’ promised arrival is multiply reconfigured by these Westernized and European writers, a process of whitening has occurred.⁴

Historian Thomas Allsen has pointed out that for medieval Tartars, whiteness symbolized both good fortune and political charisma: “White, naturally, had clear political associations . . . since special good fortune or charisma was an essential attribute of kingship in steppe ideology” (59).⁵ But for medieval Europeans, more is at work here. The transformation in textual representation, from a tribal shaman riding on a horse to a white knight on a white horse, is a

fetishization in which whiteness becomes a seemingly sanctified and universalized image of chivalric masculinity—something that the medieval West was keen on valorizing. And what is culturally and temporally transmitted and preserved is not any particular or accurate knowledge of Tartar horsemanship, but rather, its essentialized parts: the armor, the horse, the knight, the prophecy. These are the components of what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen would call a “chivalric circuit,” an assemblage of bodies, objects and voices.⁶ On the one hand, the figurative representation of the white knight on a white horse functions as recognition of the Mongols’ military strength; on the other hand, the Christianizing effect of whiteness functions to tame such displays of Oriental prowess.

The fetishization of whiteness in the Great Khan’s dreams, especially its simultaneous acknowledgement and translation of a cross-cultural chivalric ideal into the figures of the white knight and the white horse, resonates for me with a radically different but well-documented dream of fetishized whiteness in the West. Here, I would like to juxtapose the Great Khan’s dreams of the white knight with the Wolfman’s dream of the white wolves. As one of Freud’s famous case studies, the Wolfman got his alias from the pack of white wolves that haunts his dream. The Wolfman speaks of his terror at their sight:

I was terrified to see that some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window. There were six or seven of them. The wolves were quite white, and looked more like foxes or sheep-dogs, for they had big tails like foxes and they had their ears pricked like dogs when they are attending to something. (Freud, *Infantile* 29)

Freud asks of the Wolfman: “Why were the wolves white?” (*Infantile* 30). But despite his awareness of whiteness’s presence in his analysand’s dream, Freud does not interpret the meaning of whiteness beyond the sexual drives and the childhood memories of the Wolfman. Freud, in fact, observes that the wolves “were quite white” only to immediately dismiss their whiteness as “unessential in itself” (43n2). To him, the whiteness of the wolves is the result of a combination of “unimportant details from the other sources of the dream with a fragment of the primal scene which is more significant” (43n2).

But does the whiteness of the Wolfman's dream signify only the sexual and the infantile? Alfred J. López, in his critique of Freud's analysis of the Wolfman, argues that Freud's privileging of the sexual and the infantile elements of the Wolfman's dream neglects the broader cultural and national logic at work in the whiteness of the wolves. For López, the whiteness of the Wolfman's dream is emblematic not only of the homoerotic impulses of the Wolfman, but also of a Germanic masculinity that the Wolfman anxiously constructs as normative and to which he, as a Russian immigrant, aspires. Furthermore, whiteness is also "as a point of transference and countertransference" (163). As López contends, Freud's suppression of the nationalistic and cultural aspects of masculinity encoded in the Wolfman's dream of whiteness is indicative of Freud's suppression of his own difficulties as a Jew in turn-of-the-century, German-speaking Vienna. And more important, Freud also suppresses psychoanalysis's dependence on a colonial logic, in which the whiteness of the Wolfman's dream acts as both a "tacit norm in Western society" and a "cultural imperative" (López 156).

In invoking the Wolfman's dream, I do not wish to suggest that the dreams of Genghis Khan are its exact parallel; nor do I wish to force a comparative reading on the two distinct cultural and historical moments that produce the two dreams of whiteness. But I do want to pick up on López's notion of whiteness as a tacit norm and a cultural imperative in my reading of the trope of whiteness in medieval literary and visual representations of the Tartars. In López's reading, the whiteness of the Wolfman's dream is literally and figuratively watching him; the Wolfman is anxious "at finding himself under the intent gaze (and implicit menace, and judgment) of that whiteness" (164). In Hetoum's and the Mandeville-author's accounts, does not the whiteness of the knight also gaze back in similar fashion at the Great Khan and, indirectly, at the Western audiences of these texts?

Moreover, the Wolfman expresses his great terror of being eaten up by the white wolves (Freud, Infantile 29). Freud, not surprisingly, reads the Wolfman's fear as "a reminiscence as

well as a substitute by displacement” of his difficulties with father-figures (44n2). But if López is right in reading the Wolfman’s whiteness as an eye that gazes menacingly, then it is also a whiteness with a hungry mouth that is ready to consume and digest its audience. In Genghis Khan’s dreams of the white knight, might whiteness similarly threaten to devour its beholders? And if an analogy could be made, who is the Wolfman figure in Genghis Khan’s dream episodes? The Khan himself? I would argue that it is not the character of the Khan but Hetoum and the Mandeville-author themselves who are the Wolfman figures. They are the ones who deliberately transform a Tartar shaman into a knight and paint him white. For the Mandeville-author and Hetoum, as well as for the readers of their texts, the Khan is here a screen upon which they project the West’s anxiety over the Mongol imperial ambition that is clothed in whiteness and threatens to swallow up the known world. But at the same time, the two authors are heavily invested in both the figure of the Great Khan—a historical force to reckon with—and the figure of the white knight—a stand-in for European chivalric norms and religious imperatives. By clothing the Mongol ambition in white, Hetoum and the Mandeville-author effectively respond to the Mongols’ hungry mouth by figuratively swallowing up “Tartariness” in turn: the Wolfmen devour the white wolves in their collective dreams.

The kind of cultural and textual “whitening” of Genghis Khan’s dreams that Hetoum and the Mandeville-author engage in points to the power of artistic manipulations. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, in his Poetria nova, argues that art “plays about almost like a magician, and brings it about that the last becomes first . . . black white, and vile precious” (Gallo 21). For Jacqueline de Weever, such a belief in art’s capacity to transform black into white (*nigra candida*) is also a belief in the possibility of erasing alterity through whitening (3). And whitening, in its attempt to mask anxieties and assimilate differences, also ignores the origin of alterity; hence, whiteness imposes an ideal on top of the Other (de Weever 27). The act of whitening posits a new origin. In this chapter, I would like to use the Great Khan’s dreams of the white knight as the starting

point to examine other problematic figurations of the Tartars in relation to questions of origin, orality, idolatry, fetishism, courtliness and color. Seemingly unrelated among themselves or to whiteness, these issues nevertheless intersect in important ways in medieval perceptions and representations of the Tartar, both in visual art and in literary texts. Marco Polo, in his Travels, observes a peculiar oral ritual of Tartar idolaters, which is illustrated in a manuscript containing Polo's text. In these manuscript illuminations, the Tartars are depicted as both dark-skinned idolaters and white courtiers. Idolatry and courtliness appear to be the identity markers that dictate the chromatic visualization of the Tartars. This split in visual vocabulary mirrors a persistent ambivalence in the West's perception of the Tartars in the late Middle Ages. And just as Hetoum and the Mandeville-author locate the origin of the Tartar empire in Genghis Khan's dreams, Marco Polo is also interested in the quests for origins; in his narrative, he traces the origin of idolatry to the life and death of Buddha but ends up recounting a kind of commodity fetish economy of relics that the Great Khan seeks to command and incorporate into his court. Lastly, in the Squire's Tale, Chaucer moves away from issues of idolatry and color in his portrayal of the Tartars. The origin that he seeks is that of fetishized magical objects and mechanical marvels found in Cambyuskan's court. In Chaucer's tale, whiteness, if tacitly normative and culturally imperative, seems to disappear into fetishes of courtliness; the Squire's Tartars behave as (white) European courtly subjects.

The Ocular and the Oracular

The originary prophecy of Tartar imperialism, as a voice embodied in whiteness, is both ocular and oracular. For the West, the Tartars' initial lack of writing renders their "oral" activities a fetishized locus of ethnographic attention. Simon of Saint-Quentin observes that Tartars' "speech is rapid, guttural, and horrible; when they sing, they bellow like bulls or howl

like wolves” (Strickland, Saracens 195). Both Hetoum and William of Rubruck, a thirteenth-century Franciscan missionary, draw attention to the Tartars’ lack of a unique writing system until their late adoption of the Uighur script. William of Rubruck further remarks on the Tartars’ specific use of writing in pagan rituals: “The Tartars have adopted [the Uighurs’] script. They begin to write at the top and continue the line downwards, and they read it in the same way and they increase their lines from left to right. They make great use of paper and characters for their sorcery, consequently their temples are full of short sentences hanging up” (Dawson 140). Writing, for the Tartars, serves not only as a means of record-keeping and communication but also as a talisman in their idolatrous religious practices.

The Dominican and Franciscan missionaries, as proto-ethnographers and Orientalists before the rise of modern Orientalism or ethnography, drew upon the Western tradition of the Marvels of the East in their depictions of Tartary. But not only is the East exotic, it is also monstrous and barbaric. John of Plano Carpini observes that the Tartars do not use table-cloths or napkins, nor do they wash their dishes or clothes (Dawson 16-17). And William of Rubruck is struck by the excess drinking and drunkenness of Mongol men and women: “[T]hey drink all around, the men and the women, and sometimes vie with each other in drinking in a really disgusting and gluttonous manner” (Dawson 97). In addition, John of Plano Carpini contemptuously notes of the Tartars’ diet that “[t]heir food consists of everything that can be eaten, for they eat dogs, wolves, foxes and horses and, when driven by necessity, they feed on human flesh” (Dawson 16). Initially identified with the legendary races of Gog and Magog, the lost tribes of Israel locked up behind Alexander’s Gate in the Caucasus Mountains whose bursting forth would signal the arrival of the Apocalypse, the Tartars were rumored to be brutal cannibals. In Matthew Paris’ Chronica Majora, written in the mid-thirteenth century, Tartars are described as “inhumani et bestiales, potius monstra dicendi quam homines, sanguinem sitientes et bibentes, carnes canincas et humanas laniantes et devorantes” [inhuman and of the nature of beasts, rather



Fig. 5. The hardship and horrors in the land of the Tartars. The Travels of Sir John Mandeville. London, British Library, MS. Harley 3954, f. 24v.
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to be called monsters than men, thirsting after and drinking blood, and tearing and devouring the flesh of dogs and human beings] (qtd. in Blurton 84). Matthew Paris further emphasizes the Tartars' alleged cannibalism through his illustrations in the Chronica Majora. On folio 167r of Corpus Christi College, MS 16, he depicts three Tartars decapitating, roasting, and devouring human flesh; the Tartars have demonic features and display a sadistic pleasure in their diabolic consumption. The association of Tartars with indiscriminate and barbaric eating habits would linger in the visual vocabulary in the medieval West. In a fifteenth-century manuscript of The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, British Library, MS Harley 3954 (fig. 5), the illustrators depict on folio 24v the hardship and horror in Tartary, in which a Tartar holds two rodent-like animals in his hands and hungrily devours one of them—seemingly still alive—with his mouth.

As Heather Blurton recently argues, Matthew Paris's focus on the Mongols' supposed cannibalism signals the fear of the Mongols' consumption not only of human bodies, but of the body politic of Christendom itself (85). The mouth, as a site of scopophilic attention, is a bodily

organ that serves multiple functions: breathing, eating, drinking, vomiting, vocalizing, speaking, and kissing. Art historian Paul Binski observes that the open mouth, along with expressions of laughter, was tightly regulated in the production of Gothic sculpture: “the rudely open mouth is a sign of the abject, of the macabre, of those beyond the bounds of the accepted, and of *hubris*. Thus laughter and the open mouth were targets of regulation and control in the Middle Ages quite as much as the activity of the eyes and ‘lewed looking’” (354). Michael Camille has also pointed to images of idols and idolaters with gaping mouths in medieval manuscripts (“Iconoclast’s” 155, 157). The mouth, in addition to performing bodily functions, can also serve as a weapon of attack, both verbally and physically. It, Robin Waugh argues, is “the focus of physicality and violence in the face. Objects enter the mouth, are broken down, and lose their original form . . . chewing reduces a variety of objects into a kind of sameness” (362). In terms of the Tartars in the Middle Ages, their oral consumption and assimilation of human flesh become both literal and political. Matthew Paris, in one episode of the Chronica Majora, recounts how the Tartars raped and dismembered virgins, and ate their breasts as delicacies.⁷ Here, the Tartars’ mouth is both a political and a sexual organ of domination, and Matthew’s account marks their figurative yet terrifying arrival in the Western consciousness.

The ethnographic fixation on all things oral in Mongol society also leads to the following observation by Marco Polo about Oriental idolatry. He notes in his Travels that while the Tartars are supposedly monotheistic, as they believe in one supreme God, they nonetheless remain fundamentally shamanistic and idolatrous:

I will now tell you of their religion. They say that there is a High God, exalted and heavenly, to whom they offer daily prayer with thurible and incense, but only for a sound understanding and good health. They also have a god of their own whom they call Natigai. They say that he is an earthly god and watches over their children, their beasts, and their crops. They pay him great reverence and honour; for each man has one in his house. They make this god of felt and cloth and keep him in their house; and they also make the god’s wife and children. They set his wife at his left hand and his children in front. And they treat them with great reverence. When they are about to have a meal, they take a lump of fat and smear the god’s mouth with it, and the mouths of his wife and children. Then they take

some broth and pour it outside the door of the house. When they have done this, they say that their god and his household have had their share. After this they eat and drink. (Latham 98-99)

Marco Polo finds this particular oral practice in Tartar idolatry—the smearing of Natigai’s mouth with fat—so fascinating that he refers to Natigai three times in his text. And he is not the only one; many illustrators of late medieval manuscripts of Marco Polo’s Travels were also intrigued by the Tartars’ practice and took pains to depict the idolaters’ daily ritual in visual form.⁸

More important, visual representations of the Tartars and Natigai were frequently rendered in strikingly racialized and religious terms. For example, in British Library, MS Royal 19 D.I—a compilation of medieval travel writings produced in early fourteenth-century Paris for a lay audience—the artists deliberately depicted the Mongol idolaters as dark skinned, turbaned Saracens. On folio 76r (fig. 6), the Great Khan sits before a group of Tartars while a statue of an idol stands on its pedestal behind him; both the Great Khan and the other Tartars are dark-skinned and turbaned. And on folio 78v (fig. 1), three Tartars, again portrayed as dark-skinned and turbaned, are shown worshipping their idol Natigai. One Tartar reaches forth his right arm and touches the idol’s mouth, a gesture that signifies his smearing of its mouth with fat. On both folio 76r and folio 78v, the idol Natigai is imaged as completely nude. This visual depiction resonates with the Mandeville-author’s observation that the Tartars intentionally make their idols naked:

When these people make their idols, or statues of their friends to act as a perpetual memorial of them, they make them naked; for they say that true love has no covering, and that no one should love anything merely for its outward beauty; one should love the disposition of the person and the good virtues nature has adorned him with. (Moseley 159)

As Camille points out, images of idols in the Gothic period are nearly always naked (Gothic Idol 88). Here, in Royal 19 D.I, the naked skin of the idol Natigai serves as a visual parallel to the dark skin of the Tartars.

Camille regards the illustrations in Royal 19 D.I as the mediocre work of a group of poorly supervised artists who frequently ignored texts and made “mistakes” (Gothic Idol 152-54).



Fig. 6. The Great Khan and his idol in Campison (Kanau). *The Travels of Marco Polo*. London, British Library, MS. Royal 19 D. I, f. 76r.
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Moreover, the idols portrayed are of the classical type, and they “have less to do with the details set down by Marco Polo than with the preconceptions of his readers” (Camille, *Gothic Idol* 152). Instead of accurately or fully representing the complex rituals surrounding Tartar religious practices, the artists chose to show only “the blatant act of idolatry” (Camille, *Gothic Idol* 153), especially the smearing of Natigai’s mouth with fat. The placement of the idol behind the Great Khan on folio 76r also follows the medieval conventions of representing pagan tyrants who rule through false images. Furthermore, the idol has the same gesture as that of the enthroned Khan, which, according to Camille, signifies a deliberate visual equivalence of the Great Khan and the idol; the Great Khan is revered by his people as a deity, just like an idol (Camille, *Gothic Idol* 153).

Simon Gaunt, in his reading of the images from Royal 19 D.I, argues that the Tartars are depicted as stereotypical Persians (4). The dark skin of the Tartars is part and parcel of the visual vocabulary of the medieval West that frequently represents Saracens and Jews as dark, bestial, and demonic (Camille, Gothic Idol 138). I would add that the inclusion of a hat on the idol Natigai's head on folio 78v of Royal 19 D.I further suggests a link between Tartar idolatry and medieval Jewry. For Gaunt, the visual representations of the Tartars in Royal 19 D.I are translations of alien customs into "a visual idiom that domesticates them for the manuscript's European readers" (4). For art historian Debra Higgs Strickland, the illustrators of the Marco Polo manuscript were not so much making mistakes as fulfilling reader expectations; that is, the desire to conform to an "imagery already familiar to Western readers from chronicle, romance, and other pictorial contexts" (Saracens 201) far outweighed the desire to remain faithful to the text. This maneuver, Strickland contends, is "part of a larger and necessary 'translation' of aspects of a new and relatively unfamiliar part of the world into terms that the wealthy and noble patrons of these manuscripts would understand" (Saracens 201). Therefore, while Marco Polo makes no mention of monstrous races, as would the Mandeville-author, late medieval artists depicted them anyway because they had become "de rigueur in travel books produced for the aristocracy" (Strickland, Saracens 201). And while Marco Polo never describes the Tartars as dark-skinned or turbaned, their idolatry was reason enough for the illuminators to render them as what Strickland terms "functional Saracens."⁹

Steven Kruger, in his study of the history of fetishism, argues that the emergence of the fetish in the early modern period depended on an earlier, medieval racialized discourse about religions, people and objects (193-95), a discourse shaped by centuries of contacts and conflicts among Islam, Christianity, and Judaism ("Fetishism" 200). And William Pietz theorizes that the fetish is a historical object territorialized in material space (12). For Marco Polo, Natigai is such a historical object that exists in material space. Both Kruger and Pietz gesture toward fetishism's

historical and material imbrications with idolatry, often constructed as one of the roots of fetishism. The OED defines *fetish* as “an inanimate object worshipped by primitive peoples on account of its supposed inherent magical powers, or as being animated by a spirit.” Of course, there are differences in the history and the conception of the idol vis-à-vis those of the fetish, as I will discuss in the next section. But what I want to point out here is the uncannily “fetishistic” quality of the Tartars’ worship of Natigai. Is not Natigai—naked, smeared upon—an inanimate object that is animated through the daily feeding of fat? That is, the smearing of Natigai’s mouth, as observed by Marco Polo and visualized in medieval illuminations, is an act that both animates the idol’s material body and territorializes it within every Tartar household. The primitivism attributed to fetishism is here explicitly linked to the paganism of idolatry. Reaching into the future, the medieval imaging of the barefooted and dark-skinned Tartars worshipping their Natigai—as found in Royal 19 D.I—strangely prefigures the early modern coupling of fetishes and the black-skinned inhabitants of the Guinea coast in Africa.

Of course, the Tartars did not look or dress like barefooted, turbaned, and dark-skinned Saracens or Sub-Saharan Africans. But the visual mode in these miniatures suggests the ideological nature of Western representations of the Mongols. Art historian Madeline Caviness recently points to what she argues is the emergence of a historically contingent “white identity” for Europeans in the high and late Middle Ages (1).¹⁰ Prior to the thirteenth century, Byzantine and early medieval painters used layered pigments of various colors to create a pinkish-brown flesh tone for depictions of Europeans. However, in the mid-thirteenth century, Caviness argues, there was a chromatic shift from ruddy flesh tones to pure white skin and light-colored hair in the visual representations of Europeans. Caviness traces this change to the Crusades, specifically to Louis IX in France, and the increased contacts with brownish infidels and sub-Saharan Africans. The lighter complexion used to portray European women, developed at the end of the twelfth century, was appropriated by European men for all Europeans in the 1350s. By the fourteenth

century, devils were colored, and Christ and saints had bodies of pure white that glowed like the Eucharistic wafer. The emergence of whiteness as a European identity also led to what David Batchelor terms “chromophobia,” the “loathing of colour, [the] fear of corruption through colour” (22). Moreover, chromophobia manifests itself as a purging and devaluation of color’s positive valence.¹¹ In his description of the Tartars’ physique, John of Plano Carpini has noted that the Tartars are ugly, with wide, flat faces, small eyes and smaller stature. While John does not particularly remark upon the Tartars’ skin tone per se, the move to blackness in the visual program, as evident in Royal 19 D.I, seems an inevitable step to make.

The Idol and the Fetish

What is idolatry? Camille traces the etymology of idolatry to “the Greek words *eidolon*, meaning image, and *latreia*, meaning adoration” (xxv). In the OED, *idol* is defined as “an image or similitude of a deity or divinity, used as an object of worship: applied to those worshipped by pagans.” In a similar vein, the MED denotes *idol* as “a man-made object representing a deity, an image of a god.” The MED’s emphasis on the intentional making of idols is in line with the conception of idolatry as the sin of the making of graven images within the Judeo-Christian tradition; the second commandment, in Exodus 20.4, delineates the divine prohibition: “Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing [*Ne facies tibi sculptile*] nor the likeness [*similitudinem*] of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth” (qtd. in Camille, Gothic Idol 27).¹² The idols of the pagans, according to the Old Testament, “are silver and gold, made by the hands of men” (Psalm 115.4-8). The early Christian church, Edwyn Bevan points out, condemned the use of colors in art and the making of idols. According to the third-century Syriac Didascalia: “No oblations may be received from those who paint with colours, from those who make idols or workers in gold, silver and bronze”

(qtd. in Bevan 86). Clement and Origen, two of the Alexandrine Fathers, further expanded the prohibition to “any making of images, or at any rate to any making of images of worship” (Bevan 107). The ancient and medieval distrust of artifice, making, and fabrication is deeply rooted in the fear of the dangers of mimesis; fabrication, for Christian theologians, can function as the very embodiment of the devil’s deception (Camille, Gothic Idol 24). A visible object, having been made through human labor, is “a snare which hindered the mind from rising” above the body’s materiality (Bevan 107). Tertullian, in fact, argues that “every maker of an idol is guilty of one and the same sin” as that of an idolater (27). But curiously, Tertullian conceives of idolatry as a practice originally distinct from the making of idols. In his De Idololatria, Tertullian imagines a past when idolatry existed without idols:

There was a time, long ago, when there existed no idol. Before the makers of this monstrosity made their boisterous appearance, temples and sanctuaries were bare and empty, as in some places traces of the old state of affairs have maintained themselves up to our day. Yet idolatry was practised, not under that name but in actual fact. For even today it may be practised outside a temple and without an idol. But as soon as the devil had brought into the world the maker of statues, portraits and every kind of representation, that former primitive practice so pernicious to man received from idols both its name and its increase. Thenceforth every form of art producing an idol in any way became a summit of idolatry. (27)

For Tertullian, the making of idols is the result of the devil’s influence on humanity. Once the art of idol-making is introduced by the devil, there is no separation between idolatry as artifice and as worship. This linkage between idolatry and the act of making persisted in the late Middle Ages. Gower, for instance, discusses the dangers of idolatry in Book 5 of the Confessio Amantis as primarily those of unreasonableness and irrationality. Idolatry is “fer fro resonable wit” (5. 1507). Idols, Gower proclaims, are merely the results of human fabrication: “And yit the foles to hem knele, / Which is here oghne handes werk” (5. 1504-05). Ultimately, as Nicolette Zeeman contends, the distrust and devaluation of human making stems from the fear that the making of idols would naturally lead to their worship (44). There is a seemingly inevitable circularity of

and an easy cross-identification between the maker of idols and the idolater; the maker of idols is always already an idolater.

But having defined idolatry as primarily a sin of making, what precisely constitutes or identifies an idol remains unclear. How does one recognize an idol? How is an idol different from a valid religious image used in Christian worship? The premodern and modern conceptions of the idol remain diverse and at times inconsistent. Medieval Christians, Camille points out, negotiated the often slippery definitional slope of idolatry through a theology of semiotics. Images, for Christians, are signs of God's divine power through which one gains access. Christians, in other words, worship the divine represented by the image and not the image itself; power resides "not *in* tangible objects but *through* signs, which point to the Eucharist and ultimately salvation" (Camille, Gothic Idol 13, original emphases). An idol, in contrast to a Christian image, remains trapped in its materiality without any reference or signification beyond it. For early Christians, an idol is "mere matter . . . inanimate and dead" (Bevan 94). If Christian images are efficacious because they are spiritual and not bound to materiality, idols' very materiality renders them empty and useless. An idol, Richard C. Trexler argues, is "no more nor less than a representation which did not work. To accuse a person of worshipping idols [is] to accuse him of worshipping something which possessed no *virtú*, no spiritual power" ("Florentine" 20). This conception of the idol through the notions of efficacy and presence can also be seen in Clifford Davidson's argument that an idol is an "image [that is] inert, representing nothing but emptiness and imagined power, or . . . it could be the embodiment of a devil" ("Idol" 243).¹³ L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, using Lacanian psychoanalysis, has reexamined the idol's emptiness through the notions of aliveness and sentience. For Fradenburg, an idol is an object of devotion whose "quickness" has been negated ("Making" 26). The duplicity of the idol lies in its false claim to life and sentience; the idol is an insentient signifier.

Yet, despite its emptiness and insentience, an idol holds great power for its believers. For some theorists of idolatry, an idol is characterized not so much by its making, its materiality, or its sentience but by the influence it exercises over its worshippers. As W. J. T. Mitchell suggests, an idol is “simply an image which has an unwarranted, irrational power over somebody; it has become an object of worship, a repository of powers which someone has projected onto it” (113). Likewise, Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, in their study of the philosophical workings of idolatry, argue that idols are “the creatures of the human imagination that take control over people and their lives, and the breaking of idols means the uncovering of the fictional and illusive character of these creatures of the imagination” (6). Halbertal and Margalit’s theory locates the metaphysical origin of idolatry within the human imagination, something with which the Mandeville-author also concurs. Rather than equating an idol with a simulacrum, as one strand of religious and philosophical tradition would, the Mandeville-author makes a theoretical distinction between the two. As he travels to India, the fictional Mandeville remarks: “Now between simulacres [*sic*] and idols there is a great difference. For simulacres are images made in the likeness of something that occurs in nature, while idols are images made in the likeness of whatever a man wishes, that is not natural” (Moseley 121). The distinction between idols and simulacra here is premised on the separation of the natural and the real from the unnatural and the imaginary. Furthermore, the Mandeville-author conceives of idolatry as the error not only of fabrication and worship but of the human mind and its intentions. Idolatry, it seems, exists in the realm of fantasy. This implication circles back to the fundamental notion of idolatry as, according to Halbertal and Margalit, “the problem of error” (2); that is, idolatry is “perceived first and foremost as an improper conception of God in the mind of the worshipper, thereby internalizing the sin” (2). The improper conception is a deviation from God, a deception practiced by the human mind under the influence of the devil. In an etymological sleight of hand,

Isidore of Seville claims that the word *idol* is derived from “fraud” (*dolus*), and the deception involved is rooted in demonic influences (Camille, *Gothic Idol* 57).

For contemporary theorists, the attempts to define idolatry—in both its premodern and modern manifestations—are further complicated by the “modern” notion of the fetish. Such attempts to theorize idolatry, for some, inevitably lead to the theorization of the fetish as well; the efforts at disentangling the idol from the fetish can, at times, be messy and circular in nature. For example, F. Max Müller, whose works influenced Marx’s conception of the commodity fetish, has argued that “a fetish, properly so called, is itself regarded as something supernatural; the idol, on the contrary, was originally meant as an image only, a similitude or symbol of something else” (66).¹⁴ Müller’s formulations appear fairly straightforward and standard. But already, his relegation of the supernatural to only the fetish ignores the spiritual origin and the religious practices surrounding idolatry. Other theorists, instead of imposing such rigid distinctions on the fetish and the idol, attempt to explain one in terms of the other. Yehezkel Kaufmann, for instance, contends that idolatry is a kind of fetishism, a worship of reified signs devoid of significance.¹⁵ And more recently, John Freccero has suggested that idols, “*like* fetishes, were a desperate attempt to render presence, a reified sign, one might almost say a metaphor” (37, my emphasis). “A kind of,” “like,” “almost . . . a metaphor”: these words expressive of similitude already imply the mimetic workings of the logic of idolatry—one that defines an idol as a simulacrum—in the theoretical attempts to separate the idol from the fetish. An idol, it appears, is a “kind of, sort of” fetish. But is the fetish necessarily a “kind of, sort of” idol? Of course, most theorists of the fetish avoid being too sloppy in their differentiation of the two; in fact, they are careful in staking out a unique theoretical territory for the fetish. In what follows, I would like to examine some of the contemporary studies on fetishism in an attempt to point out the problematic relationship between the idol and the fetish, before turning to medieval origin stories of idolatry in general, and to Marco Polo’s version of the origin of idolatry in particular.

William Pietz, in his seminal works on fetishism, has mapped out a seemingly confident history of the origin and developments of the fetish. What Pietz offers is a strict economic definition and historiography of fetishism. The modern fetish, he argues, emerged from the early modern intercultural spaces of commerce between Europeans and Africans, which necessitated the valuation of material objects based on their sense of novelty and their translatability across radically different socio-economic systems. For Pietz, the Middle Ages serves as a kind of “pre-” history of the fetish; idolatry, along with superstition and witchcraft, is but one of the three medieval roots of the fetish. Pietz traces the fetish to its medieval appearance in the penal statutes of Iberia where, in 1176, the municipal code in Aragon on the crimes of female artificers (*de muliere facticiosa*) prohibited their making of magical objects (33). However, Pietz contends, the legal interpretation of the medieval fetish failed to consider an object’s material values: “The notion of the *feitiço*, as conceived within [medieval] church doctrine on witchcraft, did not raise the essential problem of the fetish: the problem of the social and personal value of material objects” (35). Without valuation, the fetish technically did not exist in the Middle Ages. More important for my purposes here, the idol, for Pietz, is explicitly linked to the medieval and not the modern. Pietz explains why medieval notions of idolatry cannot account for the modern fetish:

[T]he logic of idolatry displaced the status of the material object to that of an image, a passive medium effecting relations between spiritual agents according to a principle of resemblance; and it displaced the power of the bodily fetish-maker to create novel spiritual states of affairs onto the agency of the phonocentric free-will, whose spiritually significant actions were the forming of verbal, contractual relations (whose spiritually significant effect was upon the status of the immaterial soul). (35)

There are several problems with Pietz’s critique of idolatry. First and foremost, Pietz associates image with passivity, which is not entirely correct in light of medieval Christian conceptions of religious images as active signs with mediatory powers. Secondly, Pietz assumes that the logic of idolatry is all about the logic of resemblance, that of the simulacrum. While it is true that the idol has been defined predominantly in terms of the likeness of an image, the logic of resemblance

itself, as I have noted, is not the only attribute characterizing idolatry. Next, Pietz relegates materiality to only the fetish and not the idol; idolatry, in fact, displaces the material status of the object onto an immaterial realm of “phonocentric free-will.” Yet as I have delineated above, one of the basic attributes of the idol is precisely its status as a material object, however empty of sentience and efficacy. Lastly, Pietz’s account bestows upon the fetish an excessive sense of novelty. He calls the fetish a “novel idea” (45), and that “[the] Christian idol was produced as an image, whereas the Fétisso was a radically novel production associating things and purposes momentarily conjoined in a random event” (45). Pietz’s fetish has the privilege of newness, while the (medieval) idol is mired in a premodern past.

But perhaps the most problematic aspect of Pietz’s theory of the fetish is his contention that only the fetish has an agency and function in economy; the fetish is in essence a harbinger and a marker of modernity and capitalism. Pietz fixes the origin of the fetish in the sixteenth century and on the coast of West Africa: “the idea of the fetish originated on the coast of West Africa—especially along the coast from present-day Ghana to Nigeria—during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (23).¹⁶ Moreover, Pietz insists on the formative role that Protestant iconoclasm, especially Calvinism, played in the emergence of the fetish. From the Protestant perspective, Catholicism is always already suspect because of its image culture that uncannily resembles pagan idolatry and because of its backward rootedness in the Middle Ages. As Pietz puts it, the novel idea of the fetish was “utterly alien to the ideas of the Christian theory of idolatry” (45). However, what Pietz dismisses and excludes from his examination are the economic potentials within the practice of idolatry. If the premodern idol does not necessarily usher in the dawn of modern capitalism as we know it, it nevertheless generates great commercial interests and activities around it. I will return to this point in my discussion of Marco Polo’s narrative of the origin of idolatry, in the next section. Suffice it to say that Pietz’s formulation results in an artificial temporal divide between the fetish and the idol. Or, in Sarah Stanbury’s

assessment, “Pietz’s distinction between medieval and modern valuations of objects may draw rather too sharp a divide that overlooks the debate over images in pre-Reformation and Reformation Europe” (Visual Object 31).

Kathleen Biddick has recently offered a trenchant critique of Pietz’s theory of fetishism and his problematic periodization of history. Biddick begins with an examination of Freud’s own theorization of the sexual fetish, in which the fetish’s origin lies in “the last impression received before the uncanny traumatic one” (201). For Biddick, Freud’s narrativization of the fetish formation—the Wolfman’s obsession with a “shine on the nose”—reenacts the very logic of fetishism that he attempts to describe. That is, the analyst represses his own historical trauma as a German-speaking Jew suffering from anti-Semitism in fin-de-siècle Vienna, while attempting to uncover the historical trauma of his analysand. The narrativization of the fetish follows the logic of the fetish: it excludes, precludes, covers, and wards off further translation or rethinking of the originary trauma (Biddick, “Translating” 196). Biddick’s broader point is that, like Freud’s own narrative of the fetish, modern theorists of the fetish have often constructed the origin of the fetish by repeating and embodying the fetishistic logic: they “fetishize periodization [and] reinforce Western epistemological categories of the classical, medieval, and modern” (“Translating” 196). Therefore, Pietz, in his narrow economist definition, uses the fetish, his novel idea of a material object, “to sort out historical time (periodization) *and* cultural space (Europe and Africa)” (Biddick, “Translating” 196, original emphasis). Similarly, Anne McClintock’s analysis of the workings of fetishism in the nineteenth century repeats the exclusionary fetishization of historical periods by positing the medieval as the “pre-” history of the fetish, thereby allowing the fetish to remain an early modern invention.¹⁷

Origin-Heterogeneous

Fetishism, Emily Apter observes, “commemorat[es] a founding moment in the etiology of consciousness” (4). Kruger suggests that the need for the new word “fetish” grew out of the early modern desire to gloss the meetings of Europeans and Africans as something “new” and different from all the ancient and medieval intercultural encounters: “The Africans of the ‘Guinea’ coast are part of what is being actively constructed as a *new* experience, suddenly central to European enterprise, and ‘fetish’ serves as one of the tools not just for describing that experience but for making it *new*” (“Fetishism” 201, original emphases). Fetishism, thus, seems to locate directly the originary newness of modernity in space and time. Yet despite such claims for the fetish’s origin in modernity, the very temporal fixing of the fetish at a point in history exposes its own fetishistic logic of denial and ignorance. If, as Stanbury observes, the fetishist is “incapable of seeing the oedipal prehistory that binds him to the object” (Visual Object 18), then the champions of the modernity of the fetish have themselves become fetishists who reject the premodern histories of the fetish. When and where exactly did the word and phenomenon appear? Kruger has laid bare “the conflicting etymological theories about the early years of the ‘fetish’ and its derivatives” (“Fetishism” 196). There is no single originary moment of the fetish in history that confers a clean break with the premodern past; the word itself resists such neat historical fragmentations. Indeed, as Uebel suggests, the fetish provides only an “illusion of control” of time and space (280).

What I want to suggest is that there are some uncanny parallels between modern origin myths of the fetish and medieval narratives of the origin of idolatry. Uebel contends that a fantasy does not necessarily memorialize a “(future) past”; instead, it is a manipulation of temporality (275). If narratives on the emergence of the fetish are temporal fantasies, then medieval origin stories of idolatry also exhibit similar manipulative impulses. Furthermore,

Kruger has noted that fetishism is a play of absence and presence, of emptiness and fullness, and of disbelief and belief (198-99). I would like to add that such fetishistic plays are already at work in idolatry. In addition, both fetishism and idolatry are frequently associated with primitivism and paganism. Spyer argues that the fetish is a “frontier marker of Christian colonial civilization” (8). Idols, too, have been used to mark the boundaries of Christendom. In medieval discourses on idolatry, there is frequently a sense of Christianity’s superiority and its implicit displacement of idolatry in salvation history. But what if neither superiority nor supersession is necessarily evident in the medieval encounters between the Christian West and the idolatrous East, both near and far? In addition, if idolatry has been constructed in narratives of the fetish as both premodern and “pre-” fetishism, then in some medieval accounts of idolatry, such as that of Marco Polo, there is already a shift from an understanding of idols as merely empty objects to an acknowledgement of the fetishistic functions of certain objects of idolatry. If these objects do not fit precisely into modern constructions of the fetish, they nonetheless display attributes that render them proto-fetishistic. But before I discuss Marco Polo, I would like to look at both the desire for origins and some medieval origin stories of idolatry.

The desire to identify and recover origins, Allen J. Frantzen suggests in his historiographic analysis of Anglo-Saxon studies, often grows out of self-interests (22). It is a desire that seeks an originary status which a particular origin, “through its particular antiquity and its lofty position . . . [is] believed to confer on those who claimed it” (Frantzen 22). As such, the origin serves as a proto-type, a prehistory, of the self that the self later recognizes in its backward glance into the past (Frantzen 22). But this origin, this presumed beginning, is never whole when recovered. Rather, it is marked by an incompleteness that is “an aspect of textually, historically, and humanly produced beginnings” (Frantzen 25). And not only are they incomplete, origins are also, according to Derrida, multiple rather than singular. In his reading of Derrida, Leonard Lawlor argues that “the origin is immediately divided, as if the ‘fall’ into division, accidents, and

empirical events has always already taken place” (4) Derrida names this kind of divided origin as “origin-heterogeneous”:

Origin-heterogeneous: this is to be understood at once, all at once, in three senses: (1) heterogeneous from the origin, originally heterogeneous; (2) heterogeneous with respect to what is called the origin, other than the origin and irreducible to it; (3) heterogeneous *and* or *insofar as* at the origin, origin-heterogeneous because at the origin of the origin. Heterogeneous *because* it is and *although* it is at the origin. (Of Spirit 107-08, original emphases)

Derrida’s deconstructive move, in Rodolphe Gasché’s reading, rejects the classical concept of origin as “a point of presence and simplicity”; against such deductive mystification of the origin as unified and singular, Derrida effects a pluralization of the origin that acknowledges the multiple sources at play in the construction of any point of origination (Gasché 180).

Fetishism, Stanbury observes, is “generally the fixation of somebody else” (Visual Object 17). As a discourse, fetishism is about the false attachment to objects, “a label marking an Other whose difference is signed by excessive attachment to a material object, whether that object is religious, financial, or sexual” (Stanbury, Visual Object 18). The fetishist, in other words, does not announce or admit himself to be a fetishist, for doing so would undo the fetishistic displacement and substitution of the original lost object in the first place. And if the fetish is always someone else’s fetish, then the idol, likewise, is always someone else’s idol. Camille suggests that idolatry is “something practised by the other” (“Iconoclast” 158).¹⁸ This refusal to acknowledge the potential perverseness of one’s own practice is something shared by fetishism and idolatry. In both discourses, the insistent labeling of the perverse on the Other is a form of self-identification. Against the primitive worship of the fetishists or the paganism of the idolaters, the self emerges in negative definition: I, or we, do not do those things. Here, Halbertal and Margalit’s theory is useful in uncovering the foundational process of differentiation at work in idolatry. Halbertal and Margalit point out that the rabbinic term for idolatry, *avodah zarah*, literally means “strange worship” (3); the strangeness of idolatry thus refers to both the strangeness of the object of worship and the strangeness of the method of worship (3). Idolatry is

always already a “criticism of [the] culture in which idolatry developed” (5). In the words of Mitchell, an idol “tends to be simply an image overvalued . . . by an *other*: by pagans and primitives; by children or foolish women” (113, original emphasis).

And not only is idolatry constructed as someone else’s religious practice, its origin is often conceived of as lying in the Other’s loss and mourning. While the origin of the fetish is a trauma that the fetishist denies, that of the idol is continually exposed and analyzed by ancient and medieval commentators. One of the most common explanations for the origin of idolatry is the euhemeristic theory, which refutes the idolaters’ claim that their idols are gods and insists that the idols were once mortal men who had died and were later memorialized in images.

Euhemeristic theory emerged in the third century before Christ, and it offers a historical explanation of idolatry, one that is rooted in the human impulse to preserve existence through the making of a still representation (Camille, Gothic Idol 50-52). Bevan notes that to the early Church Fathers, pagan gods such as Zeus, Apollo, and Hermes were once real men and heroes, and that the oracular and miraculous powers of their images came not from the spirits of the dead but from demonic spirits who had falsely assumed the names of the deceased and enjoyed the burnt sacrifice offered to idols. (94). Cyprian, in the third century, argued that

those are no gods whom the common people worship, is known from this. They were formerly kings, who on account of their royal memory subsequently began to be adored by their people even in death. Thence temples were founded to them; thence images were sculptured to retain the countenances of the deceased by the likeness; and men sacrificed victims, and celebrated festal days, by way of giving them honour. Thence to posterity those rites became sacred, which at first had been adopted *as a consolation*. (465, my emphasis)

Literally and figuratively, euhemeristic theory posits the original idol as an Other who has died.

Numerous euhemeristic accounts of the origin of idolatry circulated in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Sometimes, medieval commentators even included different euhemeristic explanations in their works. Isidore of Seville, for instance, points out that while the pagans attribute the origin of idolatry to Prometheus, and Jews to Ishmael, it was King Ninus of Assyria

who built the first idol in human history. Isidore's account is later repeated by Petrus Comester, Vincent of Beauvais, Guido delle Colonne, and John Gower. According to Guido delle Colonne's rendition of the story in the Historia Destructionis Troiae,

Belus was the father of King Ninus, and when he was taken by death . . . Ninus . . . in his memory, ordered an image constructed of gold which was amazingly like his father, so that for his comfort . . . he could imagine by the sign of the image that he was seeing his father. Accordingly, King Ninus worshipped this image as if it were a god and ordered it to be worshipped by his people . . . And so, after not much time had gone by, an unclean spirit entered into this idol of King Belus and gave answers to those who sought them.
(39)

Belus, it turns out, is the human original of Beelzebub the demon. Mandeville's Travels also includes a similar euhemeristic explanation of the origin of idolatry. But instead of Ninus, it was Nembrot (Nimrod), the builder of the Tower of Babel, who also committed the first act of idolatry, for he "had an image made in memory of his father, and commanded all his subjects to worship that image. Other great lords roundabout did the same; and thus began idolatry first" (Moseley 61). Elsewhere, the Mandeville-author remarks that "those who worship simulacres honour them for the sake of worthy men, perhaps those who were doughty men in battle, like Hercules, Achilles and others like them, who performed many marvels in their lives" (Moseley 121), and that idols are "statues of friends" that "act as a perpetual memorial of them" (Moseley 159).

In other euhemeristic accounts, it is not the death of a father but of a son that brought about the beginning of idolatry. In Chapter 14 of the Book of Wisdom, written by an anonymous Hellenistic Jew in the first century, a grieving father "made to himself the image of his son who was quickly taken away: and him who then had died as a man, he began now to worship as a god, and appointed him rites and sacrifices among his servants." Fulgentius, in the fifth century, remarks that it was Syrophanes, the king of Egypt, who first set up an effigy of his dead son in the household as a means of mourning his loss (48-49). Fulgentius's account is later repeated by Gower in Book 5 of the Confessio Amantis:

Of Cirophanes seith the bok,
That he for sorwe, which he tok

Of that he sih his sone ded,
 Of confort knew non other red,
 Bot let do make in remembrance
 A faire ymage of his semblance
 And set it in the market place,
 Which openly tofore his face
 Stod every dai to don him ese. (1529-37)

Yet Syrophanes's attempt at memorialization did not bring him comfort or consolation, Fulgentius adds. Instead of a cure, he found only the "daily renewals of his grief" (49). Fulgentius even offers an etymological explanation for the word "idol": "that is *idos dolus*, which in Latin we call 'appearance of grief'" (49).¹⁹

In her psychoanalytic reading of idolatry, Fradenburg contends that many origin stories of idolatry are rooted in loss, mourning and the desire for consolation ("Making" 34-35). Yet mourning, Fradenburg argues, is a deeply ambivalent process: "Ambivalence—wanting to fuse with and separate from the devotional object—is nowhere more apparent than in mourning" ("Making" 35). As images that substitute for loss, idols are "prosthetic devices that retain images of love-objects" whose purpose is memorialization ("Making" 36). The finality of death, however, constitutes an unbridgeable barrier to true reunion with the lost object. In memorialization, the object always exists as representation: "What the memory-image faithfully records is that the object, whatever else it may have been, was, while it lived, always also a representation—an embodied signifier" (Fradenburg, "Making" 36). This sense of "embodiedness" of idols implies that they represent a form of survival of insentient beings and objects. In the end, it is the belief in survival, rather than in any notion of memorialization or consolation, that draws the first idolaters to their statues.

And it is the survival of the political imperative that idolatry seeks to mythologize and maintain. By laying bare the origin of idolatry, Christian commentators seek both to criticize the culture of the Other and to undermine the political allure of idolatry. Origin stories of idolatry, Fradenburg argues, serve as "demystifying analyses of the history of power relations, applicable

to human as well as divine sovereigns” (“Making” 37). Just as idols are made by human beings, so are sovereigns. But if origin stories of idolatry represent the attempts at demystifying power, then the many diverse accounts do not add up to a coherent and consistent explanation. Why do medieval Christian writers feel obligated to revise and retell the originary myth of idolatry again and again? Such narrative (re)iterations, of course, suggest that the origin story has attained the status of a narrative tradition; it is a literary trope that medieval writers could conjure up, something that would be automatically recognized by a Western audience. The writers who invoke the trope are not necessarily interested in historical accuracy, however; their interests, such as those of Marco Polo, are frequently the political, rather than merely the religious, imperatives of idolatry. And there is, ultimately, a great irony in medieval origin stories of idolatry. As much as they are stories about an “origin,” they are also about “copies”; idols are understood as simulacra and not originals. In fact, the many versions of the euhemeristic theory of idolatry already mark them as citational; they become copies of a lost and unrecoverable original. Judith Butler has pointed out that gender is a performance that does not possess an original. Every performative iteration of gender, therefore, is a “copy of a copy”; the faith in a natural origin is only a normalizing myth (*Gender Trouble* 41). Are not medieval origin stories of idolatry, like gender in performance, “copies of copies” without a singular and unified origin? Each originary myth of idolatry, therefore, produces only the Derridean “origin-heterogeneous”—multiplicity without any precise or singular beginning.

Marco Polo’s Buddha

The citational use of origin stories, the survival of seemingly insentient objects, and the political engagements with religious artifacts: these are some of the issues explored by Marco Polo in his narrative of the origin of idolatry. On first reading, his account seems rather simple

and unremarkable.²⁰ It is part of an extended narrative of his alleged travels through southeast Asia while in the service of Kubilai Khan. After a lengthy description of the idolaters in India, he turns his attention to a very high mountain on the island of Ceylon, on top of which rests the tomb of either Adam or Buddha. Marco Polo notes that the Saracens say it is the grave of Adam, while the idolaters call it the monument of Sakyamuni Burkhan. Not interested in pursuing or verifying the truth of the Saracen legend, Marco Polo next presents an extended narrative that weaves together the life of Buddha, the origin of idolatry, and the Great Khan's involvement in the competition for Buddha's relics. His story of Buddha's life follows the standard account found in Buddhist teaching. Born a prince, Sakyamuni was protected from witnessing or experiencing the brutality of mortal life by his father. Though locked away in a palace, Sakyamuni nonetheless encountered the human conditions of illness, old age, and death when he chanced upon them one day during an excursion outside the palace. Greatly disturbed by what he had witnessed and learned, the prince renounced all his worldly possessions and privileges, moved into the wilderness, and led a life of asceticism.

When Sakyamuni died, his body was brought to his father the king. Here, Marco Polo inserts a euhemeristic theory of the origin of idolatry, as the king mourned his dead son and built an effigy in the likeness of the prince:

And when the king saw that the son whom he loved more than himself was dead, there is no need to ask if he was stricken with grief and bitterness. First he ordered a solemn mourning. Then he had an image made in his likeness, all of gold and precious stones, and caused it to be honoured by all the people of the country and worshipped as a god . . . And he [Buddha] is deemed by the idolaters to be the best and greatest god they have. And you must know that this was the first idol ever made by the idolaters and hence come all the idols in the world. And this happened in the island of Ceylon in India. (Latham 283)

Marco Polo's origin story of idolatry is historically and theologically inaccurate, as early and medieval Buddhist teachings actually forbade the depiction of Buddha in images. In fact, in early Buddhist art, Buddha's presence is visualized as only a set of footprints. Marco Polo is obviously not interested in the accuracy of ethnographic details or religious teachings. Rather, his

invocation of the origin story serves to insert his text within the greater medieval tradition of the euhemeristic origin of idolatry; the story is a narrative trope that grants him both textual authority and narrative authenticity. When read, Marco Polo's version differs little from the standard euhemeristic narrative; he has simply Orientalized it by changing the characters and the setting. Therefore, his origin story is familiar enough to a Western audience to allow for its recognition, but also exotic enough to allow for its remaining an alien Other. Like Syrophanes and Ninus, as told in the earlier medieval origin stories, Sakyamuni's father effected a move from mourning to the making of an image, and finally to the political imposition of idolatry on all his subjects. And it is the political, as well as the economic, ramifications of idolatry—especially the involvements of the Great Khan, as will be discussed below—that will be the main interest of Marco Polo.

Gaunt has observed a peculiar translation discrepancy in the manuscript traditions of Marco Polo's Travels. In the original Franco-Italian text, written by Rustichello, Buddha is simply the originary cause for the making of the first idol:

Le sarain dient que celui sepou[c]re est de Adan et les idres dient qu'il est le mo<n>ument de Sergamoni Borcam. E cestui Sergamuni fui le primer homes a cui non fui fait primermant ydres, car selonc lor uxance cestui fui le meior homes que unques fust entr' aus; e ce fu le premer qu'il aussent por saint a cui nome il faissent ydres. (Ronchi 573)

[The Saracens say that this sepulchre is Adam's and the idolaters say that it is a monument to Sergamoni Borcam. And this Sergamoni was the first man in whose name idols were made, for according to their custom he was the greatest man who ever lived among them; and he was the first whom they considered a saint and in whose name they made idols.] (Gaunt 14)²¹

However, in the first French translation of the Travels, made around 1310, Buddha is both the first idolater and the first maker of idols:

Et ce dient les sarrazins que c'est le monument d'Adam, et les ydolastres si dient que ce fut le premier monument du premier ydo[la]stre du monde que il nommoient Sargamonyn Borcam. Et dient que il fut le meillor homme du monde et que il fu saint selon leur uisance. (Badel 408)

[And the Saracens say this is Adam's monument and the idolaters say that it was the first monument to the first idolater in the world whom they call Sargamony Borcam. And they say that he was the best man in the world and that he was saint

according to their custom.] (Gaunt 15)

Et si comme il dient que par cestui fut faite la premiere ydole que les ydolastres orent onques, si que de cestui dient que toutes les autres ydres en sont descendues. (Badel 408-10)

[And they say that it was by this man that the first idol that the idolaters had was made, and they also say that all the idols are descended from this one.] (Gaunt 15)

In Gaunt's reading, the French translator had decided to give the text "over to far cruder religious stereotyping" (16). For Gaunt, the subtlety of the Franco-Italian text, "which might even be seen to imply that idolatry derives from a misunderstanding of the Buddha's teachings in that he himself never sanctioned idolatry, but merely taught asceticism" (16), has been either accidentally missed or deliberately suppressed by the French translator. What results, in the French translation of the Travels, is logically incoherent. What does it mean that Buddha was the first maker of idols and the first idolater? What idol did he make and worship? The French translation is silent on this; the incoherence is simply left unexplained. To me, this small but significant revision—perhaps, a careless slip?—on the part of the French translator is indicative of both a cultural penchant for cruder religious stereotyping, as Gaunt argues, and also an ambivalence and anxiety over the narrativization of origins in general. If the discrepancy is not simply the result of a translator's mistake, then the French translation of the Travel has intentionally obfuscated and disrupted the euhemeristic theory of idolatry. And rather than locating a single originary cause of idolatry, as the Franco-Italian text does, the French text ends up doubling and tripling such an origin: Buddha is the first maker of idols, the first idolater, and the first cause of idolatry. Marco Polo, as depicted in the French translation, fails to pinpoint the precise beginning of idolatry. Instead of a single origin, a multiplicity of origins is presented; Marco Polo offers not the origin, but the Derridean "origin-heterogeneous," of idolatry.

Origin, Frantzen argues, is frequently manifested as an oral account and/or a textual document (24). As a text based on a series of conversations between Marco Polo and Rustichello,

the Travels preserves the oral quality of its origin, however fictitiously, through the endless “Let me tell you” iterated by Polo the narrator. The text’s sensitivity to orality is also evident in its origin story of idolatry, as Marco Polo emphasizes the very oral nature of cultural transmission and of knowledge acquisition. Regarding the irreconcilable religious views of the mountain in Ceylon, he says:

Let me tell you next that idolaters from very distant parts come here on pilgrimage, just as Christians go to the shrine of Messer St James. And the idolaters say that the monument on this mountain is that of the king’s son of whom you have just heard, and that the teeth and the hair and the bowl that are here also belonged to this prince, whose name was Sakyamuni Burkhan, that is to say, Sakyamuni the Saint. And the Saracens, who also come here in great numbers on pilgrimage, say that it is the monument of Adam our first parent and that the teeth and hair and bowl were his also. So now you have heard how the idolaters say that he is that king’s son who was their first idol and their first god, while the Saracens say that he is Adam our first parent. But God alone knows who he is or what he was. For we do not believe that Adam is in this place, since our Scripture of Holy Church declares that he is in another part of the world. (Latham 283-84)

Despite Marco Polo’s assertion that Christians (the “we”) know from the Bible that Ceylon is not the final resting place of Adam, his inclusion of the views of other religions reveals a willingness to at least consider difference and diversity. Marco Polo’s stance, in fact, mirrors that of the Tartar Khans who are known for their religious tolerance.

On the competing interpretations and labels of the holy mountain in Ceylon, Gaunt suggests that “[t]here is something highly (and deliberately) over-determined about [Polo’s narrative], for if this were Adam’s and Buddha’s resting place, then this would be a sacred point of origin for all three religions of the Book and Buddhism” (14). I would add that Marco Polo, having explicitly attributed the origin of idolatry to Buddhism, might indirectly suggest that the origin of idolatry (Buddhism) is also the origin of all three Abrahamic faiths. The polysemous nature of religious space collapses religious differences. And I would also contend that not only are space and religion over-determined in Marco Polo’s narrative, they are also indeterminate. One effect of Marco Polo’s emphasis on the orality of culture (“the idolaters say . . . the Saracens

say . . .”) is a potentially radical indeterminacy of religious faith and spiritual identity. If Marco Polo demystifies the origin of idolatry, he also further mystifies its claim to historical truth. Who is the holy man resting on the mountain in Ceylon? Marco Polo seems to offer an easy way out by claiming that only God knows who it is, but the cursory remark only shows his reluctance to make a final judgment on the matter. Marco Polo, of course, never explicitly states his religious relativism and spiritual skepticism; not interested in being a true believer, he is content to be a listener and observer of wonders.

As some critics and historians have pointed out, Marco Polo’s understanding of Buddhism is heavily filtered through Mongol perceptions and their imperial ideology.²² He, like the Franciscan and Dominican missionaries before him, confuses Taoist and Buddhist idols and makes no effort to distinguish the two belief systems or to understand their principles.²³ And more than the cultural lens of the Tartars, the structure of his origin story of idolatry is unmistakably Western. While locating the origin of idolatry in the East, Marco Polo nevertheless shapes his narrative according to Western aesthetics and conventions. Indeed, Gaunt has noted that Marco Polo borrows the structure and rhetoric of hagiography in his account of idolatry’s origin (13). His narrative includes familiar elements from a saint’s life: *vita*, asceticism, death, relics and their *translatio*, and miracles. Although the use of a Christian literary genre might have been intended to create an air of familiarity and a sense of identification in a Western audience, hagiography’s presence in Marco Polo’s narrative nonetheless underscores a great irony. Why use a Christian genre to depict the origin of pagan idolatry? One effect is the analogy made between Buddha and Christian ascetics. Marco Polo claims: “For assuredly, had he [Buddha] been a Christian, he would have been a great saint with our Lord Jesus Christ” (Latham 283).²⁴

While such cultural and religious parallels are indeed present in Marco Polo’s Travels, I would suggest that the focus of his narrative is not really Buddha or idolatry’s origin *per se*, but the Great Khan’s engagements with the economy of relics. In Christian hagiography, the real

narrative focus often lies in the stories of the saints' relics and the miracles they perform. A similar strategy is at work in Marco Polo's account. After the death of Buddha and the birth of idolatry, as well as the establishment of a pilgrimage site on Ceylon, the Great Khan became interested in acquiring Buddha's relics:

Now it happened that the Great Khan heard that on this mountain was the monument of Adam and likewise his teeth and his hair and the bowl from which he used to eat. He made up his mind that he must have these relics. So he sent here a great embassy in the year of our Lord 1284. What more shall I say? You may take it for a fact that the Great Khan's envoys with a great retinue set out on their way and journeyed so far by the sea and land that they came to the island of Ceylon. They went to the king and so far succeeded in their mission that they acquired the two maxillary teeth, which were very large and thick, and some of the hair and bowl, which was made of a very lovely green porphyry. With these acquisitions, they went their way and returned to their land. And when they approached the great city of Khan-balik where the Great Khan was, they sent him word that they were coming and were bringing what they had been sent to fetch. Then the Great Khan ordered that all the people, both monks and others, should go out to meet these relics, which they were given to understand belonged to Adam . . . Suffice it that all the people of Khan-balik went out to meet these relics and the monks received them and brought them to the Great Khan, who welcomed them with great joy and great ceremony and great reverence. (Latham 284)

Marco Polo's detailed account portrays the Great Khan as a quasi-Christian who seeks and worships relics; the Khan behaves in a way that a Christian would recognize and approve. But if this were the intended effect, then Marco Polo's story also offers an uneasy critique of the West. The relics that the Great Khan acquires belong to an idolatrous religion. If the Great Khan were a mirror of the West, then the distance that separates idolatry and the Christian cult of saints is not so great after all.

Marco Polo is careful not to locate the origin of idolatry in Tartary; that origin is emphatically elsewhere, in Ceylon at the periphery of the Tartar empire. In the end, his origin story is not about a quest for origin, but about economic history and political geography. By the time his narrative moves from Buddha to the making of idols and to the traffic in relics, a valuation of material objects has occurred. Marco Polo understands that a euhemeristic idol cannot bring consolation to the bereaved, but that the traffic in relics can bring forth value and

prestige. The real movement in his tale is the conversion of mourning into commerce. Relics, of both Western and Eastern origins, are transacted as commodity fetishes. In contrast to Pietz's theory of the fetish, the origin of idolatry, as well as the idol itself, is always already invested with values. Marco Polo's narrative is not about religious history but economic conversion. And in writing about the origin of idolatry, Marco Polo is really writing about the origin of the fetish before fetishism appeared, which he locates within the mythic birth of idolatry.²⁵

Idolatrous Orality

The true power of the demonic spirits that dwell in images and idols, Camille points out, "resides in their communicative capacities" (69). In the visual art, the idol's power of speech is frequently signified by a pointing finger. On folio 339r of Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 5211, a Mars-type idol touches its mouth to signal speech (Camille, Gothic Idol 69). And not just their capacity for speech, it is specifically the demons' power to utter oracles and counsel through images that is sought after by idolaters (Bevan 93). Minucius Felix, an early Christian apologist in the second or third century, observes that "the impure spirits hide themselves in the statues and consecrated images, and by the afflatus they give forth acquire with men the authority of a present deity, inspiring soothsayers, haunting temples, uttering oracles" (qtd. in Bevan 93). Centuries later, Odoric also takes note of a demonic spirit that speaks through an idol on the island of Dondin (117). Gower, in Book 5 of the Confessio Amantis, writes of a demon that speaks through the statue of Serapis, a deceased king in Greece, to its worshipper: "For thurgh the fendes sleihte him thoghte, / Amonges othre goddes mo / That Serapis spak to him tho, / Whom he sih there in gret arrai" (5.1582-85).

At the same time, the demons' power of speech is always in danger of degenerating into nonsense noise or gibberish. Cyprian speaks of the "howling [and] groaning" of evil spirits

during exorcism (467). And in Jean Bodel's play, Ju de saint Nicolas, an idol utters a non-human language: "Palas aron ozinomas / Baske bano tudan donas / Geheamel cla orlay / Bere. He. Pantaras tay" (II.512-15). In Camille's reading of the play, the idol's nonsense language severs the signifier from the signified, and it is emblematic of idolatrous representations that destroy the proper relationship between the human and the divine. What the idol speaks, in fact, is an "anti-language" (Gothic Idol 134).

But despite a grudging acknowledgment of the idols' oracular power through demonic spirits, Christianity insists that idols, as empty material objects, lack the ability of speech. Psalm 115:5-7 states that idols "have mouths, but cannot speak . . . nor can they utter a sound with their throats." And if idols must speak through demons, then they must be silenced by force. Camille notes that on folio 3v of Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, MS Hart 20960, which contains a Psalter produced in Paris around 1230, an idol is depicted as biting its tongue and signaling its being silenced by the presence of Christ. This image resonates with Mitchell's notion that idolaters, like the idols they worship, "must be emasculated, feminized, have their tongues cut off by denying them the power of expression or eloquence. They must be declared 'dumb,' 'mute,' 'empty,' or 'illusory'" (113). The act of muting an idol can also be literalized as a rubbing out of its mouth in manuscript illustrations. The physical rubbing out of an image is part of the medieval practice of erasing supposedly offensive representations like genitalia. For instance, on folio 214r of Amiens, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS lat. 108, which contains the Pamplona Bible, an image showing St. Saturnius of Toulouse destroying an idol has been partially damaged by human hand. The idol's face looks like a totemic mask used in ancient theater, and its mouth has been violently rubbed out. What remains is an off-white patch of parchment skin. The erasure of the idol's mouth might also be an attempt to restore the original "whiteness" of the parchment as a visual background. The human hand touches the idol's mouth in order to erase and silence it. To me, this gesture stands in forceful opposition to the Tartars smearing the mouth of Natigai

with a lump of fat. In one instance, the hand touches the idol's mouth to silence it; in another, the hand touches the idol's mouth to feed it. In the many plays of contact between the hand and the mouth, feeding turns into silencing, and vice versa.

I want to return now, after this extended excursion into idolatry, fetishism, and origin myths, to the Great Khan's dreams of the white knight. Through his power to utter oracles, the Tartar shaman in the original Mongol narrative uncannily functions as an idol. Yet by translating the original shaman into a figure of whiteness, both Hetoum and the Mandeville-author explicitly dissociate the oracular power of the white knight from charges of shamanism or idolatry; the shaman and the idol could serve as communicative media for demons. Hetoum even takes pains to say that the prophecy uttered by the white knights is "the worde of Christ" (26), thereby avoiding any charge of idolatry. The whiteness of the knight and his horse further removes any taint of idolatrous use of color. The fourth-century St. Epiphanius had argued that idolatry was initially "not a matter of images and the graving of stones or of wood . . . it was only in the way of colour painting and pictures that the mind of man devised for itself evil" (qtd. in Camille, Gothic Idol 42). If the use of color leads to idolatry, then whiteness implicitly connotes the absence of idolatry and the purity of Christian salvation.

For Higgins, the Great Khan's dreams of the white knight in Mandeville's Travels are part of an onomastic explanation of the rise of Genghis Khan. Because the white knight addresses Temujin as "Chan" and brings him the immortal God's divine sanction of Tartar imperialism, "Changuys" is therefore styled as "Chan" by his followers (Higgins 163). Frank Grady has similarly read the Khan's dreams as evidence of the Tartars receiving both divine approbation and commission (62). In addition, Grady views the Great Khan as a type of Moses, who receives divine instructions and then "embarks on a legislative campaign equal parts Pentateuch and *comitatus*" (61). The Tartars, therefore, figure in Mandeville's Travels as a type of the Israelites, another chosen people who are part of "providential history" (Grady 62). But if

Grady reads the Khan as a Moses figure, the analogy is somewhat flawed and problematic. The white knight that the Khan sees in his dreams is only a messenger of God and not God himself who appeared to Moses, speaking in his own voice. Furthermore, the analogy to Moses conjures up the ghost of idolatry—the Golden Calf cast by the Israelites in Moses’s absence. By figuring the Great Khan as a type of Moses, Grady indirectly associates the Khan’s dreams with idolatry. And perhaps it is because of the possible taint of idolatry that Marco Polo does not mention the Khan’s dreams of the white knight at all in his telling of the rise of the Tartars. In the Travels, he offers only a brief mention of Temujin’s election as the Great Khan:

Now it happened in the year of Christ’s incarnation 1187 that the Tartars chose a king to reign over them whose name in their language was Chinghiz Khan, a man of great ability and wisdom, a gifted orator and a brilliant soldier. After his election, all the Tartars in the world, dispersed as they were among various foreign countries, came to him and acknowledged his sovereignty. And he exercised it well and honourably. (Latham 93)

The rise of Genghis Khan is presented simply as secular political history. Marco Polo removes all suggestions of the supernatural and divine origin of the Tartar empire, thereby figuratively “rubbing out” the mouth of the white knight’s oracle from his text.

Cookbooks and Kisses

The triangulation of the mouth, food, and blackface in the visual representations of the Tartars and their idol Natigai in Royal 19 D.I resonates with an older figuration of the same visual tropes in the tenth-century comedy by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, The Martyrdom of the Holy Virgins. In this play, the lascivious pagan governor Dulcitius lusts after three Christian virgins. But stricken with illusion, Dulcitius ends up embracing and kissing pots and pans, thereby blackening his own face; in the meantime, the three maidens are rescued from his villainy.

A kiss is never just a kiss. Kissing is always interactive and communal. As Freud observes, you cannot really kiss yourself on the lips.²⁶ Thus in kissing, again and again, one

encounters the Other, which is paradoxically the self, as Derrida would add.²⁷ The kiss is always the self in contact with the Other, in the act of negotiation and identity formation. As a ritual, the kiss straddles the porous boundaries between the erotic and the holy. In addition, kissing is a form of marking, a way of forming its own textualized—that is, represented and embodied—communities.²⁸ And biologically, kissing utilizes the same body parts as eating.

In The Martyrdom of the Holy Virgins, the pots and pans that the pagan governor kisses are the medium which condenses an essential non-Christian difference into visible, colored representations. That is, the kitchenware's blackness as marker of unholy sexual pollution anticipates the later visual program of white European identity and chromophobia that Caviness describes. As stand-ins for the Christian virgins' bodily orifices, the pots and pans function, however briefly, as sexual fetishes for Dulcitius. His misdirected kiss and blackface—like the dark-skinned Tartars' feasting on virgin's nipples—mark the oral and chromatic differences between the blackface pagans and the presumably "white" Christians.

In early narratives about the Tartars, rumors of Tartars who had converted to Christianity, or the pseudo-conversion of the Great Khans and their receptivity to Christianity, was of particular importance to the West, a region faced with a seemingly imminent and powerful threat from the Far East. Marco Polo, for example, includes an episode in which Kubilai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, kissed the Gospels in adoration.²⁹ Similarly, friar Odoric tells of the Great Khan kissing the cross. Once, when the Khan was journeying to Cambalech (present day Beijing), Odoric and four other friars were sitting by the side of the road. When the Khan drew near, the bishop took a cross, fastened it to the end of a staff, and raised it aloft. Then the other friars began to chant the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*. When the Khan called the friars to him, the bishop presented the cross to the Khan, which he immediately kissed "in the most reverent and humble manner" (Odoric 163). Orally, the friars' chanting leads to the Khan's kissing of the cross; Christian faith, it seems, passes effortlessly from mouth to mouth.

It is important to note that, in both Marco Polo's and Odoric's accounts, the Great Khan kisses not other human beings, but objects. The privileging of objects over human bodies in the Khan's kiss resonates with Kruger's argument that Christian authors are compelled to demonstrate the superiority of the objects of Christian faith: relics, the Gospels, the cross ("Fetishism" 200). Long before modern fetishism, then, the West was always already busy fetishizing itself. In Odoric's account, the episode of the Khan kissing the cross does not end there. The narrator of this particular episode, speaking of Odoric in the third person, continues:

Now, the rule and custom of that court is that no one shall venture to come into the Khan's presence empty-handed. So Friar Odoric, having with him a small dish full of apples, presented that as their offering to the Great Khan. And he took two of the apples, and ate a piece of one of them while he kept the other in his hand, and so he went his way. (163)

When the same episode is revised by the Mandeville-author, however, the friar's offering of a gift to the Great Khan is no longer due to the dictates of the Tartar court but to Old Testament law:

Then that same prelate gives him some kind of fruit, like apples or pears or something, nine in number on a plate of gold. For custom there is that no man can come before the Emperor unless he give him something, after the old law that says, *Nemo apparebit in conspectu meo uacuu*s, that is, "No man come into my sight empty-handed." (Moseley 155)

As Higgins observes, the Mandeville account assimilates the Tartar custom into biblical tradition by offering a Judeo-Christian explanation from Exodus 23:15 for the Christian clergy's apparent act of deference to the Great Khan (167). In Odoric's original narrative, however, there is no such Christian glossing of the event, and the specificity of the Tartar court's protocols is preserved.

Earlier in his narrative, Odoric has looked with disdain upon the Oriental practice of offering steaming hot food to their idols as worship. As he visits a monastery in Zayton (present-day Amoy), Odoric seems awed by the sheer number and sizes of pagan idols that he sees; one statue, in particular, is "as big as St. Christopher might be" (123). What he especially wants to witness, however, is the feeding of the idols, which he describes in great details:

All the dishes which they offer to be eaten are piping hot so that the smoke riseth up in the face of the idols, and this they consider to be the idols' refection. But all else they keep for themselves and gobble up. And after such fashion as this they reckon that they feed their gods well. (123)

For a Western audience, Odoric's observation of the Eastern idols "feeding" on the smoke of the food offered to them conjures up images of demonic spirits animating the material bodies of idols and enjoying the fumes of living sacrifices at the altars. But now, Odoric's own giving of a gift to the Khan uncannily parallels the very idolatry that he despises. That is, in spite of himself, Odoric is not merely observing the protocols of the Tartar court but is reenacting a ritual that, because of its performance in a particular cultural-historical context, necessarily conjures up the smearing of fat on the idol Natigai or the feeding of idols in Zayton. In a land deeply rooted in the belief of the Mandate of Heaven, where the emperor is divinely sanctioned to rule, the distinctions between acts of religious worship and those of political submission are easily blurred. The Khan *is* an idol, the supreme fetish of the body politic. Marco Polo observes how on the Great Khan's birthday, "all the idolaters and all the Christians and all the Saracens and all the races of men offer solemn prayers to their idols and their gods" (Latham 138). Moreover, at the Tartar court, all of the Khan's subjects bow down to him at the proper hours every day, addressing and worshipping him "as if he were a god" (Latham 139). And in Mandeville's Travels, the Tartar courtiers do obeisance to the Khan, "who is God's son and Lord of the world" (Moseley 151). In visual arts, Camille has argued that the image of the Tartar idol Natigai on folio 76r of Royal 19 D.I serves as a visual parallel to the Great Khan. Both the idol and the Great Khan share the same gesture, "which is a shorthand way to sum up the text here describing how this ruler was revered as the Tatars' [*sic*] deity" (Camille, Gothic Idol 153). Like Freud who, according to Biddick, became a fetishist in his theorization of fetishism, Odoric the proto-ethnographer/psychoanalyst can only engage with idolatry by unwillingly becoming an idolater himself in the process. If, as Kruger contends, the fetishistic logic is a simultaneous denial and recognition ("Fetishism" 193), a similar logic might also be at work in Western accounts of pagan

idolatry: the anti-idolatrous Christian can approach idolatry only through the logic of simultaneous denial and recognition.

Within the concatenation of seemingly incoherent Tartar fetishes (the mouth, the armor, the horse, the skin, the kiss, the lump of fat), medieval Orientalism paradoxically depicts the Tartars as both quasi-Christians and cannibalistic beasts. Such contradictions mirror the profound shift in representation of, and relations with, the Tartars from the mid-thirteenth century to the mid-fourteenth century, the time of the so-called *Pax Mongolica*. Unlike John of Plano Carpini's negative characterization of the Mongols' physique, Marco Polo is careful to portray Kubilai Khan's body in more positive terms: "He is a man of good stature, neither short nor tall but of moderate height. His limbs are well fleshed out and modeled in due proportion. His complexion is fair and ruddy like a rose, the eyes black and handsome, the nose shapely and set squarely in place" (Latham 121-22).³⁰ And while he notes the Tartars' smearing of Natigai's mouth with fat, Marco Polo also describes the lavishness of the Great Khan's feasts, in which the servants' mouths and noses are muffled with napkins of silk and gold so that no breath or odor from their bodies would pollute the Khan's meals (Latham 136).

Food, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss, shares the same universality across human cultures as language. Cooking is "a truly universal form of human activity; if there is no society without a language, nor is there any which does not cook in some manner at least some of its food" ("Culinary Triangle" 587). In his reading of Lévi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked*, Ouzi Elyada notes that for Lévi-Strauss, cooking is a form of language that has an unconscious and universal structure, what he terms the "culinary triangle": the raw, the cooked and the rotted; this culinary triangulation, in turn, is made up of a series of oppositional pairs. Cooking techniques and rules, therefore, are really processes that transform nature into culture. Furthermore, the cook becomes "a type of cultural agent who links the raw product with the human consumer. His role is to ensure that the natural becomes cooked and undergoes a process of socialization" (Elyada 2).

Mary Douglas, while rejecting the rigid structuralism of Lévi-Strauss's scheme, nonetheless concedes that culture is produced and defined by eating habits (Food and the Social Order 18). More important, Douglas conceives of food as a linguistic code that communicates social relations ("Deciphering a Meal" 249). Douglas contends: "If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries" ("Deciphering a Meal" 249). Similarly, Roland Barthes has argued that food functions as a sign when it is manipulated, transacted, and consumed by humans. For Barthes, a particular item of food "sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies" ("Toward" 29).

Recent theorists of food have drawn on psychoanalysis, in addition to structuralism and semiotics, in their studies of cooking and eating. Susanne Skubal, for instance, invokes Lévi-Strauss's and Douglas's conceptions of food as a language or a code, and suggests that "all culture passes through the mouth" (43).³¹ But Skubal also points to Freud and his observation that oral activities are integral to the formation of the self. Oral choices define the self against the Other, for such choices constitute "a fundamental judgment about ourselves and the world: this will be a part of me; this other won't" (Skubal 3). For Skubal, an infant's first play is the cultural experience of eating, which is an aesthetic response either to swallow or to spit something out (47). If eating is about assimilation, then what one admits into one's mouth and what one emits from it are crucial to one's sense of identity (Skubal 50). The mouth, in Skubal's analysis, is a multifarious site that both desires and satisfies.³² Yet despite the formative role that eating plays in human subjectivity and sociality, Sidney W. Mintz argues that eating is also deeply ambivalent because it also seems so animal (5). The power of the image in Royal 19 D.I that depicts dark-skinned Tartars smearing fat on Natigai's mouth resides precisely in the very evocation of the primitive and bestial aspects of eating. The naked body of Natigai accepting a lump of fat on its

mouth signifies an act of eating that has been denuded of its sophistication and civility. At the same time, the dark skin of the turbaned Tartars assures the Western viewers that such primitive forms of oral consumption are associated with and retained by the Other—specifically, an imagined Islamic other that is not always accurately associated with the Tartars.

The recent culinary turn in criticism has also witnessed a renewal of interest in all things culinary in medieval studies. Historians, such as Paul Freedman and C. M. Woolgar, have noted the shifts in the eating habits of the West and the emergence of elite cuisine in Europe in the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Medieval feasts and festivals, Ken Fullam argues, can be read as texts that transmit court ideology and that function as mechanisms of sociogenesis, both producing and reacting to social changes (181-83). Not only were medieval feasts and festivals a form of drama or theatre designed for the aristocracy, but they also served “to advertise the court’s power, wealth, and legitimacy, while ostensibly celebrating other events” (Fullam 191). This intertwining of medieval food culture and court culture partly explains the fascination with the excess and the lavishness of the feasts at the Great Khan’s court. Both Marco Polo and the Mandeville-author offer extended descriptions of the Khan’s banquets, especially those held on his birthday. In Syed Islam’s reading of the Travels, Marco Polo conceives of the Great Khan’s birthday as an Eastern parallel to the coronation ritual of the West: “[Marco Polo] searches for an alternative ritual of consecration and finds it in the grand theatricality of Kubilai Khan’s birthday” (179).

But beyond ceremonial parallels, I would argue that Marco Polo’s sustained fascination with the food culture of the Tartar court is based primarily on an understanding of food as power. Paul D. Buell and Eugene N. Anderson, in their analysis of medieval Tartar food culture, conclude that the Tartars used food “as a way of showing power, generosity, and wealth. It was thus an implement of statesmanship. As in most societies, feasts were used to cement alliances, celebrate important events, reward friends, overawe enemies, and lubricate politics in general” (9).

What Marco Polo and the Mandeville-author are truly interested in is not simply food as food, but food technologies as power, with “technologies” broadly defined. Marco Polo notes in passing that there is no lack of food at the Great Khan’s court, and turns his narrative attention to a great fountain in the Khan’s dining hall that continuously spouts forth wine, and to the endless troupes of jugglers, acrobats, and entertainers who perform for the court’s pleasure (Latham 136-37).

In 1330, the Yuan emperor Toq Temur, a descendent of Genghis Khan and Kubilai Khan, was presented with a cookbook titled Yin-shan cheng-yao (Proper and Essential Things for the Emperor’s Food and Drink). The cookbook, of course, makes no mention of the smearing of Natigai’s mouth with fat. It is cosmopolitan in taste, reflecting the evolving complexity of the cuisine of the Mongols as they drew inspiration from their vast empire: Chinese, Mongolian, Turkic, Persian, and Islamic. As Buell and Anderson comment, Yin-shan cheng-yao is an attempt to represent the Tartar empire in “visible, tangible, edible form” (6). As both a medicinal text and a collection of recipes, the cookbook reflects the Mongols’ preference for sheep but also marks the significantly minor presence of pork, a staple of the Chinese but not of the Mongols. (Pork, for Europeans, is one of the dietary markers of Christianity, *vis-à-vis* Islam and Judaism.)³³ Food, as Jeffery Cohen theorizes, is a temporal archive of the human. Mintz, likewise, observes that foods have histories, whose meanings are communicated symbolically in their consumption (7). In other words, food is a fetish that one can make, consume, absorb, and excrete; then repeat the whole cycle again.

A cookbook, therefore, is an attempt at immortalizing the food fetish by teaching the secrets of its production. Here, I would like to point in comparison to a radically different and seemingly unrelated cookbook produced in the West in the late fourteenth century: the Ménagier de Paris, which contains over 380 recipes, menus for feasts, and tips for household management.³⁴ The Ménagier de Paris is part of the rising popularity of conduct manuals in the late medieval West. What these manuals have in common—be they hunting manuals, like Gaston

Phoebus's The Book of the Hunt, chivalric treatises, like Geoffrey of Charny's The Book of Chivalry, or domestic how-to guides, like the Ménagier de Paris—is that these texts are really recipe books for nurturing and producing particular, proper and disciplined subjects, however defined. Such drives toward subject formation and conduct training are also evident in the Mongolian Yin-shan cheng-yao, in which the author specifically argues that the cookbook is meant “for the gentleman’s motion and rest, gravity and deportment, rising and retiring, going and coming” (Buell and Anderson 189); it is not only an aid for hygiene and nourishment but “a great aid for training to receive the correct way of living” (Buell and Anderson 190). There are, of course, deep cultural and historical divides between the Ménagier de Paris and Yin-shan cheng-yao: a thirteenth-century Chinese courtier is not the same as a late fourteenth-century Parisian middling-class husband. However, I do want to point out that a similar program of shaping a particular class identity through oral activities, both literal and figurative, can be uncovered in both texts despite their radically different cultural-historical origins.

And I want to push my argument even further and suggest that the political use of food extends to the visual representations of the Tartars. Do not images of culinary scenes also function as “cookbooks,” in the sense that they present scenes of proper and improper culinary conduct that the viewing subject is encouraged to imitate and approve, or condemn and reject? On folio 88 of Royal 19 D.I (fig. 2), the same manuscript of Marco Polo's Travels that depicts dark-skinned Tartars smearing the mouth of Natigai with fat on folio 78v, is an image of the Great Khan with other Tartars at a table covered in food, drink and utensils. The Khan and his three companions are depicted as white Europeans with blonde hair, fully clothed, and they appear to be engaged in a pleasant dinner conversation. These Tartars are no longer the cannibals of Matthew Paris's imagination or the all-devouring monsters in John of Plano Carpini's travelogue. They now appear as civilized Europeans who carry no traces of the primitive idolatry practiced by their dark-skinned compatriots. The fact that two polarized images of the Tartars—

as black Saracens and as white Europeans—coexist within Royal 19 D.I suggests a lingering divide within medieval European perceptions of the Tartars. On the one hand, a fear of the cannibalistic Tartar imperialism persisted well into the late Middle Ages; on the other hand, a sense of wonder at the superior courtliness of the Great Khan continued to fuel the West's imaginative contacts with the East. This duality is also evident in the Travels, in which Marco Polo himself makes a sharp distinction between the court culture of the Great Khan and the less-refined nomadism of the Tartars on the steppes.³⁵ The artists who illustrated Royal 19 D.I appear to be not greatly disturbed by the split in the visual representations of the Tartars; any visual contradictions are left unexplained and presumed nonexistent. If Lévi-Strauss has conceived of a seemingly universal culinary triangle of the raw, the cooked, and the rotted, then I would contend that in the medieval visual representations of the Tartars, two sets of culinary triangles coexisted: the triangulation of the mouth, food, and blackface, and the triangulation of the mouth, food, and whiteface.

Late, Styled: Aristophilic Arrivals

This brings us to Chaucer's Squire's Tale, a romance that promises fabulous wonders from the East, high sentiments, and chivalric adventures. In the 1330s, the Ilkhanate state of the Mongol empire in Persia had dissolved; and in 1368, the Mongolian Yuan dynasty collapsed. By the time of the Mandeville's Travels, in the 1350s and 1360s, and then by the time of Chaucer in the 1380s and 1390s, Tartary was only a specter, a fantasy of romance. Chaucer's Squire moves in his imagination from England, an island proto-nation, not yet an empire and on the periphery of Europe, to an alien, nonexistent, and Orientalized empire. The Squire sets his tale in Cambyuskan's court "At Sarray, in the land of Tartarye" (V.9), into which a strange knight arrives with magic gifts. The Squire, Marco Polo-like, depicts the excess and luxury of



Fig. 7. The sin of Gluttony. *Tractatus de septem vitiis*.
 London, British Library MS. Add. 27695, f. 13r.
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Cambyuskan's birthday celebration, with strange food that he cannot identify or describe. He confesses: "I wol nat tellen of hir strange sewes, / Ne of hir swannes, nor of hire heronsewes" (V.67-68). Not only is his English "insufficient" (V.37) for a proper description of the Khan's birthday feast, the Squire suggests that, in truth, "Ther nys no man that may reporten al" (V.72). Chaucer's Squire, like the earlier missionaries and merchants to the East, is fixated on the Tartars' oral activities. But instead of presenting the mouth of the idol Natigai being smeared with fat, the Squire highlights Cambyuskan's "galpyng mouth" (V.350) that is overstuffed with

food and drink. The Squire's characterization of the Great Khan's court as a space of culinary excess participates in the medieval association of luxury and decadence with the East. For example, on folio 13r of British Library MS Add. 27695, produced in Genoa and containing the Tractatus de septem vitiis, the sin of Gluttony is illustrated as a feast held at a Tartar court (fig. 7). Unlike folio 88 of Royal 19 D.I., which shows European-looking Tartars eating at a table, the Genoese manuscript explicitly depicts the voracious Tartars as possessing Asiatic features and dressed in Oriental costumes.³⁶

But despite hints of gluttony and excess, Cambyuskan is described in mostly positive terms by the Squire. He is called a "noble kyng . . . Which in his tyme was of so greet renoun, / That ther was nowher in no regioun / So excellent a lord in alle thyng" (V.12-15). The Squire's description here is in line with Marco Polo's portrayal of the Khan as the embodiment of Eastern grandeur. As Higgins suggests, medieval audiences were fascinated by the Great Khan, "the almost mystical figure who embodies its magnitude, plenitude, power, and order" (156). And Marco Polo's Kubilai Khan, according to Syed Islam's reading, possesses a "colossal regal body" that is the engine of the Mongol "mega-machine" (170-75). The Khan is without a private body, and Marco Polo has invested it "with great singularity" (Islam 175).

For Chaucer's Squire, Cambyuskan is the epitome of the courtly ideal, both chivalric and *gentil*:

he was hardy, wys, and riche,
And pitous, and just, and everemoore yliche,
Sooth of his word, benigne, and honorable,
Of his corage as any centre stable,
Yong, fressh, strong, and in armes desirous
As any bacheler of al his hous. (V.19-24)

The fact that Cambyuskan is a Mongol seems to be of no importance to the Squire. The Squire is not interested in Tartars as Tartars per se; his Tartars are really European ideals in yellowface.³⁷

The sumptuous feasts at Cambyuskan's court are part of the tale's display of ideal courtliness.

Rather than ethnography or history, what the Squire attempts to describe in his tale is what James A. Schultz terms “aristophilia,” the love of courtliness. Schultz has argued against reading medieval romance through modern constructs of the hetero-homo sexual divide. In medieval romance, Schultz contends, there are no heterosexuals or homosexuals but only “aristophiliacs.” Courtly love is a self-generating and self-affirming mechanism of desire:

Courtly lovers respond to courtliness by falling in love. Courtly love takes the shape of courtliness. The court responds to courtly lovers with a sympathetic exhilaration. Lovers fall in love with the court’s estimation. Courtly lovemaking brings lovers the same joy to which courtliness itself aspires. Courtly love is, in a very real sense, the love of courtliness. (172)

Moreover, Schultz posits that courtliness manifests itself in the qualities of the beloved, the clothes of the beloved, and the actions that the beloved performs. In the Squire’s Tale, not only is Cambyuskan the flower of chivalric and courtly virtues, but he is also dressed “in roial vestiment” (V.59). As a site par excellence of courtliness, Cambyuskan’s household nurtures and disciplines aristophiliacs who recognize and approve of the strange knight, whose *curteisye* rivals that of Gawain (V.93-97). More important, by comparing the Mamluk knight to Gawain, the Squire implicitly casts Cambyuskan in the role of Arthur. In so doing, the Squire firmly locates the origin of courtliness not in Tartary, but back in the West. Edward Said, in his theory of Orientalism, argues that for the West, “the Orient and the Oriental, Arab, Islamic, Indian, Chinese, or whatever, become repetitious pseudo-incarnations of some great original (Christ, Europe, the West) they were supposed to have been imitating” (Orientalism 62). In the Squire’s Tale, the Tartars, rather than the embodiments of authentic courtliness, become Orientalized imitations of Western aristophilia.

In the Squire’s Tale, Chaucer is not particularly concerned with the origin of the Mongol empire or that of idolatry. Instead, Chaucer’s interest lies entirely in examining the origin of manmade marvels found in the Tartar court. While the white knight brings the prophecy of world domination to the Great Khan in Hetoum’s History and in Mandeville’s Travels, the Squire’s

strange knight bears magical objects as gifts to Cambyuskan on his birthday: a brass steed, a mirror, a ring, and a sword. In his recent study of the medieval culture of wonder, Scott Lightsey argues that the Squire's Tale participates in the late medieval rationalization of marvels, especially artificial *mirabilia* made by skilled craftsmen, which were used as tokens of exchange among European ruling classes. In the late fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries, "European aristocrats collected, traded, and bestowed upon one another an increasingly wild array of mechanically reproduced marvels" (Lightsey 57). These fabricated marvels were commercialized accessories that, through their circulation and transaction, validated noble identity (Lightsey 80). Chaucer's Squire's Tale, therefore, reflects the growing popularity of and the greater access to manmade marvels in the late Middle Ages. Moreover, in Lightsey's reading, the Squire's Tale represents Chaucer's inquiry into the nature and origin of artificial *mirabilia* through the vehicle of the romance genre (74). On the maker of the brass steed, the Squire believes that "He that it wroughte koude ful many a gyn. / He wayted many a constellacion / Er he had doon his operacion, / And knew ful many a seel and many a bond" (V.128-31). Here is the Squire's demystification of the origin of the magic horse.³⁸ For Lightsey, the Squire's attempt at comprehending the making of a magical object exemplifies Chaucer's tendency to "rationalize—even commodify—marvels in romance-based texts" (62). By turning marvels into objects of exchange, gifts for Cambyuskan, the Squire enacts an economy of wonder; manmade marvels are transacted as proto-commodity fetishes.

In his tale, the Squire is completely silent on the subject of Tartar idolatry. By focusing exclusively on fetishistic marvels in the first part of the Squire's Tale, Chaucer moves decidedly away from the thirteenth-century preoccupation with Tartar idolatry and introduces a newer, proto-capitalist economy of material objects as commodity fetishes, thereby enacting the kind of fetishization of cultural-economic history that Biddick describes. In other words, the Squire's Tartary is no longer the world of John of Plano Carpini or of Marco Polo, in which nomads of the

Asian steppes smear Natigai's mouth with fat. Instead, Chaucer presents an Orientalized economy of material wonders that looks forward to the early modern fetish.

Nonetheless, idolatry haunts the Squire's Tale and will not go away. Just as Odoric had offered fruits to the Great Khan, the strange knight brings gifts to Cambyuskan; in both cases, the Khan becomes one of the figurations of the idol that demands and enjoys offerings. As mentioned above, Camille has pointed out that in medieval visual art, idols and idolaters are frequently depicted with an open mouth that yawns and sneers. Is not Cambyuskan's "galpying mouth" (V.350) a ghostly reminder of the idol's and the idolater's cavernous mouth? And the Squire's persistent curiosity about the production of artificial marvels conjures up the Judeo-Christian definition of idolatry as the result of human fabrication, the "works of the hands of men." In addition, the belief that idols can be animated by demons to speak has an uncanny parallel in the Squire's Tale. When Canacee, through the power of the magic ring, understands the language of the birds, the female falcon that wails and swoons becomes literally a talking bird.³⁹ Though portrayed as a living bird, the female falcon encountered by Canacee in the garden of Cambyuskan's court conjures up the marvelous mechanical birds found in the Great Khan's court that were described by both Odoric and the Mandeville-author. Odoric notes that "in the hall of the palace also are many peacocks of gold, And when any of the Tartars wish to amuse their lords, then they go one after the other and clap their hands; upon which the peacocks flap their wings, and make as if they would dance. Now this must be done either by diabolic art or by some engine underground" (137). The fictional Mandeville confesses that he does not know the craft that made the mechanical birds, but is certain that "those people are marvellously clever in anything they want to do, more than any other people in the world. They surpass all other nations in cleverness, for good or ill, and they know it themselves" (Moseley 143). And though he seeks the secret of the birds' production, Mandeville is frustrated in his quest for the origin of their artifice: "I busied myself greatly to know and understand by what means these

things I mentioned were done; but the chief craftsman told me that he was so bound by a vow to his god that he could show the method to no man except his eldest son” (Moseley 143). If Chaucer’s Squire believes that the maker of the brass steed “koude ful many a gyn” (V.128), then as Lightsey points out, the Middle English *gyn* also denotes “deceptive tactics and . . . the concealment of motivating factors, both conceptual and mechanistic” (75).

Just as Odoric thinks that the origin of the mechanical birds in the Great Khan’s court lies hidden in some diabolic art, the Squire implies that such craft is occult and fraudulent in nature. Both point to the close affinity between and the intermixing of the mechanical marvel, as commodity fetish, and the practice of idolatry, in which demons conceal themselves in idols and utter oracles. Despite Chaucer’s silence on idolatry and his explicit focus on the magical fetishes in the Squire’s Tale, the specter of idolatry lingers on in the *gyn* that produces the brass steed and in the female falcon whose power of speech is “produced” by the magic ring. According to Derrida, whenever there is production, there is fetishism; that is, object relations among commodities necessarily involve social relations among people.⁴⁰ Artificial marvels, Lightsey contends, are part of a court’s magnificent self-imaging (144); the marvels of the East are a mirror of “the most elite courtly *mirabilia* of the west, performing in the presence of courtiers and makers in a familiar tableau of magnificent court rituals” (150). Again, through fetishistic magical objects, the Squire’s Tale presents an Eastern court culture that reflects but does not originate Western aristophilic ideals. Like the mechanical birds in Kubilai Khan’s court or the talking female falcon in Cambyuskan’s garden, the Tartars themselves, as figured by Chaucer, become fetishes, in the sense of Marx’s conception of the commodity fetish as a *talking* thing.

If, as Patricia Spyer argues, fetishism traces out the “border zone” that foregrounds “the unresolvable oscillations . . . and the cultural, commercial, and political crossings” (1), then the narrativized origination of the Tartars in Hetoum’s History and in Mandeville’s Travels is a biopoliticization that constitutes their body only as metonymic parts, what Agamben calls *zoē* (the

bare life). The fetish, Spyer adds, holds out “a promise of fulfillment and ultimate arrival” (9). And as Michael Uebel recently cautions, the notion of the truth of history as a point of arrival is critically limiting. Rather, the critical task is to examine all the “potentially perverse forms” of arrival itself (271). For Uebel, the subject is “always either *about to arrive* . . . or *will have already arrived*, thus remains in a rhythm of abeyance or suspense” (275, original emphases). And if fetishism commemorates a founding moment, an origin, then the Tartar conquest of Christendom was never realized, and their arrival in the West disappeared into romance. Genghis Khan’s dreams announce the Mongols’ promised arrival in a continuously future-oriented trajectory. But by the early 1240s, the Mongols had marched to the edge of Vienna only to turn back and vanish from the Eastern horizon. Never arriving in the West at a real moment in history, the Mongols can arrive only perversely and endlessly in romance, or in the kiss left on the cross or the Gospels.

Or, the Tartars’ problematic and anachronistic appearance in the romance that is Chaucer’s Squire’s Tale can be read not from the perspective of arrival but from that of lateness. Lateness, for Michael Wood, “does not name a single relation to time, but it always brings time in its wake. It is a way of remembering time, whether it is missed or met or gone” (xi). Thus, Chaucer’s own evocation of Genghis Khan is already itself a remembrance, a form of lateness in history.⁴¹ Lawlor, in his reading of Derrida, posits that the notion of origin always presumes that the origin’s “fall” into division, into time, has already taken place. Therefore, for Derrida, every experience contains an aspect of lateness, and the subject is “always late for the origin since it seems to have always already disappeared. Every experience then is always not quite on time or, as Derrida quotes Hamlet, time is ‘out of joint’” (Lawlor 4). If arrival, as Uebel argues, is a state of temporal suspension that is never fully present but is only about to happen or will have already happened, then origin, likewise, can never be reached at or occupied fully or precisely in a backward glance. Time is out of joint. And the disjointedness of time marking an origin also

facilitates further fragmentation of the material and the bodily in the act of arrival. Biddick notes that the fetish is forever “gesturing toward but never arriving at the site of trauma” (“Translating” 195). At its origin, the fetish is trauma dismembered. Or, the fetish is “dismembered on arrival” (Biddick, “Translating” 204). For Hetoum and the Mandeville-author, the mythologizing of the origin of the Tartar empire in the Great Khan’s dreams of the white knight has the effects of whitening and fetishizing the Tartars. The Tartars arrive in the West’s consciousness as whiteness dismembered: a knight, an armor, a horse. And as Marco Polo spins his own origin story of idolatry, he ends not on the idolatrous worship of Buddha but on Buddha’s relics as proto-commodity fetishes sought by the Great Khan. Finally, in the Squire’s Tale, when the Mamluk knight arrives “sodeynly” (V.80) in Cambyuskan’s court, he arrives not in whole but in “pieces,” bearing gifts of magical objects as fetishes that have been dismembered at the border.⁴²

When Fanon says, in the epigraph to this chapter, that there is always a white world “between you and us,” and that “your” arrival is always too late, he is referring to the inability of a black man to achieve full recognition by the white world; he is always, despite his strivings, less than white. Fanon’s black man is forever condemned to colonial mimicry, as Homi Bhabha would characterize. But maybe the reverse is also true. In the West’s encounters with the Other, there is always already a white world. It might have been impossible for Hetoum and the Mandeville-author to approach the Tartars except through whiteness, in the form of the Great Khan’s dreams. Chaucer, of course, makes no mention of whiteness in the Squire’s Tale. Perhaps for Chaucer, there is no longer a need for such explicit whiteness. Lateness, as Wood suggests, could also be perfectly punctual, like late evening or late autumn (xi). While temporally, the Squire’s late-fourteenth-century Tartars are too late to claim any historical authenticity, their appearance in romance is also perfectly punctual. The Squire’s white world has already been subsumed under courtliness.

The ambivalent and inconsistent representations of the Tartars in the West—as sometimes white, European-looking and civilized, and as sometimes black, Saracen-looking, and primitive—point to an inability, or perhaps a reluctance, to arrive at any definitive conclusion about them. Historically, Maurizio Peleggi notes, there was a shift in the perception of the Tartars as an imminent threat to a potential ally against Islam from the mid-thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth centuries (17). But the shift was never absolute, and ambivalence persisted. The inconsistent portraits of the Tartars indicate deeply conflicted views that refuse to settle into any singular or stable perception. Just as the Great Khan is normalized as a courtly European enjoying his feasts, other Tartars—dark-skinned, turbaned, and idolatrous—seem to defy normalization. Reaching Tartary, William of Rubruck records that when he “arrived among those barbarians, it seemed to [him] . . . as if [he] were stepping into another world” (Dawson 106). But by the late fourteenth century, Chaucer’s Squire can only conjure a knight on a brass steed that has the power to vanish into thin air and to teleport elsewhere. These disappearing things, the Squire seems to claim, are better than white armor and white horses. The strange knight brings Cambyuskan not oracular words of world conquest but magical objects, fetishes for a fetishized people.

Uebel further theorizes that the workings of history share many similarities with what he calls the “hermeneutic strategy of fetishism” (279). That is, both fetishism and history are compromises whereby a narrative about “‘things as they really were,’ is constructed as a representation of a permanently missing object” (279). The Squire’s Tale, in essence, is a fantasy history in which the Squire plays his medieval version of fantasy baseball, constructed around the cultural ideals of courtliness. Cambyuskan’s Tartary, forever absent in the West, is the fetish whose history can be approached only through a Tartar’s kiss.

And what is the temporality of the kiss? What is its origin, and when does it arrive? Is it, like subjectivity, always already past, or, will always have been? In kissing, timing is everything.

Theorists of fetishism have argued that fetishization is an interruption, an arrest, of time. Spyer remarks that when the fetish comes to life, “some process has been suddenly interrupted” (6); Uebel, similarly, observes that “time can be arrested in the form of a fetish” (276). As a bodily affection that takes place both in space and time, is not the kiss an ephemeral fetish that vanishes?⁴³ The Squire’s Cambyuskan, himself overstuffed with food, grows tired; then, with a yawning mouth, he kisses all his guests good-night (V.350). Despite his courtly attributes, Cambyuskan, John P. McCall observes, “does practically nothing. He holds a tremendous birthday party for himself, moves from room to room, and then goes to bed late—apparently in his cups” (105). He remains bound to his oral impulses. Yet unlike the Great Khan of Marco Polo and Odoric, who kisses only objects, the Squire’s Cambyuskan does not shy away from the lips of others. And if his lips could talk, what kind of histories would they tell?⁴⁴

Notes

¹ Sigmund Freud, From the History of an Infantile Neurosis, p. 29.

² Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, p. 122.

³ There are two manuscript traditions of The Secret History of the Mongols. In one, the shaman Teb Tenggeri simply said to Genghis Khan: “The decree of Eternal Heaven concerning the ruler has been foretold by heavenly signs as follows: once they say that Temujin will hold the nation, once that Qasar [Temujin’s brother] will. If you don’t strike at Qasar by surprise, there is no knowing what will happen!” (de Rachewiltz 168) In the second version, Teb Tenggeri’s supernatural powers are emphasized:

Teb Tenggeri was famous for his supernatural powers. He was believed to ride a horse into the skies to talk with spirits. Neither hunger nor cold had any effect on him; he could fast as long as he wished to, and he could sit naked in the snow until it turned into steam with the heat of his body . . . Teb Tenggeri sought an audience with the Khan, and said to him: “The ruler of Heaven has sent me a prophecy, saying: ‘At one time, Temujin shall have the realm in his hand; at another time, Kasar.’ Who can say what will happen if you do not forestall Kasar in his ambition?” (Lister 191-92)

When the Cilician Hetoum recounted the legendary rise of Genghis Khan, Teb Tenggeri had disappeared into the figure of a white knight on a white horse. Here is Richard Pynson’s early sixteenth-century English translation of Hetoum’s La fleur des histories de la Terre d’Orient:

[It] fortunèd a poore olde man that was called Congius sawe in dremynge a visyon; the whiche to hym semyng was a knyght in armour vpon a white horse, that called him by his name and sayde vnto hym: “Cangius, the wyll of thy immortall God is suche that he oweth to be shortli gouernor made vpon the vii natyons of the Tartas that ben called Malgothz, and that by hym they shal be delyuerd oute of the saruage that thei had longe ben in, and shall haue worship vpon theyr neighbours.” Cangius rose vp merily, herynge the worde of Christ, and rehersed the vision that he se to all the gentilmen. (Burger 26)

⁴ The episode might have a parallel or origin in Uighur mythology. Allsen cites a medieval Uighur legend in which a ruler, Buqu Khan, “had a dream in which he saw an elderly man dressed in a white robe and carrying a white staff who informs him of his forthcoming political success. Later, his chief adviser has the same dream and Buqu Khan, confident of his good fortune, launches his campaigns of conquest” (60).

⁵ Allsen cites how, “At the birth of Muqali, later Chinggis Qan’s viceroy in North China, ‘there was white vapor that arose from the tent’s interior’ to inform all that this was a child with a brilliant future” (58). And in 1206, the Mongols set up the “white standard” and called it “the banner of Chinggis Qan’s good fortune” (59).

⁶ See Cohen’s essay, “Chevalerie,” in his Medieval Identity Machines.

⁷ In Matthew Paris’s account, “[v]irgins were deflowered until they died of exhaustion; when their breasts were cut off to be kept as dainties for the chiefs, and their bodies furnished a jovial banquet for the savages” (qtd. in Blurton 95-96).

⁸ John of Plano Carpini remarks that the Tartars’ “belief in God does not prevent them from having idols of felt made in the image of man, these they place on each side of the door of the dwelling” (Dawson 9). William of Rubruck, likewise, observes that in the Tartar household, “there is always an idol like a doll or little image of felt which they call the master’s brother” (Dawson 95). And the Mandeville-author notes that the Tartars “believe in one God who made all things; but nevertheless they have idols of gold and silver, of felt and cloth, to which they offer the first milk of their animals and the first morsels of their meat and drink before they themselves eat or drink any of it” (Moseley 157).

⁹ See Strickland’s article, “Text, Image, and Contradiction in the *Devisement dou monde*,” and her book Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art, especially pp. 192-209.

¹⁰ I would like to thanks Madeline Caviness for generously sharing with me an earlier version of her paper.

¹¹ Batchelor further contends that chromophobia posits color as “the property of some ‘foreign’ body—usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological . . . [and] relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary,

the inessential or the cosmetic . . . merely as a secondary quality of experience, and thus unworthy of serious consideration” (22-23).

¹² But as Camille trenchantly remarks, the second commandment does not say “do not make idols”; rather, the commandment only prohibits the making of likeness itself (Gothic Idol 27).

¹³ Michele Bacci contends, however, that the difference between an idol and a sacred image is “purely terminological . . . a consequence of the viewer’s perspective” (364).

¹⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell argues that Marx’s notion of the commodity fetish as a “hieroglyphic” is derived from de Brosses’s contention that ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics were the signs of a fetishistic religion; moreover, Marx’s theory of commodities as personified objects follows “almost exactly the model provided in accounts of idolatry” (190).

¹⁵ See Kaufmann’s The Religion of Israel, from Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile.

¹⁶ Pietz’s historiography of the fetish follows the one implicitly outlined in the OED. In definition 1(a), the fetish is “originally, any of the objects used by the Negroes of the Guinea coast and the neighbouring regions as amulets or means of enchantment, or regarded by them with superstitious dread.”

¹⁷ Camille suggests that “idolatry”—the worship of the material—has frequently been conceived of as belonging to the time before European Enlightenment, whereas “ideology”—the privileging of the abstract—marks the historical arrival of Enlightenment and modernity (Gothic Idol xxv).

¹⁸ Similarly, Gaunt argues that “medieval Christianity had a penchant for imputing idolatry to other cultures while nurturing a blind-spot to its own proclivity for images in religious practice” (17).

¹⁹ For euhemeristic theory of the origin of idolatry, see also Alastair Minnis's Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity, pp. 32-33.

²⁰ I would like to thank Simon Gaunt for pointing me to Marco Polo's narrative of the origin of idolatry, as well as his generous sharing of his research and works.

²¹ All English translations of the Franco-Italian and the French translation of Marco Polo's Travels are from Simon Gaunt's "Unhomely Encounters with Others in Medieval Travel Literature."

²² See Gaunt, pp. 15-16.

²³ See Michele Bacci, p. 363. As D. A. Scott points out, medieval Christian responses to Buddhism tended not to consider Buddhist doctrines on their own merits and judged them according to whether or not they follow Christian theology (168).

²⁴ Commentators on Marco Polo's Travels have pointed out the hagiographical tradition of St. Josephat is probably of Eastern origin, and might have been based on the life of Buddha. See the Yule-Cordier edition of the Travels, pp. 323-28, nn.2-3.

²⁵ Marco Polo's emphasis on the proto-fetishistic functions of Buddha's relics, as well as the Great Khan's eagerness in acquiring them, exposes a historical trauma that is inscribed at the heart of his text. Marion Steinicke has recently argued that Marco Polo's Travels encodes the trauma in the encounter between East and West; this trauma is the West's realization of Oriental cultural, scientific, and economic supremacy. Sharon Kinoshita reads the Travels as a "thought experiment" that reflects on the contact between the West and the Mongols.

²⁶ Freud observes the impossibility of kissing oneself in his discussion of infantile sexuality and auto-eroticism: "at a later date he [the child] seeks the corresponding part—the lips—of another person. ('It's a pity I can't kiss myself,' he seems to be saying.)" (Three Essays 48)

²⁷ Derrida, in On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy, observes the reflexivity of touch (contact, caress, kiss), what he calls “self-touching”: “In the ‘self-touching-you,’ the ‘self’ is as indispensable as you” (291).

²⁸ For early Christians, the ritual of the kiss of peace was important in their self-definition as a community of the faithful. The practice of the kiss of peace, therefore, was a sign of conversion to Christianity and the subsequent access to Christian ideals of holiness. Centuries later, the kiss of the leper by saints would be represented as proof of their sanctity. St. Francis’s kiss of the lepers marks his embrace of ascetic Christianity, a conversion *within* Christian framework. For the kiss of peace, see Michael Philip Penn, Kissing Christians: Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church; Kiril Petkov, The Kiss of Peace: Ritual, Self, and Society in the High and Late Medieval West; and L. Edward Phillips, The Ritual Kiss in Early Christian Worship. For the general history of the kiss during the Middle Ages, see Nicolas J. Perella, The Kiss Sacred and Profane: An Interpretative History of Kiss Symbolism and Related Religio-Erotic Themes; and Yannick Carré, Le baiser sur la bouche au Moyen Age : rites, symboles, mentalités, à travers les textes et les images, XIe-XVe siècles. For the leper’s kiss, see Catherine Peyroux, “The Leper’s Kiss.” For the erotic kiss in courtly literature and art, see Alison Stones, “Illustrating Lancelot and Guinevere”; and Michael Camille, The Medieval Art of Love: Objects and Subjects of Desire. For studies on sexualities and kissing in medieval literature, see Glenn Burger, “Kissing the Pardoner”; and Carolyn Dinshaw, “A Kiss Is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and Its Consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knights*.” And for anthropological and theoretical studies of the kiss, see Willem Frijhoff, “The Kiss Sacred and Profane: Reflections on a Cross-Cultural Confrontation”; and J. Hillis Miller, “What Is a Kiss? Isabel’s Moments of Decision.”

²⁹ Marco Polo tells of how Kubilai Khan, on Easter, asked the Christians to bring the Gospels to him. After applications of incense, he “kissed it devoutly and desired all his barons and lords there present to do the same” (Latham 119). In Mandeville’s Travels, the Khan simply “bows devoutly to the Cross” but does not kiss it (Moseley 155).

³⁰ Marco Polo’s description of Kubilai Khan’s body follows the ancient and medieval tradition of physiognomy. Aristotle wrote: “The physiognomist draws his data from movements,

shapes and colours, and from habits as appearing in the face, from the growth of his hair, from the smoothness of his skin, from the voice, from the condition of flesh, from parts of the body, and from the general character of the body” (Latham 105).

³¹ Mintz similarly argues that the basic biological need of nourishment is transformed by humans into a symbolic system of meaning (6).

³² Skubal writes that “the mouth is a multifarious site, both a locus of need and a satisfier of desire. It is the site of recurring lack and loss as much as it is the place of pleasurable, sustaining recompense” (6).

³³ The Mandeville-author notes that the Tartars “eat dogs and lions, mares and foals, mice and rats, and other beasts both great and small, excepting pigs and other animals forbidden in the Old Law” (Moseley 158).

³⁴ Both Woolgar and Fullam remark on the central place of the humoral theory in medieval cookbooks. The theory was derived from ancient Greek philosophy and medicine, but its inspiration “may possibly be detected as far afield as China” (Woolgar 167). In the late Middle Ages, chefs were “both medical doctors and cooks” (Fullam 188).

³⁵ Maurizio Peleggi reads Marco Polo as actively romanticizing the alleged barbarism of the traditional Tartars on the steppes. For Polo, the “Tartar *bon sauvage*” is simultaneously an object of “longing and repulsion” (Peleggi 26-27).

³⁶ See Jean Devisse and Michel Mollat’s discussion of this image, in their The Image of the Black in Western Art, pp. 98-99.

³⁷ Critics have commented on the Squire’s Tale’s Eurocentricism. For Anne Middleton, the Squire’s Tartars behave like Europeans, and the tale translates the magical objects into Western framework and history (“War” 129). John M. Fyler has detected in the tale “an almost irresistible human impulse to explain the exotic, to domesticate it, by recourse to the familiar” (211). Chaucer, Kathryn Lynch argues, “blunt[s] the foreignness of the genre, and makes it less

Eastern, by substituting highly courtly and Western motifs” (“East” 541). More recently, Alan S. Ambrisco suggests that the Squire’s seemingly bad use of the rhetorical trope of *occupatio* is a self-conscious containment of the Other that removes cultural boundaries, suppresses difference, and encourages identification. In other words, the Tartars in the Squire’s Tale exist only as “shadowy versions of Europeans, whose culture and language alone have integrity and value” (Ambrisco 214).

³⁸ Chaucer’s Squire behaves like the fictional Mandeville, who also seeks to demystify the wondrous mechanical marvels that he encounters at the Great Khan’s court. Lightsey suggests that Mandeville’s search for the knowledge of the craft stems from his desire to neutralize and cancel the effect of wonder (147-48).

³⁹ In her recent reading of the Squire’s Tale, Susan Crane argues that Chaucer “aligns species difference with cultural difference” (“Bird” 30), and that the gender affinity between Canacee and the female falcon ultimately transcends species difference (“Bird” 34).

⁴⁰ See Derrida’s Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International, p. 208.

⁴¹ Edward Said contends that lateness is also “a kind of self-imposed exile from what is generally acceptable, coming after it, and surviving beyond it” (Late Style 16).

⁴² Shirley Sharon-Zisser reads the Mamluk knight’s sudden arrival in Cambyuskan’s court as “a threat to the integrity of the boundaries of sacred time and space” (380).

⁴³ The kiss is a physical embodiment in space; and in time, the kiss as the prelude, the goal, or the postlude to other events. Spatially, a situated-ness could take the form of the proximity of bodies in the act of kissing; the situated-ness of the individual body, the collective community, the proto-nation, and the imagined empire, the self and the others.

⁴⁴ The palimpsest embodies sediments and traces, geographically and textually. Can one not speak of the palimpsest of the specter of Tartars? The palimpsest is also evident in objects of

the kiss (relics, manuscripts, pax boards, crosses). And are not the lips of kissers the most palimpsestic part of the phenomenological self?

Whiteness on Sufferance: Blindness, Drama, and the Skin of Salvation in Piers Plowman and Late Medieval Drama

“Like a tailor, I cut out these portions of cutaneous tissue into a suit of clothes . . . I will need no sarcophagus. To bear on my dying flesh this second incorruptible skin, drawn from the multitude of people I have known and who will accompany me forever, will be for me sufficient shroud.” — Didier Anzieu¹

“We stowpe and stare upon the sheepes skyn . . . Wrytyng also dodoth grete annoyas thre . . . Stomak is oon . . . and to our bakkes neede / Moot it be grevous; and the thridde oure yen / Upon the whyte mochil sorwe dryen.” — Thomas Hoccleve²

Wittgenstein, in his Remarks on Colour, poses an ontological question: “Why is it that something can be transparent green but not transparent white?” (I.19). The obvious and immediate answer, Wittgenstein points out, is that white is an opaque color (I.17).³ Wittgenstein’s recognition that whiteness is not a state of transparency but of opacity suggests that, as a color, whiteness functions as a veil, a wrap, an envelope, a membrane that does not facilitate but obstructs the vision of what lies behind or within it. Put differently, whiteness is a skin that blocks, conceals and even disguises. In this chapter, I would like to examine whiteness as a skin phenomenon in the interplay between the social and the material registers of late medieval English culture. In looking at whiteness as a trope of the skin, I am less interested in questions of complexion per se than in the literal and figurative enfolding tendencies that whiteness *as* skin exhibits, with “skin” broadly defined to include clothes, animal skins, and theatre costumes. The text with which I will engage such a reading is William Langland’s Piers Plowman, especially Passus XX in the C-text. Through the use of personifications, Langland directly engages with medieval practices of allegoresis, in which the figurative veil (*integument*) of the allegorical text must be laid bare to expose its hidden meaning. Specifically in Passus XX of the C-text, Christ’s suffering body on the cross is symbolic of the unveiling of God’s

redemption of humanity; at the crucifixion, according to Mark 15.38, the earth opens and the temple curtain is torn in two.

I begin with Passus XX's intense focus on the Passion, especially on the Jews and the figure of Longinus, who is both Jewish and blind in Langland's portrayal. Longinus's blindness is emblematic of the veil of ignorance covering the eyes of the recalcitrant Jews who resist the truth of Christ's incarnation and resurrection. In medieval representational tradition, Jewish ignorance is frequently figured as the blindfold of Synagoga or as the white film covering the eyes of the unbeliever. Whiteness here is a blinding veil that impedes access to divine truth. Longinus's spearing of Christ's body thus leads to his healing and the unveiling of his spiritual eyes. As for the rest of the Jews, their association with the disabled body of the blind renders them suspect to charges of laziness and dissimulation. Like false beggars, they too might wear a disingenuous veil to hide their spiritual and moral corruption.

Next, I argue that Langland directly engages with late medieval theatrical practices in Passus XX, especially through his characterizations of Christ and the devils in the Harrowing of Hell episode, which resonates with those found in medieval French and English Passion cycles. Of particular interest is the use of masks and leather costumes in the performance of these plays. Actors playing devils and black souls, for instance, wore blackface and black masks. The self-conscious putting on and displaying of identity through clothing signals the enmeshment of the material and the social in late medieval performances of identity. Susan Crane has argued that identity "is both material and conceptual" (Performance 1). Reacting against modern identity politics that grounds so much in the biological body, a politics that turns inward and binds the body to self-consciousness, Crane pushes in the opposite direction, outward towards the binding of self-consciousness and clothing. The cultural body, Crane contends, "is costumed, and clothing, not skin, is the frontier of the self" (Performance 6). In Crane's reading of medieval material cultures, clothing functions as a visible sign of identity however much grounded in the material body. That is, the material denotes not simply the body but also "things" as well.

In my reading of Passus XX of Piers Plowman, I would like to extend, complicate, and nuance Crane's construction of medieval identity politics a bit by drawing attention to some medieval moments in which clothing is the literal skin of an animal that also signifies the skin of the human body. These are moments where the material skin, even when functioning as a literal garment in the kind of clothed identity construction that Crane argues for, exhibits and reasserts the body's power to configure, mark, or even essentialize an individual identity. What I have in mind is the white leather body suit that the actors playing Christ in the Passion cycles would wear. In this particular instance of identity *as* performance, the skin qua clothing is the frontier of the self; the human body is clothed in another bodily membrane. In an age without plastic or rubber, animal skins were prevalent in medieval material cultures. The ubiquity of skin products in the Middle Ages rendered skin the figure *par excellence* of Christ's suffering body; hence Christ imaged as a stretched piece of skin nailed to the cross. I argue that Langland, by alluding to late medieval performance culture in Passus XX, conjures up the visual trope of the crucified Christ as various skins: drum, parchment, and leather costume.

The image of the suffering Christ as a skin in pain points to skin's primary function as a surface upon which trauma is inscribed. I would like to examine the phenomenological and psychological significance of the Christ-actor in white leather suit, using Didier Anzieu's concept of the Skin Ego. Like the biological skin, the Skin Ego is a psychic sheath that contains and protects the ego. For the actor playing Christ, his Skin Ego is momentarily disturbed by the additional layer of leather skin. Resisting a medieval and modern truism that opposes appearance and reality, surface and depth, chaff and kernel, and falsity and truth, I argue that such binaries collapse in the body of the leather-clad actor. The actor's body is not the "kernel" of the divine; rather, I would argue that the actor in leather experiences a doubling of his Skin Ego. Literally and figuratively, he possesses a second skin, a veil upon a veil. By collapsing the distance between the divine and the human, the actor is able to embody Christ's physicality, masculinity, and erotic potential. The white leather suit is a pure sign, and not a disguise, of Christ's suffering.

Representing Christ's body as a skin also has important implications for (re)thinking the social in the late Middle Ages. If skin is a barrier that contains, it also excludes. But as a membrane, skin is at best a porous boundary where traffic takes place at its borders. If Christ's body signifies the whole of Christian society, then Langland, by alluding to the material and devotional practices of "white" skins in Passus XX, steps outside of an imagined community organized on the basis of medieval clothing alone. Perhaps it is not with the image of society as a social fabric that one should read Piers Plowman; instead, society could be reconceived as a skin. What precisely is the "fair feld ful of folk" (Prologue.19) that Will sees in his dream? If the fair field had a skin, what would it look like? I end the chapter with a brief look at Will, who claims in the opening of Piers Plowman that he is clothed in "shroudes as [he] . . . a shep were" (Prologue.2). Throughout the poem, Will distinguishes himself with various garments, or "skins," that he puts on and displays. His ambiguity is emblemized in the "gray" russet that he sometimes wears. Curiously, Will never seems to wear white; in that regard, his resistance to whiteness is willful by nature.

Whiteness as a skin phenomenon might exhibit certain essentializing qualities, as in the veil of blindness or the leather suit of Christ. But whiteness as a skin phenomenon is never singular or fixed. What the social skin embraces in Passus XX, and in Piers Plowman as a whole, is not only Christians, but a multitude of problematic bodies—Christians or otherwise—that resist a simple taxonomy. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri characterize the workings of the multitude: "From the perspective of political order and control . . . the elemental flesh of the multitude is maddeningly elusive, since it cannot be entirely corralled into the hierarchical organs of a political body" (192). And this flesh of the multitude, I argue, is necessarily covered in skin. If whiteness as a skin can be worn, then it can only be worn diversely, but always opaquely.

Body Pier(s)ing

As Will enters his sixth dream vision in Passus XX of the C-Text of Piers Plowman, he sees the “blynde Iewe Longius” (20.84) pierce the body of the crucified Jesus. Immediately, “bloed sprang down by the spere and vnspered the knyhtes yes” (20.88). Longinus is cured of his blindness and converts to Christianity. The figure of Longinus, as evoked by Langland, participates in a long cultural-historical tradition in medieval Europe that linked the figure of the blind to the figure of the Jew. Edward Wheatley notes that the stereotypes, as well as “the social and textual strategies of accusation and exclusion” (353), were similar for both groups. Langland’s blind Longinus is emphatically a Jew and not a Roman centurion. In medieval visual art, Longinus is sometimes represented as wearing a Jewish hat.⁴ Blindness in the Middle Ages, as Steven Kruger points out, was a “rich site of overlap” (94) between various cultural discourses. Blindness was both fact and metaphor, corporeal and spiritual. In discussing and representing Paul’s conversion, the Middle Ages focused almost obsessively on the figure of the Jew Saul when he was confronted by a blinding light, rather than the figure of the post-healing and post-conversion Paul (Kruger, Spectral 95).

The intense focus on blindness as a definitive attribute of the Jews, Kruger argues, is one example of the medieval conception of Jews as remaining in a corporeal and inconvertible state of existence (Spectral 95-96). In the French mystery play, La Vengeance et destruction du Hierusalem, Jews were stricken with blindness and stubbornness after the crucifixion because they refused to accept the miraculous salvation enacted by Christ on the cross (Trachtenberg 22). Lacking a proper reading of the real significance of the crucifixion and clinging to a literal understanding of the world, Jews are condemned to a state of carnality and spiritual blindness which, as Kruger points out, “evokes moral error and intellectual dimness” (Spectral 94). And Jewish blindness is frequently figured as a veil or shadow over the eye. Peter Damian speaks of the Jews’ “veil of ignorance [*ignorantiae velamen*]” and writes: “With the vision of so many

heavenly stars sparkling before you, Jew, I marvel how such deep shades of blindness [*densae tenebrae caecitatis*] can hold sway, even in eyes that are totally without sight” (qtd. in Kruger, *Spectral* 94-95). And Pope Innocent IV, in a 1244 letter to the French king, speaks of “the wicked perfidy of the Jews, from whose hearts our Redeemers has not removed the veil of blindness because of the enormity of their crime, but has so far permitted to remain in blindness” (qtd. in Camille, *Gothic Idol* 188).

The Jewish veil of ignorance is sometimes figured as a physical obstruction covering the eye. When Saul was confronted by a blinding light of God on the road to Damascus, he lost his power of sight for three days. But when he converted to Christianity, “immediately something like scales [*squamae*] fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized” (Acts 9.18). In addition to the figure of scales, the image of a white film over the eye is another common metaphor of Jewish blindness in the medieval West. Peter Alfonsi, a Jewish convert to Christianity in the twelfth century, describes his conversion experience as the removal of the white veil covering his eyes: “The omnipotent one inspired us with his Spirit, and directed me into the straight path, removing first the thin white film covering the eyes [*tenuem . . . albuginem oculorum*] and afterwards the heavy veil of the corrupt soul [*grave corrupti animi velamentum*]” (qtd. in Kruger, *Spectral* 117). In another medieval story of Jewish blindness, the Jew Tobit is struck with blindness for his spiritual recalcitrance. When his son, Tobias, seeks a cure, the angel Raphael appears to him in a dream and teaches him how to restore his father’s eyesight. When Tobias applies a fish’s gall to Tobit’s eyes, “a white film like the skin of an egg” peels off Tobit’s eyes (qtd. in Wheatley, “Blind Jews” 359). In his gloss of the story of Tobit, the Venerable Bede interprets “the white film which had obstructed his eyes [as denoting] the folly of self-indulgence” (qtd. in Wheatley, “Blind Jews” 359). And Kruger, reading the conversion narrative of Peter Alfonsi, contends that Peter describes the removal of his spiritual veil of obfuscation “in terms that evoke medieval theories of allegoresis” (*Spectral* 117). I will discuss medieval allegory and allegoresis in greater detail in a later section. For now, it is important to

note that whiteness, as depicted in association with medieval Jews, connotes both corporeal and spiritual blindness. Here, whiteness as a veil marks Jewish ignorance and recalcitrance. It is like the milky white clouds of cataract in the eye, the removal of which would restore bodily sight and signal spiritual conversion. Whiteness is figured as an impediment that is simultaneously a lack, in the forms of ignorance and blindness, and a bodily excess, the white film over the eye—what Kristeva would term “the abjected.” What both the historical Peter Alfonsi and the fictional Tobit suffer from, before their respective conversion and healing, is abjection in the form of white blindness.

In medieval art and literature, the veil of Jewish ignorance is frequently depicted as a literal blindfold over the eyes of the allegorical figure Synagoga. Michael Camille has pointed out that the female Synagoga, in contradistinction to the allegorical Ecclesia, is both blindfolded and “constructed as an anti-image, a pseudo-idol specifically for the purpose of being toppled at the moment of the crucifixion” (*Gothic Idol* 178). Sometimes, Synagoga’s eyes are covered by a serpent, alluding to the alliance between Jews and the devil (Camille, *Gothic Idols* 188). And on the scroll that accompanies Synagoga on the living cross depiction in San Petronio Cathedral are found these words: “*Hirco[rum] sanguis me decipit velut anguis / he[um] su[m] cecata [et] a regno dei separata*” [The blood of goats has deceived me like the serpent / Alas, I am blind and separated from God’s reign] (Kruger, *Spectral* 211n14). In addition, as Ruth Mellinkoff observes, sometimes in visual art Synagoga not only is blindfolded but is also wearing a turban, which suggests the foreignness associated with the Jews despite their living in the midst of Christian society in the West (*Outcasts* 65).

The figure of Synagoga, while not literally present in Passus XX of *Piers Plowman*, lurks behind Longinus. Derek Pearsall observes that Langland’s representation of Longinus as a Jew “demonstrates that an individual Jew received sight (i.e. was converted) at the very moment that the Synagogue (i.e. Jewry, represented in medieval art as a blindfolded female figure) received the blindfold” (323n82). As one individual Jew’s blind eyes are unveiled, the Jews are

collectively veiled by spiritual darkness. Furthermore, Langland's rendition of Longinus's healing and conversion alludes to the trope of Jewish blindness as a white film over the eye, as shown in the cases of Peter Alfonsi and Tobit. Specifically, Longinus's piercing of Christ's side resonates with the ancient and medieval medical procedures for removing cataract from the eye. Alhazen called cataract "a dense opaque fragment" placed within the "albugineous humor" of the eye (Grant 399). In one of the typical operations for removal of cataract, a sharp instrument is inserted through the cornea of the patient, forcing the lens of the eye out of its place and down to the bottom of the eye (Lindberg, Beginnings 341).⁵ When his spear "bar hym [Christ] thorw the herte" (20.87), and Christ's "bloed sprang down by the spere and vnspered" (20.88) his eyes, is Longinus not piercing his eyes vicariously through the body of Christ in order to remove his own white film of spiritual darkness from his eyes? While, as Sarah Beckwith argues, Longinus's spear "assumes a sacral quality because it enters Christ" (57), it is Christ's blood that becomes the sharp instrument of mercy and conversion.

Kruger contends that "the trope of Jewish blindness physicalizes both the moral and intellectual errors of the Jews" (Spectral 95). I would further argue that this physicalization of Jewish errors is in fact a biopoliticization of Jewish difference. That is, the medieval cultural-political management of Jewish difference is one that is fundamentally, though not exclusively, biopolitical in nature. Giorgio Agamben, in his seminal work on biopolitics, distinguishes the Greek notion of *zoē* from that of *bios*. *Zoē*, the bare life, is defined by Agamben as the "simple fact of living common to all living beings" (1), while *bios* indicates "the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group" (1). When *zoē* is converted to *bios*, physical life becomes subsumed under a system of socioeconomic and political control. And one of the objectives of biopolitics, Agamben argues, is to convert the bare life into an "object of aid and protection" (133).⁶ In the language of Christian theology, this biopolitical conversion takes the form of Christian mercy. After his healing and conversion, Longinus "criede Iesu mercy" (89).

But ironically, our attention in the moment of Longinus's healing and conversion is focused not on his body but rather on Christ's body as an agent of mercy and conversion. As Beckwith observes, the body of Christ functioned in the Middle Ages as "a basic metaphor for pre-modern theorizing about the social order" (27). Christ's body is the sacralization of the Aristotelian conception of the body as representative of society, a body that is simultaneously the Eucharistic host and the whole of Christian society (32). But while Beckwith highlights Christ's body as the site of social contests and negotiations, her analysis is primarily limited to the tensions between laity and the priesthood, i.e., among Christians. Though I do not disagree with Beckwith's reading of the functions of Christ's body in the Middle Ages, I would argue that Langland's focus on the blind Jew Longinus in Passus XX steers the thinking about Christ's body and the working of the social to a quite different realm. Langland's imagined community includes not only ideal Christians but also others such as the blind, the Jews, and, as will be discussed in the next section, the potentially problematic masculine bodies in the guise of black devils. This constellation that makes up the social body, as depicted in Passus XX, signifies what Hardt and Negri term the "multitude," "a set of *singularities* . . . whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different" (99). As a critical alternative, these irreducible singularities of the multitude shift the terms of analysis of the social away from the all-consuming and singular body of Christ and toward an analysis of the bodies of singularities in biopolitical terms, as *zoē* and *bios*. And As Langland visualizes the body politics of his "fair field ful of folk," these singularities—blindness, Jewishness, blackness—would disrupt any attempt at a unified and coherent biopolitical community.

If, as Kruger argues, the act of conversion involves "the full body" (*Spectral* 78), then it also involves issues of labor. Jews, Agamben observes, have always functioned as "the living symbol . . . of the bare life" (179) in the West. Both Jews and the blind were accused of greed and laziness: Jews because of their usury, and the blind, begging. For both groups, their bodies

were conceived as incomplete, and their money as earned not through physical labor (Wheatley, “Blind Jews” 353).⁷ The Alsatian abbot Geiler of Kaiserberg attacks the Jews’ suspect labor:

Are the Jews, then, better than Christians, that they will not work with their hands? Are they not subject to the decree of God—in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou earn thy bread? Making money by usury is not working; it is flaying others while themselves remaining idle. (qtd. in Wheatley, “Blind Jews” 362)

The word “flaying” in Geiler of Kaiserberg’s accusation figuratively links Jews’ usury to the violent skinning of Christians’ bodies; the Jews’ suspect labor is rendered injurious to the Christian body politics. The Jewish flaying of Christians also gestures towards the medieval perception of Jews as the torturers and killers of Christ, who becomes a literal and metaphoric stretched skin nailed on the cross like a piece of parchment or drumskin. I will return to the association between Christ’s suffering body and medieval skin cultures later in the chapter.

The question of the political-economic usefulness of bare life (*zoē*) is a question of the body’s role in the biopolitical collective, beyond existing simply as an object of mercy. Blindness, as a disability that highlights the suspect status of a seemingly useless bare life (*zoē*), is at the center of the biopolitics in Piers Plowman. In the Middle Ages, there was great anxiety over false beggars who feigned disabilities in order to avoid labor. Langland, in Passus XIII of the C-text, points out wasters who feign blindness and refuse to work for Piers (8.128-30): “Tho were faytours aferd, and fayned hem blynde, / And leyde here legges alery, as suche lorelles conneth, / And maden here mone to Peres how þei may nat worche” [Those were false beggars afraid and feigned themselves blind, / And twisted their legs backwards as such lazy fellows know how, / And moaned to Piers about how they may not work] (8.128-30)⁸. And in some medieval French plays, Hadassah Posey Goodman points out, Longinus is characterized as a beggar (102). In the thirteenth-century drama Rèsurection du Sauveur, Longinus cannot make enough money from begging and therefore succumbs to the demand of the soldiers that he pierce the body of Christ in exchange for money (Wheatley, “Blind Jews” 273) ; Longinus becomes as a second Judas.

The twin issues of poverty and begging, especially as they applied to the Franciscan friars, are central to Langland's work of social critique in Piers Plowman. The inner dream episode (11.167-13.211) at the center of the poem is framed by an outer dream (10.61-14.217), which, in turn, is framed at its beginning by a previous dream in Passus IX that is a long discourse on true and false beggars, hermits, and "lollares." In the early section of Passus IX, Langland alludes to the "pore folk in cotes" [poor folk in cottages] (9.72) who "with spynnyng may spare, spenen hit on hous-huyre" [with spinning may save, spend it (money) on housing] (9.74). Langland here invokes the image of traditional home clothmaking industry and associates it with the poor. The poor suffer "wo in wynter-tymes, and wakyng on nyhtes. . . Bothe to carde and to kembe, to cloute and to wasche, / And to rybbe and to rele, rusches to pylie" [woe in winter, and waking on nights . . . Both to card and to comb, to patch and to wash, / And to scrape and to reel, to peel rushes] (9.78-81).

Langland's focus on beggars in Passus IX begins with "beggares with bagges" (9.98) who "fayteth for [their] lyflode" [beg falsely for their sustenance] (9.100). He then praises "lunatyk lollares and lepaes aboute" [lunatic idlers and wandering tramps] (9.107) who wear "a somur garnement" [a summer garment] (9.119). In contrast, there are beggars that "bereth none bagges ne boteles vnder clokes, / The whiche is lollarne lyf and lewede ermytes" [carry no bags or bottles under their clothes, / Which is the lifestyle of idlers and ignorant hermits] (9.139-40). These are false beggars who "loken loughliche to lache men almesse" [look lowly to obtain men's alms] (9.141). Langland also extends his examination of true and false identity to those "That faytede in frere clothinge hadde fatte chekes" (9. 208), "thise lewede knauves, / [who] clothed hem in copes, clerkes as hit were, / Or oen of som ordre or elles a profete" (9.209-11). Forty lines later, Langland reiterates the attack on falsehood by condemning the man who "Come in his cope as he a clerke were" (9. 247) or "for þe cloth þat keuereth hym ykald he is a frere" [because of the cloth that covers him he is called a friar] (9.249).

The fact that Langland spends much textual attention on the discernment of true and false beggars, hermits, clerks, and friars in Passus IX suggests a crisis of recognition in the greater society. And this crisis of recognition is essentially a sartorial one. Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass speak of the act of putting on clothes as a formative act of self-identity: “Investiture [is]. . . the means by which a person [is] given a form, a shape, a social function, a ‘depth’. . . What can be worn can be worn deeply” (2-3). Marilyn J. Horn suggests that through clothing “the individual achieve[s] some consistency between the tangible aspects of the self and the intangible aspects of the dress, both of which communicate impressions of the self to others in the social environment” (120). Identity emerges in clothing. And “to have one’s own coat, to wear it on one’s back, [is] to hold on to oneself, even as one [holds] on to one’s past and future” (Stallybrass 202).

But what can be worn deeply can, by the same power of investiture, be worn lightly. Alan Hunt states that “appearance is eloquent and—quite literally—powerful” (36-37). Similarly, Jane Schneider and Annette B. Weiner suggest that “[as] much as cloth discloses it can conceal, however, homogenizing difference through uniforms or sackcloth, or superimposing disguised identities through costumes and masks” (1). Manipulations of clothes lead to misrepresentations and fraud, resulting in a state of “semiotic ambiguity” (Hunt 137) and chaos. Reading clothing and acquiring true knowledge of the wearer do not always coincide. For Hunt, “we can no longer ‘know’ who[m] we encounter, but neither can we ‘read’ their self-representation with reliability” (139). In the world of Piers Plowman, lazy idlers’ manipulation of clothing renders them suspect. As will be discussed later in the chapter, Will, who first dresses in “a shroude as y a shep were” (Prologue.2), is then “yclothed as a lollare” (5.2), and later appears “in this longe clothes” (5.41) is himself morally ambiguous due to his sartorial shape-shifting throughout the poem.

The growing social need for discrimination between true and false beggars suggests the prevalence, or at least an idea of prevalence, of false beggars in the late Middle Ages. These

were beggars who abused alms and stole necessary aid from the genuine poor—the disabled, the old, and the widowed. In terms of gender, false male beggars were always in danger of losing their normative masculinity. Proper masculinity depended on, or was believed to be constituted by, proper labor. The polemist Ralph FitzRalph formulated a premodern work ethic that intertwined religion and gender. FitzRalph conceived of work as divinely ordained and masculine in nature: “[I]n þe first ordynaunce of *man* God ordeyned *hym* so þat anoon as *man* was made, God put *hym* in Paradys for *he* schuld worche & kepe Paradys” (qtd. in Aers, “*Piers*” 25, my emphases). And Nicolas Bozon, in the fourteenth century, preached about the salutary effects of work on man: “Work is the life of *man* and keeper of health. Work drives away occasion for sin” (qtd. in Hewett-Smith, “Allegory” 6, my emphasis). By not doing work—that is, manly work—false male beggars were, in effect, “falsifying” themselves and preventing their male bodies from performing their proper masculine labor.

False male beggars, moreover, were in constant peril of succumbing to effeminacy. Sharon Farmer documents that in the late Middle Ages, false male beggars used makeup and faked ailments. As a result, they were frequently accused of “behaving like certain women” (Farmer, *Surviving* 43). The clergy were especially harsh in their condemnation of false male beggars’ gender ambiguity and sexual depravity. In the writings of clerical elites, “male beggars with robust bodies who feigned weakness through deception assimilated themselves to old women and prostitutes, creating, with falsified bodies, both status confusion and deception in the marketplace . . . They placed themselves in great moral danger” (Farmer, “Beggar’s” 164). Farmer argues that medieval clerical writings on the poor were influenced by the clergy’s antifeminist tradition (*Surviving* 3). There was an “asymmetrical invective against women’s adornment and use of makeup” (Farmer, “Beggar’s” 154) in Christian thought. In the rhetoric of the clergy, women’s use of makeup rendered them disingenuous and deceitful. By analogy, false male beggars’ use of makeup caused them to be associated with femininity and with false appearance. Furthermore, these men were effeminate “because they did not fulfill their roles as

lower status males, who were expected to work with their hands” (Farmer, “Beggar’s” 164). In Farmer’s analysis, “male members of the nonlaboring poor relinquished . . . the most essential element of their masculinity . . . render[ing] them even more morally suspect than the working poor” (*Surviving* 60). Because of this interweaving of masculinity, labor, and ideas of false appearance, medieval clerical writings against false beggars specifically targeted men.

Accusations of moral corruption were not only leveled against idlers. In the late Middle Ages, the reputation of the nonlaboring, involuntary poor was already suspect simply because of the fact of their poverty. Farmer points to the widespread distrust of the poor in the general culture. For instance, Guillaume le Clerc, in the thirteenth century, asserted that the poor were “felons, greedy, slanderous, proud, envious, and—as long as they can hold onto a penny—full of debauchery” (qtd. in Farmer, *Surviving* 50). Poverty, idleness, and debauchery were perceived to be interconnected and were readily conflated both in the popular imagination and in intellectual writings. Coinciding with the growing hostility towards the poor in the late Middle Ages was a greater sense of urgency, on the part of the ruling elites, to discriminate among the different categories of the poor, namely, between true and false beggars. Farmer speaks of the elites’ suspicion of the poor’s claims and the rise of the bodily tests that were administered to the poor “in order to establish the true condition of the individual” (“Beggar’s” 164).⁹

In addition to bodily examinations that assessed the physical conditions of the poor, sartorial identity markers were sometimes forced upon urban beggars in the Middle Ages (Wheatley, “Blind Jews” 364-65). In a number of cities, beggars had to wear badges as insignia of their status, thereby visually and socially linked to Jews, who were required to wear badges on their clothing so that Christians could more easily discern their true spiritual and physical identity. Of particular interest here was the decree in 1217 by King Henry III that the Jews in England should wear on their outer garment a piece of white linen or parchment in the shape of the *tabula*, the two tablets of the Ten Commandments.¹⁰ The decree was in concert with the Church’s effort, after the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, toward ever stricter sartorial

regulations of the social Others living within the borders of Western Christendom. The whiteness of the *tabula* visually conjures up the white film of pagan blindness and the blindfold over Synagoga's eyes; the Jews in England literally wore their veil of ignorance on their breast.

The medieval anxiety over the incomplete bodies of the blind and the Jews signals the failure of these bodies at full socioeconomic integration. Conversions and cures, theoretically, signal integration into Christian society and economy. Wheatley suggests that these acts effectively force the marginalized to lose their marginal identities ("Blind Jews" 381). The loss of marginal identities means that the new convert and the newly cured must now work: the blind must stop begging and join the workforce as an able body, and the converted Jew must give up usury. As for Longinus, his cure converts his disabled body into a potential laboring body. His submission of his land and body (93) to Jesus indicates his willingness to participate, through his bare life and property, in the biopolitical life of the Christian community. Longinus cries out to the crucified Christ: "Sore hit me forthenketh! / Of þe dede þat Y haue do, Y do me in 3oure grace. / Bothe my lond and my licame at 3oure likynge taketh hit, / And huae [rute] on me, riztfol Iesu" [Sorely I repent it, / For the deed that I have done, I do place myself in your grace. / Both my land and my body take at your liking, / And have mercy on me, rightful Jesus] (20.91-94). Or, at least on the level of representation, his miraculous cure allows for the fantasy of the convertibility of a disabled, Jewish body.

Yet Longinus remains marked by his status as an exceptional Jew, and his conversion is made possible, one suspects, largely by his blindness. As for the majority of the intractable Jews, the personified Faith condemns them to a loss of their "franchise" (20.106) and a life in "thraldoem" (20.106). Book, another allegorical personification in the poem, warns the Jews of their pending demise unless they convert. The Jews of Passus XX, with the exception of Longinus, function solely as the persecutors of Christ. Faith accuses the "false Iewes" (20.95) of forcing the blind Longinus to beat the dead Jesus and calls the act "a vyl vilanye" (20.97) and unchivalric (20.99-101). Faith's words, that the Jews "made þe blynde bete the dede" (20.98),



Fig. 8. Blind Man's Buff. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 264, f. 130r. © Bodleian Library. By permission.



Fig. 9. Blind Man's Buff. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 264, f. 130v. © Bodleian Library. By permission.

allude to a common late medieval association between disability, the Jews, the buffeting of Christ in the Passion, and the game of Blind Man's Buff.

As Joseph Strutt explains, Blind Man's Buff—alternatively known as Hoodman Blind, Hot Cockles, or Hoodman Blind—is a game in which a player is blindfolded and buffeted by other players until he can catch one of them. When that happens, the player caught becomes blindfolded in turn and the game continues (Strutt 308). The game is illustrated in several medieval manuscripts. On folios 130r and 130v of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodl. 264, a player (a boy) wears his hood backwards so he cannot see (figs. 8-9). In Paul B. Newman's

interpretation, the scene illustrated the other boys carrying their hoods and using them to hit the blindfolded boy. While the goal of the blindfolded boy is to grab the hoods away from the other players and avoid being hit, the other players' goal is to buffet the blindfolded boy as long as possible before being caught (91).¹¹ For me, the hood used by the game's participants resonates poignantly with the blindfold over Synagoga's eyes, as well as with the white film of blindness covering the eyes of the unconverted, in the medieval representational tradition of Jewish spiritual darkness and ignorance. Hence, the association of the buffeting of Christ and the Jews in the Middle Ages is not surprising: the physical striking of one of the players signifies Jewish violence towards the crucified God, and the material hood symbolizes the Jews' blindness. In one late medieval sermon, the homilist portrays Christ during the Passion as "betun and buffetid, scorned and scourgid, that unnethis was ther left only hoole platte of his skyn, fro the top to the too, that a man myzte have sette in the point of a nedil" (qtd. in Owst 508). And John Bromyard, in his Summa Predicantium, compares false counselors to "the Jews who buffeted Christ when blindfolded" and links them to "those who, in still playing that game, smite someone on the head smartly while his face is hidden" (qtd. Owst 510).

The deliberate association of the game of Blind Man's Buff with Christ's passion is also a prominent feature of many late medieval Passion plays. In the York play Peter Denies Jesus: Jesus Examined by Caiaphas, which was produced by the bowers and fletchers, one of the soldiers at the crucifixion tells Caiaphas: "Sertis, will ye sitte and sone schall ye see / Howe we schall *play popse* for the pages prowte" [Certes, will ye sit and soon shall ye see How we shall play pops [a kind of buffeting game] for the wretch's benefit] (354-55, my emphases). Immediately, another soldier says that he has "a hatir to hyde hym [Christ]" [a piece of cloth to blindfold him] (357). In Play 29 of the N-Town cycle, which depicts Christ's trial before Annas and Caiaphas, a Jewish bystander claims:

A, and now wole I a newe game begynne
 þat we mon pley at, all þat am hereinne:
 Whele and pylle, whele and pylle. (188-90)

[And now would I a new game begin
That we may play at, all that are here:
Spin and pluck, spin and pluck.]

The game of “Whele and pylle” consists of wheeling the blindfolded Jesus around and hitting him at the same time. Next, in the Towneley pageant of the Talents, one of Jesus’s torturers is actually responsible for inventing the game, as he shouts:

The play, in fayth, it was to rowne,
That he shuld lay his hede downe,
And sone I *bobyd* him on the crowne;
That gam me thocht was good. (qtd. in Owst 511, my emphasis)

Moreover, in Play 16 of the Chester cycle, The Passion of Christ—Annas and Caiphas, the Jews at the scene all urge Caiphas to “buffett” Jesus in the head (59, 77, 99). And finally, in Play 21 of the Towneley cycle, The Buffeting, one of Jesus’s tormentors boasts that the soldiers “shall so rok hym, / And with buffettys knok hym” (348-49). In the same play, a tormentor remarks that Jesus “is blynfold” (422), at which point he shall commence the beating.

The association between Jews and the Blind Man’s Buff is also prevalent in Lollard and Wycliffite attacks on passion plays in the late Middle Ages. The authors of A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge insist that

siche miraclis pleying is scorning of God, for right as earnestful leving of that that God biddith is dispising of God . . . as diden the *Jewis that bobbiden Crist*, thanne, sithen thes *miraclis pleyeris* taken in bourde the earnestful werkis of God, no doute that ne they scornen God as diden the *Jewis that bobbiden Crist*, for they lowen at this passioun as these lowyn and japen of the miraclis of God. (97, my emphases)

The actors (“miraclis pleyeris”), by taking in jest (“taken in bourde”) the work of God, are effectively equated with the Jews who struck Christ (“*Jewis that bobbiden Crist*”) at the crucifixion. Passion plays, to the authors of the Tretise, are “feinyd miraclis” through which “men bygilen hemsilf and dispisen God, as the tormentours that bobbiden Crist” (Tretise 99-100).¹² Here, it is Christ who wears the blindfold and suffers the violent blows of the Jews’ moral spiritual corruption. But if the Christ figure in late medieval Passion plays suffers from the

white blindness of the Jews, he himself, as I shall discuss below, wears a radically different skin of whiteness on his body that re-inscribes and re-signifies his bodily suffering.

Black Mask, White Skin

The nexus of Jews, blindness, and violence in the Passion posits whiteness as a veil of Jewish ignorance and recalcitrance. As Passus XX progresses, however, Langland moves quickly from the Passion to the Harrowing of Hell, and in the process shifts his allusions from the figurative skin of spiritual blindness of the Jews to the more literal “skins” of theatrical costumes used in late medieval England, especially in the performance of urban Corpus Christi cycle plays. In Passus XVII, Langland mentions the “clerkes in Corpus Cristi feste [who] syngen and reden” (17.120). And many Langland scholars have noted the resonances between the Passion and the Harrowing of Hell in Passus XX of Piers Plowman and those found in the Corpus Christi cycle dramas.¹³ Richard Beadle and Pamela M. King, in their introduction to The Harrowing of Hell in the York cycle, note that the York play has “more than a passing resemblance to the climactic Harrowing of Hell scene in Piers Plowman” (237). Likewise, Stephen Barney argues that Passus XX, especially the episode of the Devil’s Parliament, has sources and analogues in medieval plays of both English and French origins, in devil-lore, and in the Gospel of Nicodemus (61). The exotic and comic names for devils—such as Belial, Baal, Beelzebub, and Astaroth—can be found in French drama and English Passion cycles (Barney 63). David M. Bevington, in his reading of the Harrowing of Hell in the English cycles, similarly interprets Satan’s fellow demons as “comic in much the same ludicrous vein as their master: they raise the alarm in noisy panic, shore up useless defenses against Christ’s entry, and turn on one another in an orgy of mutual recriminations” (594). In Passus XX of Piers Plowman, Langland too portrays Satan’s rallying cry as similarly farcical in tone and image to that found in the cycle plays. Upon anticipation of Christ’s arrival at the gate of hell, Langland’s Satan shouts out:

Ac arise vp, Ragamoffyn, and areche me alle þe barres
 That Belial thy beelsyre beet with thy dame,
 And Y shal lette this loerd and his liht stoppe.
 Ar we throw brihtnesse be blente, go barre we þe zates!
 Cheke we and cheyne we and vch a chine stoppe,
 That no liht lepe in at louer ne at loupe.
 Astarot, hoet out, and haue out oure knaues,
 Coltyng and al his kyn, the ca[rn]el to saue.
 Brumstoen boylaunt brennyng out cast hit
 Al hoet on here hedes þat entrith ney þe walles.
 Setteth bowes of brake and brasene gonnes,
 And sheteth out shot ynow his sheltrom to blende.
 Set Mahound at þe mangonel and mullestones throweth
 [And with] crokes and kalketrappes encloye we hem vchone! (20.287-94)

[But rise up, Ragamoffyn, and hand to me all the bars
 That Belial your grandfather built with your mother,
 And I shall hinder this lord and stop his light.
 Before we are blinded by the brightness, let us go bar the gates!
 Let's check and chain and stop every chink,
 That no light leaps in through the louver or the loophole.
 Astarot, call out, and have out our lads,
 Coltyng and his kin, and save the castle.
 Boiling brimstone pour it out burning
 All hot on their heads that enter near the walls.
 Set cross-bows and brazen guns,
 And shoot out enough shot to blind his body of armed troops.
 Set Mahound on the siege-engine for hurling stones and throw out millstones
 And with hooks and caltraps let's impede every one!]

Barney characterizes the action in the scene, in which Satan attempts to black out hell so that no light of Christ may penetrate, as a “farcical domestic strife” (64). Several commentators on Passus XX have noted that this passage is found only in the C-text but not in the A- or B-text of Piers Plowman. For Pearsall, Satan’s speech, “with its lively detail, is . . . of a somewhat uncharacteristic kind” (332n281). But rather than being “uncharacteristic” of Langland’s style displayed elsewhere in the poem (whatever that may mean for Pearsall), Satan’s speech in the C-text may represent Langland’s (in)direct engagement with the dramatic culture of late medieval England. Barney asks, “Does [the addition in the C-text] embody [Langland’s] response to a viewing of some Corpus Christi play, or reading a French Passion play, after he issued the B version?” (63) Although my main interest in this chapter does not lie in proving whether or not Langland is directly responding to the mystery cycles, I do concur with Barney’s trenchant

speculation on Langland's possible mode of literary and theatrical engagement. Put differently, while it might be impossible to determine with certainty if Langland ever witnessed the cycle plays in performance, it is inconceivable, given the textual allusions he makes in Passus XX, that he did not know about them. I would argue that any reading of Passus XX must take into consideration the rich theatrical and performance contexts that form part of the cultural matrix of Piers Plowman.

Furthermore, I contend that Langland's representation of the devils in Passus XX might also be alluding to performance practices associated with mummings, in addition to the Passion cycles. Theatre historians have pointed out that in the late Middle Ages, devils and black souls were frequently played by men in blackface and black masks.¹⁴ The use of black and white colors to depict the blessed and the damned is common in medieval Christian visual vocabulary. As Meg Twycross points out, whereas whiteness denotes "the *claritas* of the blessed," blackness signifies the absence of divine light ("Black" 279). In medieval popular masking games, blackface is achieved through household materials such as soot, lampblack, or charcoal (Twycross and Carpenter, Masks 316). In addition to the blackening of the face, actors playing devils also wore grotesque masks with horns, animal skins, and feathers, while wielding various instruments of torture.¹⁵

This fairly standard theatrical convention could be found in the more stylized theatre of the Corpus Christi plays or the moralities, as well as in the more common performative spaces of mummings, morris dances, carnivals, and other seasonal festivities (Sponsler, "Outlaw" 322). Claire Sponsler has noted that late medieval mummings were practiced in rural villages and urban cities, and that the mummers were almost always what she terms "laboring-class males" despite the occasional involvement of the aristocracy or the urban elites ("Outlaw" 324-25). During their processions, the skin-clad mummers would disguise themselves with animal heads, visit houses, play dice games, perform short plays, and ask for food or money. Because of the potentially violent and volatile atmosphere of mummings, cities often outlawed the wearing of masks or

disguises by citizens walking through the streets or entering people's houses (Sponsler, "Outlaw" 324). The city records from London in 1334, 1394, and 1405 stipulated the prohibition. Given the dates of the London statutes and the widespread popularity of mummings, it is possible that Langland knew about them and their theatrical practices.

The blackface and black-masked male bodies participating in late Medieval English cycle plays or mummings not only represented devils and black souls, but they might have also conjured up images of pagan idols. Camille has argued that the visual schema of devils frequently overlapped with that of idols within medieval representational programs. In the Gothic period, for example, images of demons as naked, hairy, animalistic and grotesque were used to depict pagan idols (Camille, Gothic Idol 61-67). In one Psalter's depiction of the Fall of Idols (folio 3v of Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, MS Hart 20960), the idol falling down from its column has horns on its head (fig. 10). Similarly, in the depiction of the Emperor Tiberius forcing Jews to worship idols found on folio 87 of Bibliothèque Nationale, MS n.a.fr. 15941 (folio 87r), the idol on top of the column in the right has demonic features and carries a mask-like shield. As Camille notes in this instance, masks in Christian theology are fraught with representational anxiety; as a medium that disguises reality, the mask is "paradigmatic of the falseness of perception . . . [it] is a *larva*, a mere surface or specter" (Gothic Idol, 62). Idolatry, moreover, has long been associated with human labor, especially artisanal craft. As objects devoid of divine presence or efficacy, idols have long been viewed as "the work of men's hands [*opera manuum hominum*]" (Psalm 13.15). Idols are demonic images tainted with human labor, Adam's curse after the Fall (Camille, Gothic Idol 30). In John Lydgate's English translation of Guillaume de Deguileville's Le Pelerinage de la vie humaine, the association between craftsmen and idolaters is made explicit:

To for thys mawmet (in certeyn)
 I sawh knelyn a vyleyn.
 With powdrys and with fumys blake,
 Sacryfyse for to make
 To thys ydole with hys sheld.

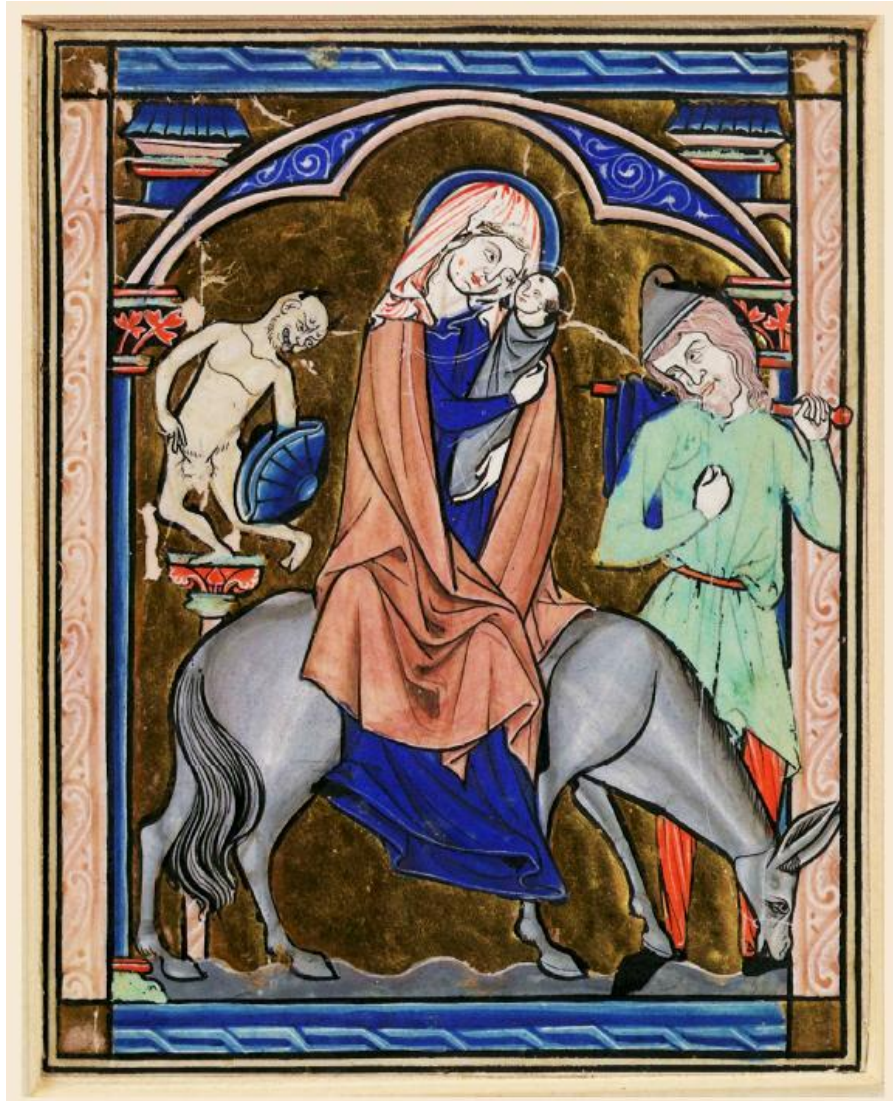


Fig. 10. The Flight into Egypt. The Potocki Psalter. Blackburn, Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, MS Hart 20960, f. 3v. © Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery. By permission.

And he that knelede (as I be-held)
 Was (to myn Oppynyoun)
 A Carpenter or a masoun. (II.20851-58)

* * * * *

The same sylue carpenter
 Dyde a-forn hys bysy peyne
 To forge hym, wyth hys handys tweyne,
 And make hym ffyrst off swych entaylle,
 And wot he may nothyng avaylle

To helpe hym, whan that al ys do.
 They ben A-coursyd, bothe two:
 And thys the cause (wyth-oute more)
 Ffyrst why that I lowh so sore. (II.20934-42)

The carpenter and the mason are idol-makers who become idolaters worshipping the work of their own hands, and the two are cursed by God for their deeds. As the blackface and black-masked craftsmen “act” out the demons they are supposed to be, they simultaneously become the images of idols, idol-makers, and idolaters. Moreover, the male artisans veer dangerously close to being associated with the Jews, who are themselves accused of idolatry and devil worship.

But if masks conceal, they also offer the opportunity for the individual wearers of masks to manipulate the presentation and reception of their masked identities. Sponsler, looking at the seasonal festivities of mummings and morris dances, theorizes that the blackening of men’s faces played a “formative role in producing laboring-class masculine subjects” (“Outlaw” 321).

Blackface both conceals and highlights identity, providing access to “tropes of cultural otherness and deviance” (“Outlaw” 339). Blackness thus marked the laboring men’s lower status *vis-à-vis* “an order grounded on (white) male, aristocratic privilege” (“Outlaw” 335). There were, of course, significant socio-economic differences between low-status laborers, rural or urban, and members of urban craft guilds, as well as differences among artisans themselves, and between artisans and merchants. I do not wish to characterize summarily the intricately differentiated social classes as interchangeable entities. Moreover, the male actors in the Passion cycles, who were sometimes professional or semi-professional players, were not the same as the laboring mummers that Sponsler discusses.¹⁶ I do want to argue, however, that Langland’s boisterous devils in Passus XX allude to a tradition of theatrical representation of the demonic as grotesque, bestial, unruly, and black—if not the male actors playing devils in cycle plays, then certainly the far less polished mummers in animal heads, horns, and skins. Reading Passus XX, one might hear in Satan’s rallying cries, however comical, the voices of late medieval English male

mummers, in blackface and masks, registering their own defiance. Satan insists on protecting the blackness of Hell, seeking to buttress Hell from the light of Christ (286).¹⁷

If culturally and historically, blindness intersects with Jewishness, then medieval Jews, frequently represented as possessing horns and tails (Trachtenberg 46-47), are linked to devils. Devils, in turn, are aligned both with blackness, quasi-racialized through “dermal” pigmentation, and with blindness, as Langland consistently draws attention to the devils’ fear of blinding by the light of Christ. What emerges, then, is a social fabric of performance practices enmeshed and enacted in Passus XX of Piers Plowman. Performing blindness conjures up the performing of Jewishness, which in turn conjures up the performing of devils, of blackness, and of laboring masculinity. Of course, I do not wish to suggest that there is a neat and simple mapping of one category onto another. But I do want to draw attention to the workings of the uncanny slippage, nexus, and concatenations of these seemingly disparate identities. In the two halves of Passus XX—the Jews in the Passions and the devils in the Harrowing of Hell—each conjures up the other; each raises the specter of the other. This is the multitude whose difference cannot be reduced or erased. Hence, the blinding of Lucifer by Jesus, when “liht hym ablende” (20.368), reenacts on a cosmic level the blinding of Synagoga and all the Jews.

The body, Agamben theorizes, is “always already a biopolitical body and bare life” (187). The act of blinding and the act of healing are both acts of power. While Longinus is healed, Lucifer effectively becomes a disabled, useless, and inconvertible body; uncannily Jewish, Longinus’s physical blindness confirms his damaged spiritual state. Within the textualized performance space of Passus XX, the blackface laboring bodies are “acting up” and “acting out” the problematic *zoē*, the bare life that refuses to be converted into useful biopolitical bodies. Here, cultural and literary representations mirror historical realities. In the late Middle Ages, craft guilds frequently rejected the disabled. The Coventry Weaver’s guild, for example, limited apprenticeships to men who possessed all their limbs (Travis, “Social” 23). The Jews, also excluded from the guilds and expelled from England in 1290, were expected to work apart from

Christians (Epstein 170). As for the converted Jews, they remained outsiders and maintained their uneasy relationship to labor. Alienated from both Christians and Jews, Jewish converts were sometimes confined to the support of medieval converts' home (*domus conversorum*), specifically in England in the thirteenth century (Kruger, Spectral 166).

Just as late medieval mummings allowed certain low-status male laborers to shape and display their masculinities through blackface devils, the Harrowing of Hell in Passus XX also stages its own containment of the devils' transgression, and indirectly, of the unruly body's bare life. The deviant and marginalized bodies, called forth, must be culturally constrained. Lucifer invokes the devil's rights to the souls trapped in Hell, only to be defeated by Christ who asserts his right to them (20.370-71, 395, 439). For the blackface male actor playing Lucifer, his is a body that, during the moment of cultural performance, straddles the volatile boundaries of biopolitical usefulness and uselessness, of the able and the disabled, and of mercy and power.

In the nexus of Jews, blindness, devils, and the Passion, what is foregrounded is the body of Christ; the incarnate God becomes a central focus in the final passus of Piers Plowman. The personified Book invokes "Godes body" (20.240) as he bears witness to Christ's powers, and during the Crucifixion, Will notes that there was "no boie so bold Godes Body to touche" (20.77). Christ's tortured body uncannily mirrors Longinus's blind, Jewish body; that is, a disabled body that cannot engage in proper physical or spiritual labor. Yet within salvation history, Christ's body diverges from that of Longinus as it undergoes a biopoliticization through the crucifixion, converting his *zoē* into *bios*. The body of Christ stands at precisely the junction between a blind Judaism and an emergent Christianity. Within Passus XX of Piers Plowman, his body is the hinge between the Passion and the Harrowing of Hell, converting disability into functional wholeness. As both the junction and the hinge, Christ's body traverses boundaries within Christian history. And as the figural and literal body that unveils the divine truth of spiritual salvation hidden behind the veil of human ignorance and recalcitrance, Christ functions as what Beckwith terms "a traverse of inside and outside" (61). Beckwith argues that "the vision of

Christ's body as a traverse between inside and outside . . . informs its dynamic coding—the striving towards an inside dynamically recodes what may be understood by the outside” (61). Upon the cross, Christ's flesh is emblemized in the skin that Longinus pierces and from which pours out divine blood that opens Longinus's eyes; the interior fluid of the divine body is externalized through the pierced membrane of the human flesh. In Beckwith's reading of the crucifixion, “the metaphorization of the skin as a bodily costume indicates the way in which exteriority and interiority are outrageously inverted in such imagery” (61). While I have no quarrels with Beckwith's figurative reading of Christ's crucified body, I would like pose a question in the context of Passus XX of Piers Plowman and the context of late medieval performance culture: What if Christ's skin as a bodily costume is not metaphorical but literal? If, within the Corpus Christi pageants, Christ's suffering body is the visual focus of public spectacle, then I would like to draw attention to a theatrical practice in which the actors playing Christ in the Passion cycles frequently wore white leather body suits to represent the body of Christ. Hence, it is not the actor's body but the skin of the white leather suit that is Beckwith's “traverse of inside and outside.”

Iconographically, the use of whiteness to represent Christ's crucified body on the cross is a fairly standard practice in the medieval West. In The Harrowing of Hell from the York cycle, the Moses character speaks of Christ's radiant face during the Transfiguration: “Whyte as snowe was his body, / And his face like to þe sonne to sight” (89-90). And in the same episode from the Towneley cycle, Moses alludes to Christ's complexion in almost exactly the same words as those in the York cycle: “As whyte as snaw was his body / His face was like the son for bright” (81-82). In a Middle English devotional poem, “A Song of Love-longing to Jesus,” attributed to the school of Richard Rolle by Carleton Brown, the poet speaks of Christ's “fayre schynyng” (24), and of how “Whyte was his naked breste, & rede his blody syde” (37). And of greater interest here is the poet's allusion not to Longinus's blindness but to Christ's own blindness that is the result of torture: “Blynded was his faire ene, his flesch blody for-bette” (41).

In Passus XX of Piers Plowman, Will describes how Christ's executioners "nayled hym with thre nayles naked vpon a rode" (20.51). For medieval Christians, the stripping of Christ and his nudity were common rhetorical and visual topoi. As Gertrud Schiller points out, "the liturgical practice of baring the altar (*denudatio altarium*), which is the symbol of Christ" (83), was familiar to medieval Christians. For the Franciscans, St. Francis's naked poverty is a literal parallel to Christ's nakedness during the Passion. Bonaventure, in De perfectione vitae, describes how during the Passion Christ "was despoiled and stripped of everything. His clothing was taken when *they divided His garments* among them" (qtd. in Derbes 31, original emphases). Likewise, the Pseudo-Bonaventure describes the stripping of Christ in even more graphic terms:

Again He is stripped. . . . His wounds reopened by the adhesion of His garments to his flesh. . . . She [Mary] is saddened and shamed beyond measure when she sees Him entirely nude; they did not leave Him even His loincloth. Therefore she hurries and approaches the Son, embraces Him, and girds Him with the veil from her head. (qtd. in Derbes 150).

In medieval English sermons, homilists also drew attention to Christ's nudity in the Passion. G. R. Owst cites a Master Rymyngton who urged his audience to behold Christ's naked flesh: "God Almighty Himself for thy redemption hung naked between two thieves upon the Cross, and of His own free will exposed his body to the Passion" (qtd. in Owst 509).

Leo Steinberg has noted that before the fourteenth century, the crucified Christ was almost always represented with a loincloth, however thick or translucent, for the sake of decorum. It was not until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that artist began to "risk representing the full nakedness" (136) of Christ that included visualization of his genitals. The partial veiling of Christ's body in visual art reveals a persistent and widespread anxiety over public displays of naked flesh, human or divine, in medieval culture. In the thirteenth century, for example, Thomas of Chabham condemned the exposure of human flesh by actors in his penitential manual:

It is also to be noted, however, that there are three kinds of performers. Some indeed transform and transfigure their bodies by means of shameful dances or shameful gestures, or by shameful stripping their bodies naked, or by putting on shameful masks; on which [grounds] all such can be considered damned unless they give up their occupations. (qtd. in Tydeman, Medieval European 47)

As a solution to the problem of indecent exposure of live human flesh in theatre, medieval actors wore leather garments to simulate nudity. William Tydeman notes that medieval actors playing Adam and Eve were clad in body stockings or leotards and tights (Theatre 213). And the English stage-directions to the Cornish Creation of the World called for Adam and Eve to be “aparlet in whytt lether” and that “garmentis of skynnes to be geven to Adam and Eve by the angell” (qtd. in Tydeman, Theatre 213). In Norwich, the white leather garments, also called “lybkleidern,” were described as “cote[s]” and “hosen” that had been “steyned” (Davidson, “Nudity” 152). In addition to the characters of Adam and Eve, the white leather garment was also worn by actors playing God and Christ, sometimes with a gilded face.

What did the white leather body suit look like? Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter speculate that it might have resembled the Death costumes used in the 1637 dramatic presentation of Niklaus Manuel’s wall painting of the Dance of Death, as shown in Bern, Historisches Museum, no.743; however, the Christ costume would be more tight-fitting to better simulate human flesh.¹⁸ According to the MED, “whitlether” is a “piece of leather treated with alum to yield a stiff, white leather able to be further treated to soften it.” The Middle English “whit,” in fact, can signify metonymically “white clothing [and] white fabric.” In the OED, “whiteleather” denotes “leather of a white or light colour and soft pliant consistence, prepared by tawing, i.e. dressing with alum and salt, so as to retain the natural colour.” The Middle English “tauen” means to “treat (a skin or hide) with alum and salt to produce a supple white leather.” Somewhat more ghastly is the alternate meaning of “tauen” as the turning of human skin into leather.

Stella Mary Newton notes that in the 1339 inventory of the confraternity Dei Disciplinati di Perugia in Italy, one of the properties listed was a flesh-colored leather garment for the actor playing Christ (78). Newton hereby documents the use of leather body suits in Western theatre by the mid fourteenth century. In England, the York Mercers paid in 1433 for a Christ tunic that displayed the marks of his Passion, “a sirke [shirt] wounded” (qtd in Tydeman, Theatre 212). And the inventory of the 1452 Coventry Smiths’ Passion play recorded “vj skynnes of whitleder

to Godds garment” (qtd. in Twycross and Carpenter, Masks 227). Then in 1498, the Smiths’ inventory entered money paid “for sowyng of gods kote of leddur and for makying of the hands to the same kote” (qtd. in Twycross and Carpenter, Masks 227). The word “kote,” Twycross and Carpenter explain, suggests a costume that is “close-fitting, like a body-suit with, apparently, gloves to match” (Masks 227). Later in sixteenth-century Kent, a payment of four shillings and eight pence was made in 1555 “to burton for skynes for the ij godheddes Coote & for makying’ and two shillings ‘for di’ dosyn shepeskynes for y godheddes coote for the iiijth playe” (qtd. in Davidson, “Nudity” 170).

Leather, according to Maryanne Kowaleski, was “an essential and ubiquitous material in the Middle Ages” (57). In an age without artificial textile, rubber, or plastic, animal skins were of paramount importance in the daily life of the people.¹⁹ Joyce E. Salisbury cites medieval laws that dealt specifically with questions of ownership of dead animals so as to regulate the proprietorship and traffic in the valuable hide. In Anglo-Saxon laws, for instance, King Ethelred “required that someone keep the hide of a slain ox for three nights until witnesses could ascertain that the dead ox was in fact the property of the man in possession of it” (Salisbury 22). In medieval England, the leather industry ranked second to the cloth industry; in many towns, leather craftsmen made up at least the third largest occupational group (Kowaleski 57). As Kowaleski concludes, changes in medieval diet led to the increased consumption of meat, which paralleled the increased consumption of leather products (64). Moreover, fashion trends in the late Middle Ages—such as the allure associated with pointed shoes, long boots, and belted gowns—also fueled the rising demand for leather (Kowaleski 65).

The expansion of the leather industry led to greater specializations, as tanning was generally divided into heavy and light depending on the particular uses of the animal skin (Kowaleski 58). The proliferation of the trade resulted in the formation of leather-related craft guilds. For several centuries, in fact, the “whit teueres,” who produced a soft type of leather, were an important guild in England, having received its charter in 1346 (Reed 62).²⁰ However,

despite their number, medieval leather tanners were relatively low in social status (Kowaleski 66). In Norwich, for instance, no tanner ever held a city office, and the tanners were ranked low during the city's Corpus Christi procession (Kowaleski 67).

In drawing attention to the use of leather, as well as of blackface and black masks, in late medieval material culture and in theatre, I do not wish to suggest that Langland, in Passus XX of Piers Plowman, explicitly depicts the Passion and the Harrowing of Hell episode with the Christ white leather-suit in mind. I do want to suggest, however, that there were deeply rooted and widespread iconographic and performance traditions that were readily available to the readers of Piers Plowman. That is, for Langland's late medieval audiences, the image of Christ as an actor in a white leather suit was part and parcel of their religious culture and visual vocabulary—their signifying matrix. And this cultural practice should not be ignored in studies of the history of the reception of Piers Plowman. The signs of the devils and of Christ in Passus XX could thus function as activators of richly layered visual and performance traditions. Was it impossible that a late medieval reader of Piers Plowman could “see” in her mind a leather-clothed Christ and a black-masked devil? In fact, as the fictional Will witnesses the Passion within his dream in Passus XX, is he not unlike a spectator of the cycle plays who walks among the various pageant wagons?

Strictly speaking, the color of the white leather suit that a medieval Christ-actor would put on is not exactly the color whites one may normally know or expect. Like parchment, the color of tawed leather used in theatrical “whytt Sollskotts” or Christ costumes ranged in shades from cream to offwhite, sometimes even turning to yellow (Twycross “Black” 272-73). But the fact that people in the late Middle Ages called the leather suit “whit” suggests, first, that there is a cognitive divide between color perception and naming. Secondly, “white” as a phenomenon was never something singular or monolithic; in fact, “white” embraced a spectrum of colors. Lastly, the perceptual diversity embodied by “white” suggests that for the late Middle Ages, the significance of whiteness did not reside simply in the literal color of the skin, living or flayed. As

Alfred J. López remarks, there are “*gradations* of whiteness” (156, original emphasis), and “‘white’ skin alone does not make one white” (156). The insistent equation between or association of European Jews and dark-skinned demons or sub-Saharan Africans in the Middle Ages is one example of López’s argument. What is significant in the conjuration of whiteness, López contends, is its functions as the “tacit norm” and “cultural imperative” (156) in society. For the late Middle Ages, the white leather suit of Christ signifies the presumed normative status of Christianity, one that is literally, skin-deep.

Leather Incarnate

The figuration of humanity or its flesh as clothing is “an ancient one,” Mary Clemente Davlin observes (67). Augustine speaks of Christ as “a God clothed in flesh” [deum carne indutum] (Confessions 7.19.14). And in the fifth-century Christmas laud “O solis ortus cardine” by Sedulius, Christ clothes himself in a human body (*corpus induit*). Similarly, in the sixth-century hymn for Christmas, “*Jesu, Redemptor omnium*,” Jesus’s birth is figured as a putting on of clothing: “Being born, you put on [our] form” [*Nascendo, formam sumpseris*] (qtd. in Davlin 67). But the metaphor of Christ with the skin of human nature takes on a darker tone for the Passion iconography. Ludolph of Saxony, in Vita Christi, pictures Christ “harshly stretched on the cross as if His body had been a hide” [*crudeliter expansus et tractus, strictissime in modum pellis hinc inde est extensus*] (qtd. in Marrow 305n511). In a medieval account of the Passion in Low German, the author compares Christ’s skin to that of a drum being tightened and struck:

Then they took Jesus and bound Him with strings to a table that was somewhat longer than He was. And they turned the table upside down so that Jesus hung suspended beneath, and they went to sit and drink and make merry, setting the tankards from which they drank on the same table beneath which Jesus was bound. Thus, the blessed Jesus was on one side of the table, bound pitifully *taut like a sheep*, with His holy body hanging down towards the ground. (qtd. in Marrow 123, my emphasis)

The imagery here derives from Augustine, who in Enarratio in psalmos compares Christ to a stretched drumskin: “*Et quoniam qui crucifigitur, in ligno extenditur; ut autem tympanum fiat, caro, id est corium, in ligno extenditur: dictum est, et tympanizabat, id est crucifebatur, in ligno extendebatur*” [And because whoever is crucified is extended upon wood, and that to make a drum, flesh—that is, skin—is stretched on wood, therefore it is said, *He drummed*, that is, He was crucified, He was stretched upon wood] (qtd. in Marrow 125, original emphases).

Christ’s skin becomes the synecdoche of the living body that he sacrificed on the cross. The Gesta Romanorum notes that “*Christus non tantum pellem in sede crucis pro nobis dedit, sed etiam vitam*” [Christ did not only give his skin for us on the cross, but also his life] (qtd. in Kay, “Original Skin” 43).²¹ But beyond the synecdoche of human skin or the trope of drumskin, it was the figure of the crucified Christ as a parchment skin that carried the most valences in the late Middle Ages. Richard Firth Green observes that the widespread topos of God as the author of the Book of Nature and the Book of the Holy Scripture led to the “image of the suffering Christ as a crucified charter or book spread out upon the writing desk of the cross and lettered with the ink of his blood” (259). In the anonymous Middle English meditation The Privy of the Passion, the author speaks of Christ “sprede o-brode one þe crosse more straiter þan any parchemyne-skyne es sprede one þe harowe” (Horst 206). And in another anonymous Meditation on the Life and Passion of Christ, the poet sees the crucified Christ as the personification of Love who writes on the white skin of parchment:

Loue, I pray þe eftsones writ
 þe rede blode, on skyn so whit,
 Gronynge, sykyng, serwe, and care,
 And shame to stonde naked bare.
 Loue, with such noble wrytyng
 þou makest a bok of gret lykyng. (1527-32; D’Evelyn 40)

In his Meditation on the Passion of Christ, Richard Rolle similarly likens the Passion to the medieval production of parchment skin:

Now, swete Ihesu, me þynketh I se þy body on þe rode al bloody, and streyned þat ioyntes
 twynnen; þe woundes now opyn, þy skyn al to-drawn recheth so brode, þy hede

corowned with þornes, þy body al woundes, nailed in þy handes and fete so tendyr, and in þe synwes þer as is most peynful felynges. Þer is on lennyng for þy hede; þy *body is streyned as a parchemyn skyn vpon a rake*; þy face is bolned þat first was so fayre; þy ioyntes vndone; þou stondest and hongest on nayllys; stremes of blode ren down by þe rode; þe syzt of þy modyr encresceth þy peyne. (78, my emphases)

For Green, the religious and literary analogies between the parchment skin, the words of God, and the physical body of Christ reveal “a culture where books and charters were regularly fetishized as objects of awe and mystery” (263). The medieval was an orally based literary culture in which the written words were “potent artifacts” (Green 249) and could carry “talismanic authority” (Green 250). Some people literally carried strips of parchment with words as amulets or remedies around their necks. Rubin cites one incident in which an amulet was supposed to stop the bleeding of a wounded or sick body by appealing to Longinus. The amulet was inscribed with the following words: “Longinus: who pierced the side and had blood flow—I dare you—in the name of Jesus Christ, so that the blood of Margery will stop flowing” (qtd. in Rubin 305). In a strange twist of logic, Longinus, who was often characterized as a disabled Jew, became a quasi-Christian saint with mediatory powers of healing.²²

The late medieval literary work that most famously exploited the legal and religious authorities associated with written words, especially in the context of Christ’s crucifixion, is The Charter of Christ. The poem circulated in both a long and a short form, each with its own variants. All the versions of the poem Green analyzes “turn Christ’s body into a specific deed of enfeoffment [that conveys] the seisin of heavenly bliss to humanity” (276). But it is only in the longer version, however, that the metaphor of the crucified book is explicitly rendered. In the A-text of the long Charter, Christ the narrator cannot find any permanent writing surface and must write out the deed of human salvation on his own skin:

Ne myzte I fynde no parchemyn
ffor to laston wel and fyn
But as loue bad me do
Myn owne skyn y 3af þerto. (A.51-54; Spalding 22-24)

Moreover, Christ's skin as parchment is one that has undergone the processes of beating, washing, and stretching out to dry on the cross:

To a pyler I was plyȝt
 I tugged and *tawed* al a nyȝt
 And waschon in myn ovne blod
 And streyte y-streyned vpon þe rod
 Streyned to drye vp-on a tre
 As parchemyn oveth for to be. (A.75-80; Spalding 26, my emphasis)

The word "tawed" in line 86 is the source of one of the denotations of "tauen" listed in the MED, meaning to figuratively "soften (Christ's skin) by beating."²³ In the Christ Charter tradition, the late medieval material culture of leather meets the religious and literary skin of Jesus. In visual art, one example of the Charter of Christ imagery can be found on folio 23r of British Library, MS Add. 37049 (fig. 11). In an illustration titled "The Charter of Human Redemption," Christ hangs nailed to the cross, next to the instruments of torture. The body of Christ is covered in bleeding wounds, and the red ink on the parchment further heightens the visual and affective effects of the image. While Christ stretches out his arms, his hands hold open a written charter of human redemption. Spatially, the artist has placed the charter directly across Christ's legs and genitals; the charter thereby also functions as a substitute loincloth—a veil—for the naked Christ that further eroticizes his body.

Piers Plowman, critics have observed, is a poem heavily invested in late medieval documentary culture. Written documents of all sorts abound throughout the poem: Meed's charter, Truth's pardon, Piers's testament, Hawkyn's quittance, Moses's maundement, and Peace's patent. In Passus XIX of the C-text, the allegorical *Spes* invokes the figure of the Charter of Christ: "y seke hym þat hath þe seel to kepe, / The which is Crist and cristendoem and croes þer-an yhanged" (19.7-8). Pearsall glosses the image as representative of "the seal of Christ, which is hanging from the deed of contract, as seals did, in the form of a cross" (306n7). And in Passus XX, Peace refers to human salvation as love letters from Christ: "Loue, þat is my lemman, such lettres he me sente / That Mercy, my sustur, and Y mankynde shal saue" (20.184-85). And a



Fig. 11. The Charter of Human Redemption. London, British Library, MS. Add. 37049, f. 23r. © The British Library Board. By permission.

few lines later, Peace again displays the patent of Christ: “Loo, here þe patente! . . . *In pace in idipsum*, / And that this dede shal duyre, *dormiam et requiescam*” (20.190-91). What Peace offers, through the conceit of Christ as a parchment charter on the cross, is a “salvific legal document that opposes the blindly literalist legalism of the devils” (Barney 49). Emily Steiner, in her recent work on late medieval documentary culture in England, has examined Langland’s preoccupation with questions of literacy, legality, and material culture in *Piers Plowman*. Steiner reads the various fictional documents in the poem as “‘key texts’ in the construction of salvation history” that reveal God’s contract of redemption with humanity (*Documentary* 93). *Piers*

Plowman therefore constructs salvation history as both “an archive and as a coherent progression of legal documents” (“Langland’s” 95). Just as Langland has “folded” the fictive documents into his poetry, the documents themselves become keys to the “unfolding” of God’s divine plan; and ultimately, the “enfolding of these documentary discourses” reveals the “peculiar reading and textual practices” the poem enjoins (“Langland’s” 95). While it is my intention neither to rehearse here the finer points of Steiner’s arguments nor to engage with a detailed reading of the phenomenon of whiteness in Passus XX exclusively in terms of late medieval parchment culture, I would like to draw attention to a peculiar trope in Steiner’s language: in her allusions to the various (en-un)folding of salvation history at work in Piers Plowman, Steiner indirectly links Langland’s myriad documents to the figure of the skin.

Malcolm Godden, in his reading of Langland’s account of the Passion and the Harrowing of Hell, has suggested, maybe even with a touch of complaint, that

Langland’s vision is strikingly different from the treatment given in most Middle English writings. There is no long description of the trials and scourging such as we find in the mystery plays or The Northern Passion, and *no emotional account of Christ’s sufferings* on the Cross and the lamentation of his followers, such as we find in the lyrics and art. Instead, Langland presents the Passion as a triumphant battle fought by God with death and the devil. . . . The dominant character is the dramatic celebration of the power and divinity of Christ, not his suffering humanity. (139, my emphases)

While it is true that Langland’s description of the Passion lacks the emphatically lengthier and more visceral—shall one say more “colorful”—language and affective acrobatics found in some of the meditative literature that I have cited earlier, Godden’s assertion that Langland offers no emotional portrayal of Christ’s suffering is unconvincing. In light of the visual and performative traditions of the Passion to which Langland alludes in Passus XX, it is hard to read the passus solely on a literal level without acknowledging the affective register of the scenes that unfold before Will. In fact, Langland uses the word “soffre” no less than ten times in Passus XX. As Peace explains, Christ’s incarnation is itself an act of suffering: “So God þat bigan al of his gode wille / Bycam man of a mayde mankynde to saue, / And soffred to be sold, to se þe sorwe of deyng, / The which vnknytteth alle care, and comsyng [beginning] is of reste” (20.220-23).

Suffering is also necessary to the knowledge of well-being: “For no wiht woet what wele is, þat neuere wo soffred” [For no one knows well-being who never suffered woe] (20.210). And lastly, through incarnation and crucifixion, Christ suffers in heaven, earth, and hell, as Peace once again proclaims:

And aftur, God auntred hymself and toek Adames kynde
To wyte what he hath soffred in thre sundry places,
Bothe in heuene and in erthe—and now to helle he thenketh,
To wyte what al wo is, þat woet of alle ioye. (20.230-33)

Peace’s reiterative attachment to the word “soffre,” though lacking the unmistakably graphic and violent imagery evoked by the likes of Richard Rolle, nonetheless signals Langland’s engagement, however cerebral it might seem on the surface, with Christ’s suffering as an affective state.²⁴

Indeed, if as Peace contends, “For no wiht woet what wele is, þat neuere wo soffred” (20.210), I would venture to argue that Langland’s reservation about and avoidance of excessive emotional and physical narrativization of the Passion in Passus XX reveals his critique of the seemingly unbridled affectivity often associated with late medieval lay piety. Langland asks: Who among us has really experienced Christ’s suffering on the cross? Must one read, again and again, vivid descriptions of Jesus’s wounds in order to become emotionally aroused and spiritually affected? After multiple repetitions, does not the trope of Jesus as parchment skin become its own kind of truism? Is not the word *soffre* enough? If one cannot grasp the spiritual significance or experience the pain of the Passion from a single word alone without the aid of visual or verbal imagery, then one is in danger of understanding religion as purely an experience of bodily senses. The believer, in other words, might become a passive spectator of the theatre of suffering. I do not wish to dismiss the centrality of affect in late medieval spiritual practices, especially those associated with mysticism; nor do I wish to reduce medieval Christians to mere proto-capitalist “couch potatoes” of religion as spectacle ready for consumption. My point, and one that I suspect might also be implicit in Langland’s Piers Plowman, is simply that affective

identification with Christ's suffering need not always be triggered by excessively graphic images or words alone. One can invoke the bloody skin of Christ without necessarily engaging in the kind of protracted narrativization that characterizes some of the Passion meditations.

Affective piety is without doubt an important aspect of lay spirituality in the late Middle Ages. For instance, in the anonymous Middle English lyric "I would be Clad in Christis Skin," collected by John of Grimestone in his 1372 compilation The Commonplace Book, the narrative voice sings of a desire to put on Christ's skin on the cross:

Gold & al þis werdis wyn
Is nouth but cristis rode;
I wolde ben clad in cristes skyn,
þat ran so longe on blode,
& gon t'is herte & taken myn In—
þer is a fulsum fode.
þan 3ef I litel of kith or kyn,
For þer is alle gode. Amen. (Brown 88)

[Gold and all this world's pleasure
Is nothing without Christ's cross;
I would be clad in Christ's skin,
That ran so long with blood,
And go into his heart and take my lodging there—
There is plentiful food.
Then care I little of kith or kin,
For there is all good. Amen.]²⁵

In this short lyric, which exhibits an economy of words resonant with the poetry of Emily Dickinson centuries later, the poet characterizes the interiority beneath Christ's skin as a sheltering domestic space that nurtures the body and soul. To put on Christ's skin is to inhabit it. Clifford Davidson has read the poem as an example of Christian identification with the suffering of Christ. In fact, such identification is the result of the narrator's sense of religious duty: "By transference, therefore, suffering becomes a personal duty, at its most extreme involving the desire to *wrap* oneself in Christ's battered and bleeding skin" (Davidson, "Suffering" 152, my emphasis). Skin, Jay Prosser argues, is a site that registers and remembers trauma (52); suffering is marked on the skin. Like parchment, human skin remembers the "detailed specificities of life histories" (Prosser 52). Furthermore, the "skin" for Prosser is both the material body and the

psychic membrane, and “if damage to the material skin can be remembered psychically, damage to the psychic envelope can be remembered physically” (Prosser 54). In the Middle English lyric, “I would be Clad in Christis Skin,” to be clothed in Jesus’s skin is to recall and experience Christ’s suffering. But with a touch of masochism, the poet converts this mantle of suffering into nourishing food for the body; pain metamorphoses into pleasure.²⁶ The actors playing Christ in the medieval mystery cycles are literally wrapping themselves in a leather suit that represents the skin of Christ marked with the memories of his suffering. What the actors wears is figuratively a garment of pain. But is it also a skin of pleasure that nourishes?

Integumental Sufferance

The psychic envelope that Prosser discusses is what psychologist Didier Anzieu identifies and terms the Skin Ego, a concept Anzieu derives from Freud’s theory of the ego. In The Ego and the Id, Freud characterizes the ego in terms of a surface phenomenon: “The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface” (364). Anzieu reads Freud literally and argues that the ego as a projection of a surface is the skin. Psychically, the Skin Ego is “the mental image of which the Ego of the child makes use during the early phases of its development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychic contents, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body” (Anzieu 40). Among the many functions of the Skin Ego that Anzieu enumerates, four are important to my analysis of Piers Plowman and late medieval performance culture. The primary function of the Skin Ego, Anzieu argues, is the maintenance of the psyche, in much the same way that the bodily skin is the outer support for the skeleton and muscles. Anzieu further compares the skin’s maintenance of the psyche to what the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott terms the biological function of “holding” performed by the mother supporting her baby’s body (98). Secondly, the Skin Ego must envelope “the whole of the psychical apparatus” (Anzieu 101), thereby corresponding to the physical skin’s function of

containing all the bodily organs. Thirdly, as a result of the containment and maintenance of the psyche, the Skin Ego acts as “a protective shield” (Anzieu 102). And lastly, the Skin Ego functions as the “libidinal recharging of the psychical functioning, the maintenance of internal energetic tension and its unequal distribution among the psychical subsystems” (Anzieu 105).

Pain, Anzieu theorizes, is a “topographical disturbance” of the Skin Ego (200). Moreover, “pain cannot be shared, except by being eroticized in a sado-masochistic relationship” (Anzieu 200). Hence pleasure, at least in terms of sado-masochism, is the eroticization of pain. Anzieu further argues that the abandonment of oneself to pleasure “presupposes the security of a narcissistic envelope,” which is indicative of one’s prior acquisition of the Skin Ego (201). Pain as a disturbance, when it fails to become eroticized, threatens to disrupt and destroy the structure of the narcissistic Skin Ego, “the space between its outer and inner faces, as well as the difference between its function as a protective shield and as a surface for the inscription of signifying traces” (Anzieu 201). In other words, the destabilizing power of pain blurs and confuses the Skin Ego’s separate functions of protecting the ego and of inscribing the ego’s existence in the signifying order of language. For the Skin Ego in pain, the psychic gestures of shielding and writing grade into one another. That is, it is only through the inscription of wounds on its surface that the Skin Ego manages the onslaught of pain. The shield must bear visible scars as evidence of its protective function. Temporally, protection as a concept comes into existence only after the infliction of injuries—after having protected something. Trauma and protection, then, emerge as interconnected but belated effects written on the Skin Ego. Like a palimpsest, the Skin Ego is “the original parchment which preserves . . . the erased, scratched-out, written-over first outlines of an ‘original’ pre-verbal writing made up of traces upon the skin” (Anzieu 105). Survival, on the level of skin memories, is a constant reminder of one’s having faced pain and lived.

The Skin Ego in pain is an “envelope of suffering,” a term that Anzieu borrows from Micheline Enrique. As outlined by Anzieu, Enrique further differentiates “the body of suffering” (*corps de souffrance*) from “the body on sufferance” (*corps en souffrance*), both of which

characterize the masochistic envelope of the Skin Ego. The body of suffering is indicative of the psyche's failure at finding identificatory pleasure in its exchanges with the Oedipal mother, the sign of the abject body. The psyche is hence "kept alive by an affect, the experience of suffering" (Anzieu 205). In order to survive and shape its subjectivity, the body of suffering must actively court and engage pain. The body on sufferance, on the other hand, is marked by its passivity. The OED defines "on sufferance" as follows: "by virtue of a tacit assent but without express permission; under conditions of passive acquiescence or bare tolerance."²⁷ The body on sufferance, Anzieu argues, characterizes "the insufficiency of the common skin" between the subject and others (205). That is, without a minimum of validation by others, the subject can at best survive, almost in a vegetative stage, on sufferance.

The body on sufferance, according to Enrique, is "incapable of pleasure and representational activity, emptied of affect, [and] uninhabited" (qtd. in Anzieu 205). The body on sufferance is without an owner and is subject to the arbitrary powers of others. It lacks a secure sense of its own subjectivity and possesses an unstable identificatory mechanism; it can only have "recourse to strange initiatory procedures, some of which involve bodily pain" (Anzieu 205). Furthermore, in its engagement with initiatory procedures, the body on sufferance is marked by two potentialities: first, a "persecutive potential," in which the subject attributes to a persecutory object "both a power and a desire to bring about his death" (Anzieu 206); and second, "an extraordinary ability to act out, represent and embody suffering. To embody pain in that way is an ordeal, a sacrifice, a Passion" (Anzieu 206). It is the second potential of the body on sufferance to embody and act out suffering that is at work in late medieval performances of Passion plays. The body of a male actor playing Christ, sheathed in a white leather suit, is the body on sufferance which embodies and acts out the Passion. But in the act of putting on the leather suit of Christ, a traffic in skins takes place as well. As Enrique theorizes, the transition from the body on sufferance to the body of suffering is necessary to the subject's metamorphosis from a passive medium to an active agent; it is the "price to pay for *being* for another and for *having for*

oneself”(qtd. in Anzieu 209, original emphases). Wearing the white leather suit, the actor symbolically moves from a body on sufferance (his own) to a body of suffering (Christ’s). A similar psychic process is at work in the Middle English lyric, “I would be Clad in Christis Skin,” in which the poetic subject actively desires to put on the skin of Christ, thereby enacting a transition from a body on sufferance that passively indulges in worldly pleasures to an active body of suffering that dwells within spiritual sustenance. And is not this transition the very eroticization of pain by the Skin Ego that Anzieu describes?

Before applying Anzieu’s notion of the Skin Ego to my reading of whiteness and the skin in Passus XX in Piers Plowman and in late medieval performance culture, I would like to examine briefly the notion of the skin as a veil in relation to the theory of *integumentum* in ancient and medieval practices of allegory and allegoresis. Twice in Passus XX, Langland describes the allegorical figure Peace as “in pacience yclothed” (20.174). Rita Copeland and Stephen Melville have pointed out that *integumentum* as a rhetorical trope is associated with the Chartrian school in the twelfth century, especially with Guillaume de Conches and Bernardus Silvestris (169-72). The word *integument* is used in descriptions and interpretations of pagan texts, conceived of as veils painted over by pagan authors and within which moral truths lie hidden. Other figurative terms related to *integument* are *involutrum* (a wrapping) and *fabula*. Boethius, in his Consolation of Philosophy, has portrayed Lady Philosophy’s tattered garments. And Macrobius, in the Commentarium in somnium Scipionis, compares fabulous narratives to the veil covering the natural world:

sed quia sciunt inimicam esse naturae apertam nudamque expositionem sui, quae sicut vulgaribus hominum sensibus intellectum sui vario rerum tegmine operimentoque subtrahit, ita a prudentibus arcana sua voluit per fabulosa tractari. (1.2.20)

[But because they realize that a frank, open exposition of herself is distasteful to Nature, who, just as she has withheld an understanding of herself from the uncouth senses of men by enveloping herself in variegated garments, has also desired to have her secrets handled by more prudent individuals through fabulous narratives.] (Stahl 87)

As Bernard Silvester defines it, “*Integumentum vero est genus demonstrationis sub fabulosa narratione veritatis claudens intellectum, unde et involucrum dicitur*” [an *integument* is a kind of demonstration that wraps the understanding of truth in a fabled narrative—that is why it is also called ‘a wrapping’] (qtd. in Dronke, *Fabula* 25 n. 3). Guillaume de Conches, however, conceives of the *integument* as primarily a covering, but also that which is covered by it (Dronke, *Fabula* 25).²⁸

As Copeland and Melville argue, to say that a text is an *integument*, i.e., a protective veil or metonymic container of truths, is “to suggest that its ‘literal’ level is never ‘proper’ speech, but rather is in itself already figurative. Such a designation makes impossible a distinction between literal and figurative at the level of textual discourse, *in verbis*” (170). If allegoresis is the unveiling of the veil that is allegory, then the veil does not exist until the act of unveiling; or, put differently, the necessity of unveiling is always already implied in the existence of the veil. In the dialectics between veiling and unveiling, through which allegoresis substitutes itself for allegory, meaning is necessarily a belated phenomenon. According to Copeland and Melville,

To read the text as *integumentum* imposes a new temporal and causal order between reader and text. The act of reading is figured as that of unveiling the text, which suggests the necessary belatedness of interpretation; but the “veil” itself is necessarily a belated addition to the text, so that the cause or prior meaning revealed beneath it is in fact the belated result of the veil. Thus the ‘veil’ supplied after the text becomes the prior cause of any meanings that it delivers up. (171)

In terms of Christian exegesis, the duality between text and meaning, obscurity and clarity, is figured in the terms *velatio* (things hidden) and *revelatio* (things revealed), rather than in the figure of the *integument*. The opposition of *velatio* and *revelatio*, Camille notes, is central to Christian thinking on the unbridgeable gap between Christian images and pagan idols (*Gothic Idol* 189). But despite their differences in usage and significance, the *integument* and the *velatio*, in their respective grounding in the figure of the veil, remain fundamentally related phenomena.

What does whiteness have to do with the *integument* or the *velatio*, in the context of Christ’s suffering? More important, is it possible to read the white leather suit of Christ—a suit

that, as I have mentioned, is never strictly white—as an *integument*? To begin with, the white leather suit is not a superhero leotard; there is no fantasy of supernatural impersonation on the part of the actor. While displaying Christ's skin in suffering, the actor is actually veiling his own body. And a strange inversion takes place: through the veiling of the actor's body, the skin that signifies Christ's body is “unveiled” to the collective gaze of the spectators. It is an allegoresis in performance; not only is meaning a backward formation in time—in the visual reading of the Christ body suit after it has been placed on the actor's body—but it is also what Beckwith calls “a traverse of inside and outside.” And what is revealed is not so much the skin of the actor as the Skin Ego of Christ in suffering, or the Skin Ego of humanity in the guise of a Christ costume.

For the actor playing Christ, what does it mean to wear a white skin that symbolizes divine suffering? If one were to read the leather costume as a materialization of the Skin Ego, human and/or divine, does the actor merely assume the role he plays? Does he inhabit the skin suit as a dwelling, like the poetic subject in the lyric “I would be Clad in Christis Skin”? Or does he hold Christ as much as he is being held by Christ? The situation here is further complicated by the fact that the Christ costume is not made of fabric but of skin. As the actor superimposes Christ's body in suffering on his body on sufferance, a doubling occurs. The second layer of skin further transforms the actor's body into a living palimpsest, however momentary during the time of performance. Anzieu, in his formulation of the Skin Ego, has commented that the double-layered structure of the ego as conceived by Freud replicates that of the skin: the Ego has two layers, “the one a protective shield . . . the other a writing-surface” (Anzieu 11).²⁹ The stigmatic, Steven Connor contends, “read[s] the Crucifixion as a flattening out; the crucified body becomes a single sheet of flesh, reduced to its recto and its verso” (136). The white leather skin suit of Christ does not so much flatten the crucified body as scrape off the flesh from the inside, then reanimate it through a second, living body of the actor. The actor's body becomes “the second skin . . . inside the contours of the first as a hand is in a glove” (Connor 136). The second skin, here, is not the “narcissistic phantom” of the common skin between a child and its mother that

Claudia Benthien attributes to childhood fantasy (9). Recall that for Guillaume of Conches, the *integument* refers both to a figurative covering and what is covered by it (Dronke, *Fabula* 25). In effect, Guillaume reconceives of the thing behind the veil as a second, inner veil, another *integument*. Just as allegory is never without allegoresis, perhaps there is never a body—even if flayed—without a skin of some sort. There is always another layer of skin to flay or to wear. The actor playing Christ, of course, does not wear the “original” skin of Jesus; the original does not exist, for there are only copies of copies.

In the context of Passus XX of *Piers Plowman*, something else has been doubled in the Passion and the Harrowing of Hell episodes. If one takes seriously the theatrical allusions that Langland might be making in Passus XX, not only is the Christ figure a shadowy unnamed “actor” in a white leather suit, but the suffering Christ himself is described as dressed in someone else’s skin:

That this Iesus of his gentrice shal iouste in Pers armes,
In his helm and in his haberion, *humana natura*.
That Crist be nat yknowe for *consummatus Deus*,
In Pers plates the Plouhman this prikiare shal ryde. (20.21-24).

[That this Jesus in accordance with his noble birth shall joust in Piers’s armor,
In his helmet and his coat of mail, human nature.
That Christ be not known for the supreme God,
In Piers the Ploughman’s plate-armor this cavalier shall ride.]

Ostensibly functioning as a “third” layer of skin upon the figure of the Christ-actor, Piers’s armor is the sign of humanity that Christ assumes in his incarnation. As Davlin observes, the armor is “the human nature of Piers. It is both a disguise . . . and a means of entering the state of mortality, of becoming vulnerable” (66). Pearsall goes further and glosses Piers’s armor as “the flesh,” and Piers is conceived by Langland “for a moment as God incarnate, in his manhood” (320n21). James Simpson similarly identifies Christ’s armor as not a “literal knightly coat of mail (‘haubergeon’) or its under tunic (‘paltok’) . . . [but] the ‘coat’ of the flesh” (211). The Word becomes flesh in Piers’s armor.

If Piers's armor is a sign of human flesh, then Langland's Christ, like the medieval actors playing him, also wears a second "skin" over his divine body. This second skin of Christ stands as the figure of both his incarnation and crucifixion. Therefore it is through human skin that Jesus outwits Satan and redeems humanity:

Ergo soule shal soule quyte and synne to synne wende,
 And al þat man mysdede, Y man to amenden hit;
 And þat Deth fordede my deth to releue,
 And bothe quykie and quyte that queynte was thorw synne;
 And gyle be bigyled throw grace at þe laste. (20.388-92)

[Therefore soul shall requite soul and sin go to sin,
 And all that man did wrong, I as man to amend it;
 And that which Death destroyed my death to relieve
 And both quicken and requite what was quenched through sin;
 And guile be beguiled through grace at the last.]

And is not Christ's body crucified the sign of masochism *par excellence*? In her examination of masochism and male subjectivity, Kaja Silverman foregrounds the element of exhibitionism in Christian masochism, for which "an external audience is a structural necessity, although it may be either earthly or heavenly. Second, the body is centrally on display. . . . Finally, behind all these 'scenes' or 'exhibits' is the master tableau or group fantasy—Christ nailed to the cross" (30). Christian masochism, coupling exhibitionism with voyeurism, is a technology of visibility—or more precisely, of visible suffering.

In my reading of Passus XX, I would push the argument even further and ask: Is not the Charter of Christ, the suffering skin nailed to the cross, also a masochistic contract of gender? The masochistic contract presupposes the contractual nature of gender. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in his study of masochism in medieval chivalric literature, explicates the notion of contractual gender:

Like linguistic value, gender is "outside the individual," determined relationally and "by virtue of a sort of contract": male and female cannot stand alone conceptually, for they are at once open-ended and mutually constitutive terms made meaningful through cultural ordering processes. (*Medieval Identity* 85)

Cohen's observation highlights the social component of contractual gender; gender, in practice, does not exist outside of contractual validation and collective social recognition. For Christ, the skin of humanity (Piers's armor) that he wears is the sign of the masochistic contract that produces his suffering masculinity on the cross. And for the medieval actor wearing the white leather body suit of Christ, does not a similar masochistic contract or gender exist between the actor's body and the representative skin of Christ? I do not wish to argue that the late medieval leather suit carried the same erotic valence as that of modern S&M ("leather") culture. However, I would like to point to Žižek's conception of masochism as theatre in which the masochist stages his own submission only as a scripted play that has been specified in a previously agreed-upon contract. The masochistic game, Žižek argues, is a suspension of social reality ("Courtly Love" 92). While I would not necessarily characterize medieval Passion plays as "games"—though, as I have pointed out earlier, medieval Passion plays do appropriate elements of popular children's games, such as Blind Man's Buff—I would like to argue that for the actor playing Christ, his body in performance exists in a state of negative affective suspension. The white leather suit becomes a pure sign of pain, the masochistic envelope that sheathes both the body in suffering and the body on sufferance.

Garrett P. J. Epp, examining medieval and modern performances of the body of Christ in the context of the anti-theatre tract A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge, has advocated for the legitimate place of erotic pleasures that might be aroused in the spectator. Resisting the opposition between spirituality and sexuality too easily assumed by critics both premodern and today, Epp argues that the realization of erotic potential in the body of the Christ-actor is in fact central to the viewer's experience of "the spiritual pleasures of a Passion play" (233). In the visual traffic in gaze between the Christ-actor and the audience, desire for the body of Christ criss-crosses the space of performance. Christ, who possesses the power of the gaze absolutely, both invites the audience's gaze upon his body, i.e., the actor's flesh, and asks them to lose

themselves within it (Epp 242-43). And the actor, “through his spectacular physical presence” (Epp 242), directs the audience’s eyes to focus on his male body.

Yet while his cultural reading is persuasive and his advocacy urgently needed, Epp does not fully address the question of precisely what kind(s) of body of Christ late medieval audiences saw in the Passion cycles. That is, Epp implicitly assumes that, like modern audience of Terence McNally’s 1998 play Corpus Christi, late medieval spectators of Corpus Christi cycles too might have seen the theatrical body of Jesus represented directly in the naked flesh of the actor. But if the actor is clothed in a white leather suit meant to simulate the naked flesh, how does the leather skin complicate the perception of the male body on display? Does the suit make Christ’s body appear less human, less masculine, and less erotic? Or does it make the body of Christ appear more human, more masculine, and more erotic? I do not know which way the affective pendulum of the leather suit swung. But I suspect that whichever direction it went—more or less (or both)—the effect of the leather suit must have been an exaggeration of the human flesh, its masculinity, and its erotic potential. Whatever else it might symbolize, the white leather suit in the Passion cycles is part of the theatrical technology of suffering. Christ’s body is literally a prosthetic body suit—a pure sign of pain—that must bleed red. Like the bleeding Lamb in Pearl, the white leather skin of Christ is marked by its woundedness. William Tydeman has shown that one of the practical purposes of the Christ body suit was to spare the actor from possible injuries that might be inflicted on his body during the course of multiple performances (Theatre 76). And a small sac of blood or red liquid would be hidden inside the leather costume into which Longinus would pierce, simulating the effect of bleeding running down the spear and healing Longinus’s blindness (Davidson, “Nudity” 159). The prosthetic, I would contend, is no less real than the real thing. Nor is exaggeration necessarily a false resemblance of the real. Could it be that the white leather suit of Christ actually heightens the erotic potential of the male body on display in the Passion cycles, and that it is truly, as the authors of the Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge complain, “stiring othere to leccherie” (96)?

Sarah Stanbury, in her study of Middle English Passion lyrics and meditative texts, argues that the gaze on the body of Christ “disrupts distance and conventional marks of gender” (“Regimes” 267). Drawing on contemporary film theory and Foucault’s works on surveillance and discipline, Stanbury contends that the viewing subject’s control and maintenance of spatial distance is key to the subject’s power over the object. This play of visual distance is a distinguishing feature of late medieval devotional culture, one that stresses the desire to behold the Life and the Passion of Christ. It is seeing that facilitates an “act of visual participation” in salvation history (Stanbury, “Regimes” 266). Stanbury terms this form of participatory visuality “tactile visualization” (“Regimes” 266), for the gaze becomes “intersubjective, specular, and emotional” (“Regimes” 267). Stanbury’s linking of the tactile to the visual in her reading of late medieval devotional practices, I would argue, circles back to the phenomenon of skin. In tactile visualization, does not the eye become the viewing subject’s “skin” that reaches out and “touches” the very object of its desiring gaze?³⁰ Claudia Benthien, a modern theorist of the skin, recently observes that the perception of skin often turns into a perception of distance. Benthien remarks:

[O]nly as the observed skin of the other with whom I come face to face does skin become a sign, only through this separation can the other truly become a recognizable and classifiable object. The skin is constantly interpreted, read, invested with or emptied of semantic meaning, recoded, neutralized, and stylized. (11)

For both Stanbury and Benthien, in quite different terms respectively, the maintenance of a proper distance is necessary to the identification of both the subject and the object. The skin must be viewed and recognized as both separate and distant in order for it to function properly as a sign of the subject: I am in my skin, you in yours.

But what happens when separation no longer exists between skins and the spatial-visual distance collapses? For the leather-clad actor playing Christ, there is no moderate distance between his skin and the skin that signifies Christ’s body. The skin of Christ adheres to that of the actor. And what does the collapse of tactile distance do to desire in this instance of viewing?

Speaking of the touch of his shirt caressing his skin, Jean-Paul Sartre observes: “My shirt rubs against my skin, and I feel it. What is ordinarily for me an object most remote becomes the immediately sensible . . . all are present to me in a certain way, as posited upon me without distance and revealing my flesh by means of their flesh” (509). The “flesh” of the object that Sartre speaks of, of course, is an object already transformed by his desire. In the intimate proximity between his skin and the skin of an inanimate object, Sartre’s own fleshiness is present to him. But Sartre does not confuse the existential boundaries between him and his shirt: a shirt remains a shirt. In a similar fashion, the white leather suit of Christ might have enhanced the visual status of the actor’s body as body during performance. And like Sartre’s shirt, the skin of Christ, metaphoric or literal, is not the skin of the actor. The white leather suit too is a commodity fetish that was bought with money and inscribed as property among the inventories of medieval craft guilds. As such, the white leather suit is not unlike the “carapace” that Derrida uses to refer to the armor of Hamlet’s dead father which, for Derrida, stands for the modern commodity fetish as “a technical prosthesis” and “the body of a real artifact” (Specters 7). Covering up the spectral body of Hamlet’s dead father, the armor “prevents perception from deciding on the identity that it *wraps* so solidly in its carapace” (Derrida, Specters 8, my emphasis). Derrida’s notion of the commodity fetish’s carapace that tightly enwraps conjures up the ancient and medieval *integument* that also conceals a supposed truth beneath its wrapping. At the conclusion of their performance, the dozens of actors who played Christ in the Passion cycles must undress and take off their respective costumes, each inflicting a symbolic (self-)flaying upon himself. The empty *integumenta* of white leathery skin lay uninhabited, waiting for the next meeting of the body on sufferance with the body in suffering.

Willfully Gray

The fundamental irony of the white leather suit of Christ is that its leather is not made from human skin but, in most cases, from sheepskin.³¹ And it is with sheep that Will, the narrative voice of Piers Plowman, has the greatest personal affinity. I would like to conclude this chapter by briefly examining Will's engagements with issues of skin, clothing, color, and visibility. If there ever were an "actor" with a sizable wardrobe among the many allegorical personifications who make their appearances in Piers Plowman, it would be Will. Throughout the poem, he is both self-conscious about and obsessed with what he is wearing. At the opening of the Prologue, Will declares his appearance: "Y shope me into shroudes as y a shep were; / In abite as an hermite, vnholy of werkes" (Prologue.2-3). In Passus V, often identified as Will's Apologia, he is first "yclothed as a lollare" (5.2) and then dressed "in this longe clothes" (5.41). Later in Passus X, he is "yrobed in russet" (10.1). And at the beginning of Passus XX, Will is "Wollewaerd and watschoed" [wool-shirted and wet-shoed] (20.1). At many significant transitional points in the poem, when he awakes from a dream or falls into another one, Will meticulously notes his clothing. In fact, the various costumes that Will wears constitute an important set of structural markers for the entire poem. Words are not enough; Will must constantly display his wardrobe.

Will begins his spiritual journey in Piers Plowman by emphasizing the fluid nature of identity and clothing. By putting on sheepskin, "shroudes as [he] . . . a shep were" (Prologue.2), is Will a shepherd or a wolf in sheep's clothing? As Andrew Galloway observes, Will's first description of himself is "self-concealment as well as self-presentation" (26). In Passus IX, Langland alludes to the infiltration of wolves into the folds of sheep: "For many wakere wolues ar wroken into [the] foldes" [For many watchful wolves have broken into the folds] (9.259) who "shyt þe wolle" [befoul the wool] (9.264) and "many a fayre flees flasliche is ywasche" [many a fair fleece is falsely washed] (9.270). And in Passus XVI, *Liberum Arbitrium* compares false

priests to wolves disguised as lambs: “Riht so many prestes, prechours and prelates, / That ben enblaunched with *bele paroles* and with *bele* clothes / And as lambes they loke and lyuen as wolues” [Just so many priests, preachers, and prelates, / That have been whitened with fair words and fair clothes / And they look like lambs but live as wolves] (16.268-70). But in spite of such overt allusions to and condemnations of the wolf-sheep equivocation, the true nature of Will remains ambiguous and protean throughout Piers Plowman: he can be the clever rhetorician in the Apologia of Passus V or the repentant beggar in Passus XVI. Will is both literally and figuratively using his garments as dissimulative *integumenta*.

Passus X begins with Will in the waking state, “yrobed in russet [and] romede aboute / Alle a somur seson for to seke Dowel” (10.1-2). He soon meets two “Maystres of þe Menores” (10.9), two Franciscans, and asks them for the direction to Dowel. Though the text is not explicit, one can infer that Will recognizes the two friars as Franciscans on the basis of their outer appearance. In the Middle Ages, Franciscans were known as grey friars because of the russet they wore as an outward sign of their vow of poverty. “Russet,” here in Passus X and throughout the poem, becomes a crucial term and object of identification and comparison. Note that Will, too, is dressed in russet (10.1). Langland hereby sets up a juxtaposition of Will in his russet and the two friars in theirs, and the reader is invited to compare the two on the basis of their clothing.

R. H. Britnell notes that in the fourteenth century, because of the pre-modern dyeing process, the word “russet” “embraced shades of grey and brown not now normally grouped together” (53). Rather than signifying a single identifiable color, russet, like the “whit” of white leather, denotes a continuum of possibilities in the color spectrum. It is, in other words, ambiguous by nature. And in addition to the Franciscans, Lollards’ Poor Priests were also known to wear russet. W. H. Summers describes how Wycliffe’s priests, “clad in russet gown, with bare feet . . . travelled with staff in hand from town to town . . . like Wesley’s itinerants four centuries later” (35). But as Anne Hudson argues, although “russet was not peculiar to Lollards, even amongst the clergy . . . it apparently remained characteristic” of them (145). Enemies of Lollards

consistently linked Lollards to russet, believing that russet was “a sign of their hypocrisy” (Hudson 145). Friar Daw comments: “3it wolde I wite / Whi þat þe Lollardis weren moost greye cloþis” (qtd. in Hudson 146). In a sermon against Lollardy, a late medieval English preacher attacked “this lollardes and tis fals ypocrites . . . thei wassche sothylike hir clothes withowtyn with teres of hir ezen . . . Thei thee go to ragged” (qtd. in Owst 374). And William Courtenay, Archbishop of Canterbury, even called the Poor Priests “these wolves in sheep’s clothing” (qtd. in Galloway 28). John Wyclif, in response, attacked the “capped freris, þat ben calde maystres of dyvynite, [who] have hor chaumber and servise as lordis or kynges, and senden oute ydiotis ful of covetise to preche” (376). Lollard sermons also condemned the “false prophetys þat comen in cloþyng of schep’ (qtd. in Galloway 29). As it turned out, at least on the level of figurative *integumenta*, just about anyone could be accused of being a wolf in sheepskin.

Russet was appropriated by both the Lollards and the Franciscans in the fourteenth century. Is Will, dressed in russet, a Lollard priest? Hudson notes that Langland uses the term *loller* and not *lollard* in *Piers Plowman* (407). She further argues that there is “no aspect of the *lollarene lyf* that Langland mentions. . . [that] is assimilable to Wycliffite ideals or practices” (407). Yet Hudson also points out that the term is more common in the C-text than in the others (407). Critics have also dated the C-text to the 1380s, after Wycliffe began his systematic attacks on the Church and when the term *lollard* began to gain currency. It can therefore be argued that in his increased usage of the term *loller* in the C-text, Langland was not ignorant of the Lollard movement that was gaining momentum in the 1380s. Moreover, both “russet” and *loller* do not clearly identify but instead create equivocating resonance. Langland steers away from a direct equation between russet, the Lollards, and Will. He is more interested in ambiguities. As Britnell succinctly remarks, “Being dressed as a shepherd or dressed as a sheep was all one” (56).

As Passus XX opens, Will signals that he is now “Wollewaerd” (20.1). In Pearsall’s gloss, “wollewaerd” denotes “[w]earing a garment of rough wool next to the skin [as a form of penance]” (319n1). Barney notes that the Will *wollewaerd* “prima facie bespeaks poverty . . . but

the term also suggests a penitential mortification of the flesh . . . or an apostolic simplicity adopted by the religious, especially Franciscans” (7). Once again, as he prepares himself to witness the Passion and the Harrowing of Hell, Will circles back to his earlier associations with sheep, russet, and questions of spiritual identity. And as the scenes of salvation history unfold before him in Passus XX, perhaps Will, like Langland’s late medieval readers, also beholds Satan and his legions of demons in blackface and black masks, and Christ in white leather.

The performative culture to which Langland alludes provides a meaningful context to a question posed by Peace during the Debate of the Four Daughters of God in Passus XX. Peace asks, “Ho couthe kyndeliche with colour descreve / Yf alle þe world were whit or swan-whit alle thynges?” [Who could naturally describe with color / If all the world were white or all things swan-white?] (20.212-13) Curiously, these two lines do not appear in the B-text in the parallel passage. Langland’s revision and addition of the two lines in the C-text concerning whiteness suggest his deliberate rethinking of the nature of Christian epistemology. In her speech, Peace uses “whit” as part of her logic of necessary contraries that forms the basis of natural knowledge and of Christ’s Incarnation; her idea is grounded in the Christian concept of *felix culpa*. In Barney’s reading, Peace argues that experience, “literally the sensations of hunger, color, daylight, taste, rest, well-being in general, must qualify our understanding of the authority of biblical narrative adduced by Treuthe and Rihtwisnesse” (52-53). If Peace means what she says, then is she not inviting Will, as well as *Piers Plowman*’s readers, to behold and maybe even to experience affectively the erotic potential of a Christ in white leather?

Langland, however, might not simply be citing only the traditional philosophical notion of necessary contraries or of *felix culpa*. Rather, I would argue, Langland’s specific conjuring of whiteness in the C-text might also be a conscious allusion to another philosophical tradition. Within Western thought, “white” (Latin *albus*) is a term that has been used by philosophers to discuss the nature of language and of signification. Peter Travis has noted the prevalence of the trope of “white” in late medieval philosophy and its connections to literary texts. As a paronym

and not a proper name, *albus* (white) is not necessary a predication of any “thing”; that is, it “fail[s] to name the being, or essence, of any subject” (Travis, “White” 15). Anselm of Canterbury points out that the statement, “A white is in this building [*in hac domo est album*]” is insufficient in itself to identify precisely what the “white thing [*album*]” is (4.4210). In light of the philosophical significance of “whiteness,” Peace’s question concerns both the contraries necessary to natural knowledge and the very nature of signs themselves. If all the world were white, not only would one not be able to describe it naturally with colors, but one would not be able to know the essence, the substance, of anything. Whiteness alone constitutes an epistemological blindness.

Typologically, the blind Jew Longinus could function as the symbolic (pre- and post-) figuration of Will. Is Will the pre-conversion Saul and Longinus, blinded by his (Jewish) ignorance? Or is he on his way to reformation, becoming the post-conversion Paul and Longinus with their sight restored? Earlier in *Piers Plowman*, Will claims that he is “to wayke . . . And to long . . . To wurche” [too weak . . . and too tall . . . to work] (5.23-25). He, at the beginning of Passus XX, is a “rechles renk” [reckless man] (10.2) and a “lore!” [lazy fellow] (10.3) who has “waxe wery of the world and wilnede to slepe” (10.4). Will’s physical dysfunctions if not disabilities, as well as his laziness, put the economic usefulness of his *zoē* in question. Is he not in danger of becoming a recalcitrant, ignorant, and blind Jew? Moreover, his “longe clothes” (5.41) identifies him as part of the clerical circles in the late Middle Ages. As such, Will’s engagement with medieval documentary culture draws him intimately close to the material culture of parchment skins. Thomas Hoccleve, a clerk himself, complained that clerks’ “yen / Upon the whyte mochil sorwe dryen” (*Regiment of Princes* 1021-22). “Whyte” here connotes the color of the parchment skin at which a clerk directs his intense gaze. But if he gets too close to the page, the clerk can “lose sight of the parchment . . . [and] see nothing but its colour” (Davis 147). The Middle English “whyte,” Isabel Davis notes, “is a metonym for the skin but also suggests the whites of the eyes themselves, producing an uncomfortable association between the

eye and the page” (150).³² When proper distance between the viewing subject and the parchment collapses, the skin of the page dissolves into a blinding whiteness, like a white film over the eyes of the unbeliever. If blackness and whiteness in Passus XX emerge as performative prostheses—blackface, black masks, white leather body suit—that could be put on and taken off by the actor, then these cultural tropes reveal that one is always in danger of becoming blind, Jewish, devilish, or black, if not sighted, Christian, holy, or white. The safer alternative, Will seems to suggest, is to wear the grayness of sheepskin or russet. Is gray a shade of white? Or is it a shade of black?³³ And what does Will do except dream of both whiteness and blackness? Entangled in the interlocking folds of dreams that wrap so tightly around his Skin Ego, Will cannot extricate himself but can only wake up, again and again throughout Piers Plowman. His is a gray skin of a body on sufferance seeking the white skin of a body of suffering.

Notes

¹ Didier Anzieu, L'Epiderme nomade et la peau psychique, p. 26. The translation is by Steven Connor, in The Book of Skin, p. 7.

² Thomas Hoccleve, The Regiment of Princes, lines 1014-22.

³ Wittgenstein also asks: "The impression that the transparent medium makes is that something lies *behind* the medium. If the visual image is thoroughly monochromatic it cannot be transparent" (5). Wittgenstein is primarily interested in the perception of colors, the idea of colors, and the problematic naming of colors—all of which point to the problem of signification in language.

⁴ See Ruth Mellinkoff, "Demonic Winged Headgear," p. 370; and her Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages, p. 69.

⁵ Nancy G. Siraisi notes that in the Middle Ages, certain medical procedures, such as couching for cataract and treating hernia, were performed by itinerant craftsmen and by barbers (177). For medieval illustration of cataract removal, see MacKinney, pp. 70-71.

⁶ For a critique of Western liberalism and its culture of aid, see Slavoj Žižek, "From Politics to Biopolitics. . . and Back."

⁷ Similarly, the wounded body and the disorderly body cannot work. Claire Sponsler argues that the wounded body is "a sign of anti-instrumentality—a tool that refuses to, indeed cannot, work" ("Violated" 155), and that the disorderly body's "lack of docility [is] a mark of its incommensurability with the demands of labor" ("Violated" 157).

⁸ All modern English translations of Piers Plowman are mine.

⁹ Another medieval discipline of problematic bodies is the punishment of branding. As Wheatley notes, beggars who were found without a highway pass on English roads were branded (366). Kellie Robertson, in her study laboring bodies in the Middle Ages, draws attention to a 1361 statute in England that penalized laborers or artificers who left their locale with

imprisonment and branding on the forehead (136). As Robertson points out, the laboring bodies become “texts” for collective gazing and reading (135). I would add that this textualization of laboring bodies also depended on the figure of the skin as a writing surface.

¹⁰ For the 1217 decree by Henry III, see Guido Kisch, “The Yellow Badge in History,” p. 105; and Michael Camille, The Gothic Idol, p. 181.

¹¹ Wheatley cites an anonymous chronicler in Paris who in 1425 observed a public amusement, in which a group of blind people armed with sticks were put in a pen with a pig. While the objective was to kill the pig with the sticks, the blind ended up giving one another many violent blows because of their disability (“Blind Beating” 215).

¹² There were also deliberate confluences of Jewishness, blindness, and idolatry in the Middle Ages. Blindness, Camille observes, is an attribute of idolaters (Gothic Idol 189). If the Old Testament is figured as a veil, then Christ through his sacrifice unveils the truth of spiritual salvation for mankind. The foundational opposition between “obscurity and clarity, things hidden (*velatio*) and things revealed (*revelatio*)” (Camille, Gothic Idol 189) is key to understanding medieval attitudes towards visual representation. If Christians see the spiritual significance of Christian images by faith, then idolaters see their idols with blind eyes. Though demons may speak through idols, as Guido dell Colonne remarks, they also keep their worshippers “in the perpetual blindness of error” (90). In terms of medieval perception of Jews, the association of Jews with idolatry and devils was common. Chrysostom of Antioch suggested that “the synagogues of the Jews are the homes of idolatry and devils, even though they have no images in them” (qtd. in Trachtenberg 21). Guilty of the sin of usury, medieval Jews were deemed “worshippers of the devil and of their idols Anti-Christ and Money” (Camille, Gothic Idol 185). And in one Lollard sermon, the chain of associations of Christian Others is made explicitly clear: “alle suche [idolators] ben maad blynde or blyndefeld for a tyme, as men pleyen abobbid, for þei beþ bobbid in hire bileue and in hire catel boþe bi suche lepers ouer londe þat libbep bi hire lesyngis” (Cigman 113-14). For medieval Christians, be they orthodox or Lollards, who else have “pleyen abobbied” but the blind Jews?

¹³ As Pearsall explains, the feast of Corpus Christi, which celebrated the body of Christ in the Eucharist, was first confirmed in England in 1311 (283n120). In addition to the Corpus

Christi procession, many late medieval cities in England also staged cycles of mystery drama dealing with salvation history, especially the life and the Passion of Christ. Miri Rubin has noted that the earliest reference to a play on Corpus Christi was made by Robert Holcot around 1335, and that the first possible mention of the York cycle was in 1376, followed by entries in the guild ordinances in the 1370s and 1380s (273-74). David M. Bevington gives a slightly different year for the first recorded performance of the York cycle, in 1378, theorizing that the cycles did not take hold until the Corpus Christi procession had been “growing for some decades” (235).

¹⁴ See Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England, pp. 201-16.

¹⁵ For ancient and medieval theories of masking, see Twycross and Carpenter, Masks and Masking, pp. 280-310.

¹⁶ According to Bevington, some actors in the Corpus Christi plays were professionals who were paid well (239). Twycross, however, points out that most of the actors were amateurs belonging to semi-professional dramatic societies (“Theatricality” 44).

¹⁷ John D. Cox, however, rejects reading the presence of devils in medieval plays as signs of social subversion. For Cox, the “devils need not be understood either as exuberant subverters of a hegemonic social order or as proto-Enlightenment examples of failed attempts to challenge cosmic order” (18). What the mystery plays embody is “social ambivalence” (18).

¹⁸ I would like to thank Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter for their generosity in answering my questions through email correspondence.

¹⁹ Françoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane, in their Dress in the Middle Ages, observe that “[t]he strength of leather and its relative impermeability when thick, plus the softness of the finest skins, made it a material with a wide range of uses” (24).

²⁰ For an example of the ordinances of the white-tawyers from the mid fourteenth century, see Edward Potts Cheyney, English Towns and Gilds, pp. 23-25.

²¹ The English translation is by Sarah Kay, from her article “Original Skin.”

²² Aquinas, in Summa Theologiae, forbids the wearing of amulets in most instances, citing the fear that inscriptions might imply an “invocation of the demonic” (2a2æ.96.4)

²³ MED, s.v. “tauen,” 1(a).

²⁴ Britton J. Harwood argues that “Christ’s suffering—his intuitive knowledge of human sin, of which it is the effect—results in mercy” (143). And Anne M. Scott suggests that “Will, who suffers like Christ, finds his identity in Christ, and transfers this dignity, by association, to all the involuntarily poor” (175).

²⁵ I would like to thank Glenn Burger for his suggestions on my modern English translation of this poem.

²⁶ For the foundational study on medieval food culture and women’s spirituality, see Caroline Walker Bynum’s Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women.

²⁷ OED, s.v. “sufferance,” 6(d).

²⁸ For other studies of the *integument* in medieval philosophy and rhetoric, see Brian Stock, Myth and Science in the Twelfth Century: A study of Bernard Silvester, and Winthrop Wetherbee, Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: the Literary Influence of the School of Chartres.

²⁹ Scientifically, of course, the skin consists of more than two layers.

³⁰ Steven Connor has traced the etymologies of *color* and *chromatic*: “The word for colour derives, via the Latin *color*, from a Sanskrit word meaning the skin on the surface of the milk . . . The word ‘chromatic’ derives from the Greek *chroma*, colour of the skin, complexion, style. *Chroma* is related to *chros*, skin, skin-colour, and to the verb *chroizien*, to touch a surface

or the skin, which in its turn derives from an Indo-European root *gheo*, meaning to abrade, or rub hard against” (151).

³¹ Bruce Holsinger, in his recent article, “Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal,” points out the fact that most medieval literature survives “primarily *on* and *as* animal” (619). Resisting the critical impulse towards allegoresis, Holsinger advocates thinking of manuscript not *qua* manuscript but *qua* animal (619).

³² MED, s.v. “whit,” 3(a) and 4.

³³ Compare to Alberti’s notion that the color of the earth is a mixture of black and white: “Terrae quoque color pro albi et nigri admixione suas species habet” (qtd. Gage 119). As John Gage argues, gray (*bixi*) is “the key to the tonal coherence of the pictorial composition” (119).

Epilogue: The Whiteness Confound

“Omnis enim color ex candore et omnis albedo lucens. Lux igitur universa ex albedine procedens, si eius terminum excedat, obscura dicitur et fusca. Rursum omnis albedo vita, nigredo universa mors.” [All colour derives from whiteness, and all that is white is lucent. Thus everything that is luminous, proceeding from whiteness, if it should transgress its bounds, is called obscure and dark. Again, all whiteness is life, all blackness death.]

— *Liber Apolloni de secretis nature et occultis rerum causis*¹

“What we see as luminous we do not see as grey. But we can certainly see it as white.”

— Ludwig Wittgenstein²

“[H]ere he was, plunged into a whiteness so luminous, so total, that it swallowed up rather than absorbed, not just the colours, but the very things and beings, thus making them twice as invisible.” — José Saramago³

Consider the following scenario: a man, having lost his beloved lady, is urged by another man to describe the deceased’s beauty. The mourner obliges and enumerates the ravishing whiteness of the beloved’s body, one body part at a time. Or consider a slightly different scenario: a man, having lost a precious object (a person? a thing?), endlessly recalls to himself its/her dazzling white luster. But when he is finally face-to-face with the lost object, he becomes confused by the splendid whiteness he sees before him and is uncertain if this embodied “thing” is the very object that he has lost.

Now consider a cognitive experiment conducted in the first decade of the twentieth century, in which a researcher asked a subject to match the blue of a certain friend’s eyes, the black of his hat, the red of his lips, or the color of a brick, with color patches available in the laboratory. The results? The subject always picked color samples that were too deep, too bright, or too saturated when compared to the original colors. There was not a single exact match, only a series of mismatches.⁴

The first two scenarios—can I also call them primal scenes here?—describe what takes place in Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* and in the anonymous *Pearl*, respectively. The twentieth-century experiment was the work of the German psychologist David Katz. Despite the

great and obvious disparities between the two fictional scenes and the scientific investigation, temporal and social gaps notwithstanding, I want to deliberately yoke them together and argue for a critical affinity among them. What all three cultural moments share is an interest in color, memory, language, and affect. More important, they are about color perception. It is a scientific truism that color perception is a deceptively simple but complex process. The perception of color is influenced by variations in illumination and differences in material surface (texture). Hence strength of saturation and degree of brightness are often associated with color attributions, like “bright yellow” or “deep red.” As Brian Massumi observes, color is inseparable from illumination, and the perception of color is “always a fusion of color and degree of brightness” (162). In Latin, the words *candidus* and *albus* both denote the color white, but whereas *candor* suggests a dazzling whiteness, *album* is whiteness without luster.

In the play of color, affect, and memory, the key question is not what the subject is doing with color. Rather, as Massumi contends, the critical question is “what is color doing to the subject” (211). Color is primarily a trigger of affect and memory (Massumi 209). This notion, as I have already discussed on several occasions in the dissertation, is akin to the ancient and medieval concept of the Aristotelian *catena* of memory; color, especially white, is an affective tag or an imagistic link within the mnemonic chain. But “triggering” does not accurately describe what color is really doing to affect or memory. Rather, as Katz would describe it, color is “striking” the subjective affect and memory; Katz attributes the imprinting of objects’ colors in memory and the subsequent cognitive exaggeration of the same colors in recollection to “the absolute *striking* character of these colour peculiarities” (164, my emphasis). Here, I want to suggest that in some of the specific medieval engagements with whiteness that I have examined, whiteness is similarly marked by an absolute striking character. In *Pearl*, when the Dreamer first sees the Maiden across the stream, her whiteness both entices and stuns him. The Dreamer cries out:

To calle hyr lyste con me enchace

Bot baysment gef myn hert a brunt.
 I sey hyr in so strange a place,
 Such a burre myght make myn herte blunt. (173-76)

[To call her desire drove me
 But shock gave my heart a blow.
 I saw her in so strange a place,
 Such a blow might stun my heart]

Are not the “brunt” [blow] and “burre” [stroke] of which the Dreamer speaks the violent striking of the Pearl-Maiden’s whiteness upon his psyche? And in the Book of the Duchess, the Man in Black speaks of White’s ability to hurting her suitors with a look: “many oon with hire lok sher herte” (883). The courtly convention of the piercing arrow of love is here reconfigured as an absolute striking character of a feminized whiteness. Lastly, when Longinus pierces Christ’s body, his eyes are struck by the red blood that flows out of the white body of Christ.

The “striking” of color results in a psychic and bodily overreaction on the part of the subject. Katz theorizes that “the absolute strikingness of the whiteness, blackness or hue of certain objects may have led to an exaggeration of these colour-attributes in memory” (164). It is as if the subject’s body, having been wounded by color in the act of perception, experiences a trauma-like state in which the imprinting of sensory impressions becomes inordinately amplified. Moreover, affective attachment to particular objects may also lead to a cognitive exaggeration on the part of the subject. Affect is both a modulation of and an interference with the formation of color memory. Regarding Katz’s experimental subject who could not match the blue of his friend’s eyes with the correct laboratory color patch, Massumi remarks that

[t]he interaction of the objective dimensions of blue was *interfered* with and *modulated* by a previousness of familiarity and fondness: by an unconsciously ingredient emotional charge. This affective modulation was as effectively conditioning of the memory-color’s emergence as the objective properties of the light that might be scientifically confirmed as have been reflected by the friend’s retina. (222, original emphases)

Figuratively, and perhaps literally for the body affected, memory becomes colored as it forms. Upon recollection, the remembered color of an object includes the object’s actual color *plus* something else. And this excess, which does not exist in the real world except in the memory of

the subject, is the scar inscribed by color's affection; color's absolute power to wound is "as unwilling as it is unmatched by its human hosts" (Massumi 211). In Pearl, the absolute strikingness of the Maiden's whiteness intensifies the Dreamer's affect and memory. As he fixes his gaze upon her, the Dreamer claims that he knows "hyr more and more" (168). But what precisely does he mean by "more and more"? Is it not his exaggerated memory of the lost pearl's former whiteness? Perhaps one can rephrase the Dreamer's claim of knowing the Pearl-Maiden "more and more" as his having remembered her too brightly, too deeply, too saturably.

In gesturing toward the works and theories of Katz and Massumi, I want to suggest that the imbrications of whiteness with the affective, the social, and the material registers in the late Middle Ages often exhibit a similar cofunctioning of color, affect and memory. On the affective register, mourning as a self-reflexive form of affective labor is uncannily like the matching of colors real and remembered. In other words, mourning is a recollecting of the lost object, in which the object remembered is always already in excess of the object lost. The Dreamer in Pearl is obsessively trying to match *up* and *beyond* the Maiden's whiteness with that of his lost object (a pearl? a daughter?). And the Man in Black attempts to match the White he lost with the White that he remembers and recounts to the Chaucerian-narrator in the Book of the Duchess. Mourning, then, is an exaggeration of desire; or, in the context of the Middle Ages, the absolute strikingness of desire is precisely what drives courtly love.

On the social register, the ambivalent visualizations of Tartar idolaters as sometimes black, Saracen-looking and sometimes white, European-looking can similarly be read as acts of color matching. The Tartars' smearing of fat on the mouth of the idol Natigai draws them closer to shades of blackness, while the Great Khan's presiding over marvelous Eastern feasts drives him towards the white end of the color spectrum. In both instances, the artists exaggerated and missed the Tartars' complexion; the color of the imaged and imaginary Tartars exceeds their actual skin tone. In the case of the Squire's Tale, Cambyuskan and his courtiers are excessively courtly. The strange Mamluk knight, in fact, is so courteous "That Gawayn, with his olde

curteisye, / Though he were comen ayeyn out of Fairye, / Ne koude hym nat amende with a word" (V.95-97). On the religious level, the persistent associations of medieval Jews with the white blindfold of spiritual ignorance in no way reflected any attempt at accurate representation. Or, for medieval Christians in the West, the white body of Christ in suffering signifies an individual and collective ideal of spirituality and sociality that few could claim to have reached or approximated.

And lastly, on the material register, medieval manifestations of whiteness almost always involved object relations. As Katz and Massumi point out, color matching is first and foremost a cognitive activity grounded in an intimate engagement with everyday objects; these are the things that develop memory colors for individuals who can claim possession of or have close contact with them (Katz 162). When Anselm of Canterbury observes that it is experience which leads one to associate mentally the idea of a white thing (*album*) with a body or a surface (*corpus aut superficies*), he means that it is the work of color memories that establishes such a link between whiteness and "such things" (*his*). But beyond purely cognitive and philosophical levels, the physical whitening of objects in the Middle Ages is itself a form of color matching. The artificial whitening of most pearls is deemed an improvement upon—really, an exaggeration of—their natural colors, which are valued as flawed, lackluster, and unattractive. It is incumbent upon the artificer to "match" the color of the pearl with its ideal. The fabricated whiteness of the pearl, "Al blysnande whyt" (Pearl 197), exposes the presumed intimacy between the subject and the object as artifice, as the result of a deliberate manipulation of the distance between desiring being and the desired thing. In other words, the Dreamer's professed knowledge of the Maiden's lost splendor in Pearl is predicated on his having remembered her as always already covered in a dazzling post-fabrication whiteness. Desire's play with *jouissance*, then, can be viewed in this instance as a game of color matching; the absolute strikingness of whiteness is the *jouissance* that the subject must sacrifice, remember, and desire.

Psychologist Marc H. Bornstein calls the inseparability of color and illumination the “brightness confound,” a phenomenon that thwarted his attempts to understand certain anomalies of vision in infants (132).⁵ Here, I want to suggest a similar, though figurative, confoundedness attached to whiteness as manifest in particular late medieval moments. The “whit lether” body suit worn by actors playing Christ in medieval Passion dramas, for example, is never the color white as one might know it today. Here, it is the color word that exceeds the material nature of the skin; “whit” is an exaggeration of shades of cream, offwhite, tawed, and yellow. Yet the color designation of white stays attached to this piece of skin that signifies the body of Christ. The phenomenon is comparable to a hypothetical situation imagined by Wittgenstein:

If I say a piece of paper is pure white, and if snow were placed next to it and it then appeared grey, in its normal surroundings I would still be right in calling it white and not light grey. It could be that I use a more refined concept of white in, say, a laboratory. (I.5)

“A more refined concept of white” is precisely what has been exaggerated in the case of the leather costume of Christ. The absolute strikingness of Christ in suffering must be matched to the absolute strikingness of white; and apparently, “light grey” would not do the trick. When the anonymous author of the Liber Apolloni de secretis nature postulates that “Omnis enim color ex candore et omnis albedo lucens. Lux igitur universa ex albedine procedens” [All colour derives from whiteness, and all that is white is lucent. Thus everything that is luminous, proceeding from whiteness], he is leaning towards an idea of whiteness as the theory of everything. The convergence of science and metaphor, the linking of luminosity and whiteness, and the coupling of *candor* and *album* betray not so much naïveté as confidence. But the whiteness of the Liber Apolloni risks becoming a whiteness so luminous that is blinds. If all that is white is lucent (*omnis albedo lucens*), then rather than illumination, it is a whiteness confound.

Notes

¹ According to Peter Dronke, the text is probably the work of a Hellenizing circle in fifth-century Syria. The book survived in both Arabic and Latin versions. The Latin translation is of the Spaniard Hugo of Santalla in the twelfth century. The English translation is that of Peter Dronke, in The Medieval Poet and His World, p. 77.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, Remarks on Colours, sec. I.37 (Anscombe 7).

³ José Saramago, Blindness, p. 6.

⁴ Or consider Wittgenstein's philosophical musing on color matching: "If you impress two shades of colour on your memory, and A is lighter than B, and then later you call one shade 'A' and another 'B' but the one you call 'B' is lighter than 'A,' you have called these shades by the wrong names (This is logic)" (III.12; Anscombe 18). Wittgenstein's hypothetical experiment parallels the affective exaggeration of color memory that Katz theorizes.

⁵ See Marc H. Bornstein, "Chromatic Vision in Infancy," in Advances in Child Development and Behavior, vol. 12, ed. Hayne W. Reese and Lewis P. Lipsitt (New York: Academic P, 1978), pp. 117-82, especially p. 132.

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