Rise and fall: tropes of verticality in Middle English literature

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RISE AND FALL: TROPES OF VERTICALITY IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

by

Joseph Paul Rodriguez

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

July 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Claire Sponsler
ABSTRACT

While excellent scholarly work exists on medieval space, especially in cultural geography, no book-length study of the conceptual implications of medieval vertical space exists. Attention has been lavished on the surface of the medieval world, while the heights go unseen and the depths go unplumbed. Using theories of space by scholars such as Henri Lefebvre and Jacques Le Goff, this project explores this lacuna through close reading of three late medieval English texts. The emphasis within Christian theology on a vertically-oriented model of virtue and the afterlife (ascending to Heaven, falling to Hell) was likely the initial reason for the prominence of verticality in the Middle Ages; the work of religious writers such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Walter Hilton set the stage for an explosion of the vertical imagination, as a blossoming of the incredible variety of what could be called “vertical thought.” These ideas foreshadowed and accompanied similar developments in the secular arena, soon becoming an integral part of medieval life. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, closely interrelated—and strongly vertical—frameworks arose to structure complex concepts such as moral virtue, social class and kinship relations. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw several major developments in what can be called “vertical thought.” The evolution of Augustinian ideas of religion and morality led to a nuanced vertical hierarchy of virtues and vices, while the rise of the middle class helped define the explicit division of class into vertical tiers. A shift in conceptions of kinship, from a synchronous network to a diachronic tree of ancestry, affected perceptions of gender and family. Finally, the growth of parliamentary and urban political capital in late medieval
England, especially in response to the reign of child-king Henry VI, led to a battle of wills between the powerful men of London and their king.

These concerns with verticality were not limited to the realms of religious belief or temporal power, but manifested themselves in medieval literature and iconography as well. Highness and lowness feature in the plots, characters, and settings of many texts, and tropes of height and depth and rising and falling make frequent appearances textually and visually. Depictions of Heaven and Hell, for example, frequently make use of height and depth, and instances such as the Virgin Mary’s ascension to Heaven or Lucifer’s fall from Heaven to Hell involve explicitly vertical movement which parallels the perceived virtue of said figures. The Jesse tree, a genealogy of Christ, is usually illustrated as a tree emerging from a recumbent man’s body, and reflects a newly vertical visualization of familial ties, while the concept of degree or scale, often represented as a ladder or stairs, is explicitly used as a framework for both moral virtue and socioeconomic status. Through discussion of three specific medieval tropes in literature and art— the tree of Jesse in Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale, the Dead Sea in Cleanness, and the giant of Lydgate’s Triumphal Entry of Henry VI—this project attempts to demonstrate the importance of verticality in late medieval English literature from 1300-1500 and show how these tropes responded to and influenced changes in the way medieval, and modern, audiences perceived social class, kinship, politics, and religion.

Abstract Approved: ____________________________________________________

Thesis Supervisor

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Date
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

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Thesis Supervisor: Professor Claire Sponsler
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To Mom and Ben
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INTRODUCTION

Circa 1120, respected theologian and abbot Bernard of Clairvaux wrote a treatise meant for his friend, the abbot of Fontenay. This work, entitled De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae (“Of Degrees of Humility and Pride,” more colloquially known as The Degrees of Humility and Pride), constructs a vision of moral virtue and turpitude that is arranged vertically; indeed, the conceit of a hierarchy in which rising corresponds with virtue and falling with vice serves as the core of Bernard’s essay.¹ He positions humility and pride as steps on a stair or rungs on a ladder, a motif he explicitly links with the biblical trope of Jacob’s ladder. The ladder seen by the sleeping Jacob, with angels climbing and descending, is in fact one and the same as Bernard’s hierarchy, he argues, to the point that the gradibus of the title (“steps” or “degrees”) are defined as rungs on this metaphorical ladder.

Bernard’s hierarchy is beautifully simple, and in many ways reflects both medieval and modern assumptions about verticality. Upward movement is positive and associated with virtue, downward movement is negative and associated with sin. Climbing is good, falling is bad. Closer to God is better than being closer to Hell. The virtue and sin by which Bernard defines his

¹ Bernard borrows here from an earlier hierarchy of humility written by St. Benedict, who also classified humility into twelve degrees or steps in his Rule for monasteries. Bernard patterns his own degrees of humility directly after Benedict’s, perhaps a major reason why he does not enumerate the steps of humility in the same depth that he does the steps of pride, which are original to Bernard.
hierarchy are, respectively, the humility and pride of his title. By growing more humble, one climbs the ladder towards God, while by growing more proud, one descends the ladder and falls farther from God’s love. Humility, he says, “is the virtue that belongs to those who have set their hearts to the climb and have gone from virtue to virtue, from step to step, until they reached the highest peak of humility and gazed upon truth from the watchtower of Zion.” Bernard emphasizes the slow and meticulously measured nature of this progress; the path to humility is not an energetic, unrestrained climb but a labored progress measured in degrees of a single step. The human soul does not, cannot, entirely climb the ladder by itself, Bernard’s point seems to be, nor is the soul entirely conveyed upwards through God’s actions; to climb the ladder, humans must both accept God’s assistance and exert effort, undaunted by the difficulty. By the same token, failing to accept God’s assistance will lead to movement in the opposite direction. Bernard carefully avoids describing it as a “fall” per se, emphasizing again the way in which movement along this axis is also measured in degrees: “one does not plunge to the depths of evil in one sudden fall, no more than one springs to the heights of virtue at one bound, but has to climb step by step. So the descent too is spread out little by little…” The climb to perfection may be gradual, but so too, reassuringly, is the slide to perdition.


In spite of the differences and seeming diametrical opposition of these two processes of salvation and its lack, Bernard never forgets that both actions take place in the same vertical hierarchy: “The same ladder is for those who come down, the way of iniquity, for those who go up, the way of truth. By the same steps one goes up to the throne and one comes down from it...Indeed, it was by the one same ladder that Jacob saw the angels ascending and descending.” He even explicitly claims that the steps of pride are the steps of humility, but reversed; the top rung of the descent towards pride is the bottom rung of the descent towards humility, and the steps towards each are thus placed in opposition with each other. The first degree of pride (curiositas, or curiosity) is set against the stricture to keep one’s head bowed and eyes on the ground, while the second degree (levity of mind) is contrasted with serious contemplation of one’s position as a sinner at God’s mercy. The climb and the fall, while diametrically opposed, are inseparable from the vertical framework in which they both take place, and require each other to exist. The climb always holds inherent in itself the danger of the fall, while the fall consequently retains the promise of the climb.

Bernard’s carefully constructed ladder, which like much of his writing was highly influential on medieval theological discourse, serves as an example of the importance of vertical hierarchy and vertical metaphor in European culture during much of the Middle Ages. Morality was envisioned

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vertically, but so were numerous aspects of secular life, from social class and feudal obligation to political power and familial descent. Vertical space played a strong role in the medieval European imagination both literally and conceptually, ranging from the soaring cathedral constructions of Bernard’s era to a newly reshaped hierarchy of class defined by the burgeoning “middling classes” several centuries later. Many of these spaces and structures survive even into modern Western culture, showing the lingering strength of the ideas they represent.

Scholarship on Verticality

Much excellent scholarly work exists on medieval space, especially in the realm of cultural geography. Evelyn Edson has argued that medieval maps reflected their creators’ conception of both space and time, while Asa Simon Mittman has written on the portrayal of monsters on medieval maps. Several scholars, including Clare Lees and Gillian Overing, have edited collections of essays about medieval landscape and place. More specifically focused on England, Kathy Lavezzo has written on the British Isles’

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paradoxically both privileged and monstrous position at the edge of the world map, while Kathryn Lynch has edited a collection examining the works of Chaucer through the lens of cultural geography.⁷

Despite a wealth of focus on the spatial concepts of the era, no book-length, scholarly study of the conceptual implications of medieval vertical space exists. Attention has been lavished on the surface of the medieval world, while the heights go unseen and the depths unplumbed. Nevertheless, a few theorists of space have addressed the medieval period, just as there are some medieval historians who have acknowledged the importance of vertical hierarchy in the era. In the realms of history, architecture, and art history, several scholars have written on the vertical as well.⁸ The idea that the Middle Ages were a highly vertical time (pun unintended) is not a new one, even if it has yet to be fully explored.

Among theorists of space who have applied their work to pre-modern Europe, Henri Lefebvre is noteworthy for having constructed an origin for medieval concepts of height and depth. Lefebvre argues that those concepts are inherited from classical notions of space even as they are emphatically not the same representations that the Greeks and Romans would have

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recognized. A shepherd, for example, would see binaries like high/low not as absolute, abstract ideas but as relationships and qualities. He begins by discussing the *mundus*, a subterranean space of abjection which encompasses “the greatest foulness and the greatest purity, life and death, fertility and destruction, horror and fascination.” This parallels and reflects another *mundus*, the orthodox Church concept of the world. Spaces which grew out of the *mundus* served as sources for the high culture of the Middle Ages, and Lefebvre points to the blossoming of these motifs in the works of medieval authors such as Dante. As part of a larger study of the evolution and production of space—which he sees as moving from the consecrated, semi-natural space of the classical period to the primarily formal, quantitative, abstract space of the Romantic period—Lefebvre discusses the twelfth-century blossoming of secular life in the form of the urban landscape of the Middle Ages. This landscape “turned the space which preceded it, the space of the ‘world’ [*mundus*] upon its head.” The medieval urban landscape was “a landscape filled with broken lines and verticals, a landscape that leapt forth from the earth bristling with sculptures.” For Lefebvre, urban life and the built environment introduced verticality into a hitherto flat terrain, through

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10 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 194.

11 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 242.

12 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 256.
the soaring cathedrals that began to be constructed in the twelfth century and their inversion of the space of earlier, subterranean religious structures. The space of these cathedrals fulfilled what Erwin Panofsky dubs a “visual logic,” an implied upward movement or growth; in spite of his general disagreement with Panofsky, Lefebvre expands on the idea of this upward visual logic, which he interprets as a desire for revelation. That which is on the surface ascends while that which is subterranean rises to the surface, a production of verticality which Lefebvre associates with the rediscovery of classical knowledge. To Lefebvre, the Middle Ages are a period when everything from information to buildings emerges from the depths and reaches for the heights.

While Lefebvre’s analysis and construction of medieval space is elegant, it is not without its problems. Much of his thought about the medieval era seems to stem from the now rather outdated view of the high Middle Ages as a comparative ray of light shining forth to end the “Dark Ages” that succeeded the conquest of Rome, just as the Renaissance then provides an improvement over the superstition and violence of the medieval period. The comparison is made explicit when he likens the rising of the medieval era to an emergence from darkness into the light, a metaphor that

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13 Intriguingly, Lefebvre claims that one of the figures opposing this emergence of secular life from religious space was Bernard of Clairvaux. Though Bernard perhaps did not entirely accept this particular expression of verticality, he certainly seems to have wholeheartedly embraced others, as I have shown above.

14 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 256-260.
cannot help but invoke the so-called Dark Ages. Lefebvre links his argument to a dubious and discredited narrative of continuous progress that requires him to ignore or downplay historical events and phenomena, such as the sophistication of the Carolingian court or the relative freedom and opportunity for many women in the era compared to the centuries afterwards.

Despite this faulty engagement with history, Lefebvre’s claim that the Middle Ages were a time of intense verticality is accurate. The groundwork had been laid within Christian theology, which for centuries had emphasized a vertically-oriented model of virtue and the afterlife (ascending to Heaven, falling to Hell) that ultimately provided the impetus for this pattern of thought. The work of religious writers such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Walter Hilton set the stage for an explosion of the vertical imagination, a blossoming of the incredible variety of what could be called “vertical thought.” Thanks in part to this religious verticality, similar reflections of verticality crept into many areas of secular thought and practice as well, and served to broaden the reach of the ideas and concepts of vertical imagination. Vertical thought permeated numerous aspects of medieval life, and as the Middle Ages progressed, closely interrelated—and strongly vertical—frameworks helped structure ideas such as moral virtue, social class, and kinship relations.

15 Bernard I have already discussed: English mystic Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection* creates a vertical measurement for moral virtue similar to Bernard’s.
In contrast to Lefebvre’s sweeping theoretical approach, Jacques Le Goff and Paul Strohm explore medieval verticality in relation to those more specific human hierarchies of morality, social class, and person-to-person obligation. Le Goff emphasizes that medieval man’s position on the vertical hierarchy was understood to be God-given. Rising and falling within this hierarchy represented the temptation of pride and the consequence of sin, respectively. In this way, Le Goff argues, earthly society was patterned after the heavily hierarchical heavenly society enumerated by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in his *De coelesti hierarchia*. This hierarchy included numerous classes of angels, such as thrones, dominions, and virtues as well as the more usual angels and archangels; these were arranged in a strict ordering which defined which classes of angels were subordinate to the others. Le Goff classifies medieval man as “a disciple of Dionysius caught in a hierarchical conception of the structure of the world.” The hierarchical positioning of the earthly realm, however, was not completely immutable, and gradually “a horizontal hierarchy of the ‘estates’ of society in this world appeared to accompany the vertical hierarchy,” a social classification scheme which allowed for change.

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Strohm expands on this idea of a shift from a purely vertical hierarchy to the horizontal within the social sphere. Like Le Goff, he charts the emergence of a new social paradigm in which a vertical hierarchy is replaced by “a depiction of social relations as horizontally arrayed, communal, secular, and bound in finite time.” Strohm argues that the move from (for example) strongly hierarchical vassalage to a process like indenture, which is defined by a contract and the exchange of money, changed a system “in which loyalties were defined vertically in terms of ties to a social superior, in favor of horizontal agreements between persons in similar social situations.” He sees a stronger shift from vertical to horizontal than is conveyed in Le Goff’s side-by-side hierarchies, perhaps because his primary focus is more specific: England in particular, a century or two later than Le Goff’s study. Nevertheless, Strohm acknowledges that in spite of this move, the horizontal did not rule entirely during the period of his discussion. As is shown by authors such as Chaucer, there is contention between these two social paradigms—the vertical hierarchy of feudalism and the horizontal structure of guilds and confraternities—not replacement of one by the other. Aristocrats and even kings might join confraternities or guilds, while merchants’ religious lives and loyalties to the crown were still firmly hierarchical. While changes in horizontal structure helped create social mobility, such mobility was also made possible by the vertical hierarchy itself opening up, and creating a “middle” for the middling classes. Like Le Goff,

Strohm ultimately sees coexistence between these vertical and horizontal systems, even as he claims the one strives to co-opt and replace the other.

The view of social verticality presented by Le Goff and Strohm can easily be extended to define a society stratified by economics as well. Members of the middling classes exchanged goods, services, and money horizontally within their own class, and even with those of higher status—indeed, the idea of exchange in many ways requires the assumption of at least a partial relationship of equality. However, as a social group, they still nevertheless held a position viewed as decidedly below the landed and the titled. Even as the period of overt feudalism was nearing an end by the late Middle Ages, in part due to urbanization and the rise of the middling classes—though feudalism certainly was still practiced in England through most of the fourteenth century, as witness the violent counter-reaction of the 1381 Peasant’s Revolt—the result of centuries of aristocracy and serfdom was not so easily thrown off. Feudalism no more ended hierarchy than the official end of slavery in nineteenth-century America ended racial inequality. Le Goff and Strohm make good points: post-feudal life was less strongly stratified than it had been under feudalism, and the possibility of movement within a class hierarchy, between different social classes, was greatly increased. However, they persist in seeing this mobility as a strictly horizontal phenomenon, one in which it is possible to move from group to group but not from stratum to stratum. This is in part due to the way in which they
envision this vertical hierarchy; they seem to see it in the most general of
terms, in which only the largest categories occupy positions on this societal
ladder. In such a paradigm, movement within a single large social category—
the gentry, for example—would be considered horizontal, within its own
social group. The socioeconomic stratification of medieval England, however,
affected even the perception of status within these larger categories.
Hierarchical differences between, for example, a wealthy guildsman and a
newly established merchant were very real, and such fine distinctions existed
in various social groups, classes, and estates (as ably limned by Chaucer in
the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*). While there certainly were
possibilities for lateral movement, or movement that in some way lay outside
the standard secular social hierarchy (taking clerical vows, for example),
much of the intra- and inter-class social mobility made possible in this era
was seen as distinctly vertical. As a result, unease over social mobility
became tied in with equally vertical discourses of prideful rise and shameful
fall.

Carlo Ginzburg offers a view of medieval verticality very different from
that of Le Goff and Strohm. According to Ginzburg, the human obsession
with polar opposition is one impetus for the distinctions drawn between high
and low degrees of social class: he claims this opposition of high/low to be the
most universal of opposition between categories. The strength of this
opposition in human culture grows out of the extended time humans spend as
infants, in which “high” is immediately identified with “strength, goodness
and so on.”\(^\text{19}\) While Ginzburg at times overstates his claims—his assertion
that “every civilization located the source of cosmic power—God—in the
skies” is grossly overreaching—he usefully draws attention to important
developments in vertical thought, particularly the connection between
symbolism of highness and secular power and knowledge, a connection fueled
by a mistranslated but influential Pauline passage. The phrase \textit{noli altum
sapere}, a warning against pride or arrogance—through a linguistic shift in
the meaning of \textit{sapere} and a mistranslation of \textit{altum}—became a warning
against learning “high things,” interpreted as a warning against intellectual
curiosity. This garbled transmission reflects both the way in which verticality
served as a framework to define areas as diverse as moral virtue, temporal
power and educational engagement.

The work of non-medieval scholars is also helpful on the subject of
verticality. Michel de Certeau has written of a voyeuristic gaze from the
heights (in this case the World Trade Center), arguing that such a view of the
world below gives the pleasure of “‘seeing the whole,’ of looking down,
totalizing the most immoderate of human texts.”\(^\text{20}\) He compares this “big
picture” view with the experience of the street-level pedestrian, whose actions

\(^\text{19}\) Carlo Ginzburg, “High and Low: The Theme of Forbidden Knowledge in the Sixteenth and
Seventeenth Centuries,” \textit{Past and Present} 73 (Nov 1976), 32-33.

\(^\text{20}\) Michel de Certeau, \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life} (trans. Steven F. Rendall) (Berkeley:
University of California Press, 1984), 92.
are of necessity not taking the full layout determined by the city’s organizing bodies into account (a reflection of his larger distinction between “strategy,” institutions and structural creations constructed by producers, and “tactics,” the consumer’s action within these institutions and structures). The elevated observer has a clarity of vision and an understanding of organizing principle that the pedestrian cannot attain, but the pedestrian nevertheless has his or her own ways of engagement with these organizing principles based on what parts of these structures that he or she can see and encompass in understanding.

Emmanuel Levinas has written of two different kinds of infinity, what he calls horizontal infinity and vertical infinity, processes that run perpendicular to each other. Levinas’ horizontal infinity represents “totality”—specifically, the totality of an infinite process—while his vertical infinity opposes the disclosure and cultivation of totality. Every point in horizontal infinity represents a vertical infinity; in this comparison, horizontal infinity “can only be recognized as finite in relation to the vertical infinity” and hence is not truly infinity at all. In a sense, one could argue that Levinas’ horizontal infinity represents breadth of knowledge, while his vertical infinity represents depth of knowledge. Gaston Bachelard constructs a similar paradigm of the horizontal and the vertical, but does so within the realm of time. Bachelard imagines “vertical time,” which he envisions as a

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stopping or reorientation of time that allows for a metaphysical perspective (most often used in poetry). “Every real poem, then,” he writes, “contains the element of time stopped, time which does not obey the meter, time which we shall call vertical to distinguish it from ordinary time which sweeps past horizontally along with the wind and the waters of the stream.”

“Ordinary” time, then, is envisioned as horizontal, while the one moment in time represented by the vertical is the place of poetics, like a dragonfly in amber. Horizontal infinity and horizontal time extend outwards forever but can never delve into a single point, while vertical infinity and vertical time involve a wealth of detail about a single point or moment but are necessarily limited by that particularity.

The work of these theorists helps explain the medieval association of verticality with a variety of cultural phenomena. Associations of verticality with ideas of fragmentation, enclosure, and stasis appear in the work of female mystics, for example, as well as in such images as the tree in Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale (an object emphatically associated with verticality and vertical movement), which forms the core of a hortus conclusus or enclosed garden. Similarly, the strangely reversed verticality of the Dead Sea in Cleanness accompanies a torturous stasis affecting those unfortunate enough to be thrown in. In these and many other instances in Middle English

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literature, verticality shapes not just the physical environment, but also the behavior and relationships of characters within that environment.

**Terminology, Methodology, and Chapter List**

Though intriguing moments of vertical thought can be found throughout medieval European literature, I attempt to understand medieval verticality through a very specific set of case studies. I focus on the specific subcategory of late medieval English literature—that of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the era in which English vernacular literature blossoms. While at times I turn to the Western tradition as a whole to frame my analysis, I center my attempt to understand medieval verticality on the vernacular literature of late medieval England and the historical events that inspire these works.

This would perhaps be a good time to define the terms that I will use throughout this study. The word “vertical” comes from the Latin *vertex*, or peak. When I say “vertical” or “verticality,” I refer to any orientation along the geometrical y-axis, whether upward or downward. I use “vertical mobility” to describe movement upward and/or downward along the y-axis, usually taking place in some sort of larger vertical framework: movement in a specific direction will be classified as either “upward mobility” or “downward mobility.” I use “height,” “elevation,” and “altitude” all to describe an
orientation placed above the y-axis, but not interchangeably: “height” implies a continuous mass still in contact with the surface of the ground or other equivalent “ground level,” such as a tower or a giant, whereas “altitude” implies discontinuity with empty space between the object described and ground level. In this framework, a tree or a mountain would be described in terms of height, while a bird in flight would be described in terms of elevation. “Elevation” encompasses both height and altitude, and serves equally well to describe the mountain or the bird. Conversely, “depth” is used to describe any orientation below the y-axis, whether in contact with the ground-level surface or not. The terms for verticality used by modern authors sometimes differ from those used by medieval authors, but hold many of the multiple valences that modern words and phrases for the subject do. Words such as “heighe,” “degré,” and “lofte” all carry metaphorical weight in addition to their literal description of physical space, and their use is accompanied by connotations of social class and moral virtue.

Each of my chapters focuses on a key episode within a particular text, which I read closely and consider in light of the historical context of its era of composition. Within each chapter, I further engage with a specific cultural trope in each key moment, looking at the evolution of each trope and its use in other literature of the time. Through the use of both close reading of each text and discussion of social and cultural phenomena that likely impacted its
reception, I argue that each episode uses vertical metaphor and language to subtly imply and/or argue for a particular set of beliefs.

I focus specifically on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century literature, because it chronicles several important developments in vertical thought and increasingly influential vertical tropes. The evolution of Augustinian ideas of religion and morality led to a nuanced vertical hierarchy of virtues and vices by 1300. The rise of the middling classes helped further define the explicit division of class into vertical tiers while simultaneously making those divisions far more permeable than they had been previously. A shift in conceptions of kinship, from a synchronous network to a diachronic tree of ancestry, affected perceptions of gender and family. Finally, the growth of parliamentary and urban political capital, especially in response to the reign of a child king such as Henry VI, posed a challenge to a decidedly vertical hierarchy of kingship and led to a battle of wills between the powerful men of London and their king.

These concerns with verticality manifest themselves in both art and literature. Highness and lowness feature in the plots, characters, and settings of many verbal texts, and tropes of height and depth and rising and falling make frequent appearances visually. Whether drawn in words or paint, depictions of Heaven and Hell, for example, often make use of height and depth, and instances such as the Virgin Mary’s ascension to Heaven or Lucifer’s fall to Hell involve explicitly vertical movement by these figures,
paralleling their perceived virtue. The Jesse tree, based on the genealogy of Christ as descendant of David’s father Jesse, is usually illustrated as a tree emerging from a recumbent Jesse’s body, and reflects a newly vertical visualization of familial ties that continues in use even today. The Wheel of Fortune is a common trope in romance and advice literature, with its inherently cyclical rise and fall (perhaps exemplified in Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*). And the concept of degree, often represented as a ladder or as stairs (as in the *gradus amoris*, “stairs of love”), is explicitly used as a framework for moral virtue (as we have seen) as well as for social and economic status. All of these representations of verticality can be found in varied representational media, whether visual, oral, or mimetic.

While I at times turn to the visual arts as a point of comparison, in this dissertation I focus on textual vertical representations, examining the use of three medieval tropes of verticality in three different Middle English texts: the Jesse tree in Chaucer’s *The Merchant’s Tale*, the Dead Sea in *Cleanness*, and the giant of London Bridge in Lydgate’s *Triumphal Entry of Henry VI*. In each case, as I show, verticality serves as a framework for specific social preoccupations: religion, familial ties, political power, and/or social class. Through discussion of these areas of medieval culture, I demonstrate the omnipresence of vertical tropes—tropes medieval people used to define their lives and their afterlives—and to show how these tropes reflect and respond to social, political, and religious changes of the times.
In my first chapter, “‘A tree/Charged was with fruyt’: Gender, Genealogy, and the Tree of Jesse in Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*,” I explore the climax of *The Merchant’s Tale*, which features the elderly cuckold January and his clever young wife May. When May and her lover Damian consummate their illicit relationship in a pear tree while a temporarily-blind January unwittingly looks on, the potential reproductive verticality of this moment figures the lovers’ tree as a tree of Jesse, a visual trope representing the genealogy of Christ. Newly prominent in the Middle Ages, the Jesse tree constructed a framework through its presentation of Christ’s ancestry that served as an early family tree, as modern audiences understand the concept. Through parallels between the Merchant’s tree and the Jesse tree, and the oddly gendered biblical connections it suggests between Chaucer’s characters and the Holy Family, the tale reflects a change in the way medieval audiences conceptualized genealogy and kinship, and the possibilities of maternity and paternity. Maternity could both serve as a passive transmitter of lineage and an active symbol of it, a paradox exemplified in the Salic law of succession of France and the Hundred Years’ War it led to: maternal descent there served as both an excuse to disinherit and a rallying point for conquest. Similarly, marriage to a woman of status could bestow that status on your children, as Chaucer himself would do when he married Philippa Roet, one of the queen’s ladies-in-waiting. Through this family tree, and the vertical form it takes, Chaucer gives us a set of parallels for the core characters of his tale.
that insinuate a more sympathetic portrayal of all three, and the possibility of a new family structure.

My second chapter, “Fro heuen to helle’: The Dead Sea, the Peasants’ Revolt, and Vertical Mobility in Cleanness,” examines Cleanness and its reimagining of various biblical narratives—the Flood, the destruction of Sodom, and Daniel’s interpretation of the mysterious writing on Belshazzar’s wall—in the context of the Peasants’ Revolt. By looking at the unsettlingly reversed verticality of the Dead Sea in this poem and medieval culture at large, I shed light on the ways in which the poem illustrates the increasing (and increasingly problematic) possibility of social mobility. While the Cleanness poet is anonymous, scholarly work on the dialect of his poem has located it in the county of Cheshire, a region that played a major part in social unrest for much of the last two decades of the fourteenth century and that had ties to Richard II at the time of the Peasants’ Revolt. In the Flood victims’ climb to high ground and subsequent “drowning in the deep streams,” the fall of Lucifer from heaven, and Nebuchadnezzar’s descent to all fours as an animal, the poet’s frequent use of physical rises and falls mirrors similar changes in social position and moral standing, reflecting and complicating a vertical conception of social class through the medieval concept of “degree.” This culminates in the poem’s portrayal of the Dead Sea, where lead floats and feathers sink, mirroring a society whose rules about social mobility (or lack thereof) are also being turned upside-down, leading to
a larger statement on the rewards and dangers of social mobility in the face of authority.

In my final chapter, “‘With the grace off God at th’entryng off the Brigge’: Crown versus Town and the Giant of London Bridge in Lydgate’s *Triumphal Entry of Henry VI*,” I end by discussing fifteenth-century monk and unofficial poet laureate John Lydgate. Lydgate’s prolific, aureate poetry placed him in high demand among a diverse set of patrons, ranging from Henry V to well-to-do urban merchants. In his poetic account of the boy-king Henry VI’s triumphal entry into London after a French coronation, Lydgate chronicles an implied struggle for power between town and crown, exemplified in the figure of the intimidating giant, standing atop the tower of London Bridge, who greets Henry on his entrance into London. By examining the trope of the towering giant, both wild and “tamed,” in medieval literature and supplementary biblical apocrypha, I argue that the giant of London Bridge invokes the specters of figures as diverse as the British giant Gogmagog, St. Christopher, and Nimrod (builder of the Tower of Babel). I discuss the implications these identifications hold for the struggle between an increasingly powerful urban mercantile class and a boy-king with anointed but untested authority. Lydgate, patronized by both town and crown, finds himself caught in the middle of this struggle, and attempts to reconcile the two groups and their covert conflict through his poem while chronicling the power vacuum that would eventually lead to civil war.
I end with a coda that briefly examines the slow wane of the medieval obsession with verticality. As the end of the Middle Ages brought on the early modern period, the discovery of the New World led to an increased focus on horizontal expansion through exploration and colonization, and the Reformation’s focus on a direct relationship between man and God began to de-emphasize the vertical hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, many of the vertical frameworks constructed during the medieval period survive today in Western thought, from the image of the family tree to the vocabulary we use to describe social class. These medieval portrayals of ladders, trees, seas, and giants—though long gone now—cast a long shadow, one that remains with us today.
CHAPTER I

“A TREE/CHARGED WAS WITH FRUYT”: GENDER, GENEALOGY, AND THE TREE OF JESSE IN CHAUCER’S MERCHANT’S TALE

The defining moment of arboreal cuckoldry at the end of Geoffrey Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale serves as a paean, not only to male blindness and female deceit, but also to a newly vertical medieval conception of genealogy. In the tale, the elderly knight January, recently struck blind, escorts his young wife, May, into his enclosed garden. May asks him to assist her into a pear tree—ostensibly to satisfy her sudden craving for pears, but actually to satisfy a longing for a more forbidden fruit: coupling with her illicit lover, January’s squire Damian, who is hiding in the tree. The two lovers consummate their passion before January’s unseeing eyes, at least until his vision is restored through the intervention of Pluto; the newly exposed sight of the lovers entwined makes January cry out in pain “[a]s dooth the mooder whan the child shal dye” (2365). Through May’s longing for the pears on high—couched in terms of a pregnancy craving—and through the moment of January’s revelation, associated with both the potential conception and the potential loss of a child, not to mention the possibility that May is carrying Damian’s child, not January’s, this climactic moment evokes ideas of reproduction and genealogy which seem a natural accompaniment to the trope of the fruit-bearing tree. The tree surrounded by its enclosed garden, along with May’s duplicity, also suggests several biblical parallels—most

24 I am using modernized names for two of the main characters (January and Damian) over the Middle English originals (Januarie and Damyan) for purposes of clarity.

25 Larry Benson (ed.), The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). All line numbers from the tale are given as parenthetical citations.
notably that of the Fall, which is evoked by the fruit motif. May reenacts the Fall by giving in to Damian’s temptation. She is more than just another Eve, however—she also embodies the Second Eve, Christ’s mother Mary, through the presence of themes popular in Marian stories. The lovers’ tree, then, takes on genealogical valences, becoming potentially figured as a tree of Jesse—a tree-form genealogy of Christ in which Mary is frequently portrayed in a pivotal position. Chaucer uses the device of the tree of Jesse, and the vertical genealogy it creates, to construct and subvert identifications between January, May, and Damian, and their several biblical analogues. Through these biblical parallels, and by evoking changing attitudes towards gender, Chaucer complicates the stereotypes of his source and hints both at potentially hidden motives and roles for his characters and at a level of humanity absent in his source material.

Through this scriptural figuration as a Jesse tree, the Merchant’s tree reflects medieval developments in the representation of genealogy and kinship. In the later Middle Ages, European construction of familial genealogy, and that of Christ in particular, was undergoing a shift from a synchronic, web-like representation of the extended family to a more diachronic, vertical representation of the nuclear family. This is, after all, the period during which the strongly vertical word “descent” (from the Old French *descente*) gains its associations with genealogy. While the conventional wisdom that the tree of Jesse was a direct ancestor to the modern family tree has held sway in medieval scholarship for most of a

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26 Its Latin forebear, *descendare*, deals with physical movement rather than the idea of familial descent. The first English use of the word relating to lineage comes around 1330—the *Oxford English Dictionary* claims that it first appears in Mannyng’s *Chronicle*, while the *Middle English Dictionary* (hereafter MED) instead opts for *Arthour and Merlin*, a metrical romance from the Auchinleck manuscript, as the first usage.
century, in recent years Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and Zrinka Stahuljak have convincingly argued that the tree of Jesse did not directly inspire what we think of as a modern family tree, as such representations did not become widespread until several decades after the Jesse tree’s popularity began to wane. Nevertheless, I believe that the tree of Jesse, the family trees, and the pear-tree of Chaucer’s tale are all responding to a distinct shift toward a vertical visualization and conceptualization of genealogy and kinship during this period. The tree of Jesse may not lead directly to the family tree, but both reflect the same change in the way medieval Westerners imagined genealogy.

This conceptual change takes place through a host of factors: linguistic change, an increased focus on paternal descent and on the nuclear family, and the increasing possibility of social mobility. In an inherent paradox, this change both privileges the role of women—acknowledging that the only sure lineage is that of the mother—and supports a focus on the father, exemplified by an increased focus on Joseph’s role in the Holy Family. May, through her not-so-furtive coupling, becomes both passive transmitter of lineage and active participant in its creation, embodying women as diverse as the virginal Mary, the duplicitous Eve, and the tale’s own fairy queen, Proserpine. May’s

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27 See Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *L’ombre des ancêtres: essai sur l’imaginaire médiéval de la parenté* (Paris: Fayard, 2000) and Zrinka Stahuljak, *Bloodless Genealogies of the French Middle Ages: Translatio, Kinship, and Metaphor* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005). Klapisch-Zuber and Stahuljak point out that, aside from two German lineages of one lesser family, nothing truly resembling our modern family tree appears until the late 1400s, by which point the influence of the Jesse tree, though still felt, was beginning to wane. For perhaps the most prominent example of the forebear theory, see Arthur Watson’s *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934).

rise and fall—climbing into the tree with January’s help, then her subsequent leap down to the ground during her post-coital conversation with January—emphasize these identifications for May. She ascends, like Mary, and like Mary, her child will potentially have a heavenly father and an earthly father. Like Eve, she falls through her own actions and the betrayal of her husband. Nevertheless, her fall is not involuntary, but self-directed—less of a fall and more of a leap, one from which she lands on both feet (figuratively if not literally). She may consume the fruit of forbidden love, much as Eve did the apple of forbidden knowledge, but she does not share Eve’s infamy.

Correspondingly, January’s eventual willingness to raise this possible cuckoo in his nest also carries multiple interpretations. Certainly he remains the pitiable figure, the mockable cuckold he is traditionally seen as—a part not uncommonly filled by the suspicious husband Joseph in medieval drama. He is, however, also a sympathetic figure in many ways, one who is perhaps complicit in May’s deception for his own reasons (much as Joseph was with Mary in some versions of the story). In playing along with May’s ruse, January ultimately achieves his originally stated goals: a young bed partner and an heir to inherit his property. The fact that May also has at least one other bed partner (though perhaps “tree partner” would be a more appropriate moniker), or the possibility that her child may not be biologically related to January, does not change January’s achievement of his goals. He is arguably, then, a practical figure who, like Joseph, is willing to parent a child that may not be his own, and in doing so may earn the reader’s respect as well as his or her pity.

Why, then, does it matter that we see this more complex relationship between January and May in the context of changing familial relationships
and the Holy Family? A more equitable and sympathetic interpretation of both January and May can change the way in which we read the Merchant’s Tale. On the one hand, it is a ridiculous fabliau in which a woman cuckolds her husband before his very eyes. On the other, it is a poignant story of two very human spouses who strive to meet their own goals within the bounds of marriage, albeit imperfectly by the standards of the day. The conflict between these two viewpoints reflects the changes occurring in the structure of medieval European families and representation thereof—changes which accompanied and reflected an increasingly vertical conception of kinship.

“I fare as dooth a tree”: The Tree of January and the Merchant’s Tale

The Merchant’s tale begins with January’s decision to search for a bride. The narrator at first refuses to say “were it for hoolynesse or for dotage” (1253), but eventually January claims that he seeks to marry both for sexual pleasure and for reproductive capacity. He tells his brothers Justinus and Placebo that

Though I be hoor, I fare as dooth a tree
That blosmeth er that fruyt ywoxen bee,
And blosmy tree nys neither drye ne deed.
I feele me nowhere hoor but on myn heed,
Myn herte and alle my lymes been as grene
As laurer thurgh the yeer is for to sene.

(1461-1466)

The prospective bridegroom figures himself as an evergreen tree. Though he is graying, he nevertheless remains fertile and can give rise to “blossoms,” which with the aid of a wife may come to fruition. The representation of the bridegroom as a blossoming tree is a conventional one: the most influential version, perhaps, is the description of Joseph’s wedding to Mary in Jacobus de Voragine’s Legenda aurea. A husband is to be selected for Mary from a
group of young men holding branches, and Joseph is chosen because his is the only branch that bears blossom. In spite of Joseph’s blossoming branch, however, he fails to father any progeny himself on his new wife—a fate January may also face later in Chaucer’s tale. 29

The evergreen tree is also fraught with meaning in medieval thought. In the gardens of monastic cloisters, the evergreen tree at the center represented both the Edenic Tree of Life, and the allegorical Tree of Life (i.e., Christ) that lay at the center of Christian and monastic life. Then, as now, the birth of Christ, heralding eternal life, was associated with the evergreens still vibrant in midwinter (albeit not in the same manner that the modern Christmas tree is). The evergreen also held arguably romantic associations, vestiges of which are still present today in the form of mistletoe; people walking underneath the evergreen and mistletoe “Christmas kissing bush” were expected to kiss their nearest neighbor. This act may have been intended to foster peace but likely fostered other, more carnal emotions as well on more than one occasion. 30

Once January begins considering the idea of marriage, he evaluates most of the young women of the community, and finally settles on a girl named May, of “fresshe beautee and... age tendre” (1601). She seems so delicate and amiable that his major worry is that his life will be so good and lusty on earth that he will not have paid dearly enough to make it to heaven, 29


but shall have his “hevene in erthe heere” (1647). His misogynistic but practical brother Justinus, perhaps channeling the Merchant himself, offers the alternative that she “may be Goddes meene and Goddes whippe; / Thanne shal youre soule up to hevene skippe / Swifter than dooth an arwe out of a bowe” (1671-1673). January foolishly fears the descent of heaven to earth; Justinus cynically fears that she will drive an ascension from earth to heaven. Marriage in this scene becomes associated with two conflicting vertical movements—the drawing down of heaven to earth, and the rising from earth to heaven.

Their marriage is described as a union of “tendre youthe” and “stoupyng age” (1738). January is, then, perhaps less the proud evergreen thrusting upward and more the figure of his fears, his “stoupyng” the effect of being brought down to earth (though by gravity rather than his new bride). Perhaps unsurprisingly given the vast differences between January and May, their newlywed life quickly meets with challenges. His squire, Damian, spies May and immediately falls in love at first sight. When Damian becomes ill from lovesickness, a concerned January invokes both Mary and May in his efforts to discover and cure Damian’s unspecified ailment:

    And so bifel how that this goode man
    Remembred hym upon this Damyan,
    And seyde, “Seynte Marie! how may this be,
    That Damyan entendeth nat to me?
    [...] But after mete, as soone as evere I may,
    I wol myself visite hym, and eek May,
    To doon hym al the confort that I kan.”

(1897-1900, 1913-1915)

May goes to nurse him at January’s request, and Damian confesses his feelings in a letter. She soon returns these feelings, as “pitee renneth soone in gentil herte” (1986). When January is inexplicably struck blind, perhaps externalizing his willful blindness to his wife’s and squire’s betrayals (in
heart if not yet in body), May arranges a tryst with Damian, giving him the key to January’s locked garden and asking him to wait for her there. After telling January of her cravings for the small, young fruit, she and Damian enter the tree and do their business. After the restoration of January’s sight by Pluto and the anguish that follows, May convinces January that his newly-restored eyes misled him, and the tale ends with the married couple standing together, with January rubbing May’s possibly quickening womb. January may be “a tree / That blosmeth er that fruyt ywoxen bee,” but what he fails to specify is exactly whose blossoms will lead to this particular hoped-for fruit. A symbol for these complications emerges in the tree of Jesse, which muddles January’s self-identification and foreshadows the reproductive uncertainty that ends the tale.

_Radix, Virga, Flos: The Tree of Jesse and Genealogy in Medieval Thought and Art_

Here I should perhaps note that I am not the first to discuss the Merchant’s pear-tree in the light of the tree of Jesse. V.A. Kolve, in his _Telling Images_, includes a brief but intriguing analysis inspired by Caxton’s illustration in his 1484 _Esope_, of an old man embracing the tree, which Kolve identifies with the man’s Chaucerian analogue January.\(^3\)\(^1\) As Kolve dedicates only three pages to his discussion, however, it is of necessity cursory, and while he does note several of the links I will discuss here, he does not have the space or inclination to take them to what I see as their logical conclusions.

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How, then, does the seemingly innocent fruit tree of the Merchant’s Tale (well, perhaps not entirely innocent, given what it becomes accomplice to) become figured as a genealogy of Christ? Returning to de Voragine’s trope of the blossoming branch, the previously-mentioned account of Joseph and Mary’s betrothal links the branch to an interesting biblical text:

...when the high priest went in to take counsel with God, a voice came forth from the oratory for all to hear, and it said that of all the marriageable men of the house of David who had not yet taken a wife, each should bring a branch and lay it upon the altar, that one of the branches would burst into flower and upon it the Holy Ghost would come to rest in the form of a dove, according to the prophecy of Isaias, and that he to whom this branch belonged would be the one to whom the virgin should be espoused. Joseph was among the men who came...[and he] placed a branch upon the altar, and straightway it burst into bloom, and a dove came from Heaven and perched at its summit; whereby it was manifest to all that the Virgin was to become the spouse of Joseph.\(^\text{32}\)

The “prophecy of Isaias” mentioned here comes from Isaiah 11:1: “And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root.”\(^\text{33}\) Jesse was the father of King David and a distant ancestor of Christ, a figure in the genealogies of Christ recounted in Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-28, which enumerate Joseph’s descent from King David. This prophecy was invariably believed to foreshadow Christ’s coming (being the flower which emerges from Jesse’s root), in spite of the fact that Christ was canonically not the son of Joseph, but of God. The Jesse tree itself is a visual representation of this scriptural genealogy of Christ’s descent from King David, and a frequent subject in medieval art and sculpture.\(^\text{34}\)

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\(^\text{33}\) All English biblical quotations are taken from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible.

\(^\text{34}\) Note that the medieval tree of Jesse should not be confused with many modern Christian portrayals thereof, which are closer to Advent calendars than to the trope I discuss here.
The tree of Jesse has a rise to prominence during the Middle Ages because the medieval period saw a major shift in English terminology for describing kinship, one that I believe plays a major part in these changing representations of genealogy. In Anglo-Saxon England, kinship was represented through what Lewis H. Morgan dubbed “Sudanese” kinship terminology—a language system in which distinctions are made among relatives based on gender and a parent’s gender. (So, for example, different words would be used for a maternal uncle versus a paternal uncle.) Latin kinship terminology had used a similar system, though even more regulated. As the medieval period progressed and moved into the early modern period, much of Europe—including England—began to adopt what Morgan calls “Eskimo” kinship terminology, centering on the nuclear family and focusing on differences in kinship distance from that core, and as a result losing distinctions like those between matrilineal and patrilineal relatives.35 Perhaps as a result of these changes, around the eleventh century the bilineal approach toward ancestry—tracing ancestry through both male and female lines—began to lose popularity, and was gradually replaced by an agnatic system focused on patrilineal descent.36 It is around this time that the tree of Jesse becomes a standard visual representation of Christ’s ancestry.

The image first became a popular subject for German miniature painting, and moved into formal ecclesiastical art through the decision of the Frankish abbot Suger, the most notable early patron of Gothic architecture, to add a stained-glass window depicting the motif to the newly reconstructed


cathedral of St. Denis. The tree of Jesse soon spread throughout Europe as a popular visual trope and remained prominent throughout the medieval period, truly waning in popularity only with the rise of the Protestant Reformation.37 Images of the tree of Jesse usually represented the sleeping Jesse with a tree growing from his groin or occasionally his side, representing either the traditionally reproductive aspects of this genealogy or the similarly reproductive creation of Eve from Adam. Along the branches, the tree featured major biblical figures of Christ’s lineage, and culminated in the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus, or both Mary and Christ enthroned in glory (later, the crucified Christ occasionally appeared).

As befits its original rise to popularity, the tree of Jesse frequently appears as a subject in stained glass, and panels from medieval English Jesse windows have survived in York Minster, Salisbury Cathedral, and Canterbury Cathedral itself.38 Chaucer’s pilgrims, then, would not only likely be familiar with the tree of Jesse as an object of visual culture, but also could expect to see a depiction of one not long after their arrival at their destination, the pilgrimage site of St. Thomas à Becket’s memorial in Canterbury Cathedral. In addition to its use in stained glass, the tree of Jesse was also a frequent subject of sculpture (both ecclesiastical and secular), from rood-screens to knife handles.39 The tree of Jesse was likely the most prominent genealogical representation of the Middle Ages, and even

37 For a more detailed history of the tree of Jesse, see Watson, Early Iconography.

38 Other surviving British Jesse windows include the Priory Church of St. Mary in Abergavenny, Wales and the Abbey Church of St. Mary at Dorchester. Chartres Cathedral contains the oldest complete tree of Jesse window, dating from 1145.

39 For a beautiful example of a Jesse knife handle, see James Robinson, Masterpieces: Medieval Art (London: The British Museum, 2008), 122. The Priory Church of St. Mary, Abergavenny contains a wooden effigy of Jesse (known, sensibly enough, as The Jesse) that once served as the basis for a now-missing three-dimensional wooden tree of Jesse.
uneducated audiences would be familiar with the motif from church windows and other forms of visual art.

Stained-glass windows featuring the tree of Jesse tended to be tall, narrow, and oriented vertically, with major figures of the Davidian genealogy comprising small side panels and the Virgin Mary frequently occupying either a larger central panel or acting as the trunk of the tree herself. John F. A. Sawyer points out that while the motif of the tree of Jesse was innately attractive for stained-glass windows due to its shape, its hierarchical nature and link with inheritance—and, arguably, with the divine right of kings—also made it an attractive trope. Kinship and kingship thus become intricately intertwined in the Jesse tree, even as it serves as a basis for non-royal genealogies.

In Latin, Isaiah’s prophecy—*et egredietur virga de radice Jesse et flos de radice eius ascendet*, “and there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root”—held a slightly different set of valences. The root (*radix*) gives rise to the flower (*flos*) through the rod (*virga*). Jesse, the root, is the ancestor of Joseph and Mary—both of whom are descended from his son, King David—and the “flower” is, of course, Christ. The parallel between *virga* (rod) and *virgo* (virgin) must have seemed inescapable; in spite of the *Legenda aurea*’s link between Joseph’s blossoming branch and Isaiah’s prophecy, conventional wisdom placed the Virgin Mary, as sole biological transmitter of human kinship to Christ, as the link with Christ’s human ancestry, guaranteeing her a prominent place on the tree. While Mary’s own ancestry is never explicitly given in the canonical books of

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41 See Isaiah 11:1 (the Latin version comes from the Vulgate).
the Bible, the two different genealogies of Christ given in Matthew and Luke are often believed to represent the Davidian genealogies of Joseph and Mary, respectively. Thanks to Jewish law that at the time mandated marriage within the Davidian tribe, authors such as Eusebius, Ambrose, and Jerome generally assumed Mary to be of David’s line as well. The blossoming virga, then, becomes a symbol of both paternity and maternity, a symbol of Joseph and Mary simultaneously, though in the popular imagination it was overwhelmingly associated with the latter. This makes January’s self-identification problematic, in light of the pear-tree of the tale and the Jesse-tree of the Bible: he believes he is the fertile, blossoming tree, but it is more likely that May is the branch that will give rise to blossoms, and he will have no fruit of his own loins.

Authors such as Arthur Watson and Mary Bouquet have examined the development of the tree motif for genealogical visualization and its continued use in many modern Western conceptions of family. Watson, in his groundbreaking study of the iconography of the tree of Jesse, traces the evolution of the representation of familial and genealogical relationships into the eventual tree-like form so familiar today. The Roman stemma, or garland, model of patrician genealogy involved a set of imagines (literally “images,” but usually meaning busts with waxen masks of deceased ancestors). If a patrician had permission to display his family’s imagines, they were arranged in a series of alcoves in his atrium and connected with a set of painted lines on the walls, and decorated with laurel wreaths on festal


43 Watson, Early Iconography, 38-44.
days. The Arabic term used for genealogical tables (shajaratun-nasab), on the other hand, contains the term for tree (shajara), but extant examples of early genealogies show no consistently vertical trend in their construction, and several manuscripts of such genealogies present vertical, horizontal and diagonal examples.

Similarly, in the eighth and ninth century, diagrams of consanguinity known as arbor iuris (“tree of law”), and later arbor consanguitatis (“tree of blood relation”) emerged. Like the Arabic charts, these were also nominally trees, but in spite of their arboreal names they tended to represent kinship as closer to an inchoate web rather than as a linear hierarchy of descent, arranged in a geometric mass of cells or circles. Early biblical genealogies were similar to the Arabic forms, though like the arbor iuris the names of individuals frequently appeared in a series of circles linked to each other. Boccaccio’s Genealogia deorum gentilium (“Genealogy of the Gods of the Gentiles”) is believed to be among the earliest non-biblical uses of a tree to represent genealogy. Then, of course, comes the tree of Jesse, which first appears around the eleventh century but continued to gain popularity until well into the late Middle Ages. Pamela Sheingorn has written on the shift from the Holy Kinship, Christ’s female-focused extended family, to the Holy (nuclear) Family, as personified by the tree of Jesse: the Holy Kinship is another example of the web of relations I have mentioned above.

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45 Watson, Early Iconography, 38-39.


Despite these linkages, the relation of the tree of Jesse to the modern family tree is disputed. Watson and R. Howard Bloch, among others, have argued that the Jesse tree laid the foundation for what would become the modern family tree. On the other hand, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber has argued that there is no medieval connection whatsoever between genealogy and the concept of the tree in medieval Europe (though Zrinka Stahuljak draws attention to some of the problems raised by this assertion in her nuanced study of medieval French genealogy). While Klapisch-Zuber’s claim that the tree of Jesse is more “the image of a rising stem” than the “careful transcriptions of genealogical ties and precise channels of transmission” of a family tree seems clear, her assertion that the spiritual and the secular genealogies are radically opposed is perhaps overstating things (especially when she herself characterizes the role of Mary in the Tree of Jesse as participating in both spiritual and secular genealogies). Still, numerous medieval visual and verbal texts connected the tree of Jesse to lineage, in ways close to our modern understanding of genealogy.

It should be noted that the family tree framework for genealogical representation eventually became widespread but even now is hardly universal: Mary Bouquet has discussed, from an anthropological perspective, this lack of universality of the tree motif for representing even modern European genealogy. I have mentioned disputes over the tree of Jesse as

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50 Quoted in Stahuljak, *Bloodless Genealogies*, 137; English translation is Stahuljak’s.

51 Bouquet, “Family Trees and Their Affinities,” 44.
the root of our modern conception of the family tree. While it is during the lengthy medieval period when representations of familial relations transition to consistently vertical diagrams—presumably mirroring a widespread shift in thought on the topic—actual family trees as we now know them to represent secular genealogy are rare. Stahuljak has pointed out that as far as modern family trees go, only two date from before the late medieval period, documenting the genealogy of a minor German family. While it may be the case that the tree of Jesse, as both Klapisch-Zuber and Stahuljak argue, is not the direct precursor to the late medieval and early modern family tree, certainly it seems to play into a similar belief about vertical imagination and lines of descent.

The Jesse tree does not merely represent a spiritual genealogy, however. There is a very concrete, secular genealogy represented through the appearance of the various Davidian kings. As in the Salic monarchies, Mary may not be able to wield the power of kingship herself, but she can transmit it through the power of kinship. Joseph is also part of the Davidian line, and indeed the Matthaean genealogy of Christ (which unambiguously descends through Joseph) is that most commonly cited. The Lucan genealogy, more ambiguous in its details, has been argued to represent Mary’s own Davidian descent, but regardless of its canonicity, such descent was commonly accepted in medieval exegesis and belief. Though Joseph’s Davidian genealogy is necessary to create Christ as earthly heir to the Davidic line—as Joseph is his earthly father to all who would assume so—Mary’s is equally important.

52 The tree as a vertical expression of lineage was more likely to run from bottom to top in medieval texts, much like the tree of Jesse—examples include early genealogies of Henry IV of England and Charles VI of France. According to Stahuljak, in the fifteenth century, what modern audiences would recognize as a more typical family tree began to emerge, going from a single ancestor at the top to many descendants at the bottom.
creating the sole blood link between Jesus and his Davidic forebears. Her descent, however, also transmits spiritual power through her own innate sinlessness (according to medieval belief) and through her favoring by God. While Joseph’s genealogical bonafides are necessary, the true power is transmitted through Mary.

The tree of Jesse is also cognate with that most famous of trees, the Cross itself. Often conflated with its source tree in medieval language and thought—from the Old English *Dream of the Rood* to various lives of Saint Helena—Christ’s cross is also identified with several of the biblical trees already mentioned, such as the French *Queste del Saint Graal*’s construction of the cross from a scion of the Tree of Life. Sara Ritchey has discussed the ties between trees and Christ in late medieval Christian spirituality, through the process she has dubbed “spiritual arborescence.”  

Christ’s death as man—and subsequent rebirth as God—comes about through the medium of a tree (the cross), and in this act he redeems the sin of humanity stemming from another tree (that of the knowledge of good and evil). It is perhaps not surprising that as the Middle Ages neared their end, and Marian devotion and traditional religion waned, trees of Jesse sometimes replaced Mary and Jesus with Christ on the cross (sometimes alongside his mother, sometimes without). However, for the majority of the Middle Ages, the pole position, so to speak, on the tree was occupied by Mary herself, and the tree was the virga rather than the rood.

The popularity of this new genealogy of Christ during this period may reflect, or may have impacted, medieval audiences’ spatial perception of kinship relations. The tree of Jesse, the German family trees, and the

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eventual shift toward the modern family tree all reflect and are reflected in an increasingly vertical conception of genealogy during the medieval period. The Jesse tree marks perhaps the first place where the web of kinship relations truly becomes a literal, vertically-charged line of descent (or, more properly, ascent), a pattern that molds medieval thought on the subject of genealogy even once the trope itself has fallen out of favor—what Sheingorn characterizes as a shift from a synchronous network to a diachronic tree of ancestry.54

Based on the mishmash of languages and forebears that have gone into this medieval trope, it should not seem odd that the Jesse tree is often something of a Franken-genealogy. Although for the authors of the Gospels it was apparently enough to enumerate Christ’s legal lineage (through his stepfather Joseph) as fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, later audiences clearly felt something more was needed, as the desire to provide a biological lineage rose early, and patristic and apocryphal texts constructed a similar lineage for Mary. However, it is frequently not this apocryphal lineage of Mary that is represented on the lower branches of the tree of Jesse, but Joseph’s, based on the figures named in his pedigree. Yet with a major exception that I will shortly discuss, most extant trees of Jesse present Mary—always more prominently than Joseph on the rare occasion he appears, and sometimes even more prominently than Christ—and it is clearly a Marian kinship for Christ that they represent.55 Given that the creators of the trees of Jesse are working from step-paternal Gospel genealogies, why present Mary as the primary, and frequently only, parent of Christ on the tree?

55 For one example of Mary more prominent than Christ, see the tree of Jesse at Chalgrove, Oxfordshire.
To answer this question, we can perhaps turn to the major exception, the fourteenth-century Queen Mary psalter. The psalter actually features two parallel genealogies of Christ, with the tree of Jesse (sans Virgin and Christ, and emphasizing the Old Testament kings) directly opposite a Holy Kinship diagram, focusing on the female kinship of Christ. The psalter's illustrations here draw a clear association between masculinity and verticality. One might expect a contrasting parallel between femininity and horizontality, especially given the similarity of the Holy Kinship to the webs of kinship relation I have already discussed. Nevertheless, while the Holy Kinship is usually presented as such, here in this context it is also vertically ordered, much as the tree of Jesse it opposes. The association between masculinity and the phallic tree of Jesse—which often grew out of Jesse’s groin—is an obvious connection, so the real question becomes, why is the Holy Kinship shown vertically as well here, when so often it is represented horizontally? When the obvious choice would be a vertical masculine tree of Jesse, versus a non-vertical feminine Holy Kinship, why does this Kinship prove the exception when placed opposite the equally exceptionally masculine tree of Jesse? Sheingorn has discussed the shift from the Holy Kinship to the tree of Jesse, arguing that the growing popularity of the latter in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries reflects an increasing emphasis on patrilineage.\(^56\) However, the differently gendered genealogies also reflect different structures within which to view kinship, something embodied in this version of the Kinship. Just as the female-focused Holy Kinship sometimes took on valences of the masculine Jesse tree, so the tree then can be frequently embodied by that \textit{ur}-example of pious femininity, the Mother of God. This psalter, then, serves as a visual

representation of the ways in which female descent and male descent, while
still incredibly distinct, take on aspects of each other—aspects that privilege
feminine descent even in an ever-more patrilineal world.

This treatment of female descent held more significance for English
audiences than many others, as at the time of the composition of the
Merchant’s Tale, the Hundred Years’ War was in full swing. The war
involved Edward III of England’s claim to the French throne, the groundwork
of which was laid with the death of the French king Philip IV. He had four
children—Louis, Philip, Charles and Isabella. He was successively succeeded
by Louis, Louis’ infant son, Philip, and Charles. With Charles’ death, the
Capetian dynasty ended and the throne went to the more distant Valois
branch of the family, since France had recently revived the ancient Salic law
of the Franks—and, more precisely, its policy of agnatic succession, through
which only male heirs could inherit. Edward III, as the son of Philip IV’s
daughter Isabella, disputed the Valois claim to the throne, arguing that while
women could not inherit, they could pass their rights of inheritance down to
male descendants—and Edward was the only living direct male descendant of
Philip IV. It was through his maternal line of descent, then, that he laid
claim to the French throne, and a claim that served as the basis for the
Hundred Years’ War: a war that defined not only Edward’s reign, but his
successors’ for the next century.

Englishwomen’s roles in advantageous genealogy were not limited to
passing along claims to their children, however. Many women held property
and a certain amount of power in their own right, and marriage to an heiress
or a widow was a vital method of social and financial betterment for men.
Chaucer himself was well aware of the upward mobility marriage could
provide; as the son of a moderately well-to-do wine merchant, his marriage to
Philippa Roet, a lady-in-waiting to the Castilian wife of royal duke John of Gaunt, helped him obtain a position at court as well as royal favor.\textsuperscript{57} Chaucer’s own situation also shows that this genealogical accumulation of power was important, not only to royalty and nobility, but to the rising middle class of merchants and bureaucrats as well. This perhaps illustrates Chaucer’s reason for assigning this particular tale to the Merchant: the Merchant is an apt spokesperson for the attempt to reconcile a mercantile view of wife-as-commodity with the fact that his wife is a human being with a will of her own, one who can remove his blood from his own legal genealogy if she so wishes through cuckoldry. The tale, then, takes place in a liminal space: in the new class arising within the traditional estates and in a place between patriarchal and matriarchal power, justifying the puzzling genre of the tale as something between serious moral anecdote and comic fabliau.

In the fourteenth century, these concerns over gender, descent, and inheritance became embodied in the tree of Jesse and its newly vertical conception of genealogy and kinship. This new imagining of relations not only helped construct the idea of the nuclear family, but also aided in direct transmission of power along familial lineages. Power and wealth were no longer diffused, but channeled directly through primogeniture, flowing down the family tree like rain down the trunk of an actual tree. Women, in this model, could not only transmit power but also facilitate their husbands’ accumulation of same—still, however, a primarily passive role, requiring only the presence of the woman as a wife or mother. Women nevertheless did

\textsuperscript{57} The John of Gaunt connection can only have been strengthened by the fact that Philippa’s sister Katherine Swynford was Gaunt’s long-time mistress and eventual second wife. And after Chaucer’s own time, his son Thomas made another financially advantageous marriage, to heiress Maud Berghersh, and eventually became one of the most influential and well-connected men in England.
retain a certain amount of agency to affect familial accumulation of power and status in a more active manner (widows were often able to choose their own subsequent husbands, for example). Even women without the ability to choose their marital partner could affect genealogy through what limited control over their own body they held: birth control and abortifacients existed at the time, and women held the ability (at least in theory) to determine who fathered their child, genetically if not legally.

This brings us back to Mary’s primacy in the tree of Jesse. In some versions, Mary’s body itself actually forms the trunk of the tree (an image that almost certainly derives from a Latinate pun involving virga, rod, and virgo, virgin). Given that virga (like our modern “rod”) held expressly phallic implications, the frequent rooting of the tree in Jesse’s groin, and the association with fertility and parentage, the implications are unexpected: the Virgin subsumes, co-opts—or possibly becomes—Jesse’s penis, appropriating this traditionally thrusting, vertical masculine form for herself. Mary’s active role is even more striking in contrast with Jesse’s sleeping, supine form, the passive root to Mary’s active rod. As the Nativity story—and numerous medieval tales of cuckolded husbands—demonstrates, only the maternal half of genealogy is foolproof. Though the transmission of genealogical claims is more passive than active, this is counteracted by the at least presumptive ability of a woman to choose, or even know, who fathered her children.

This leads to a distinction between male and female lines—conventionally, the difference is that female lines are preoccupied with the transmission of blood while male lines are preoccupied with the transmission of property. Here, though, May has the best of both worlds, capitalizing on

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the distinction between legal and genetic descent; it is entirely possible for her to bear a child of her blood but not of her husband’s, while still ensuring that he inherits her husband’s property as a legal son technically born within wedlock. May, like Mary, similarly supplants January as the primary parent of any child she conceives, as both January and Damian must doubt their parentage of her offspring.

Certainly women’s power over conception was truer in theory than in practice, given the frequency of arranged marriage (especially among wealthy and high-status families) and the lack of recognition of marital rape. Nevertheless, the threat female sexuality posed to male dynastic ambitions was very real to medieval audiences, as seen by the widespread appeal of stories (both humorous and didactic) about cuckolded husbands. The Christian religion, after all, is founded on a story of divine cuckoldry, and much as medieval audiences may have respected Joseph, he was certainly perceived as the least vital and necessary member of the Holy Family. Occupying the Joseph position was socially undesirable for men, especially as their secular Marian counterparts opted for decidedly maculate conception.

“Ah! lewd woman, what is this thou doest?”: The Merchant’s Tale and the Lidia

There certainly seem to be parallels between the muddled genealogies of Christ, and the vexed genealogy of May’s potential child. How many of these parallels belong to Chaucer himself, and how many are holdovers from 

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argues that in chivalric romance, the blood of men confers values and preservation of states of being, while women’s focused on procreation. Though she primarily is talking about actual blood shed, she does address the genealogical use of the term as well.
his sources? In writing the Merchant’s Tale, Chaucer seems to have drawn from several earlier works of literature such as the *Roman de la Rose*, as well as folk motifs such as “The Cherry-Tree Carol.” The most immediate source for the Merchant’s Tale, however, is the tale of Lidia, originated by Arnulf of Orléans in his *Lidia* and retold by Giovanni Boccaccio as the ninth novel of day seven of the *Decameron*. The story of Lidia is the story of the titular woman, young wife to the elderly duke Nicostratus (Decius in Arnulf’s original), and the duke’s liege knight Pyrrhus. The tale is a fairly straightforward one of female perfidy. Lidia falls in love with Pyrrhus and suggests an affair to him. Pyrrhus, loyal to his lord and assuming that Lidia is the same, believes she is somehow testing him, and as a result demands that she accomplish several seemingly impossible tasks in order for him to satisfy her urges. She handily deals with each task, each of which serves to both deceive and humiliate Nicostratus, and Pyrrhus is obliged to consent to Lidia’s planned tryst. Pyrrhus is portrayed as a generally good sort of knight, explicitly said to be loyal, who ends up almost passively indulging Lidia in her urges as her husband falls for increasingly large-scale tricks. The tale culminates in a very different tree-scene from Chaucer’s: Lidia persuades Pyrrhus to climb the tree and tell Nicostratus that he seemed to see Nicostratus and Lidia coupling on the ground. Nicostratus, to investigate this phenomenon, climbs the tree and indeed spies Lidia and Pyrrhus lying together. After yelling invectives at them, he descends; they detach from each other and are sitting calmly when he reaches the ground, and Pyrrhus

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60 “Pyrrhus” is more properly “Pirus,” which is both a name and the Latin word for “pear”; Elliott’s translation of the *Lidia* dubs him “Pearus,” to keep the pun intact.
convinces him that the tree has the strange effect of convincing whoever climbs it that he sees those on the ground copulating with each other. Nicostratus begs their forgiveness, Lidia implores Pyrrhus to cut the tree down so that no other innocent woman’s honor will be impugned the way hers has been, and Lidia and Pyrrhus continue with their affair with Nicostratus none the wiser.

Chaucer makes several major changes to this source story. Nicostratus is much more the traditional senex amans figure than January, an object of mockery; nevertheless, at the same time he is a victim wholly wronged by his wife and knight. January’s selection and treatment of May in Chaucer are characterized as signs of his poor judgment, and seem to lead in large part to his eventual cuckolding. Nicostratus has seemingly done nothing explicitly wrong to earn this betrayal other than loving and trusting his wife and liege man too well. Though perhaps unknowingly so, he is right and justified in the judgmental invective he hurls at Lidia and Pyrrhus from on high. January gets no such chance; when he spies May and Damian coupling, he releases a cry of maternal loss, a wordless expression of his grief. They overlook him rather than vice versa, leaving him forlorn while they disport themselves in the branches of the tree. Pyrrhus is both more and less morally ambiguous than his Chaucerian counterpart, being more a follower of Lidia than an instigator himself. He seems to go along with Lidia, shocked at yet secretly admiring her brazenness. He wrongs Nicostratus, but seemingly only through his willingness to indulge his mistress. Nevertheless, in the climax of the story, it is Pyrrhus’ glibness that convinces Nicostratus that he has indeed seen wrongly from the “enchanted” tree. Whether through self-preservation or through malice, Pyrrhus takes center stage here, leaving Lidia to bluster a defense of her virtue (though she does slip in the jibe that were she such a
woman, she would conduct such an affair in a chamber secretly, and that Nicostratus would never learn of it—what the conclusion of the tale eventually tells us is the case) and to call for the tree’s felling.

The biggest change from Chaucer’s source, however, comes in the character of May. In the Decameron and Arnulf’s *Lidia*, the wife is the epitome of the lustful, deceitful woman so often railed against in antifeminist treatises, seducing Pyrrhus’ loyalty away from Nicostratus and taking heavy risks in her interactions with Nicostratus in order to win Pyrrhus’ consent to a bedding. When Pyrrhus sets her three tasks—killing her husband’s beloved sparrow-hawk in his presence, giving him a lock of Nicostratus’ beard, and finally removing one of Nicostratus’ good teeth—each is a variant on a traditionally emasculating motif, and she succeeds in all three through guile.61 As questionable as Pyrrhus’ actions are, in his journey from loyal knight to cuckolding lover, his actions are nearly all reactions to Lidia’s actions. As is not entirely unusual in fabliaux, the courtly paradigm is turned around on itself—Lidia woos the distant Pyrrhus, and he sets her tasks before he deigns to accept her affections. As the questing lover, Lidia is the sole mover and shaker in this story, courting her paramour and deceiving her husband, and correspondingly the figure clearly culpable for most of the various immoral acts committed. She may not be the traditional heroine, but she is the character readers love to hate in her cleverness and amorality.

Chaucer’s portrayal of all three main characters is considerably more nuanced and ambiguous than his source material. He reverses the initial spark in the lovers’ relationship, in which Damian first makes advances, defining the relationship more traditionally at its beginning and constructing

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May as initially innocent. Likewise, January shares the blame for the unfortunate climax due to his treatment of May. We see his poorly thought-out courtship of May, a less-than-magical wedding night, and a willful blindness to the externalized emotions of his squire (who becomes literally ill with lovesickness)—a blindness that itself is externalized later in the story, at least temporarily. May and January seem to share the responsibility for their marital problems in Chaucer’s version, as opposed to pathetic, cuckolded Nicostratus and scheming, clever Lidia.

Finally, why does Chaucer make such sweeping changes to the Lidia’s climactic (no pun intended) scene, upending the climb up the tree and reversing the vertical orientation of the story entirely? Rather than the husband looking down on the two lovers, we have him looking up at them—a seeming change in not just the physical position of the three principals, but in their places in hierarchies of power and morals. Though Nicostratus is pathetic in his cuckold’s horns, he has the social and moral high ground over his wife and knight, represented by his literal high ground over Lidia and Pyrrhus copulating on the ground below. The power balance is considerably shifted in Chaucer’s version, where it is the socially powerful one (January) blinded and grounded while his wife and her lover take to the heights. May here, like Mary, shares the top of her tree only with a young male, and all else is below: a true sign of woman on top.

“A tree/Charged was with fruyt”:

May as Second Eve and Second Mary

Scholarly work on both January and May’s roles has frequently and skillfully addressed their biblical references and parallels. Mike Rodman
Jones has explored biblical exegesis in the tale and the way, à la Genesis’ “one flesh” imperative, that January recreates himself bodily through his marriage to May, taking as his cue Genesis’ bodily focus on Adam and Eve. Kenneth Bleeth has examined Chaucer’s use of iconographic Marian and Josephine tropes within the tale’s fabliau-plot, while Bruce Rosenberg documents numerous parallels in his article on the tale as a parody of the Marian folk song “The Cherry-Tree Carol” and its medieval predecessor. Rosenberg envisions the parallels between May and January and their biblical counterparts in service to a vicious mockery, in which the superficial likeness between the two only serve to highlight the failings of Chaucer’s characters. Along these same lines, Christian Sheridan has discussed the way in which everyone in the story is flawed to the point that the reader cannot wholeheartedly sympathize with any character and is discouraged from identifying with anyone, a strategy he ascribes to the tale’s approach to text(s) as mercantile negotiation.

I would like to venture a more compassionate, and a more nuanced, reading of May and January (and even Damian) through these same parallels. It is not that no character is sympathetic, it is that every character is sympathetic at times and very much not so at others. Though we may feel contempt for May and Damian’s trickery of January, or January’s unwillingness to accept all counsel on the matter of his marriage, we nevertheless also feel a certain level of sympathy for January at his

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anguished cry on seeing his wife and his squire *in coitu*, or with May during the description of January’s sagging body on their wedding night, or even with Damian’s lovesickness over his lord’s beautiful young wife.

While Damian sits in his pear tree, May tells her husband that she wishes to eat some of the fruit from the tree. She couches it in terms that evoke cravings during pregnancy:

I moste han of the peres that I see,  
Or I moote dye, so soore longeth me  
To eten of the smale peres grene.  
Help, for hir love that is of hevene queene!  
I telle yow wel, a womman in my plit  
May han to fruyt so greet an appetit  
That she may dyen but she of it have.  

(2331-2337)

The combination of May’s “plit”—her implication of pregnancy—and her appeal to January’s “love that is of hevene queene” work in concert to figure May as a type of Mary. 65 However, the parallels with Eve and Proserpine, in her desire for fruit (and “fruit”), are also undeniable.

Pears held a host of associations with gender and reproduction in the Middle Ages. They were associated with Venus, and hence love, fertility, fornication, and adultery. Bawdy medieval English poems rhapsodize on the planting of pears as a metaphor for sex, while pear-tree roots were believed to have contraceptive virtues when held next to the body. 66 Pears, like the blossoming branch, were associated with both men and women in medieval


symbology. There was a wide variety of pears—from something close to our modern pear and its traditionally feminine shape to smaller, rounder pears—and the commonality of small, round pears suggests that perhaps May’s desire for “smale peres grene” is actually a desire for another small, “green” (youthful) “pair” of balls.

The astonishingly broad set of meanings for pears notwithstanding, May’s pears hold associations with other biblical, mythical and folkloric fruits. The most obvious is perhaps Eve’s apple, especially given the characterization of Mary as “the second Eve,” but the tale also invokes the Roman Proserpine—whose consumption of pomegranate seeds dooms her to spend part of every year in the underworld—who appears in the tale as a fairy queen along with her husband/captor, Pluto.

Slippage between the apple and the pomegranate was not uncommon during the Middle Ages—the name of the latter comes from *pomus granatus*, “seeded apple,” and its names in other languages work similarly (such as German *Granatapfel*, “garnet apple”)—and several early church writers characterized the “fruit” of Genesis as a pomegranate rather than an apple (figs were the other popular choice). Pomegranates also held other Christian associations with medieval audiences, being used as a decorative motif in Solomon’s Temple and on occasion being held by Mary herself (most notably as “Our Lady of the Pomegranate,” as famously painted by Botticelli). This perhaps hails back to traditions in which Hera was portrayed similarly, but also seems to be a reference to Proserpine’s twin pursuits of life and death. The fruit symbolizes both her time in the underworld of the dead and her time on the surface, bringing fertility and health to the world.

The apple represents a similar dichotomy in Christian doctrine. The apple is both vehicle of the fall and vehicle of eternal life, whether through
the Tree of Life or through the medieval belief that an apple-tree provided the wood for the Crucifixion in sources such as the *Golden Legend*. Apples were frequently associated with love in classical mythology, from the Judgment of Paris to the belief in their power to cure lovesickness.\(^{67}\)

As a final fruitful parallel, there is the popular late medieval song, the Cherry-Tree Carol. In this song, Mary’s prenatal craving for cherries leads Joseph to reject her, telling her that the father of her child should get the cherries for her. The fetal Christ asks the tree to lower its limbs so that Mary can harvest her cherries, and an abashed Joseph retracts his attack. Rosenberg’s tracing of the similarities between the Cherry-Tree Carol and the Merchant’s Tale finds that May and January suffer rather badly in the comparison.\(^{68}\) I do not believe Chaucer is using these similarities solely as parody, but that the commonality between May and January and their biblical counterparts gives us a more nuanced and complex portrayal—one partially but not entirely negative—that takes the *Lidia*’s stock characters and uses them as raw material to construct characters both more archetypal and more human.

Mary’s cherries, Eve’s apple and Proserpine’s pomegranate all present a set of parallels for May’s small green pears. May becomes a benevolent mother-to-be, a betrayer of male self-interest, and an unwilling wife who has perhaps resigned herself to giving at least part of herself to her husband. Because she serves as a nexus of feminine interpretation, her husband both reveres and reviles her, even within the same scene; just as we do not know entirely what to make of May, neither does January. But how much does


\(^{68}\) Rosenberg, “The ‘Cherry-Tree Carol’ and the ‘Merchant’s Tale’,” 264-276.
January truly see? And when January pushes May towards Damian, does he have any idea what he’s truly doing?

Certainly it is January’s suggestion that May nurse Damian that sets the adultery plot in motion, but he seems dismayed at witnessing the adulterous act itself. How far does his blindness extend, given his choice to turn a blind eye to May’s infidelity? Does he, consciously or unconsciously, intend to set up Damian as a surrogate partner for May, ensuring an heir at any cost (he is, after all, rather elderly)? His repeated boasts of virile fertility in his conversation with his brothers suggests an insecurity over his performance; the knight doth protest too much. While the general scholarly consensus is that January is willfully but unintentionally blind to May’s scandalous behavior, there may be reasons for him to turn a blind eye to May’s liaison. The January at the beginning of the tale seems blissfully ignorant of his own age and potential infirmity, but his blindness seems to lead to a somewhat clearer sense of self-perception. As the tale progresses, he becomes more conscious of his own mortality (embodied in his wintry name, no less), and while still not fully recognizing his own senescence, does see matters more clearly even if he willfully refuses to recognize their implications. But to a certain extent, the part of his family tree to which January is blind is the same part to which every man is blind: only a woman can have absolute certainty of parentage, so January is in many ways no less sure than any other man of his potential fatherhood.

Just as May is eventually paralleled with Proserpine, so January is paralleled with her husband Pluto. Noble and worthy of respect, he is nevertheless “overmacched” by Proserpine. The Merchant, teller of the tale, also implicitly likens May in his introduction to his own formidable wife, who can “overmacche” Satan himself (as well as, presumably, her husband). The
Merchant may create intriguing, strategic females in this story, more nuanced than those in tales like *Lidia* or antifeminist treatises, but the males—though overmatched—also hold a certain level of dignity. January and Pluto are both older than their vibrant, fertile young wives, but are more than merely elderly figures of japery. Also, while both have in a sense bought their wives (January through his social status, Pluto through the traditional tale of Proserpine and the pomegranate), both seem to genuinely value them, if not love them. The Merchant may tell this tale about a woman like his wife, but such a tale necessitates a man like himself. Even if the Merchant is overmatched by his wife, he is also a “worthy man” whose description in the General Prologue emphasizes his fiscal responsibility and wit.\(^69\)

As the Merchant’s wife can overmatch Satan, so Proserpine overmatches Pluto (both in the text and in the source material, albeit with the help of her mother’s negotiation in the latter). Proserpine, again, is a fertility deity in her source myths, daughter of the goddess Ceres; nevertheless, she is married to an older, harsher man who prizes her greatly. While the Pluto and Proserpine of Chaucer’s tale are considerably different in personality from their mythical counterparts, the associations are there nonetheless. As with Eve, Proserpine’s original fall came from a craving for fruit: as such, it is understandable that she would wish to spare another woman the same fate, and help her get away with the daring act that neither Eve nor Proserpine herself were able to. As Proserpine wins partial freedom through her mother’s actions, a matrilineal solidarity that protects her from the consequences of her own actions and helps her survive life with her older husband, so Proserpine aids May in the same way.

\(^{69}\) General Prologue, lines 270-284.
May and Mary, then, become curiously identified with each other in these moments. Even their names are only one letter apart. The name May, originating from the Greek Maia via the month, represents a respected pagan goddess of fertility worshipped only by women, just as Mary represents a chaste Christian concept of fertility. Just as the Virgin Mary becomes the *virga*, simultaneously co-opting her male ancestor’s and husband’s reproductive abilities and passing off her child as Joseph’s, so does the (non-virginal) May do the same with January. Perhaps this is meant to highlight the implications of cuckolding in the Nativity story; Kenneth Bleeth argues that the final scene of the Merchant’s Tale, with January apologizing to May and stroking her womb, should be examined in light of the parallel to Joseph’s doubting of Mary.\(^{70}\) Certainly Chaucer’s would not be the first medieval work to express a concern with the relationship between Joseph and Mary in light of Christ’s unusual birth. The York *Pewterers’ and Founderers’ Play*, for example, features Joseph attempting to put the pregnant Mary away secretly until an angel commands them to go to Bethlehem, and the N-Town *Trial of Mary and Joseph* features a trial on suspicion that Mary has broken the couple’s chaste marriage.\(^{71}\)

The *hortus conclusus* in which the tale takes place is an implicitly Marian space, as Mary herself is the *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden, the fertile yet ever-sealed ground. May’s climb into the tree also mirrors the *virga* Mary growing out of the sleeping Jesse. As Jesse lies insensate at the

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\(^{70}\) Bleeth, “Joseph’s Doubting of Mary,” 62-63.

base of Mary’s tree, so January is insensate—at least until Pluto restores his sight—while May enjoys a very different *virga*.

Mary is not the only parallel May’s actions suggest. As Bleeth notes, her duplicity, and her desire for the fruit, link her to Eve as well. Such dual identification would not have been uncommon during the medieval period: Mary was “the second Eve,” and official Church doctrine preached that just as Woman had led to the Fall, so humanity would be redeemed through Woman. Just as Eve dooms humanity to fall through her fruit, Mary saves it through hers and allows an ascent to heaven. In addition, the relationship between Eve and the serpent was occasionally seen as adultery of a sort, adding a sexual component to Eve’s fall and enhancing her betrayal of Adam. These sexual associations are heightened by the shame-producing consumption of the fruit, and the fact that sexual reproduction was seen as post-dating the Fall during the medieval period.

More unusually, perhaps, is the link between May and the mythical Greco-Roman figure of Proserpine, embodied within this text as Proserpine, queen of the fairies. The mythical Proserpine (originally the Greek Persephone or Kore) also suffered a fall through the eating of fruit—a pomegranate in most versions of the story—after her kidnapping by Pluto, and was doomed to spend her life in the underworld. However, her mother Ceres negotiates her partial release, through a refusal of fertility to the entire world, and Proserpine must spend only half the year in the underworld, mitigating her every fall by balancing it with a rise. The Proserpine of the Merchant’s Tale certainly seems a less ominous or tragic figure—not only does she seem to be with Pluto through choice rather than through force, but the two generally seem a happily married couple. Though their mythical sources superficially mirror January and May (older man attains young
woman in mercantile manner), the fairy couple debates the fates of January and May amicably, and their apparently loving and honest marriage stands in stark contrast to the relationships between the humans. William Woods has argued that the movement of May from space to space—from cloistered bedroom, to privy, to garden—mirrors Proserpine’s own peregrinations, where the disposal of Damian’s letter in the privy becomes an underworld journey of sorts, resulting in purpose and resolve to climb to her lover.

These three identifications for May ensure that the environment in which she appears becomes equally multi-valenced. The garden here, then, acts as both heaven and hell, at least for January: heaven to be alone with May, hell to see her being ravished by his squire. Both his and Justinus’ prophecies are fulfilled: he finds his terrestrial paradise, which immediately becomes incredibly painful to him through his wife’s actions. May arguably serves as the archetypal medieval image of Woman, at its best (Mary) and at its worst (Eve). Her identification with Proserpine also reinforces her as a figure of feminine power: rescued for half of the year through her mother’s efforts, and not entirely under the control of her husband Pluto, Proserpine perhaps embodies an alternative to the subject body of Eve without being limited by the ideal of Marian virtue.

If January and May both contain these multitudes of identification, how then to define Damian? Certainly Mary, Eve and Proserpine all had husbands. If January is the Joseph figure in this tree of Jesse, is Damian then acting as God, the possible true father to May’s hypothetical child?

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Probably not, since this conception is by no means immaculate: the Merchant makes excuses to the ladies for his crude speech when he recounts that “sodeynly anon this Damyan / Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng” (2352-53). Perhaps he serves as the snake in May’s Eden (in more ways than one); he certainly poses a temptation to her. Whether divine or serpentine, Damian’s role even here is necessarily limited: after the moment of restored sight, Damian disappears from the tale, and is not mentioned again by the narrator once January spies the illicit tryst. This is taken to perhaps ridiculous levels when, after her clever, manipulative defense is accepted, May “leep doun fro the tree” (2411); as there is no description of Damian’s departure, she appears to have convinced January that he mistook what he saw while she was still in the tree with her lover. Unlike Eve, she does not fall: she leaps, and finds safe landing under the protection of both January and Proserpine. Damian, then, serves as a narrative tool to spark a conflict between the two married couples at the center of the play (January/May and Pluto/Proserpine), and to cast doubt on the parentage of May’s child. May falls in with him out of “pitee,” a traditionally Marian trait.

May is not the only character in the tale to exemplify Marian traits. Concerns of motherhood even work to feminize the already-emasculated January: upon spying his wife and Damian coupling in the tree, “And up he yaf a roryng and a cry, / As dooth the mooder whan the child shal dye” (2364-65). Here January becomes the maternal figure—even Marian, in a sense, grieving over her dead child. He is not the fecund, gravid Mary of the Annunciation, but the bereaved Mary of the Crucifixion, deprived of his future child (or at least of surety over the child’s parentage). If May’s tree is

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that of Jesse, January’s is that of the cross; if May is the rod, January is the rood.

But what of Damian? He has been left hanging (perhaps literally), forgotten in the tree since January spied the *coitus in ‑tree·ruptus*. As January and May have been rich sources for biblical parallels and reflections of shifting genealogical representations, perhaps an examination of Damian will also bear fruit.

**“Partaker of the root”: The Grafting of Damian**

When Damian is introduced, pining for May, he is compared “lyk to the naddre in bosom sly untrewe” (1786)—the comparison to the serpent of Eden is unavoidable. He is, of course, not just the snake, but also the “fruyt” for which May has such an appetite, both tempter and temptation in one, both object and catalyst. Though May, unlike Eve, does not offer Damian to January to share in her sin—the relationships in this story are not quite *that* scandalous—nevertheless the two do share him, in a way. January sends his squire to his wife—shares him with her—and it leads to his downfall. (Or more accurately his down‑stay.) Though May is clearly paralleled with Eve and January with Adam, in many ways January receives the punishment of Eve himself. He shares Damian with May, and as a result feels the pain of a mother. Damian, however, is not merely an apple to be handed from spouse to spouse, but a person with his own motivations and desires. What of Damian himself, the third in this already‑crowded marriage?

As was the case for January and May, the immediate analogue for Damian’s name is plainly evident: the third‑century Syrian martyr Saint Damian. The connection is, however, a bit mystifying: Damian and his twin
brother, Saint Cosmas, were physicians, noted for accepting no payment for their services and given the epithet *anargyroi* (lit. “without silver,” usually translated as “silverless” or “unmercenary”) as a result of this policy. They were martyred under Diocletian in 287 A.D.; their torments involved being crucified, stoned, riddled with arrows, and finally beheaded. The two are considered patron saints of physicians and surgeons, and are associated with medical organizations from the British Dental Association to the Mayo Clinic. The brothers’ best-known miracle is the grafting of a dead Ethiopian man’s leg onto one of their patients, who awakens to discover that he has two fully operational and healthy legs of different colors.  

This selfless physician-martyr at first glance seems an odd namesake for Chaucer’s lustful squire, who is more in need of medical care during his fit of lovesickness than able to offer it. There are, however, some possible associations Chaucer may have had in mind for the randy squire. Not only were there local Canterbury associations with the saint, but later associations with Saint Damian suggest that perhaps Chaucer imagined Damian as something more than the less-than-courtly lover. Few English churches were dedicated to Cosmas and Damian, but two of those few were located near Canterbury—one was just two miles to the north, in Blean, and even shared oversight with Canterbury’s Eastbridge Hospital, a primary stop for pilgrims to the cathedral.  

Canterbury Cathedral itself supposedly held relics of the two. Perhaps writing about an expedition to Canterbury led Chaucer to think of

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77 Matthews, “SS. Cosmas and Damian,” 282.
the parish there, and the various associations with Saint Damian led him to use the name for the lustful, possibly child-giving squire in the Merchant’s Tale.

While Cosmas and Damian are patron saints for various forms of medicine, they also count a surprising number of children and child-care professions among their patronage. In Brazil they are the patron saints of Brazil’s oldest church, and they are venerated as protectors of children in particular (hence a local custom to give candy to children on their feast day). It is recorded in the eighteenth century that at their main shrine in Naples, the most common wax effigy presented—to represent the body part for which the supplicant wished healing—was that of a penis, and in the nineteenth century it is recorded that the brothers were venerated by women who wanted marriage and/or children.78 While no indications are given as to how long these customs had existed, they are not suggested to be particularly new: it is conceivable (albeit likely unprovable) that they may have dated at least to the later Middle Ages. Even if that is not the case, however, worshippers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw something in the lives of Cosmas and Damian that suggested physical reproduction (hence the wax phalluses, and their association with marriage and with children)—a link that that I argue stems from the story of the grafted Ethiopian leg. When Cosmas and Damian amputate their patient’s leg and attach that of a dead Ethiopian man, they do not merely give the man a new leg to replace his old one, but also graft a new lineage onto his own. The leg may now be part of the man, but it has had a life separate from him in the past and still does, a life to which its differing color bears witness. Cosmas and Damian, then, graft

onto their patient a physical link with the nameless Ethiopian corpse and everything relating to him, including his lineage. The admixture of ancestry the patient represents—implied visually by his parti-colored lower half—constructs him as a hybrid creature, and Cosmas and Damian as medieval Dr. Frankensteins.

Just as his beatific namesake grafts bodies and grants children, the squire Damian grafts himself into January’s lineage by potentially giving May (and January) a child. Or, more accurately, he may—in fact, “may” is the key word here. The ambiguity, uncertainty, and possibility the word represents—there may or may not be a child: the child may or may not be January’s: it may or may not be Damian’s—all become embodied in May herself. She is paradoxically both the nexus of possibility and the bottleneck through which male fertility flows: it is within her and through her that any graft takes, or doesn’t, and her will controls access to her womb. Like Mary, she is the virga, to which the men attempt to attach their own lineages through insemination.

The vegetal metaphor the tree of Jesse offers suggests another dimension to the idea of the genealogical graft. The grafting of plants was certainly known to medieval audiences: both King Alfred and Albertus Magnus write of it, and it was likely practiced in monasteries. While the actual term “graft” is not used in Middle English until the late fifteenth century, the practice certainly predates this, as Old English has the term impian which carries a similar meaning. The process of grafting includes a


characteristic used by medieval authors, that of the grafting agent, a sort of catalyst required to graft the branch of one tree onto the trunk of another. The idea of the tripartite graft—rootstock, new growth, and grafting agent—echoes through medieval thought, perhaps stemming from a biblical passage (Rom. 11:17-24) in which the grafting agent is God. The grafted tree is frequently used to represent the Trinity, such as the tree of charity (*Cor-hominis*) in *Piers Plowman*. In one legend, the wood for Christ’s cross originates from three different trees (each originating from one of three seeds from the Tree of Knowledge) buried by Moses in the wilderness and miraculously grafted together. A grafted tree serves as a major image in Chretien de Troyes’ *Cliges*, while *Sir Orfeo* has the “ympe-tree” under which Heurodis is stolen by the fairy king.

Just as Saint Damian grafts another ancestry onto his nameless patient, the lover Damian grafts his own ancestry onto January’s family tree through his intercourse with May. And just as Damian and his twin give women children, Damian also potentially gives May a child. The child-giver tradition of Saint Damian originates in Naples. While January is from (and the story is presumably set in) Pavia, in Lombardy—on the opposite side of what is now Italy from Naples—nevertheless these Italian associations for the story might suggest this Neapolitan parallel for Damian. May may or

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82 See *Piers Plowman*, Passus XVIII, lines 4-7.

83 This legend appears in both *Cursor Mundi* and the *Queste del Saint-Graal* (in the Prose Lancelot cycle).

84 See *Cliges*, lines 6317-21 and 6325-29, and *Sir Orfeo*, line 70.
may not conceive a child by her aged Italian husband. However, Damian and May’s potential child is a gift to January as well, especially if January sees more than perhaps he admits. After all, any child of May’s will be raised as January’s son and inherit his property and status—and relatively soon at that, given January’s advanced age. Damian’s potential son, then, is grafted onto January’s family tree through the grafting agent of May.

The idea of the grafting agent or catalyst is more intriguing than perhaps expected at first glance. Through this idea, January, May, and Damian form a trinity of sorts—in fact, we are left with a trinity of trinities, in which each person involved functions at once as rootstock, graft and agent. Damian is grafted onto January’s tree, through May as transmitting agent. January facilitates the arboreal and reproductive union that grafts Damian onto May’s rootstock. And Damian acts as catalyst to May and January’s marriage, through his intervention allowing May to bear a shoot that will cement her place in January’s own genealogy, as the mother of his legal child. She becomes Notre Dame de Scion, if you will.

Both January’s and May’s names are clearly taken from the months of the year, each apparently representing a season: January as hoar winter and May as fertile spring. What season, then, does Damian’s name suggest? The feast day of Saints Cosmas and Damian was 27 September. If January and May are winter and spring respectively, then perhaps Damian is autumn (or “fall,” even). January represents the bare tree or the evergreen, May is lush and fertile and flowering, while Damian is physically mature but not yet in the waning of his life. The fall is associated with harvest and fertility: apples are autumn fruits, while pears were traditionally harvested in both summer

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85 In 1969 the feast of Cosmas and Damian was moved a day earlier, as a new saint was canonized who shared the same feast-day as the two saints.
and fall. (Both May and September, perhaps, to reflect our young lovers?)

Fall is also the time of year that animals would be bred, to ensure birth after the hardships of winter were over. Damian, then, is mature enough (in his prime, even) while young enough that fertility is presumably not an issue. May plucks this fruit both for her own sake and, potentially, for a future child’s as well. One father to provide financially for a child; one father to provide biologically for a child. One to engender, one to raise. Though Damian is far from the Godhead himself, he fills a similarly important role for May.

The Ravishing Radix and the Virtuous Virga:

May, January, and the Genealogical Struggle

After a horrified January spies May and Damian’s arboreal tryst, he reviles May, but she manages to convince him of her innocence, on the pretext that she was attempting to restore his eyesight through her contact with Damian: “Was no thyng bet, to make yow to see, / Than strugle with a man upon a tree” (2373-74). In response to his accusation of explicit coitus (“algate in it wente!” [2376]), May laments that her “medicyne” seems to have failed, as he is not yet seeing properly; she laments that she ever tried to help January. He, seemingly mollified, admits that if he says he saw such a thing, clearly his newly-restored eyes are playing tricks on him, and it will take some time for them to settle in and represent things truly to him. He eventually apologizes to May for accusing her of adultery, and after a graceful acceptance she warns him that “ther may fu

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ll many a sighte yow bigile,” suggesting that perhaps her adulterous trysts will continue (2406). Is January’s mollification a sign of Josephine forbearance and acceptance, or of his role as May’s willing dupe? Certainly his blindness, both physical and
metaphorical, seems to be self-inflicted, but is he refusing to believe unpleasantness, or merely willing to keep May as she is, even at the cost of the occasional dalliance?

The last few lines of the tale leave us with an image that ensures that these problems of reproduction and genealogy stay fresh in our minds:

He kisseth hire and clippeth hire ful ofte,
And on hire wombe he stroketh hire ful softe,
And to his palays hoom he hath hire lad.
Now, goode men, I pray yow to be glad.
Thus endeth heere my tale of Januarie;
God blesse us, and his mooder Seinte Marie! (2413-2418)

We end with one final conflation of May and Mary—a possibly pregnant young woman, potentially presenting her husband with a child that is not his, and “Seinte Marie,” both bride and mother to God.

This would seem—emphasis on seem—to be solely a triumph of female agency. May persuades January that he has misconstrued her actions, and through the genealogical power that is female fertility, May casts all ancestry of her future child into doubt except for her own, while simultaneously keeping the social and economic benefits of a knight’s wife. January’s literal blindness is replaced by a metaphorical willing blindness (whether conscious or not) to his wife’s behavior. Through May’s victory, Proserpine wins her corresponding (if better-natured) contest with Pluto. However, January’s fate is perhaps not as humiliating as it first appears. Knowledge of his cuckoldry is limited to his wife, his squire, and various deities. May’s fertility seems to imply that he will have an heir: whether it will biologically be his child or not, he will have a son who will be primarily his and May’s to raise (supported by Damian’s disappearance from the text as soon as the adultery is witnessed) and to whom he can leave his worldly wealth. And as biblical analogues go,
there were many worse possibilities than the kindly, increasingly venerated St. Joseph.

January and May, then, form a united tree, traditional genders switched as in their counterparts’ version – May is the virile *virga* of Mary, while January is the blossoming branch of Joseph. Like Christ in the tree of Jesse, May’s child will enjoy the benefits of both legal and blood lineage. While direct identifications are ludicrous—January is not Joseph, May is certainly not Mary, and there is little godlike about the transient and snakelike Damian—the resulting family unit’s parallels with the Holy Family perhaps reflects a recognition of the changing nature of the family and of medieval ideas of kinship and descent.

**Conclusion**

So what, then, is the effect of this shift in representation of genealogy, these biblical parallels, and why do they matter within the context of the Merchant’s Tale? It complicates the way in which we envision gender roles within the medieval family, and the way in which such roles were valued. Though clear parallels exist for January and May within the Holy Family—parallels that the characters never pretend to live up to—the seemingly clean-cut equivalencies break down as we find Marian parallels for January as well. The same holds true for parallels with the Edenic trio (Adam, Eve, and the serpent): Chaucer in a way inverts, or at least shares responsibility for, the biblical Fall. Though May’s betrayal of January is likened on some level to Eve’s of Adam, January and May both seem equally liable for the unhappiness of their marriage and arguably what subsequently happens
with Damian, as emphasis is placed on January’s lack of appeal for May and the ill-advisedness of marrying such a young and beautiful girl in the first place. One could say that both spouses are (un)sympathetic. May, unlike Eve, does not attempt to blame the serpent in her garden when she is caught. Damian may be an adder in the bosom, but his parallels with his saintly namesake suggest that he may be fulfilling a more benevolent purpose. Since Damian vanishes from the story just as the scales fall from January’s eyes, May’s aplomb in defending herself in a way makes her a second Eve, one who succeeds in her defense not through blaming her partner, but in the brazen denial of wrongdoing at all.

The figuration of the Merchant’s tree as a tree of Jesse continues to complicate these biblical parallels for the various characters of the story. The rise of these new genealogical forms accompanied a shift in perception of the importance of motherhood and fatherhood and of the nuclear family—or, more accurately, in the conflict of different perceptions. This genealogical conflict manifests itself in the tale in the figure of May, who by one standard transmits the only sure lineage to her potential child—that of the mother who bears it—but also transmits a blood and legal obligation to the child through its father (biological or adoptive). Thanks to May’s guile, neither potential father can be entirely sure of the child’s biological descent, though its legal descent is clear. May, then, as the virga of this particular tree, embodies these new and shifting ideas of family and parenthood, in the maybe-child that embodies the ambiguity in her very name.

The tree of Jesse, then, serves as both a genealogical representation which envisions a new idea of family, as well as a strong example of vertical thought and metaphor. This new vision of the family, both nuclear and extended, reflects changes in the way both gender and genealogy were being
imagined by medieval audiences. The parallels between the characters of the
tale and their biblical and extra-biblical counterparts complicate and enrich
these views further. Both January and Damian are considerably more
complex when their namesakes and counterparts are taken into account, but
it is May who lies at the heart of the tale. As both central and complex figure,
she faces a riskier yet more rewarding challenge than any of her mythic and
religious forebears (whether Queen of Heaven or most reviled of women). The
potential rewards of the genealogical challenge she poses are power, security,
and a kind of independence that none of those forebears—not Eve, not Mary,
and not Persephone—were ever able to achieve.
CHAPTER II

"FRO HEUEN TO HELLE": THE DEAD SEA, THE PEASANTS' REVOLT, AND VERTICAL MOBILITY IN CLEANNESS

Forþy hyʒ not to heuen in haterez totorne, Ne in þe harlatez hod, and handez vnwaschen. For what vrþly haþel þat hyʒ honour haldez Wolde lyke if a ladde com lyþerly attyred, When he were sette solemnely in a sete ryche, Abof dukez on dece, with dayntys servued?

Therefore do not hurry to heaven in ragged clothes, nor in the hood of a beggar and with hands unwashed. For what earthly man who possesses high rank would be pleased if, when he was placed ceremoniously in a splendid throne, above dukes on the dais, served with delicacies, a fellow came meanly dressed?86

This admonition, which comes early in the fourteenth-century poem Cleanness, serves in several ways as a microcosm of the text itself. The poem as a whole preaches clannesse (purity), and likens moral virtue to good clothing—a comparison that the author illustrates in this passage through Christ’s parable of the wedding guest. Just as one would not be admitted to a wedding feast in torn clothing, so those without “spiritual cleanness” will not be admitted into the kingdom of Heaven. In this version of the parable, the fine lord hosting the wedding feast sends one of his guests, for the crime of being clad in poor clothing inappropriate for the occasion, from the feast to the dungeon. In doing so, the author foreshadows relations between moral and religious virtue and social class upon which he will draw later in the poem. He also draws implicit and explicit parallels between these concerns about virtue and class and physical space. Most notably, his re-imagination of

86 Cleanness, lines 33-38. All Middle English quotations are taken from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (ed.), The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript, 5th ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007). The prose modern English translation is also by Andrew and Waldron, from the compact disc included with this edition, with my occasional emendations.
Christ’s parable adds vertical metaphors—of height and depth, and of rise and fall—to the actions taken by the lord and his guest, and to the consequences suffered by the latter. The poet uses similar vertical metaphor in the other major biblical incidents that the poem chronicles: Lucifer’s descent to Hell, the Flood, the destruction of Sodom, and the stories of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. What the author gains through his use of verticality is the ability to construct a framework in which attempts to rise above one’s station—and the creation of an environment where such social mobility is possible—result in a social, moral, and physical fall. This message, I argue, is a response on the part of the poet to two social movements of his day. First, he is generally responding to increased social mobility for urban dwellers, and the resultant growth of the middle class. Secondly, he is specifically responding to the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, a failed rebellion centered around issues of social and economic class.

In the passage I cite at the start of this chapter, the poet explicitly links moral and religious virtue to social status. He draws an explicit parallel between spiritual purity and social position. Just as physical uncleanness would disgust a high lord on a raised dais, with his social and spatial superiority, so spiritual uncleanness will disgust God himself.

The “vrthly haþel þat hyʒ honour haldez” (God), who represents the pinnacle of both virtue and status, holds the wedding feast for his son (Christ), which Cindy Vitto argues is an attempt to define the proper relationship between man and God in terms of a feudal relationship. When those originally meant to attend the event discourteously fail to appear, he

sends his servant into the city to bring all he meets—rich and poor, male and female—to the wedding as guests. The steward invites each man to sit, “[a]s he watz dere of degré dressed his seete” (“the seat of each assigned according to his rank,” 92). The social status (“degré”) of each guest, then, is determined solely by his or her rank. The most wealthy and best dressed are seated at the “hyʒe dese” (“high dais”), while the poorer guests are seated at a long table below, reflecting a setup that was not unusual for the day. When the lord notices that one of his guests is dressed, not in festal clothing, but in garments soiled by work, he grows angry and rails at the man. He ends by ordering guards to haul the poorly-dressed man off to be held “[d]epe in my doungoun þer doel euer dwellez” (“deep in my dungeon where sorrow ever dwells,” 158). The dungeon presumably represents Hell, where those without the proper “clothing” (spiritual cleanness) will end. The “depe doungoun” also describes moral and religious ideals through vertical metaphor and links it to social status—as penalty for his poor clothing, the man is imprisoned in the depths. Virtue, here, is patterned on a vertical axis; lowness is equated with, if not sin precisely, then certainly a lack of virtue.

In the introductory passage I quoted, the poet uses the word “hyʒ” in its verbal sense (the archaic “hie”), but it contains within itself the alternate reading “high.” As one might “hie” oneself to “high” Heaven through personal virtue and faith, so on earth status is “high” honor, represented by the very physical raised dais on which those of highest social rank would often have been seated. This ambiguity is characteristic of one of the poet’s uses of verticality in the text, allowing for multiple interpretation of polyvalent words or homonyms. The two are homophones in Middle English as in modern English, and medieval audiences would have undoubtedly appreciated the double meaning in that introductory passage, especially
coming so soon before “heuen.” The duality is strengthened by the use of the same word two lines later (“hyȝ honour haldez”), in this instance explicitly used to mean “high.” At the end of these two sentences, a final reference to high places comes in the mention of a hypothetical lord or lad seated “above dukes on the dais,” signifying a place of privilege represented by physical elevation. These last two lines, about being seated on the dais above the dukes, are ambiguous in an entirely different way. While context would suggest that these lines refer to the lord, seated overlooking those men of lower social status, grammatically the referent is unclear and they could also be referring to the poorly-dressed man (who of course should not be elevated above dukes). As a result, even when attempting to codify and prescribe a set of social strata where everyone stays firmly in their place and mobility is not possible, ambiguity and possibility remain—an ambiguity that works for the author to make his point, giving him the ability to critique without ever being explicit and while maintaining plausible deniability.

The Cleanness poet uses several other stories from the Bible in the poem, in addition to the parable of the wedding guest, each of which carries implications for vertical mobility and social class. The poem focuses primarily on three biblical incidents (the Flood, the destruction of Sodom, and Daniel and Belshazzar); the poet explicitly uses these incidents to illustrate the consequences for spiritual “cleanness” and “uncleanness,” and I would argue implicitly does the same for the consequences of social mobility. The poem also briefly addresses incidents like Nebuchadnezzar’s descent into

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88 Earl G. Schreiber argues that the wedding feast serves as a microcosm of later events, such as the two sets of invitations to the feast representing God’s two “replenishments” of Creation: his creation of Adam and Eve in response to Lucifer’s fall, and the work of Noah to repopulate the earth after the Flood. See “The Structure of Clannesse,” in The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century, ed. Bernard S. Levy and Paul E. Szarmach (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1981), 131-152
bestial madness and the creation of Adam and Eve, as well as extra-biblical apocrypha such as Lucifer’s fall from Heaven. Biblical retellings and reimaginings of this sort, using specific stories as exempla, were not uncommon in medieval Europe—texts such as the Old English Genesis and Cursor Mundi worked to engage nonclerical audiences, and were common enough to be collectively known as the “medieval popular Bible.”

The particular time and place of the poem’s composition also play into the idea that the author is using it to critique issues of social class. Cleanness (also sometimes translated Purity) is approximately 1,800 lines, divided into quatrains, and is extant in only one manuscript, MS Cotton Nero A.x. That manuscript contains three other poems that are almost universally believed to have been written by the same author (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Patience); the four poems were originally a separate manuscript that was later bound with several unrelated religious texts into the current manuscript.89 While the author of the Cotton Nero A.x poems is unknown, the dialect of all four is that of the Northwest Midlands of England, likely from the area of Cheshire. An actual composition date for the poems is difficult to determine, but general estimates place the time of their writing in the late fourteenth century, a period in which the possibility and reality of social mobility became major concerns in a way they had not previously. 1381 marked the Peasants’ Revolt, in which biblical imagery like that of Cleanness was used to criticize the system of social class (one of the rebels’ mottoes was famously “when Adam delved and Eve span, who was then a gentleman?”). Anne Middleton has discussed anxiety over the increasing

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89 Another poem, Saint Erkenwald, was believed for decades to belong to the same author, but in recent years convincing arguments have been made against a shared authorship for that poem.
possibility of advancement represented by “new men” such as Geoffrey Chaucer and several of his characters in the fourteenth century, and the performative self-consciousness that emerges as a result. (Middleton does not limit her discussion of “new men” to those from rising lay social classes, however, including clergy and gentry among their ranks. Similarly, Philippa Maddern points out that it was not until the early fifteenth century that numerous terms relating to social status and class—specifically those relating to the gentry, and distinguishing them from the middling classes—became more firmly defined.\footnote{See Anne Middleton, “Chaucer’s ‘New Men’ and the Good of Literature in the Canterbury Tales,” Literature and Society, ed. Edward Said (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) and Philippa Maddern, “Gentility,” in Gentry Culture in Late Medieval England, ed. Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2005), 18-34.} The emergent social mobility in the fourteenth century did not only benefit the so-called “peasants,” but those in the other estates whose power and wealth were fairly limited. The idea that these distinctions in class and power could, and indeed would, be reflected in physical and conceptual space would hardly have seemed new in the Middle Ages. Much as they do today, distinctions of class, status and wealth were reflected spatially: land ownership and temporal power went hand-in-hand, the locations of city homes reflected their owners’ status and prosperity, and even individual seating positions in church or the royal court were linked to social class.

Both the physical spaces and social hierarchies of Cleanness are explicitly associated with ideas of high and low, and much of the narrative movement of the poem involves rises to, and falls from, those spaces and places. Because of the poem’s subject matter of spiritual and moral “uncleanness,” and its subsequent punishment, this movement often takes
the form of unauthorized rise and authorized fall, where the authority is (naturally) God. From Satan’s attempt to “telde vp [his] trone in þe tramountayne” (“set up [his] throne in the north,” 212) and subsequent descent into hell, to the Flood victims scrambling to high ground only to die “in þe depe stretmez” (375), these transgressive upward movements are condemned in the poem, and punished with forcible downward motion which is divinely orchestrated—in short, a Fall. Through its use of this recurring motif of physical movement along the vertical axis and its strong association with similar social movement, the poem engages with the implied problems or dangers that lie in social climbing, as well as the temptations that make such a risk inviting. Explicitly social upward mobility is often treated slightly differently in the poem—the fall tends to come, not to those who rise in social position, but to the society or individuals who made that rise possible—but nevertheless these incidents follow the same pattern of transgressive upward movement and downward fall by God’s own authority.

As I have mentioned, the feast at the beginning implicitly parallels physical elevation and social elevation. The higher one’s physical position (i.e., on the dais), the higher one’s social position. This direct connection at the poem’s opening, combined with the linguistic and cultural associations between concepts of physical and social vertical space, would have likely primed his medieval audience to view vertical physical motion throughout the rest of the poem as analogous to or interchangeable with vertical social motion within a medieval class hierarchy. The physical and/or social upward mobility of these characters is punished by downward physical and/or social “falls,” all of which serve as warnings to the reader: upward social mobility, if not sanctioned by God, will be punished. These incidents serve as a critique
of the new social mobility, all the more effective for never being explicitly stated.

In my close reading of the portrayal of vertical space and motion in *Cleanness*, I examine the way in which the author appropriates biblical and apocryphal stories. I am most interested in moments where the poet changes the original narrative to condemn upward physical and/or social mobility where such condemnation was lacking in his source. This occurs in several of *Cleanness*’ biblical reimaginings. With the exception of the parable of the wedding feast and the apocryphal story of Lucifer’s fall, all the stories drawn on by the author come from the Old Testament. All three have strong ties to verticality and to vertical mobility, and reveal the poet’s ambiguous attitude towards the hierarchy of social class and the possibility of upward social mobility.

**Verticality and the Medieval Imagination**

As mentioned in the Introduction, Henri Lefebvre argues that the medieval period is an era of things rising and coming to light, and that vertical space often represents power.\(^91\) Whether representing the spiritual power of God or the economic power of the Church, the soaring vaults of cathedrals were meant to evoke ostentatious grandeur and serve as a source of marvel. Great spires rose hand-in-hand with the Gothic style, and the Gothic spires’ visual thrust toward heaven worked to remind onlookers both

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of the glory of Heaven and of more worldly glories, such as economic and political power.⁹²

Both in the macrocosm of medieval Europe and in the microcosm of *Cleanness*, vertical space does indeed seem to symbolize the power Lefebvre argues it has. This is the case in both religious and social spheres. From a medieval Christian point of view, the ultimate arbiter of both life and afterlife was God, explicitly identified with vertical space within the poem through its frequent description of him as “on lyfte” (“in heaven” or “aloft”) or “on hyhe.” Even Christ’s own resurrection involved an upward motion—especially in the medieval imagination, which due to the general use of in-ground burial would have been more likely to imagine burial in an earthen grave than in a rocky tomb—and was soon followed by the even more vertical Ascension. Likely in response to these religious frameworks and devices, hierarchy of social class was envisioned in a similarly vertical manner, and named in explicitly vertical terms of “degree.”

The concept of degree permeates medieval thought. From the Latin *gradus* to the Middle English *degré*, the concept was applied to everything from the swooping movements of the stars above down to the tiniest shift in alchemical hue. The term “degree” was used for stages of development and for mathematical and astronomical measurements. It denoted different levels of heat, cold, moisture and dryness that constituted but could also destroy the body. It was even used to distinguish kinds of kinship and successive generations in genealogy (of which the word “pedigree” is a partial remnant).⁹³ These uses are widespread in medieval literature—Chaucer uses

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⁹³ “Degree.” *MED.*
the word in its spatial and class senses in the Knight’s Tale on multiple occasions, as does the *Cleanness* poet himself in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (“Bi vche grome at his degre grayþely watz serued”), while Lydgate uses the “pedigree” sense in his *Triumphal Entry of Henry VI*, which poem I will discuss in Chapter III.

The concept was also commonly linked to physical elevation in a way that intensified its application to social rank. Two of the most prominent applications of the term were to physically elevated places (or the means of attaining those places, such as steps or tiers) and to social position/rank. Though spiritual hierarchies officially valued different traits from secular hierarchies, and within them lust for worldly power was decried, nevertheless they were still oriented towards upward mobility; various theories of angelic hierarchy, or texts like Bernard of Clairvaux’s, still portray the upward climb, but value different traits which give spiritual rather than secular currency and position. In the process, these constructions of spiritual hierarchy completely revamp the explicitly vertical secular hierarchy to suit religious and spiritual ideals, rather than working within that secular hierarchy; it is easier and more imaginable for these texts to completely reverse the secular hierarchy than to value the low man on the secular totem pole.

This upward striving for moral virtue was therefore connected to social class, but not always in a way that encouraged social ambition. I have discussed Jacques Le Goff’s vision of vertical hierarchy in my Introduction. The generally accepted position, as Le Goff explains, was that morally and spiritually, people strived for the heights of Heaven, while socially, people

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94 *Sie Gawain and the Green Knight*, line 1006.
tried not to slip lower in the social hierarchy but otherwise were expected to remain in their allotted places. This is true, insofar as one believes that prescriptivist texts accurately describe medieval attitudes; however, such texts were presumably created in response to those who did not follow these rules. Morally and spiritually, many failed to reach the heights, or even to reach for them; from non-Christians to those who found life on earth more worthy of thought and effort than life in Heaven, some people had other concerns than climbing the moral and spiritual hierarchy. Solidarity among the middle classes was not guaranteed. Some merchants and burgesses strove for urban power and control, available only to a limited few; other urban merchants and tradesmen readily gave way to those who attained these very different heights of wealth and power, leading to a division between a powerful oligarchy of *potentiores*, who elected the city's council, and the often self-stated *mediocres* and *inferiores* that made up the rest of the townspeople.95 Nevertheless, some *mediocres* and *inferiores* rose to *potentiores*, as *potentiores* rose to the gentry. Social mobility, though frowned upon to a certain extent, was entirely possible, especially over the course of several generations. Geoffrey Chaucer was born the son of a wine merchant and died a well-respected court official and author, and brother-in-law to a prince’s mistress. His son was even more prominent, and his granddaughter married the duke of Suffolk, one of the most powerful men in Henry VI’s England. John Lydgate took a different route, that of monasticism, which officially ignored or made irrelevant the inviting lure of social climbing; nevertheless, he was born into a relatively humble family and yet was

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eventually patronized by kings, queens, and princes. Social climbers like Chaucer and Lydgate laid the groundwork for fifteenth-century and early modern figures like Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, reputed the son of a butcher who rose to become the wealthiest man in England, and the most powerful aside from King Henry VIII himself. As Chaucer and Lydgate show, people did rise in social status—sometimes through their parents’ work to give them a better education (and hence a chance at a higher status later in life), and sometimes through their own work or decisions. The permeability of class barriers, as well as the possibility for rise (either rapid or over generations) certainly existed, but the possibility for a fall did as well—Alice Chaucer de la Pole, duchess of Suffolk, found herself under a cloud when her husband was murdered by his political enemies and she was subjected to a state trial, which she overcame to keep her social position and to patronize fellow social climber Lydgate.

The same ideas of a rise in social class appear in *Cleanness*, to be followed by a fall. Medieval conception of the subterranean depths are congruent with Lefebvre’s claims that they are associated with death: the most prominent medieval representation of a low point in the scale of verticality is Hell, home of the dead and damned. These kinds of portrayals in the realm of literature extend beyond the *Cleanness* poet—texts such as Dante’s *Inferno*, or medieval representations of the Hellmouth and the Harrowing of Hell, help build the tie between subterranean depth and death and horror. Within *Cleanness* itself, the depths of the Flood or of the Dead Sea (subaquatic rather than subterranean environments, but following the

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96 Wolsey’s ultimate fate, however, was to be stripped of office and property by his king, and to die *en route* to a treason trial—showing that the consequences of social mobility were sometimes as harsh in the early modern era as they were in the *Cleanness* poet’s day.
same principle) serve as equally ominous manifestations of the concept. In the poem, being cast down is never a good thing; whether a sinner literally falls into hell (as with Lucifer and the city of Sodom) or is merely condemned to walk on four limbs rather than on two (as with Nebuchadnezzar), these punitive downward movements become both metaphoric and very, very literal.

“Pe derrest at þe hyhe dese”: The Parable of the Wedding-Guest

In *Cleanness*, the poet’s seeming proscriptions against physical changes in elevation are coded warnings against attempting to make a similar movement socially. Practically, the barriers of class became more permeable than they had been for centuries during the period leading up to *Cleanness*’ composition, most clearly embodied by the emerging “middling classes.” It seems natural that an anxiety over social ascent would arise. Even in other poems believed or formerly believed to be by the same poet—specifically *Pearl* and the problematically attributed *Saint Erkenwald*—similar issues of upward social movement appear, albeit in a much briefer and less draconian form. What is unusual about *Cleanness* is that the poem rarely focuses on this concern with social mobility directly, preferring instead to address it and warn against it through a transposition to physical verticality.

The poet links social place and physical space early on, explicitly engaging social class in a context of physical verticality at the beginning of

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97 In *Pearl* the dreamer is surprised to learn that a young girl has been made a queen in heaven, but quickly rallies, reminding himself of the Virgin Mary’s similar rise; *Saint Erkenwald* a pagan judge is raised to the position of king posthumously because of his virtuous actions.
the poem, as I have discussed. The wedding guest of the tale is swept off to the death-aligned subterranean depths for punishment, potentially to be released when he learns to “dress” properly. (Clothing and class were relatively intricately tied together at the time—as witness sumptuary laws.) Despite the ostensible leveling effect of a feast to which all are invited, the author feels the need to inform us that everyone is seated according to his or her social status:

Ful mannerly with marchal mad for to sitte,
As he watz dere of degré dressed his seete.
[...]
Pe derrest at þe hyhe dese, þat dubbed wer fayrest,
And syþen on lenþe bilooghe ledez inogh.
And ay as segges serly semed by her wedez,
So with marschal at her mete mensked þay were.

Whether they were respectable or inferior, they were all well placed, always the highest in rank and the most splendidly attired in the forefront, the noblest, who were dressed most brilliantly, at the high table, and then, down the length of the hall, people in plenty.

(115-118)

The biblical version has no explicit emphasis on either class or vertical space. The man is cast into “exterior darkness” rather than a dungeon—a shift by the Cleanness poet from outward to downward movement. In response, the man is not even allowed to hang his head in shame, as in Cleanness—it is merely said that “he was silent.” The moral of the parable also differs from that of Cleanness—rather than talking about spiritual cleanness and uncleanness, the parable ends with, “For many are called, but few are chosen.”98 The poet, then, reimagines the text with an increased focus on the outward signs of rank (even if, as with clothing, they are not always explicitly described as such).

If the original parable revolves around the wedding guests’ clothing

rather than their rank (i.e., one’s spiritual “cleanness” as opposed to their place in a spiritual hierarchy), why does the poet make a point of informing us that the conventions of social class have been upheld, even in this admittedly unusual situation? And why does he make a point of informing us of the physical elevation of those highest in rank, at their “hyhe dese”? One thing is certain: the scene shows awareness on the poet’s part of the importance of social degree, and introduces class and rank as concerns within the text. Those of high degree (especially royalty, as in this case) would likely have been placed at the head table for feasts, which would have in reality often have been on a raised dais; the poem here reflects actual practice, then. Especially given a potential contrast with the king’s “depe doungoun” for the unlucky guest, the dais may also be an explicit effort on the author’s part to parallel physical elevation and social elevation, and to place the physical movements of the subsequent tales in an unstated context of social mobility. The poet gives his medieval audience, who would have been highly conscious of the multivalent implications of “degré,” a lens through which to view the incidents that follow: physical elevation can represent social elevation.

The poet offers another template that links physical elevation to metaphorical elevation through his explicit correlation between physical and metaphorical cleanness. As Sarah Stanbury observes, the poem’s introduction “establishes an important correlation between behavior and the perception of visual form, a correlation that subsequently guides our reception of focused descriptive passages.”\(^99\) While Stanbury is referring to the use of garments as a reflection of spiritual (un)cleanness, the identification set forth in this introductory narrative invites us to see a correlation as well between other

visual forms—such as seating—and subsequent judgment of behavior. Just as the visible materiality of clothing represents an invisible, immaterial purity, so physical placement at the banquet can represent metaphorical rise and fall. Perhaps because the association between elevation and social mobility was so ingrained, the Cleanness-poet did not need to show his characters specifically exercising social mobility. Once he had introduced the connection between physical elevation and social elevation in the banquet scene, the two would have become indelibly associated throughout the rest of the poem for an audience attuned to such correlations.

“When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?”: The Cleanness Poet and the Peasants’ Revolt

Despite uncertainty about the date, authorship, and provenance of the poem, Cleanness is likely responding at least in part to the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, and its complicated portrayal of social mobility and ambition is a reaction to economic and social unrest in the poet’s presumed home county of Cheshire. The Revolt—actually a series of smaller uprisings across much of England—was sparked by Richard II’s attempt to enforce a poll tax. After the storming of the Tower of London and the death of major rebel leader Wat Tyler, the Revolt arguably sounded the death-knell for feudalism. In spite of its failure, the Revolt brought home to those in power the dissatisfaction of the middling and lower classes and the potential dangers they posed.

Collection of a heavy poll tax was the immediate cause of the initial uprising, but legal restrictions placed on serfs (especially in light of the labor shortage caused by the Black Death) and perceived mismanagement by Richard’s advisors also contributed to the unrest. The rebels demanded
abolition of certain aspects of the feudal system and protested unreasonable
taxes, unfair urban governance, and unpopular nobles’ influence on young
Richard II.\footnote{Paul Strohm, “A ‘Peasants’ Revolt?’” In \textit{Misconceptions About the Middle Ages}, ed. Stephen J. Harris and Bryon Lee Grigsby (New York: Routledge, 2008), 197.} The rebels did not, however, attempt or even plan to overthrow
the king and his government, seeking only to correct failings in the
government as it existed. Those involved were not the mob of peasants the
name suggests; they instead were “of middling and lesser status,” primarily
made up of laborers, servants, journeymen, craftsmen, and merchants.\footnote{Strohm, “Peasants’ Revolt,” 200-201.}
Large groups of dissenters converged on London from Kent and Essex, and
were eventually let into the city by lower-class supporters (it was rumored at
the time to have been done by treacherous aldermen, but that has been
mostly disproven since), and stormed large parts of the city, razing John of
Gaunt’s Savoy Palace to the ground and entering the Tower of London (after
the king had left it) to execute several high-level officials.\footnote{R. B. Dobson, \textit{The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381}, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1983), 209-213.} Their coarse,
transgressive actions towards the Tower inhabitants they spared—Thomas
Walsingham writes in horror of “rustics” asking the king’s mother for a kiss,
or lounging on the king’s bed—upset the established social hierarchy and won
them few friends. Many citizens of the city also were died or injured. At a
meeting between the fourteen-year-old Richard and the rebels, Wat Tyler was
killed (under circumstances which no two chronicles can entirely agree upon,
but which involved the Mayor of London and one of the king’s squires), and

\footnotetext[100]{Paul Strohm, “A ‘Peasants’ Revolt?’” In \textit{Misconceptions About the Middle Ages}, ed. Stephen J. Harris and Bryon Lee Grigsby (New York: Routledge, 2008), 197.}
\footnotetext[101]{Strohm, “Peasants’ Revolt,” 200-201.}
with that the Revolt lost its primary representative and one of its unifying figures, and soon dissolved.103

While much of the scholarship on the Revolt has focused on the politically important events in the London area, many smaller revolts took place far from London, including in Cheshire; Chester, for example, saw an armed rebellion among villeins of its abbot.104 Cheshire in fact held an intriguing position in later Plantagenet England. Edward I began to assimilate this frontier area more fully into the realm during his conquest of Wales, but Michael Bennett has argued that “[t]he region continued to have a reputation, as befitted a frontier, for turbulence.” Despite this reputation, the earldom of Chester, originally held by a marcher lord, had belonged to the crown for some time by Richard’s reign, and invariably the king or his eldest son held the position. These connections with the royal court, Bennett argues, strengthened the area’s sense of identity even as it became a stronghold of (absent) royal power.105 The reputation for turbulence in the area seems paradoxical given its status as a stronghold for royal power, but nevertheless both existed side-by-side in the area.

Because of Richard’s involvement in Cheshire, the Cleaness poet may have been tangentially linked to the royal court.106 A Kenilworth chronicler criticized the king for allowing the guardsmen to address him in their local


104 Dobson, *Peasants’ Revolt*, 297-299.


dialect, and claimed that the Cheshire dialect was heard in the royal chamber, something John Bowers points to as a result of the presence of Cheshire men within the king’s inner circle.\textsuperscript{107} (Richard had recruited a guard of Cheshire men for his own protection in the late 1380s in reaction to the various rebellions in London and southeast England.)\textsuperscript{108} It is not unthinkable that the poet might be connected, even second- or third-hand, with the Ricardian court in the area. The poet may have been part of the bureaucracy of this court or its hangers-on, even if (as has been argued by some) he is likely to have been a clergyman. As one possibly related to the royal court, it is not unlikely that his livelihood may have depended on the largesse of the king, even as many of those around him found themselves increasingly dissatisfied with the king’s policies.

As a result, I would suggest (along with numerous other scholars), that the Cleanness-poet was likely at least somewhat politically and socially conservative. He was probably connected to some kind of wealthy house, either a household native to Cheshire or one transplanted from London along with so much of the king’s goodwill. (The former is more likely, given the Cheshire dialect of his poems.) In this case, it would be in the poet’s best interest to at least ostensibly support the status quo, especially after the punishments meted out in the wake of the Revolt. As someone who must have been, at least at the time of the poem’s composition, considerably above the lowest ranks of society, the \textit{Cleanness}-poet had a substantial amount to lose if he expressed disloyalty. Even if he was a clergyman, this was likely the case; while Richard had conflicts with the Church later in life, at this

\textsuperscript{107} Bowers, \textit{The Politics of Pearl}, 76.

\textsuperscript{108} Bennett, ”Historical Background,” 86.
point much of the clergy was firmly royalist (as witness the various clergy serving as officers of the realm, who were killed as part of the Revolt). The poet was conservative because it was in his best interests, long-term, to be conservative.

Nevertheless, even as it was a stronghold of Ricardian power, Cheshire was also a center for discontent, and there were other, smaller revolts in the Cheshire area, most notably in 1391-93, 1400, and 1403.109 While these later incidents appear to be primarily the result of unemployment among former soldiers, they suggest that a strong strain of dissatisfaction with the way things were, and a willingness to use popular revolt as a method of protest, ran deep in the Cheshire region. If the poet did indeed come from or have strong ties in the area, he may have shared at least some of these sympathies even as his inclination may have been to safeguard employment, which likely relied on stability and the status quo. Even the Church was not immune to these kinds of popular discontent: any clerics who had a benefice and ministered to the masses would likely need to express, or even feign, a certain sympathy with them, and that may have included the author of *Cleanness*. The Peasants’ Revolt led to the deaths of both major and minor royalists, and clergy were not spared: the Lord Chancellor they killed was also the Archbishop of Canterbury. Regardless of his personal opinion—certainly dissent seems to have been widespread enough in the area that the poet could hardly have been ignorant of counter-arguments and their reasons, and may in fact have shared them—his position relied on conservatism and loyalty to crown. Nevertheless, it is not impossible that he in fact may have shared some of the beliefs of the dissenters. As a result, the

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poet likely found himself caught in the middle, between the working classes and the ruling classes, not unlike the crown and town divide we will see Lydgate navigate in Chapter III. Here, however, the conflict is not merely a political one for the author, but I would suggest a moral one as well. Such straddling of delicate social balances could easily lead to divided sympathies, and hence to the kind of ambiguity in the text of *Cleanness*.

Because of its prominence in the politics of the day, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Revolt also had a noticeable impact on fourteenth-century literature. In addition to its appearance in chronicles of the day, the Revolt shows up in literary texts: Chaucer mentions Tyler’s fellow leader Jack Straw in his *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, while Gower devoted much of his *Vox Clamantis* to lambasting the revolutionaries.110 William Langland alludes to the Revolt in *Piers Plowman* as well: David Fowler, primarily looking at *Pearl*, argues that in contrast to the more politically engaged Langland, the *Cleanness* poet “expresses through his work a Christian serenity, untroubled (apparently) by the turbulence of his time.”111 Fowler may, however, be overlooking the fact that while the *Cleanness* poet may or may not share Langland’s politics, his mere existence in such a politically charged area would have forced him to be engaged politically on some level, both in his writing and in his daily life (albeit perhaps more subtly than Langland). *Pearl* may be relatively apolitical—though even that is disputed—but *Cleanness*, with its tales of kings toppled and a revolt quelled, certainly does

110 *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, lines 3393-96.

not seem to share this trait. And it introduces the idea of civil unrest and rebellion very early on, with the story of Lucifer.

“I schal telde vp my trone in þe tramountayne”: *Cleanness* and Lucifer

The first major story the poet reimagines is that of Lucifer’s fall. Lynn Staley Johnson has convincingly argued that the poem has a tripartite structure, and the Lucifer story lies outside that structure, preparing us for our reading of the main body of the poem.\(^{112}\) It is important, then, to consider what expectations the Lucifer anecdote sets up for us as readers and for the rest of the poem.

Unlike most of the other stories which appear in *Cleanness*, this one is apocryphal: the story of the fall of Lucifer, in this form at least, appears nowhere in the Bible. However, it was a popular tale in the medieval era, and was (almost universally) accepted as canonical. In the poem itself, Lucifer (or Satan; he is nameless) is already “hyhe in þe heuen houen vpon lofte” (“raised aloft high in heaven,” 206), but nevertheless places his desire to usurp God’s position and rise higher in terms of vertical power \(à la\) Lefebvre: “‘I schal telde vp my trone in þe tramountayne,/And by lyke to þat Lorde þat þe lyft made’” (“I shall set up my throne in the north, and be similar to the Lord who made the sky,” 211-212). God punishes him with a descent that is both literal and figurative:

As sone as Dryhtynez dome drof to hymseluen,
Þikke þowsandez þro þrwen þeroute,
Fellen fro þe fyrmament fendez ful blake
Sweued at þe fyrst swap as þe snav þikke,
Hurled into helle-hole as þe hyue swarmez.

Bot as smylt mele vnder smal siue smokez forþikke,
So fro heuen to helle þat hatel schor laste,
On vche syde of þe worlde aywhere ilyche.

...as soon as God's judgement came to him, dense thousands fell violently out of heaven. Fiends black all over fell from heaven, whirled at the first blow like thick snow, hurled into the pit of hell as the hive swarms...but as sieved meal smokes thickly under a fine sieve, so that vile shower stretched from heaven to hell on each side of the world, everywhere alike.

(219-223, 226-228)

As punishment for Lucifer's pride—and their own—the demons are literally and metaphorically cast down into hell.

The “hatel schor” of Cleanness—the “vile shower” that is the fiends falling from heaven into hell—reflects the possible, even likely, fate of those who attempt to rise above their stations. (“Hatel” may also bring to mind the “hathel,” or lord, of the opening. Not only is it a vile shower, but it comes from the Lord as well.) The Middle English “schor” (a variant spelling of “shour”), like the modern “shower,” tends to reflect the falling of some liquid (rain, tears, blood, etc.). Water in general works as a tool to stabilize social status in Cleanness—the Flood is used to destroy humanity after the giants literally tower above other men, while the Dead Sea is all that remains of that site for social mobility, Sodom. Perhaps unsurprisingly, water is often associated with the “cleanness” of the title, both secularly and religiously—one cleans oneself of grime with water, just as one is cleansed of sin through the sacrament of baptism. It was also associated with both civil and class unrest indirectly, as the issue of infant baptism was vigorously argued against by Wyclif and the Lollards. As clerical histories claimed that the Lollards were secretly behind the Peasants’ Revolt (or at least inspired one of its leaders,
radical preacher John Ball), this may also suggest that the author of
*Cleanness* was either a clergyman or clergy-trained.\textsuperscript{113}

The immediate historical parallel for the Lucifer incident is clear—the figure who rises up against his rightful lord, inciting his fellows to follow him, seems tailor-made to connect with Wat Tyler. In the eyes of conservative Englishmen there may have been very little difference between the chaotic mobs of the Revolt and the storm of demonic beings swirling towards hell. Froissart, for example, claimed that the rebellion was caused by “the ease and riches that the common people were of,” and Gower likened the mob to “a monstrous thing or species” which came “like a shower scattered by the east wind,” raging from hunger and fury.\textsuperscript{114} Especially if the *Cleanness* poet was at all connected with the Ricardian court in Cheshire, repositioning the legitimate grievances of the peasants as a matter of overweening pride would have had the pleasant side effect of figuring Richard as the benevolent yet judgmental deity.

Why, then, read this social movement—easy as it may be to do so—into the relatively straightforward adaptation *Cleanness* makes of Lucifer’s fall, or claim that the act of falling somehow enhances or emphasizes the idea? After all, Lucifer’s story already included this fall, and the explicit focus on the act thereof. Nevertheless, this is only the beginning of the focus on vertical movement in the poem, and much of the remainder is not necessarily supported by the source texts and is in fact added by the poet. By placing such a strong, *added* focus on verticality in later examples, he brings attention to the political and social valences inherent in Lucifer’s fall.

\textsuperscript{113} Dunn, *The Peasants’ Revolt*, 81.

\textsuperscript{114} Both quoted in Dobson, *Peasant’s Revolt of 1381*, 370, 388.
“Deth in þe depe stremes”: *Cleanness* and the Flood

Of the three major incidents in *Cleanness*, the first the poet chooses to include is the story of Noah and the flood. The Latin Vulgate Bible, the most canonical version of the flood tale for medieval audiences, gives a relatively bare-bones account of the flood:

In the six hundredth year of the life of Noe, in the second month, in the seventeenth day of the month, all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the floodgates of heaven were opened: And the rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights. [...] And the flood was forty days upon the earth: and the waters increased, and lifted up the ark on high from the earth. For they overflowed exceedingly: and filled all on the face of the earth: and the ark was carried upon the waters. And the waters prevailed beyond measure upon the earth: and all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered. The water was fifteen cubits higher than the mountains which it covered. And all flesh was destroyed that moved upon the earth, both of fowl and of cattle, and of beasts, and of all creeping things that creep upon the earth: and all men. And all things wherein there is the breath of life on the earth, died. And he destroyed all the substance that was upon the earth, from man even to beast, and the creeping things and fowls of the air: and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noe only remained, and they that were with him in the ark.\(^\text{115}\)

The only explicit references to height in this biblical narrative are the description of the flood itself and the references to crawling and flying animals.\(^\text{116}\)

*Cleanness* is not the only medieval text to discuss the Flood. Texts such as *Cursor Mundi* and the various play-cycle renditions of Noah deal

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\(^\text{115}\) Genesis 7:11-12, 17-23.

\(^\text{116}\) The backstory of the Flood—the creation of the half-angelic Nephilim, a race of giants whose very existence displeases God—certainly holds vertical significance; as we will see in Chapter III, giants are often used to represent an overly strong concern with self and to symbolize pride, and potentially an overweening desire for social mobility just as Lucifer does.
with the incident; however, they usually focus primarily either on the ark's inhabitants or on the sin of unnatural lust. Very few place an emphasis on vertical motion or space. Perhaps the only version of the Flood story that places as much emphasis on height and depth is a parody: Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, which involves washtubs hung from the ceiling and a painful and embarrassing fall on the part of the cuckolded husband. Unlike the more conservative *Cleanness* poet, Chaucer has no problem punishing John for others' sins—his blindness to his wife's and tenant's actions and his gullibility make him an appropriate target for Chaucer's slightly more savage Flood—or "Flood"—narrative. The *Cleanness* poet, on the other hand, prefers a relatively rigidly-maintained sense of justified punishment, even as he arguably identifies with and sympathizes with the doomed victims.

*Cleanness* depiction varies considerably from the Vulgate version, and adds much to these bare bones, including an extended segment filled with upward movement, which centers on the doomed humans trying to reach high ground. Here the poet imbues the scene with both a sense of horror at the rising water's inevitability and a surprisingly immediate sympathy with the doomed. He tells us that people "bowed to the hyh bonk" ("went to the high ridges") and "to the hyhe hyllez" (379-380); animals also, where hares and harts "to the hyhe runnen" (391). Though even the mountains are no longer dry, the people still go there seeking refuge; when the water "to her fete flohed and waxed" (398), the doomed humans resign themselves to their fate, and are united in their grief and fear. Vertical movement seems to provide the humans' only hope (however ultimately hopeless) of survival; nevertheless, it turns out to be fruitless. God is unmoved by their tragedy, and while the narrator seems sympathetic to their plight, he also does not question the justice of their divinely-assigned fate. They are punished by
being sent to “deth in þe depe stremez” (374); as in Lefebvre, depth here (in this case not subterranean, but subaquatic) clearly signifies death.

The association of upward physical movement with a subsequent fall continues even after the forty days have passed and the flood has subsided. Both the Bible and Cleanness recount Noah’s use of a raven and a dove as scouts to find dry land. The Vulgate sums up the raven’s journey in two verses: “And after that forty days were passed, Noe opening the window of the ark, which he had made, sent forth a raven: Which went forth and did not return, till the waters were dried up upon the earth.” Cleanness once again elaborates on this brief anecdote, expanding the incident to twenty-two lines; the author also adds numerous references to vertical motion. He clearly positions the use of the raven as a mistake on Noah’s part from the beginning by describing the raven as “so ronk, þat rebel watz euer” (“so proud, that was ever a rebel”) and as a “corbyal vntrwe” (“unfaithful raven,” 455-456). The raven, through his lack of responsibility, is proved to be all of these things; in becoming distracted from his mission by carrion and failing to return; not only is he untrue to the mission with which he has been charged, but he privileges his own desires over those of his master. This failure itself is recounted in explicitly vertical terms: when he “fongez to þe flyht” (“takes to flight”), he “halez hyhe vpon hyht” (“sweeps high upon the heights”) [457-458]. His downfall, both moral and physical, comes about when he discovers carrion “kast vp on a clyffe” and immediately “fallez” upon it (460, 462). He falls, and in doing so, fails, which Staley Johnson characterizes as a relapse into the sins of the antediluvian world: he is never mentioned again. Like

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117 Genesis 8:6-7.

Wat Tyler, the “rebel” crow brings about his own downfall through taking to the heights.

As in the biblical original, the *Cleanness* poet includes the faithful dove as a counterpart to the faithless raven. One might expect, after having spent so much time examining the negative portrayals of upward physical motion, that this might provide a counterpoint – after all, flight is innately height-related, and nothing about the dove’s journey is particularly negative, so this clearly could be an example of neutral or even positive upward motion. However, in contrast to the explicit mentions of height in the raven’s story, the dove interestingly receives none of this height-oriented imagery; despite flying out much like the raven, only multiple times and more successfully, there are no explicit references to height in this section of the story. The closest is a request from Noah to “dryf ouer” the water, and the fact that the dove goes “on wyngez” (472, 475). Because the dove does not receive punishment or a subsequent physical/metaphorical fall, her upward physical movement, while obvious, is not explicitly referred to as such in the way that the raven’s is. However, it still seems odd, especially given that the poet introduces an exception to the “upward movement is bad” rule in the character of Lot.

**Death by Degree: *Cleanness* and the Destruction of Sodom**

The Bible’s portrayal of Lot’s escape from Sodom and its subsequent destruction is relatively straightforward:

And they brought him forth, and set him without the city: and there they spoke to him, saying: Save thy life: look not back, neither stay thou in all the country about: but save thy self in the mountain, lest
thou be also consumed. And Lot said to them: I beseech thee, my
Lord, Because thy servant hath found grace before thee, and thou
hast magnified thy mercy, which thou hast shewn to me, in saving my
life, and I cannot escape to the mountain, lest some evil seize me, and
I die. There is this city here at hand, to which I may flee, it is a little
one, and I shall be saved in it: is it not a little one, and my soul shall
live? And he said to him: Behold also in this, I have heard thy
prayers, not to destroy the city for which thou hast spoken. Make
haste, and be saved there: because I cannot do any thing till thou go
in thither. Therefore the name of that city was called Segor. The sun
was risen upon the earth, and Lot entered into Segor. And the Lord
rained upon Sodom and Gomorrha brimstone and fire from the Lord
out of heaven. And he destroyed these cities, and all the country
about, all the inhabitants of the cities, and all things that spring from
the earth. And his wife looking behind her, was turned into a statue
of salt. And Abraham got up early in the morning, and in the place
where he had stood before with the Lord: He looked towards Sodom
and Gomorrha, and the whole land of that country: and he saw the
ashes rise up from the earth as the smoke of a furnace.119

In Cleanness, on the other hand, the Sodom narrative and the subsequent
fate of the area is perhaps the section most charged with ambiguity about
social aspiration and vertical mobility. Not only does the poet introduce a fall
for the entire city of Sodom, but he presents the site of what was formerly
Sodom, the Dead Sea, as a horrific, unnatural place due to its subversion of
traditional ideas of upward and downward mobility.

The story at first seems an exception to the correlation between
upward physical or social mobility and fall-as-punishment; after all, there is
no specific evidence of the Sodomites’ own physical or social rise, so for what
are they being punished? In the context of Cleanness, however, Sodom must
be destroyed, not only because of its sexual unconventionality, but because it
is a place where social mobility is possible. The primary evidence for this
argument appears when the Sodomites rebuke Lot for withholding his guests,
claiming that he is a foreigner who “com a boy to þis burh, þah þou be burne
ryche” (“came to this city a churl, though you are [now] a rich man”). While

some translators such as Casey Finch have placed the last half of this sentence in the past tense, making Lot’s possession of wealth contemporaneous with his arrival in Sodom, the verb seems clearly to be in the present tense, implying a lapse of time between the two events as well as some direct connection between them. The implications of this lacuna seem clear: Sodom provides Lot an opportunity for upward social mobility, the ability to go from a “boy” to a “burne ryche.” Staley Johnson claims that Lot’s wealth “is inextricably involved with the doomed city,” and indeed both his wealth and presumed accompanying social position are made possible only through Sodom itself.\(^{120}\) In the world of *Cleanness*, this, as much as “unnatural” sexuality, makes Sodom suspect, and the city must be punished with an unwilling descent (specifically here being drawn into hell).

As *Cleanness* is so concerned with physical and metaphorical spaces, it is those who create this space for upward mobility (the Sodomites) who are punished, rather than those who benefit from it (Lot). This is perhaps reflective of, or reflected in, medieval Christian attitudes towards the Jews, who frequently received more blame for lending money to Christians than the Christian borrowers did: I would submit that much of the animosity borne towards Jewish moneylenders came from the social mobility they made possible.\(^{121}\) The language of movement along the vertical axis appears throughout the narrative of Sodom, mostly focusing on downward movement: Sodom’s sound “synkkez” in God’s ears, and the angels warn Lot

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\(^{120}\) Staley Johnson, *Voice of the Gawain Poet*, 121.

\(^{121}\) As an example of Jews being blamed for the actions Christian took to borrow them, see the culmination of the anti-Semitic riots in York during Richard I’s reign in Robert Chazan, *The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom, 1000-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 161.
of Sodom’s inevitable fate in similarly vertical terms: “Sodomas schal ful sodenly synk into grounde./And þe grounde of Gomorre gorde into helle” (“Sodom will very suddenly sink into the ground, and the foundation of Gomorrah shall hurtle into hell,” 910-911). But the verticality of the Sodom narrative truly appears only on the morning Sodom is destroyed; we see Lot and his family fleeing Sodom in the early hours of the morning to seek high ground, while simultaneously Sodom is swallowed by Hell in a catastrophic vertical movement: God opens the “grete barrez of þe abyme” (“the great barriers of the abyss”) and “[a]l þo citees and her sydes sunkken to helle” (“all those cities and their surroundings sank into hell,” 962, 969) Like Lucifer earlier in the poem, Sodom itself is physically drawn into Hell: the ultimate in downward mobility.122

Perhaps even more interestingly, the author also places the city of Segor, or Zoar, on a hill, an addition unsupported by the biblical source. Lot tells the angel that “Per is a cite herbuside þat Segor hit hatte— / Here vtter on a rounde hil hit houez hit one” (“There is a city near here that is called Zoar—out here it stands alone on a round hill,” 926-927). This change accomplishes several purposes: it parallels the escape of Lot’s family with the Flood victims’ attempts to reach safety, showing the difference between upward movement that is approved (i.e., unpunished) and that which is not. It also conflates this part of the biblical narrative with the following chapter, in which the remaining members of the family leave Segor and go up into the hills nearby; there Lot’s daughters get their father drunk and initiate an incestuous sexual relationship with him. The incest element is a notable absence in Cleanness: the poet conflates the two incidents when he

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122 As biblically, the city is destroyed by a rain of fire, this descent into Hell is an explicit addition by the poet, though with precedent in the work of authors such as Josephus.
appropriates the hill motif for the moment of refuge, and reminds his readers of the absent incest incident. In doing so, he authorizes his narrative’s biblical authenticity – invoking this incident assures his audience that he knows of and acknowledges it. However, he omits the incest narrative itself both because it fails to fit the stated argument he attempts to make in *Cleanness*—after all, neither Lot nor his daughters are punished for their very definite sin of uncleanness—and because he could then no longer use Lot as an example of an unpunished climb.

The concept of punishment throughout the poem necessitates the consideration of its source: by whose authority are these characters punished? The obvious answer within the world of the poem is God himself—judgments such as the Flood or the destruction of Sodom are explicitly said, both in the poem and in the biblical source, to issue from God. However, only certain characters find themselves punished for daring to strive upwards: Lucifer is cast down to Hell, but Lot’s transgressive social climbing merely results in the loss of his home. Peter C. Braeger has argued that Lot’s sins are not to be wholeheartedly endorsed, but are meant to show that even good men can be sinful.¹²³ And indeed, the author conspicuously fails to make excuses for Lot’s poorer behaviors, though he does occlude the incest narrative (which always lurks behind the story, but is never directly addressed here). The question then must be raised: why this inconsistency in punishment? Staley Johnson argues that it is because Lot serves as a figure of reform—that that is, in fact, his story—but I would argue that the looming

specter of incest, unsaid but unforgotten, hovers at the edge of the narrative, placing into question the consistency of the author’s warnings.\textsuperscript{124}

All other examples of upward movement in the poem we have examined (and will examine) are followed by a fall, except for this one. The difference between Lot’s upward movement and that of the others in the poem is his lack of agency in doing so; his upward social movement is arguably Sodom’s fault for making it possible (as we will see later with Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar), and his upward physical movement is endorsed by God. The issue of God-approved physical/social movement is a tricky one in \textit{Cleanness}, as this is the only example of such in the poem; working from the claim that physical movement is analogous to social movement, it certainly seems different (at least in its results) from unapproved upward movement. However, it is difficult to construct a theory of “acceptable” social movement without more evidence of approved (i.e., unpunished) movements. What makes Lot’s movement different from, for example, that of the Flood victims, who are similarly portrayed seeking refuge within the poem? Perhaps it is merely the limiting effect of the biblical source material, but then why place Segor on a hill and introduce the concept of vertical movement into Lot’s escape from Sodom at all? Or why not introduce the movement where it originally occurs – a scene that ends with the catastrophe of incest? (It could even arguably be a punishment of downward motion then, as Lot would presumably move from an upright position when drinking to a prone or supine position when drunk and insensible, something the author could easily work with.)

There certainly appears to be a clear purpose to including this

\textsuperscript{124} Staley Johnson, \textit{Voice of the Gawain Poet}, 125.
unpunished upward movement, and a large part of it seems to involve God’s endorsement, but the specific motivation for doing so is unclear. Perhaps its purpose is to reinforce that, as Lot’s ascent in Sodom was an “unnatural” rise, so the ascension to Segor is was well. Lot perhaps does not escape punishment for his social mobility in Sodom or entirely shift blame to the city, so much as his punishment is delayed until he escapes.

_Cleanness_’s rendition of the story is especially interesting when placed next to another Middle English retelling. In the Southern Version of _Cursor Mundi_, no mention is made of the hill of Segor, merely the existence of the place itself, and the story of Lot’s incest is told explicitly. However, the story here also uses vertical language and metaphor, albeit in a slightly different way from the _Cleanness_-poet. The angels tell him to save “Sone or dou3ter þat þou owe / To þe longynge hy3e or lowe,” and his wife and daughter are described as those “þat my3te vp loke.”

Certainly they seem to be occupying positions with an established hierarchy, but the usage and implications here are slightly more unclear than in _Cleanness_, so it is unclear whether this hierarchy is social, familial, moral, or something else entirely. Regardless, the individuals performing these vertically-oriented acts—longing, looking—are the women of the story, often voiceless in other versions. The destruction of Sodom itself is described in similarly vertical terms—no part is left “vnsunke” as God lets fire and brimstone rain from the sky and destroy the city. As a result, the city is gone and replaced by a “stynkand…lake of helle,” the Dead Sea.

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125 _Cursor Mundi_, 2807-2808, 2824.

126 They show unexpected agency and voices again later in the text, when we see Lot’s daughters’ fairly lucid explanation of their reasoning for seducing their father.

127 _Cursor Mundi_, 2862-2863.
Medieval Accounts of the Dead Sea

According to the Bible, the place in which Sodom once stood, as a result of the cataclysm, becomes known as the Dead Sea. The Sea itself, then and now, has a high density due to its high salt content, leading not only to a natural buoyancy but to legends about floating rocks and sinking feathers—legends that reach from Sir John Mandeville to Sir Walter Scott, and which play a prominent role in Cleanness' description of the aftereffects of Sodom's destruction.

These descriptions originate with the Jewish author Josephus. In his History of the Jewish Wars, Josephus emphasizes the fact that it was impossible to drown in the Dead Sea—a living person would merely float—and claims that the Roman emperor Vespasian tested this by selecting men who could not swim and then having them thrown into the water with their limbs bound. He also discusses the “asphalt” or pitch which rose to the surface of the water, which he mentions can only be dissolved through the use of menstrual blood or urine. Josephus’ work was later condensed and adapted into Latin, circa 370 AD, by Pseudo-Hegesippus: in his De excidio urbis Hierosolymitanae (“On the Ruin of the City of Jerusalem”), he claims that the Dead Sea is a place for dead things only and rejects living things, which “however violently thrown in are immediately ejected,” citing Vespasian’s experiments as evidence. He also claims that an oil lamp set

128 Josephus iv.4.

alight will float on the water, but will immediately sink once the flame goes out or is extinguished. Meanwhile, *De Sodoma* (“On Sodom,” written between the fourth and seventh centuries A.D.) claims that dead and inanimate objects sink into the sea, while living things float; it also enumerates a list of life that will not be found within.\(^{130}\) Circa 702 AD, Bede, in *De locis sanctis* (“On the Holy Places”), cites Pseudo-Hegesippus word-for-word, while adding a few of his own embellishments.\(^ {131}\) The anonymously-written *Descriptio locorum circa Hierusalem adjacentium* (“Description of Places Around and Adjacent to Jerusalem”) focuses on the deadness of the Sea, claiming that were a bird to merely fly over it, it would drop from the sky and die, sinking into the sea.\(^ {132}\) Other descriptions can be found in *Itinerarium Antonini Placentini* (“Travels of Antoninus of Piacenza”), circa 570, and in Petrus Comestor’s twelfth-century *Historia scholastica*, among other texts.\(^ {133}\)

*Cursor Mundi* contains a rendition of the Dead Sea that differs noticeably from both its predecessors and its successors. Not only will a burning brand float on the surface—something it argues occurs as a result and/or a cause of burning brimstone rather than the suggestive implicit

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\(^{132}\) An English translation of the *Descriptio locorum* merged with another letter to form a facsimile of both works’ source, the *Work on Geography*, can be found in John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrimage, 1099-1185* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1988), 180.

characterization of a flickering flame as life—but “þere stondeþ euer wondirly / A cloude þerfro vp to þe sky.” In contrast to the descent of heaven to earth in the rain of torment, and of earth to hell in Sodom’s destruction, the Cursor Mundi poet instead focuses on the anomalous rises. The cloud, associated with the floating brand and the burning brimstone, is miraculously everpresent. It extends up to the sky, just as the brand and the brimstone rise to the surface of the Sea itself. Interestingly for a narrative so focused on sexual sin and its subsequent punishment in other sections (such as the Flood narrative, which seems to imply that lesbian sex was the cause of the Flood), Cursor Mundi characterizes the aftereffects of Sodom’s destruction—unlike most of its fellow narratives—fairly consistently as rises. The only fall in the poem’s Dead Sea is that which creates it.

Sir John Mandeville took several of these sources and incorporated them into his Travels, an enormously popular text whose influence on the Dead Sea was felt well into the nineteenth century. Mandeville writes of the Dead Sea that

It is called the Dead Sea because it neither ebbs nor flows, but always stands still, and it neither brings forth nor fosters any living thing. It will receive no manner of living thing into itself, man nor beast, fish nor fowl. That has often been proved: for men have often thrown criminals into it who have been condemned to death for their crimes, and it has immediately cast them out again. Ships cannot sail on it unless they are well dressed with pitch; for nothing dead can go into it without immediately sinking, unless it is well painted with pitch. If a lighted lantern is thrown in, it floats; if an unlit one is thrown in, immediately it sinks. And if iron is thrown into it, it rises again and floats on top; but if a feather is thrown in, it sinks. And that is against

134 Cursor Mundi, 2871-2872.

135 in 1555, French priest Gabriel Giraudet recorded a description of the Dead Sea much like Mandeville’s (sinking feathers, floating metals, and submerged criminals in a state of stasis), and Sir Walter Scott uses the trope similarly in his 1825 novel The Talisman, which features a Dead Sea sequence presumably inspired by Mandeville’s account.
Mandeville’s Dead Sea lives up to its name much like its predecessors, refusing to accept any living thing but immediately subsuming the dead. This extends even to things that are not technically alive—have never been and could never be—but seem somehow alive or animate in a way: a living flame will float, while an extinguished one will not. However, even here we see exceptions: specific mentions are made that both iron and pitch will float, neither of which are living, moving, or have any suggestion of life. The buoyancy of the pitch at least has precedent: Mandeville earlier emphasizes the fact that the sea throws up “great lumps” of pitch regularly, such that it is sometimes called the Asphalt Sea, which is likely a reference to the formation of bitumen on the surface of the actual sea. Petrus Comestor likely serves as a source for the floating iron: he claims that heavy things all float in the water of the Dead Sea. The Sea, then becomes a space into which no living thing may pass, while dead and inanimate objects are welcome; yet, unlike many of the earlier, generally more consistent texts, certain inanimate objects may float as the living do. Even its reversed verticality is not consistent: the Dead Sea is unnatural in every sense of the term, even in its unnaturalness.

These disparate narratives of the Dead Sea have only relatively recently been collected and examined as a group. In 1898, Andrew Dickson White published the first even remotely in-depth study of the Dead Sea phenomenon in archaic and medieval literature.\textsuperscript{137} More recently, Joan E.


\textsuperscript{137} Andrew Dickson White, \textit{A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom}, vol. II (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), 221-235.
Taylor has surveyed the Dead Sea in Byzantine and later travel narratives.\footnote{Joan E. Taylor, “The Dead Sea in Western Travellers’ Accounts from the Byzantine to the Modern Period.” \textit{Strata: Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society} 27 (2009), 9.}

The \textit{Cleanness} poet, then, takes these sources—most notably Mandeville’s account—and recounts the transformation of the site of these cities from a blasted wasteland to the slightly less blasted wasteland that is the Dead Sea, using much of the myth and metaphor of his predecessors. He describes the sites of these destroyed cities “\textit{þat foundered hatz so fayr a folk and þe folde sonkken}” (“which has engulfed so fair a folk and sunk the land,” 1013); Sodom’s former site is now “plunged in a pit like of pich fylled” (1010), and sends ashes “vpe in þe ayre” (1014). Working from the tradition of Josephus and Mandeville, the \textit{Cleanness} poet describes the Dead Sea in vivid terms; “brod and bopemleze, and bitter as þe galle” (1022), the laws of nature fail to apply here.\footnote{Whiston, William, trans. \textit{Works of Flavius Josephus: The Wars of the Jews.} Calvin College: Christian Classics Ethereal Library. \texttt{<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/josephus/works/files/works.html>>}. Accessed 05/16/07. 4.8.4.} The poet paints an unsettling picture of the scene:

\begin{quote}
And noht may lenge in þat lake þat any lyf berez,
And alle þe costez of kynde hit combrez vchone.
For lay þeron a lump of led, and hit on loft fletez,
And folde þeron a lyht fyber, and hit to founs synkkez;
And þer water may walter to wete any erþe
Schal neuer grene þeron growe, gresse ne wod nawþer.
If any schalke to be schent wer schowued þerinne,
THa3 he bode in þat boþem broþely a monyth,
He most ay lyue in þat lohe in losyng euermore,
And neuer dryhe no dethe to dayes of ende.
\end{quote}

...and no living thing can survive in that lake, and it destroys every one of the qualities of nature. For lay a lump of lead on it, and it floats on the surface, and place on it a light feather and it sinks to the bottom; and where water can flow to any wet earth, nothing green shall ever grow on it, neither grass nor wood. If any man were pushed into it to be drowned, though he might remain wretchedly in that deep place for a month, he must always live in that lake in perdition evermore, and never suffer death until the last days.
It robs life from the soil it touches, and the trees that grow near it bear luscious-looking fruit that is revealed to be nothing but ash within; unpleasant substances such as sulfur and asphalt wash up on its shores. In the Dead Sea, the “natural” order of all things becomes perverted, and vertical movement is no different. Things that should rise up go down and vice versa; a drowning person should either sink toward death or float, but instead stays in a torturous stasis. Even downward movement is complicated: a human body paradoxically could stay at the bottom for a month, but while sinking brings one closer to death (as one might expect in Lefebvre’s framework), the sea itself is “bottomless.” In this hellish place, a person can endure eternal punishment and eternal downward motion without ever quite reaching an end.

The Dead Sea is an important central metaphor for Cleanness and serves as the visual centerpiece for the longest of the three main centerpieces, the destruction of Sodom. It also poses more strictly morally-implicated punishment than those of the Flood victims, Belshazzar, or Lucifer, and one that perhaps reflects a conservative viewpoint on the part of the author more clearly. The only survivors are Lot and his daughters, who seem to come out of the incident fairly well. Nevertheless, if we acknowledge that medieval audiences almost certainly would have thought of the incestuous couplings that immediately followed Lot and his daughters’ escape, ultimately the blame for the tragedy of Sodom and the Dead Sea can potentially be distributed to everyone. Does this reflect an ambiguity on the part of the poet? Certainly he seems to describe the Dead Sea itself with a selection of motifs that are not entirely original to his own work but the combination of which is: the unnatural flotation and sinking of the sea combined with as the
stasis of eternal torment for the living do seem to differ at least in this particular combination of details from every other version. The reversed verticality of the Dead Sea seems to be criticizing mobility of class and status as unnatural, but the eternal torment suffered by a live person in the sea seems to suggest a punishing stasis or stagnation—even perhaps figuring the sea as an entrance to Hell—which potentially suggests a more negative view of the status quo.

Given the link between physical and social mobility for which I have argued, the absolute reversal of physical movement seems to recall Bernard of Clairvaux’s spiritual hierarchy, or even more closely, the world of the Beatitudes (which are explicitly invoked near the beginning of Cleanness). In this world the humble also rise to the top, but of a social rather than a moral hierarchy: “Blessed are the meek: for they shall possess the land.” The negative connotations inherent in this description suggest, however, that the poem is perhaps taking a slightly oppositional position towards God’s actions; this topsy-turvy conception of social class is divinely sanctioned (in the case of both the Dead Sea, which is the result of God’s actions, and the Beatitudes), but nevertheless seems to leave the poet deeply uneasy. The societal reversal created by replacing the secular hierarchy with a spiritual one—placing the meek at the top, displacing the former landowners and leaving them lowered in status—is biblically supported, but here the poet seems to position the physical personification of such a society as repugnant and unnatural. Those who should float on the top of society instead sink to the bottom, and those who should stay on the bottom instead rise to the top. In contrast to the idyllic biblical vision of the Beatitudes, in Cleanness this new world gives rise to unnatural fruits (literally). Though the poet has previously always aligned himself with God’s decisions, he cannot disguise his anxiety and disgust for
this place within the poem. Whether it is because spiritual hierarchy should not exist in a worldly setting, or merely that the tradition of secular hierarchy is so strong that reversing it causes unease, even divine sanction cannot entirely wipe away the abject horror of this possible new world ordering, and of the twisted social hierarchy it implies.

"God of be grounde": *Cleanness* and the Babylonian Kings

The final biblically-inspired segment of *Cleanness* centers on the Babylonian king Belshazzar. In the Vulgate account, after he desecrates God's holy vessels (taken from the Temple by his father Nebuchadnezzar), a ghostly hand appears and writes a mysterious text on the wall. After his scholars and prophets fail to read the writing, Belshazzar calls in the prophet Daniel. Daniel translates the text and gives an interpretation to Belshazzar: his kingdom will soon fall. To convince Belshazzar of God's power, Daniel tells him of Nebuchadnezzar's own adversarial relationship with God. Daniel recounts Nebuchadnezzar's pride, his desire for control over social status, and the manner in which he is very literally cast down by God.

O king, the most high God gave to Nabuchodonosor, thy father, a kingdom, and greatness, and glory, and honour. And for the greatness that he gave to him, all people, tribes, and languages trembled, and were afraid of him: whom he would, he slew: and whom he would, he destroyed: and whom he would, he set up: and whom he would, he brought down. But when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit hardened unto pride, he was put down from the throne of his kingdom, and his glory was taken away. And he was driven out from the sons of men, and his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild asses, and he did eat grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven: till he knew that the most High ruled in the kingdom of men, and that he will set over it whomsoever it shall please him.140

140 Daniel 5:18-21.
*Cleanness* expands this brief three-verse flashback in the biblical source to a fifty-line digression, keeping most of the earlier verticality of the biblical narrative and adding more downward movement to Nebuchadnezzar’s punishment, emphasizing the literal physicality of Nebuchadnezzar’s figurative fall into the world of the beasts. This shift in emphasis may be due to the author’s focus on personal responsibility for social movement, whether one’s own or another’s, and on the punishment thereof. He is to a certain extent following the biblical tradition in doing so, but the changes he creates support what I have been arguing is his goal. Nebuchadnezzar attempts to usurp God’s authority when he assumes the responsibility of controlling the hierarchical structure of social class: “Whoso hym lyked to lyft, on lofte watz he sone,/And quoso hym lyked to lay watz lohed bylyue” (“whoever it pleased him raise, he was soon on high, and whoever it pleased him to lay low was immediately humbled,” 1649-1650). Then he explicitly parallels himself with God, placing himself in the same position at the top of the hierarchy: “I am god of þe grounde, to gye as me lykes./As He þat hyhe is in heuen, His aungeles þat weldes” (“I am god of the earth, to rule as it pleases me, like Him who is high in heaven, who rules His angels,” 1663-1664). In *Cleanness*, Nebuchadnezzar hedges his bets by ensuring that he specifies that his domain is only “the ground,” but God punishes him nevertheless for this would-be upward mobility: God condemns Nebuchadnezzar to live among the beasts as one of them. He “fares forth on alle faure,” and feeds only “when erbes were fallen” (1683-1684). The language in this section is oriented downward, toward the ground that Nebuchadnezzar claimed to rule – even his hair grows to such lengths that it reaches “þe bare vrpe” (1693). It is only when he renounces this plan that he is allowed to return to the high position which God has given him.
It is important that Nebuchadnezzar’s kingship is specifically established by “þe stronge Dryhtyn” (“the mighty Lord,” 1652). Only God is authorized to socially elevate others. As in the Sodom narrative, the person ultimately responsible for transgressive upward mobility is the one punished; just as Sodom, not Lot, was held responsible for Lot’s upward mobility, similarly Nebuchadnezzar is held responsible for his beneficiaries’ upward mobility. Said beneficiaries are not punished, as the fall is not a result of social movement in itself but of the desire and attempt to violate the social hierarchy (which here is explicitly Nebuchadnezzar’s rather than his protégés’). Nebuchadnezzar learns this lesson not quickly but well, and is rewarded with the return of his sanity and of his previous life; on the other hand, his son Belshazzar fails to grasp it, as proved by his social elevation of Daniel immediately following this story. Like Lot, however, Daniel does not seem to be punished at all, though Belshazzar is graphically and thoroughly punished. He is dragged out of bed “bi þe fetes” and “fowle dispysed” (1790). The details of this disposition are unknown; however, likening the dead Belshazzar to “a dogge...in a dych” (1792) both reflects his father’s vertically oriented punishment (in the comparison to a beast) and evokes thoughts of those biblical characters who end up lying in the street, the dogs licking their blood (such as Jezebel), suggesting a downward physical movement that corresponds to his clear downward social mobility. Belshazzar is “[d]one doun of his dyngneté” for his deeds, marking God’s displeasure and serving as a warning to those who would exert control over the system of social class. In a way, Belshazzar’s death is reminiscent of the Peasants’ Revolt itself—though the king himself was never harmed, the rebels did storm the Tower of London and kill the Lord Chancellor and Lord
Treasurer. This tale then may serve as a caution to nobles against mistreating their inferiors; the author certainly would not condone this sort of violence, but perhaps warns that it may occur if the people are kept too strongly under their heels, and will not be wrong in doing so. The poet, I believe, is fundamentally conservative at heart, but also may be trying to demonstrate some sympathy with the rebels, and that bad or oppressive magnates can sometimes bring their own problems onto themselves.

*Mene mene tekel upharsin: The Images of Cleanness*

The Cotton Nero A.x manuscript does have several illustrations; critics have generally found the artistry of these images to be lacking—Sarah Pierson Prior calls the artist “fairly inept,” for example—and have generally thought that the images were added to the text some time after the composition was complete. Two of these images are paired with *Cleanness*, one portraying Noah’s Ark and one portraying Daniel’s interpretation for Belshazzar.

The first portrays Noah and his family aboard the ark, presented not as the typical enclosed structure—almost a house atop a boat—but unusually as an open boat, complete with mast and oar. Curiously, Noah’s family seems incomplete: there are only seven figures aboard (and not the canonical eight: Noah, his wife, three sons and three daughters-in-law). There is no sign of animals in the ark, or indeed any place in which they could exist. Roiling

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water streams across the page below the ark, in which several fish swim; a large fish is devouring a smaller one. The larger fish devouring the smaller one is the most interesting part of the picture. Given the prominent piscine identification with Christ and Christianity, is this a symbol of God’s vengeance? Or are the bestial fish perhaps contrasted with the human residents of the ark, thereby representing the antediluvian society and its worldly/temporal concerns as opposed to those cast in God’s image and bearing his goodwill?

The other illustration shows Daniel interpreting the writing on the wall for Belshazzar and his queen. The picture portrays the royal couple sitting at a cloth-draped table set with Christian sacred objects such as a monstrance and a candle-snuffer—presumably the sacred vessels of the biblical account—while Daniel humbly kneels before the table. Though the perspective of the illustration, like that of many medieval illustrations, is not reflective of actual scale—the kneeling Daniel appears to be taller than the sitting king and queen, for example—the considerable space between Daniel’s feet and the bottom of the table suggest either a distance between him and the table or an elevation of the table, perhaps reminiscent of the *hye dese* of the opening banquet. The illumination then would evoke not only the particular anecdote of Daniel and Belshazzar that it illustrates, but also the wedding banquet of the opening. Along the left side of the picture, a disembodied hand (curiously wearing what appears to be the end of a sleeve) holding a stylus has clearly just finished writing a message. While the

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142 William Vantuono claims in his reproduction of the illustration that the monstrance is in fact a “wide-mouthed goblet,” but I find the idea of the monstrance more convincing given the emphasis in the text on the desecration of the sacred vessels at this feast. See Vantuono (ed.), *The Pearl Poems: An Omnibus Edition, Volume 1: Pearl and Cleanness* (New York: Garland, 1984).
written text is unclear and partially indistinct in every reproduction of the image I have seen, it appears to me to be *mane decal phares* or something similar, presumably a bastardized Latinization of the Hebrew phrase *mene [mene] tekel upharsin* (alternately “two minas, a shekel, and two parts” or “numbered, weighed, divided”), the phrase written on the wall in the biblical account. The scroll advances from the midpoint of the illustration to its top, so while the message is horizontal by its own orientation, in the context of the larger illustration it must be read vertically, from bottom-to-top.

Both illustrations present a similar structure—divided into above and below—in a way that most of the other illustrations in the manuscript are not.143 In the first illustration, the division is between the humans in the ark above, and the fish in the water below; in the second, the division is between the sinful yet temporally powerful Belshazzar and his queen, and the abased yet humble Daniel. Going strictly by who seems to be favored by God in the text and the source material, the two illustrations would seem to be opposing reflections of each other: in one God’s chosen stands at the top, in the other he kneels at the bottom. However, looked at from a temporal point of view, it also becomes a division of “civilization,” with those on top presented as higher on the human scale of social class, or possessing more material goods. This separation is only bridged in these illustrations by the scroll in the Belshazzar illustration, and even there, the idea of division is an integral part of its text. While the *Cleanness* poet himself likely had nothing to do

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143 One of the illustrations for *Pearl* portrays two scenes divided in the middle by the river of the tale, presenting a similar structure, but the others are structured differently. Intriguingly, the river is portrayed very much like *Cleanness* Flood. Sarah Pierson Prior points out that the river in *Pearl* serves both in the text and the illustrations to demarcate the division between one world and the next, between divine and human (60-66); perhaps the same holds true for *Cleanness* Flood.
with the illustrations, the vertical divisions within the image may possibly reflect a potential rigidity in *Cleanness*’ various hierarchies, moral and social.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, what does the *Cleanness* poet want to accomplish with his poem? Ostensibly he is a centrist, siding too heavily neither with those in power nor with those agitating for more. If he does seem to lean to a particular side, it would be that of the royalists—perhaps unsurprising in the wake of the Peasants’ Revolt and its equally bloody aftermath. For the relatively conservative poet, the act of upsetting the status quo and striving for social mobility is problematic and likely to be punished, but the ambiguity of his portrayal gives him some plausible deniability. The same ambiguity perhaps also suggests some more positive emotion—admiration, sympathy, respect—toward those attempting to better their social position. The poet, even if he was not officially within a hierarchy of social class (i.e., a clergyman), nevertheless would have known people who were within that hierarchy and determined to claw their way up the ladder. Just as the Flood victims, even while doomed, strive for high ground, so many people in medieval England would have worked to better their position even in the face of heavy odds and active hostility towards those who moved between classes. The poet, just as he gives us a sympathetically horrified portrayal of the Flood victims’ terror, also likely appreciates and sympathizes with those social climbers even while advising in his poem against such practices.

While no one would likely label the *Cleanness* poet a fire-bellied revolutionary, the ambiguity in his text seems to indicate that he recognized flaws inherent in the system even as he attempted to preserve it. Perhaps he
saw the only alternative to the system being the violent dissent of the Peasants’ Revolt, with its slogans valorizing manual labor and its ability to turn the accepted hierarchy topsy-turvy. Only in the chaos of such a movement could a serf kiss a queen, or a laborer parley with a king. Such chaos is also the result of the negative social mobility in *Cleanliness*, mobility that must be punished as harshly as Wat Tyler’s rebellion. Whether by axe or by divine wrath, those who attempt to climb the social ladder unsanctioned by authority must be punished, and fall.
CHAPTER III

“WITH THE GRACE OFF GOD AT TH’ENTRYNG OFF THE BRIGGE”:
CROWN VERSUS TOWN AND THE GIANT OF LONDON BRIDGE IN
LYDGATE’S TRIUMPHAL ENTRY OF HENRY VI

In February of 1432, ten-year-old King Henry VI of England returned to his capital in triumph, after having been crowned king of France in Paris two months before. Henry was the living outcome of the Treaty of Troyes, which was meant to end the Hundred Years’ War by marrying Henry V of England to the French princess Catherine of Valois, bringing the elder Henry and his heirs into the French succession, and officially the Parisian coronation was a glorious moment that united the English and French thrones in the person of the younger Henry. To commemorate the French coronation and the king’s return to London, the city celebrated his arrival with a pageant, consisting of a series of lavishly presented tableaux along his entry route.144

The majority of these tableaux, in this and other royal entries, involved allegorical or historical figures that overtly extolled the monarch’s nobility or instructed him in kingly virtues. The focus of the first tableau along this entry, however, was neither celebratory nor instructive. As Henry and his retinue crossed London Bridge, leading from the suburb of Southwark into the city of London itself, they were greeted by a giant, who stood near or atop

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144 The terminology used to describe civic ceremony in medieval writings is varied and inconsistent. I have here attempted to use such terminology in a way that is at least internally consistent, for the purpose of clarity. When I say “pageant,” I am referring to the entirety of a ceremonial event, such as Henry’s triumphal entry, in which performances play a part. “Tableau” will refer to a single performance presented at a stop along the route of a processional pageant.
one of the bridge’s gate-towers, brandishing a sword. (Sources differ as to whether the giant stood on the tower, or on a raised device near or on the tower.) The giant spoke to the child-king, or perhaps presented a large scroll to him, quoting briefly from Psalms before vowing to protect the king’s person and to drive off foreign enemies.

The tableau of the giant, unlike every other tableau in the royal entry, neither presented an overt lesson to the king nor lauded his breeding or deeds. In accounts of the entry, the giant is a clearly militaristic figure, through his sword and his words, but he does not offer military instruction, nor does he laud the military deeds of either Henry. This is likely, in part, because there were few such deeds yet done in Henry VI’s name worth celebrating; because of his youth, the military side of his reign was primarily handled by his regents and advisors, who had in the preceding years lost large swathes of English territory in France to the forces of Charles VII, the late French king’s son and Henry’s rival for the French throne. (In fact, the Parisian coronation from which Henry was returning was a response to Charles’ rival coronation in 1430, after the French, led by Joan of Arc, re-conquered the traditional coronation site of Rheims.) In this context, then, the giant’s purpose is somewhat unclear: he does not instruct Henry, he does

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145 Lydgate and his source Carpenter both seem to suggest that the giant stands atop a device raised specifically for the pageant’s purposes, though it is unclear whether this device is placed on or merely near the tower. If the device is indeed placed on top of the tower, and the giant stands atop, it adds another level of height to the spectacle, and would emphasize the points I make in this chapter even more.

146 Most accounts of this entry, including Lydgate’s, do mention that the giant preceded, or was possibly accompanied by, two antelopes with the royal arms of England and of France held between them (a clear reference to Henry’s dual ancestry). However, authors such as Gordon Kipling have read the two moments as separate—the giant admits Henry in to the bridge gate, which features the antelopes—and if they are in fact together, the focus of the tableau seems to be on the giant rather than the antelopes, as most descriptions spend far more time on the giant.
not celebrate Henry, and his offer of aid against foreign enemies merely serves to remind audiences of England’s problems, both at home (a child-king) and abroad (a weakening hold on France). What, then, was the giant’s intended function, and why was such a creature chosen to be the opening act, as it were, of the celebration that welcomed Henry back to London?

Similarly, why is the giant located atop either the gate-tower or another device? Certainly the effect achieved by this placement would have made the already-towering giant even more so, especially in comparison to the child-king. The sheer height of the giant seems a conscious decision on the part of the pageant’s creators, but what is this meant to accomplish?

One answer may be that the giant’s appearance plays into the medieval discourses of height; what is achieved by constructing such a size difference between the king and the giant, especially in a location much more associated with horizontality and movement across? The giant must have towered over the king and his retinue, as well as spectators. The figure of the giant would have led the onlookers’ gaze upward, up the tower or device and then up the body of the giant. In comparison to Henry, the giant no doubt seemed to stand on high, in a position often associated with power. The onlookers then become implicated in a vertical narrative embodied by the giant, a narrative that I will argue implies the threat of civil discontent and a challenge to the king’s royal authority.

As a major civic ceremony, the triumphal entry and its accompanying pageantry were recorded in some detail in several London chronicles of the time.\textsuperscript{147} The pageant was staged by the citizens of London, and at Mayor

\textsuperscript{147} At this point I should also note that records of medieval civic performance frequently leave out important details of that performance, or differ between accounts. While Henry’s entry, as a major civic occasion, was recorded in several sources and in some detail, it is still difficult to entirely reconstruct how this particular tableau would have appeared. Anne
John Welles’ commission the entry was also recorded in a poem by John Lydgate, the preeminent English poet of the time and one with strong ties to both the royal family and the city of London. Viewed from the perspective of verticality, the giant of the triumphal entry, through his raised placement and his contrast in size and height with the child-king, seems meant to highlight the king’s youthfulness and inexperience. The giant also carried innate associations with mythic and Christian giants whose presence loomed large in English culture—specifically, the figures of Gogmagog and St. Christopher—and general European associations between giants and urbanity linked the giant with the city of London itself. Embodying all of these characterizations, the giant represented a tug-of-war between pageantry as a representation of London’s growing self-determination and as a representation of the young king’s control of his capital. This conflict is present both in the triumphal entry itself and, perhaps even more dramatically, in Lydgate’s poem: Lydgate, who had strong ties of patronage both to the king and his family and to the city officers and guildsmen of London, found himself caught in the middle. In a sense, both the town and the crown wish to be standing proud on top, as the giant is, representing and/or commanding the power and menace it signified.

That Lydgate was involved in the reproduction of discourses of verticality is perhaps not surprising given his connections to elite culture, whether courtly or civic—as we saw with Cleanness, such discourses are intricately intertwined with concerns about social status. Lydgate was the

Lancashire claims that the giant would have been constructed of wood and canvas, while Gordon Kipling, based on Lydgate’s poem, imagines it as mechanically rigged to shake his sword. See Anne Lancashire, London Civic Theatre: City Drama and Pageantry from Roman Times to 1558 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 131, and Gordon Kipling, Enter the King: Theatre, Liturgy, and Ritual in the Medieval Civic Triumph (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 147.
unofficial English poet laureate of the early fifteenth century, and his production of work for both aristocratic and mercantile audiences meant he straddled the divide between court and town. Though he was a monk, based at the wealthy and influential abbey of Bury St. Edmund’s, his writings ranged from religious to courtly to theatrical, and while not often read today they were widely popular and influential well into the early modern era; he possessed the literary capital and currency to both reflect and affect popular English thought.¹⁴⁸ Like the Cleanness poet, Lydgate seems from his writings to have been relatively conservative—perhaps unsurprising, given his dependence on traditional noble and royal patronage. However, he is writing several decades after Cleanness, and much of the social mobility among the middling classes that was so problematic in the late fourteenth century had become more accepted by his day. Consequently, he also willingly worked with and wrote for those social classes that were less set in stone and in which social mobility was made more possible. In the Triumphal Entry, the discourses of verticality allow Lydgate to walk a fine line between offending the crown and offending the town, through alternate identifications for both the giant and the tower (ranging from the traitorous Nimrod and his Babel to Christ himself). Building in these alternate interpretations allows Lydgate to attempt to stabilize an inherently unstable situation in which each party involved can see themselves as benevolent yet powerful while seeing the other as a potentially dangerous and traitorous figure who nevertheless may be “tamed” to serve their opponent’s purposes. He allows

both the citizens of the city and the king and his court to imagine themselves in the privileged position of holding power over the other in the vertical hierarchy Henri Lefebvre suggests, in which height is power.

Because of the demand for his work, Lydgate undertook numerous commissions and maintained relationships with several of the commissioning patrons.\textsuperscript{149} Several of those patrons lay within the house of Lancaster itself, and his relationship with the royal family was a long-running one. Years before, when at Oxford, he had come to the attention of his fellow student Henry, Prince of Wales (later Henry V); a letter survives in which the prince wrote to Lydgate’s abbot, saying that he had heard good reports from the chancellor of Oxford about “J. L.”, and asking that the abbot allow Lydgate to continue his studies at Oxford.\textsuperscript{150} Lydgate later composed several long poems for Henry V, both as Prince of Wales and as king, at his commission and as gifts.\textsuperscript{151} After Henry V’s death, Lydgate’s relationship of patronage continued with both his widow, Catherine, and his son Henry VI: he composed poems for both, and wrote mummings that were performed for them.\textsuperscript{152}

\textsuperscript{149} The information on commissions and patrons of the longer poems frequently comes from Lydgate’s own dedications, but in the shorter poems (which often lack dedications) this information usually comes from John Shirley’s headnotes to the poems. Shirley collected Lydgate’s work after his death, and attempted to place much of it in a context that would otherwise have been lost. Most of what is known about Lydgate’s patronage relationships with non-noble patrons, and about the circumstances and details of the pieces written for performance, comes from Shirley’s headnotes.


\textsuperscript{151} These include \textit{A Defence of Holy Church}, \textit{The Troy Book}, and \textit{The Life of Our Lady}.

\textsuperscript{152} For Catherine, “That now is Hay some-tyme was Grase,” and for Henry VI, \textit{The Lives of St. Edmund and Fremund}. Lydgate also wrote his “Mumming at Hertford” to be performed before the royal family during Christmas of 1427, and a few days later he also composed an occasional poem for the king, “Ballade on a New Year’s Gift of an Eagle presented to King Henry VI.”
Lydgate also composed numerous works for influential men of London, of which his account of the triumphal entry was only the latest. He was commissioned by several of the guilds to write poems and mummings, and he also undertook commissions for wealthy merchants. And indeed, those same skills that placed him in demand by the royal court made him desirable to the mayor of London, who could be assured that once Lydgate had created a poetic account of the triumphal entry, it would likely be the most widely read and most influential account of the event, and would be a definitive account both for contemporary readers and for posterity. Lydgate, working from a letter by city clerk John Carpenter (and perhaps from memories of his own possible attendance), transformed Carpenter’s serviceable Latin prose into a vernacular poem.

Given Lydgate’s diverse set of patrons, and his status both as Lancastrian laureate and London poet, it is not unexpected that his poem on the triumphal entry of Henry VI attempts to reconcile these divided loyalties through verse. Though Lydgate evenhandedly presents both the city of London and the young king at their best in the poem, the conflict that I argue the pageant-giant innately represented—a struggle for authority between town and crown—is a subtext throughout the poem that bubbles to the surface in his account of the giant. Aware of the vertical implications of the pageant itself—the giant’s looming size and power, and the potential threat it signifies—Lydgate’s strategy to resolve this conflict ingeniously uses the

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153 For example, Lydgate’s *Legend of St. George* was composed for the armorer’s guild, and “Bycorne and Chychevaché” for an unnamed *werdy citiseyn*.

same trope of verticality that allowed the conflict to surface. He drafts the
trope of the giant, and all it represents, to engineer a resolution that
attempts to exalt the king, and to place him in a position of power and
authority, without offending the city.

The Verticality of the Giant

Historically, giants were linked to discourses of height and its
associated sin, pride. Giants and towers have both long served as symbols of
pride. The most famous tower in Judeo-Christian culture is that definitive
symbol of pride, the Tower of Babel; meanwhile, prideful giants in medieval
literature include the biblical (Nephilim, Goliath), the apocryphal (Nimrod),
and the original (the giant of Mont St-Michel). In texts such as the Spanish
Douce bestiary, giants are said to signify “proud men who wish to seem
greater than they are, who when you praise them feign virtue.”155 Susan
Stewart points out that giants make “normal” humans seem smaller in
comparison; “smaller” here carries associations of helplessness,
insignificance, and childlikeness.156 This certainly seems to be at work in the
triomphal entry; not only is the giant larger than the humans he is facing,
but he also stands on the gate-tower of the bridge, placing him in an even
higher position and emphasizing the height differential between this literally
larger-than-life figure and the boy-king Henry. In a realm where the king’s
youth was already the cause of problems, both home and abroad, this can

155 See John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*

only have reminded the audience of those problems. The fact that the giant stands atop a tower may emphasize the power the city holds over the king, but it perhaps unintentionally emphasizes the pride and potential treachery of the city as well.

Giants also, like most medieval “monsters,” enjoyed a highly complex position with regard to gender, class and space; this is reflected in scholarship on the subject, which is considerable and frequently contradictory. In medieval literature, giants were frequently used to represent a form of the monstrous Other, and in addition to their inhuman size were frequently portrayed as bestial, voracious, and lustful. Walter Stephens claims that traditional medieval giants “were portrayed as evil in every way.” Even the so-called “good” medieval giants begin their stories as menacing, bestial figures; while they are eventually tamed, Stephens argues that these exceptions proved the rule, and that they were still “a threatening and essentially inhuman Other who had been miraculously tamed and convinced to serve the good.” Only the authority of a greater figure domesticates these giants, transforming them and in doing so neutralizing the menace posed by their Otherness. The giant’s monstrous Otherness and

157 While much scholarship on giants works primarily or exclusively from an early modern context, major works by John Block Friedman, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, and Walter Stephens have all devoted large amounts of space to discussion of specifically medieval giants and their interpretation. See Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*; Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and Stephens, *Giants in Those Days: Folklore, Ancient History, and Nationalism* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989). From a less strictly historical perspective, authors who work with theories of size and scale such as Susan Stewart, in *On Longing*, have examined the cultural status of giants.

158 For only one of many discussions of these portrayals, see Cohen, *Of Giants*, xiii-xv.


his height, when juxtaposed with the young Henry, draw attention to failures and flaws in the latter's reign that were major points of contention at the time.

This, then, creates questions for the triumphal entry: What threat does the giant represent? If the giant is only tamed by a greater authority, what happens when that authority disappears? And what did this mean for Henry, a boy-king freshly out of his minority and still under a regency? Was his newly and unsteadily minted authority enough to keep the threat the giant represented at bay?

The giant on the bridge was linked to civic pride and urban identity—town giants were a common appearance, and the affiliation of particular giants with particular cities were well-known. His association with the upwardly mobile city constructs a vertical identity for him as well, in the sense that it aspired to compete with the crown. The giant becomes an obvious choice due to his innate association with pride. The Middle English Dictionary definition of “heighe” again links the idea of height and pride, being defined spatially as “high up, aloft; from a high place” but also figuratively as “in a position of authority or honor; proudly” and as “proudly, overbearing, haughtily.” Phrases such as “riden heighe on hors” or “sitten heighe in sadel” also serve double duty, implying both a physical elevation but also “to be successful, ostentatious, or powerful, while to be “heighe-ikinned” is to be well-connected.161 “Heighe” is applied both to the more positive applications of pride and status and to the more negative ones.

The idea of spatial elevation, pride, and high social status all come together in another frequent visual and literary trope of the Middle Ages, the

161 Middle English Dictionary, heighe (n.).
Wheel of Fortune. The Wheel reflected popular belief in the transitory nature of both life and acclaim, consisting of a cyclical pattern of rise and fall (usually related to morality, status, or power). This motif held extra significance for kings, who occupied such high positions and whose lives tended to go so badly if toppled; Lydgate himself constructed his *Fall of Princes* around the motif of the Wheel. It is a much more human motif than that of the giant: focusing on the lives and deeds of great people, it is less of a risk and more of a certainty than the threat posed by the giant. The Wheel also innately holds the hope of future rise as well, however; it embodies creation and destruction, while the giant only embodies destruction. The Wheel makes explicit the idea that that which goes up, must come down; both height and pride goeth before a fall.

“Tamed” Giants in Medieval Romance

The trope of the giant is a common one in medieval romance. While the threatening giant who is quickly slain is far more common, “tamed giant” figures such as Rainouard, Galehaut, Gowther, and Ascapard are prominent in romance as well. Though these figures aid (and in Gowther’s case, are) the heroes of their respective narratives, they never entirely overcome their monstrous natures and the unrestrained excess innate to the medieval giant. Though these men are baptized and become good Christian knights, the giant always lurks close to the surface and can emerge at any moment—the civilization is always a veneer covering innate savagery.

In the *Chanson de Guillaume* and *Aliscans*, Rainouard is a Saracen scullion turned Christian knight, and companion to hero William of Orange. Rainouard serves as a figure of comic heroism and excess, slaughtering
innocent cooks and bureaucrats without thought in his quest for self-indulgence yet portrayed as a lovable scamp. In the Lancelot-Grail cycle of French romances, Galehaut is a half-giant knight whose desire for conquest leads him to take over numerous neighboring kingdoms. When he meets Lancelot, he gains such respect and affection for him that he ceases his plunder and becomes fanatically attached to Lancelot, dying of a broken heart when he believes that his beloved friend has been killed. Though he is less dangerous than his fellows, he is proud and hard until softened by his love for Lancelot, and even afterwards represents an unhealthy excess of emotion. Sir Gowther’s titular character, fathered by Satan, is a figure of joyous and horrific lack of restraint—as an infant he murders his nurses and mutilates his mother through overly-enthusiastic high-cannibalistic breast-feeding, and as an adult he gleefully rapes and slaughters a convent of nuns. Only when he discovers his demonic parentage does he attempt to change his ways, a process that involves a parody of communion in which he receives bread and wine from the mouths of dogs. In Bevis of Hampton, Bevis befriends a giant named Ascapard who has been sent to kill him. The giant quickly becomes Bevis’ trusted page; when Bevis and his lover Josiane are threatened while riding Bevis’ horse Arundel, Ascapard rescues them by picking up Bevis, Josiane, and Arundel and carrying all three under one arm. The power inherent in this scene, though it is used to help Bevis rather than to harm him, is nevertheless unsettling; as readers in sympathy with Bevis, we find ourselves glad that the giant is on “our” side, so to speak, rather than the enemy’s. He aids and rescues both Bevis and Josiane on multiple occasions. Nevertheless, after Josiane gives birth to twins, Ascapard kidnaps her on the orders of the Saracen ruler Yvor, and as a result is killed by one of Bevis’ human retainers. The only reason given for his turned coat is a lack of
funds and of friends. The size difference between giants and men means that even when giants are “tamed,” so to speak, they never entirely lose their sense of power or danger. Their innate monstrous nature means that, *in extremis*, they may revert to self-interest and unbridled desire (for food, sex, violence, or some combination of the three). The giant may have a veneer of civilization and amiability, but underneath he is bestial and monstrous, incapable of true loyalty; given the chance, as Ascapard is, he will revert to his inner nature. The giant of London Bridge is always a potential Ascapard—a subject who betrays his king when the veneer of “civilization” wears away.

“The geaunt wolde abyde”: English Civic Ceremony and the Giants of London Bridge

Coinciding with the rise of urbanization in Europe, giants—previously associated with nature and untamed wilderness—become associated with towns and cities.\(^\text{162}\) Certainly London and giants were inextricably linked in Lydgate’s day through the frequent use of giants in civic ceremony. Giants are recorded in numerous civic ceremonies both before and after Henry VI, most prominently in major royal entries welcoming monarchs or their intended spouses into London and in the festivities accompanying a new Lord Mayor of London’s installation. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen sees such ceremonial giants as “political theater in which to repeat the legendary history of Britain, a performance that aimed to materialize royal power in the present through the invocation of a long and therefore authoritative genealogy”;

specifically, he sees this happening through their implicit invocation of the British foundational myth of Brutus and Gogmagog. Cohen’s argument that this Gogmagog identification frequently supports royal power, I believe, holds true in most instances. The giant in the *Triumphant Entry*, however, has almost the opposite effect: though the giant may be intended to serve as a sign of royal power in theory, in practice it exposes the cracks in the foundation of that power. What reinforced the authority of Henry V, a grown man returning from the glorious victory of Agincourt, did not necessarily have the same effect for Henry VI, a ten-year-old boy returning from being installed on a rather unsteady French throne. Rather than shoring up the younger Henry’s authority, the giant reveals his lack thereof, a lack that did not end with his minority.

Even in this view, however, Henry’s pageant-giant would seem to recall the incident that Cohen refers to, which first appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*. In his recounting of the mythic founding of Britain by the Trojan prince Brutus, Geoffrey includes Brutus and his men’s encounters with the indigenous giants of the island, led by the fierce Gogmagog. The climax of the segment is a wrestling match between Brutus’ lieutenant Corineus and Gogmagog in which Gogmagog is killed, so clearing the way for subsequent colonization. I certainly believe that Cohen is right that the giant recalls this moment from Britain’s mythic past—

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164 For the problems Henry’s lack of authority would eventually cause in his adult reign, see chapters 5–7 in John Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1996). I will also discuss some of these problems at length later in this chapter.
Gogmagog is an obvious analogue for the pageant-giant—but I am not entirely convinced the comparison reinforces the young king’s royal authority.

While Henry’s battles, like Brutus’, may have been fought by his lieutenants, they were hardly as successful as Corineus, and Henry himself was no Brutus. Lydgate had earlier written in his *Troy Book*, composed for Henry V, that Brutus had “of geauntys thorugh his manhood wan” (835); the younger Henry is not yet old enough to become a man, let alone win manhood through battle with giants.165 This was more of a source of contention than it might have been otherwise, as Henry’s reign immediately followed that of his father, who had already become a legend for his military prowess.

In facing the giant at all, however, Henry was following in his father’s footsteps—and in his mother’s, at that; Charles Lethbridge Kingsford records that both Henry V and Catherine of Valois had been greeted by giants at London Bridge upon earlier entries into the city.166 In fact, giants are recorded in numerous civic ceremonies both before and after Henry VI, most prominently in major royal entries into London such as coronations (of either monarchs or their intended spouses) and in the festivities accompanying a new Lord Mayor of London’s installation. The tradition continued for some time after Henry VI’s reign: when Mary I entered London with her new husband Philip of Spain, they were greeted by two giants on the same bridge. (By the coronation four years later of Mary’s successor Elizabeth I, however,

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166 Henry, upon his return from Agincourt in 1415, was greeted by two giants standing on the gate-tower, a male (holding the keys to the city and an axe) and a female, while Catherine in her entry was greeted by a giant who had been designed to bow to welcome her. For Henry V’s welcome, see Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, ed., *Chronicles of London* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1905), 302.
the giants had moved to Temple Bar.) And here, as it happens, Cohen’s association draws greater strength. The giants that greeted Mary and Philip were explicitly named Gogmagog and Corineus. The giants that appeared in the Lord Mayor’s procession were also known, after Henry’s time, as Gog and Magog. In fact, these names persist even into the present day: the Guildhall of the city was guarded by two statues of giants, christened Gog and Magog, until they were destroyed in the London Blitz. (They have since been replaced.) Kingsford, therefore, is not alone when he postulates of Henry V’s giants that “[n]o doubt they were the mediaeval ancestors of Gog and Magog.” Though unnamed, Henry’s giant clearly seems to be associated with this mythic giant in ways that became explicit in later royal entries.

Henry’s giant was standard in many ways compared to its predecessors and successors, but he was decidedly unstandard in others. The most prominent was his use of a sword. In spite of giants’ usual near-bestial characterization, weapon use was not unheard of: Henry V’s aforementioned giant carried an axe, though even this was rare. Nevertheless, the giants of medieval romance and folklore are almost never described as wielding swords, preferring bludgeoning instruments such as clubs and staves or simply weaponless physical combat (as in Gogmagog’s wrestling match with Corineus). The use of a sword unusually associates the giant not with monstrosity, but with chivalry; not with the giant of medieval romance, but with the knight. This, combined with the use of the word “champioun” (which I will discuss at length later), may perhaps help redefine the giant’s relationship with the king as that of a vassal to a lord.

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At this point one could perhaps dismiss the implications I have suggested, and could argue that the figure of the giant as seen here is a standard trope in a royal entry (except for perhaps the niggling anomaly of the giant’s sword use), and in fact greatly similar to his father’s similar entry after victory in France. I am not attempting to deny the giant’s place in a ceremonial tradition; I am merely suggesting that, given the associations with giants that I have mentioned and will explore in greater detail, there is a great difference between Henry VI’s entry and his father’s. The latter involved a giant facing a grown man, secure in his long-held royal power and flush from the greatest victory of the Hundred Years’ War. The former involves a giant facing a prepubescent boy, who may rule in name but in deed rules neither self nor kingdom. Negative associations with the idea of the “giant” that may have seemed negligible or laughable when facing the larger-than-life hero of Agincourt may have loomed much larger when facing his young heir. At the very least, the balance of power between the king and his capital had shifted—and not in the throne’s favor—since the giants’ last appearance; his father had returned from a military triumph with what seemed at the time like an unbreakable position in the French royal succession, while Henry VI was returning from being installed, in name only, on a much unsteadier throne. After the glory days of the expansionist Henry V, so confident of his control over his own country that he could spend his time conquering swaths of another, the authority of Henry VI and his squabbling advisers must have seemed tenuous at best.

Just as the giant’s role as a standard part of a royal entry does not preclude additional significance specific to Henry, so its traditional location on London Bridge nevertheless highlights associations specific to Henry’s reign. The route Henry took into the city was one traditional for most kinds of
royal entries, from coronations to the arrival of royal spouses; the young king and his retinue were met in a suburb outside London, and escorted over the bridge and into the city, by Lord Mayor John Welles and a contingent of prominent citizens. The site of London Bridge was already associated with civil disobedience, however, as well as jockeying for power earlier in Henry VI’s reign: as a symbol of innate threat and potential discontent, the giant’s appearance seems to serve as a reminder of this. The bridge was the site of at least two violent incidents between the respective retainers of the Protector Gloucester and Cardinal Beaufort, feuding for place and influence as advisors and guardians to Henry.\(^{169}\) On one occasion Beaufort even assembled his archers at his Bankside palace and attempted to storm the bridge. London Bridge—more specifically, the gate-towers, on one of which Henry’s giant stood—was also a site for the display of not only the heads of Lollards and heretics, but also for those guilty of major crimes (usually treason).

While the pageantry of Henry VI’s entry was nothing out of the ordinary, it signified much more for him than those of his parents had for them. The circumstances of Henry’s entry—specifically his young age, the struggles by the members of his council for power and influence, and his newly-confirmed but still uneasy seat on his French throne—suggest a more complicated reading in this instance of associations inherent in London’s ceremonial giants. These factors strengthened mythical and religious analogues that giants carried—analogyes that were both helpful and harmful to a perception of Henry’s royal authority.

\(^{169}\) The incident is most famously immortalized by Shakespeare a century and a half later, as the conflict where “tawny coat beats blue, and blue pommels tawny” in 1 Henry VI. For a contemporary account of one of the two skirmishes, see Kingsford, Chronicles of London, 130.
“A sturdy champeoun”: Gogmagog and St. Christopher

Giants have a long and storied history in British myth and literature, including in the fifteenth century; this history was invoked, in several ways, within the triumphal entry itself through the figure of the giant. More specifically, the giant would have invoked for its various spectators the spectres of the religio-mythic giants Gogmagog and St. Christopher, both of whom were popular figures with medieval audiences. While Gogmagog is a primarily threatening presence in his source material and Christopher is a primarily benevolent presence in his, the two giants’ stories have a certain amount in common: both are simultaneously threat and ally, and both present a challenge to authority while eventually becoming subjugated to it. While both of these analogues are implicit in the presence of Henry’s entry-giant, in this context the Gogmagog parallel proves primarily a threat to Henry’s royal authority, and the Christopher parallel proves primarily a bolster to it.

I have mentioned the Gogmagog story briefly; now I will set it out in full. In Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, Geoffrey recounts the mythic founding of Britain by its namesake, the Trojan prince Brutus, and his men. When the newly-christened Britons come to what is then called Albion, they are attacked by the indigenous giants, who are led by the fierce Gogmagog; Geoffrey writes that they “caused great slaughter among the Britons.”170 Brutus and his men kill all the attackers except for Gogmagog, and Brutus decides that one of his men should wrestle with

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Gogmagog: Brutus’ lieutenant Corineus, who greatly enjoys fighting such giants, happily obliges. While Gogmagog breaks several of Corineus’ ribs, Corineus gets the better of the giant, throwing Gogmagog over a cliff and casting him into the sea. To demonstrate the cultural currency of his story, Geoffrey informs his reader that the place is still called Gogmagog’s Leap, even in his own time.

As foreshadowed by Geoffrey’s aside, the story of Gogmagog exerted a strong presence throughout the medieval period, not only in literature but also in civic ceremony. The wrestling match between Gogmagog and Corineus was heavily echoed in several encounters with giants in medieval romance, most notably the fight between King Arthur and the giant of Mont Saint-Michel in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. And I have already mentioned the use of Gogmagog and Corineus as names for later ceremonial giants.

Most literary giants—including Gog, Magog, and Gogmagog—are usually described in terms of size rather than in terms of height (though the latter is necessarily implied in the former). There are numerous exceptions, however. Mandeville describes bestial, cannibalistic giants of thirty and fifty feet tall. Another exception is Canto 31 of Dante’s *Inferno*, where the narrator sees what seem to be towers from the perspective of the Eighth Circle of Hell. When he reaches the Ninth Circle itself, he realizes upon closer inspection that the towers are actually chained giants: two classical figures (Antaeus and Ephialtes) and one Judeo-Christian figure (Nimrod). While the

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171 Larry D. Benson, ed., *King Arthur’s Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994). In the *Alliterative Morte*, Arthur faces a giant that is terrorizing the countryside, and that threatens to emasculate him by taking his beard and attaching it to his girdle, as the giant has done with other kings before him. Though Arthur fights the club-wielding giant with a sword, after Arthur stabs him the giant casts away his weapon and grabs Arthur, wrestling him, and before Arthur can finish him off with a dagger he breaks three of Arthur’s ribs.
biblical Nimrod is limited to serving as an example of a mighty hunter and lending his name to his lands posthumously, he serves as the ur-example of a rebellious people in Jewish rabbinical literature.\footnote{See “Nimrod,” The Jewish Encyclopedia, v. 9 (Funk and Wagnalls, 1906), 309.} Both Jewish and Christian extra-biblical traditions makes him the architect of the tower of Babel, while many of the same traditions name him a giant.\footnote{Stephens, Giants in Those Days, 67.} In Dante, just as the pride of Babel was punished by linguistic fragmentation, so Nimrod finds himself unable to comprehend or be comprehended by others. Similarly, as punishment for constructing a tower, he becomes one himself.

The aforementioned giants are all in the Ninth Circle, the lowest circle of Hell and the place where Lucifer sits imprisoned. While ostensibly it is the circle of traitors—those who betray those who trust and love them—many of the figures in this area also serve as cautionary tales of pride, most notably Lucifer himself. Dante here does describe individual parts of the giants in terms of height—a face here, a torso here—which gives us a sense of immense scale: one calculation, working on Vitruvian proportions, sets the height of Nimrod at over 116 feet, while Lucifer himself dwarfs even the nominal giants at over eight thousand feet tall.\footnote{Richard Kay, “Vitruvius and Dante’s Giants,” Dante Studies 120 (2002), pp. 17-34.} Here lofty height again seems to be associated with pride—as the giants tower over Dante, Lucifer towers over the giants.

If towers and giants can represent both overweening pride and treachery, the giant of London Bridge takes on rather interesting associations. In one reading, the giant serves as a cautionary tale to the king, representing both a warning against poor stewardship and pride and a veiled
threat of the city’s popular power. In the other reading, the giant represents London’s elevated opinion of its own power and civic unrest as betrayal. Open threat versus passive threat: free giant versus tamed giant. While London’s civic Gog and Magog are not necessarily described in terms of height, they frequently function along the vertical axis. They stand on towers, they bow or kneel or lower a weapon. The same holds true for the giants of literature: Gogmagog is thrown and falls from a high place, the giant of Mont St-Michel lives atop a mountain, and Nimrod orders a tower to be built. Even the sculptures of Gog and Magog that stood for centuries, until they were destroyed by the Blitz, were placed in an elevated position in the London Guildhall.

It’s not entirely clear what the pageant-giant that greeted Henry would have looked like, or even whether the construction on which it stood lay on the bridge-tower or next to it. Walter Stephens describes European town giants as “large effigies of wicker, paper, and cloth,” and it’s likely that London’s were no different. However, they usually had ingenious mechanisms built in allowing them limited but presumably dramatic movement—Henry’s giant swung a sword, but other giants offered weapons or bowed. While it’s not entirely clear how London’s specific giants were constructed or what they looked like, certainly there are analogues that can help us visualize them. Similar giants existed at the entries and coronations of later monarchs such as Mary I and Elizabeth I. And even now, the Lord Mayor’s Show in modern-day London contains tall wicker giants patterned after the Gog and Magog in these earlier civic pageants. These modern-day parade giants, made of wicker with leather hands, measure fourteen feet tall.

175 Stephens, Giants in Those Days, 37.
(a decision based on early modern descriptions of ceremonial giants), so it’s likely that Henry VI’s giant was around that height—certainly enough to tower over any man, let alone a boy. They do not seem to incorporate some of the materials that their medieval counterparts did, so they are likely an imperfect copy; nevertheless, they do give modern audiences an approximation of what Henry would have faced on that bridge.

While Henry VI’s pageant-giant was unnamed, and we have no hard evidence for such pageant-giants explicitly taking their name from the Gogmagog story for another century, there would still have been definite links between Henry’s giant and Gogmagog: a connection between the two is a connection we can expect the triumphal entry’s audiences made as they watched the spectacle. Certainly the possibility remain that Henry’s giant, like his descendants, was explicitly identified with the Gogmagog story and this identification has merely not survived in written records. And if not explicitly identified as the Gogmagog of Britain’s shadowy past, certainly the use of a giant could invoke another Gog/Magog, creating an implicit parallel with Geoffrey’s giant; the apocalyptic tribes of Gog and Magog, in the biblical book of Revelations, also held a strong presence in medieval eschatological tradition, and were frequently portrayed as and linked with giants.

To cement the comparison, all of the above—Gogmagog and Gog/Magog, giants in general and Henry’s pageant-giant in particular—are strongly characterized by association with demarcating boundaries, such as walls, rivers, shores, and national borders. As with many medieval monstrosities, giants were usually portrayed as bestial if humanlike creatures who lived on the margins, both figuratively and literally; they

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literally occupied the edges of the medieval world on *mappaemundi*, and occupied similarly edgy (pun intended) territory in the medieval imagination.\(^{177}\) Gogmagog is thrown over a cliff and into the ocean, crossing from land to sea. The tribes of Gog and Magog, in medieval texts, were believed to have been sealed by Alexander the Great behind an iron gate, a mountain range, and a river, to mention only a few of the myriad devices said in versions of the legend to entrap these tribes. Henry VI’s pageant-giant, like his father’s before him, is likewise associated with a wall (the city walls of London, dividing the city from the suburb of Southwark) and a river (the Thames, of course, was the boundary of the city of London). More specifically, through the text he presents, Henry VI’s giant is also associated with the defense of nation, in his offer to battle Henry’s foreign enemies.

So given these primarily negative associations between Gogmagog and ceremonial giants, one might expect this triumphal entry, officially celebrating Henry’s “dominance” over two countries at once but in fact exposing his lack thereof, to downplay or jettison altogether the use of the London giant; using a device that draws attention to the problematic aspects of his control over the one country he was officially ruler of in deed, as well as in name, seems less than prudent. But it is important to remember that the pageant was being staged by the city of London itself. Was the use of this giant, as I have suggested, an attempt by Londoners to downplay the significance and power of the king in favor of exalting that of the city itself? After all, London was growing increasingly powerful throughout the latter

half of the Middle Ages; this power was coming to fruition in this period and, within approximately a hundred years, it would be a deciding factor in installing monarchs. Considering the later linkage of Gogmagog with London in general, and with the city fathers and the mercantile class in particular (through its associations with the Lord Mayor and London Guildhall), might the pageant-giant represent the rising power of these groups? This figure, whether it is or is not identified with Gogmagog, does seem to serve as a representative of London, to the point that some of the other contemporary narratives of the triumphal entry refer to the pageant-giant as a “champion of London” (suggestive, based on what I will later discuss about the meaning of the word “champion” in Middle English); as London’s champion, he is a protective figure but ultimately still threatening to authority through his monstrosity, a figure who allows entrance into London but only through his forbearance. Is the threat that the giant inevitably poses to authority the threat of London being in a position to exert influence over the king, rather than the other way around?

In contrast to the threatening specter of Gogmagog as the authority-threatening champion of London against its monarch, there is another equally strong implicit identification for the pageant-giant: that of St. Christopher. Christopher is unusual, since he is as a saint whose association with monstrousness stems from his earliest appearances and continues well into the early modern era. The oldest portrayals of Christopher originate in the Eastern Byzantine church, and portray him as a Cynocephalus (dog-headed humanoid) who happened to be, like all his people, inhumanly tall. By

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the fifteenth century, however, Christopher had lost his canine head and had been reimagined as strictly a giant. The first coherent hagiography of him as such appears in Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda aurea* (c. 1260–70), the most popular source for saints’ lives throughout much of the Middle Ages. By this time no longer a canine, but a Canaanite, the *Legenda aurea* tells of a giant named Reprobus, a reprobate who wants to ensure that his loyalty is sworn to the most powerful of masters. Throughout the first part of his hagiography, Reprobus repeatedly abandons one lord to serve another, more powerful one. After working his way through various earthly lords, he discovers that even the most powerful earthly ruler fears the; but when he discovers that even his new master, the “devil” (or at least someone claiming to be such), fears the sign of the cross, Reprobus decides finally to give his loyalty to Christ, the ultimate liege lord. Attempting to discover how to locate Christ and swear his fealty, Reprobus comes upon a Christian hermit; the hermit attempts to explain the concept of Christian salvation to him, but as a giant (and therefore monstrous and bestial), Reprobus is unable to properly grasp spiritual concepts like prayer and fasting. He can only understand Christ on the most base physical level, through action: in this case, the hermit persuades him that he will be serving Christ by assisting strangers in crossing a dangerous river. One of the strangers is a young boy, whom

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179 The confusion seems to stem from the similarity of “canine” and “Canaanite” in Latin. In the *Acta Santorum* he is described as *genere Canineorum* (“of the doglike people”) and is described as having *corpus hominis caput autem canis* (“the body of a man as well as the head of a dog”). In the *Golden Legend*, conversely, Christopher is now described instead as *gente Cananaeus* (“of the Canaanite people,” evidently a mistake for *Canineus*) and is described as having *caput Cananerum* (“the head of a Canaanite”). Stephens gives a comprehensive description of these changes in the Christopher legend and some compelling arguments about their implications for the idea of a folkloric Bakhtinian giant in *Giants in Those Days*, 43–52.
Reprobus carries across on his shoulders, and the boy is afterward revealed to be Christ himself:

> But at last he made his way to the other bank, and set the child down, saying: “Child, thou hast put me in dire peril, and hast weighed so heavy upon me that if I had borne the whole world upon my shoulders, it could not have burdened me more heavily!” And the child answered: “Wonder not, Christopher, for not only hast thou borne the whole world upon thy shoulders, but Him Who created the world. For I am Christ thy King, Whom thou servest in this work!”

After Christ reveals himself, Reprobus—now capable of true piety—pledges his loyalty to Christ and is baptized as Christopher (from the Greek, “Christ-bearer”).

This version of Christopher’s hagiography is the one that would have been known by a majority, if not the entirety, of both the pageant-giant’s and Lydgate’s audience, and the staging of the tableau itself seems intended to recall it. The Canaanite Christopher first appeared in the thirteenth century, and was almost universal by the fifteenth century, and not just in England, but Europe as a whole. Though it waned in popularity over the next century, due to Catholic and Protestant backlash, this version of Christopher’s story is the one that was the standard at the time in question . . . and it was a story very familiar to more than just the well-educated. Because of his status as protector from *mala mors* (sudden death unshriven, which was a major concern in a time where plague, war, and mishap were not uncommon), veneration of Christopher was popular among all social classes. His intercession was something from which anyone, regardless of class or wealth or gender, could benefit, and this trait made him one of the more universally recognizable medieval saints, with worship widespread in a way that more

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specific patron saints failed to achieve. We can therefore safely assume that this version of Saint Christopher would have been well-known to the audiences at the triumphal entry, and to medieval readers of Lydgate’s poem—especially since large swathes of the Legenda aurea, translated into Middle English, were highly popular with English audiences even before William Caxton’s print version pulled them all together. Having examined this version of the Christopher story, we can see that it bears some marked resemblances to the tableau that played out in 1432, with a giant facing the child-king—and it all happens when crossing a river, no less. These parallels are never explicitly named, but this subtext cannot have been lost on medieval audiences any more than the parallels with Gogmagog can have been.

While the Christopher parallel, like Gogmagog, suggests a gigantic threat to royal authority, it presents a very different solution to such, and one which serves as a more attainable template for the young Henry than a wrestling match. As the parallels between Christopher and the pageant-giant would have been apparent to medieval audiences, so would the juxtaposition of the King of England with the King of Kings. It would have been helped along by the relative frequency of such identifications, and civic historians have drawn attention to parallels between Henry and Christ elsewhere in the triumphal entry. Those later parallels, however, seem to be merely the

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181 Caxton in fact “borrowed” much of his text from earlier Middle English translations of Jacobus. Partial Middle English translations of the Legenda aurea which he used are included in MS Harley 4775, MS Lambeth 72, and MS Addit. II 565, among others.

182 Kipling has argued that the triumphal entry corresponds directly to the feast of Epiphany, positioning Henry as a Christlike infant savior through actions later in the pageant, while McLaren argues that there is an explicit association between Henry and Christ due to the “multitude of aungells” that appear late in the pageant, paralleling those that heralded Christ’s birth. See Kipling, Enter the King, 143–169 and McLaren, London Chronicles, 55.
culmination of an identification made much earlier here, with this first tableau of giant and boy-king. Such an identification works here to balance the play for urban power which I have argued the giant also represents. After all, if giants are associated with cities in general and London in particular, at least in an English context, then the identification with Christopher positions the city in a position ultimately subservient to kingly authority. If Henry is Christ, then the giant is not merely allowing entry into the city, but actively aiding this river-crossing, and reinforces a feudal sense of fealty in so doing. London is put in its place, as a subject-vassal of the king-Christ, and is neither a necessary crutch to his power nor an ominous threat to it. (Christopher’s loyalty throughout the *Legenda aurea* is explicitly framed in terms of fealty and vassalage.) This recasting of the city/king relationship as vassal/lord also perhaps explains the giant’s anomalous sword: it invites us to make this connection.

The already-mentioned liminality of the setting of the tableau itself (on the bridge, over the river), as it supported the Gogmagog analogue, also supported that of Christopher. As previously mentioned, locating the giant at the start of a major bridge into the city both positioned it as a defensive placement and reinforced the river-crossing parallel. The bridge over the river Thames served as a passage over the river itself, which marked the border between London and Southwark: it defined and allowed the move from new to (comparatively) old, from suburban to urban. The bridge’s position over the river, however, made it simultaneously an edge and a passage, a place where space was ill-defined and so roles were too: slippage of identification and identity is possible for both the giant and Henry. The giant can be both Gogmagog and Christopher, a threatening monster and a saintly
vassal: Henry can be both orphan and Christ, a vulnerable boy and a representative of the divine.

While the linkage between Christ and Henry creates several new problems for Henry's royal authority, here it serves to counter, at least to a certain extent, the threat I have argued that Gogmagog's influence presented. This is not to say that the giant is not still problematic in light of the Christopher parallel: as a giant, he is innately threatening, much like Sir Gowther and his fellow tamed giants. However, the challenge to royal authority Christopher poses with his disloyalty to his earthly lords is neutralized when his lord is the Lord, by definition supreme and all-powerful. Similarly, the threat the giant posed to Henry's temporal authority was lessened when Henry was paralleled with Christ and thereby endowed with spiritual authority instead. One can defy a lord; one cannot defy the Lord. This strategy is not entirely without its problems, the most prominent being that Henry was not Christ; though divinely anointed, his authority was temporal, and his rule was that of Caesar rather than that of Christ. For Henry to become Christ was an impossibility, and even divinely anointed and appointed, his spiritual authority was of necessity secondhand. No matter how pious Henry might attempt to be, it would not make him an inviolable monarch. Henry found himself in a double bind: as a child, his only true route to power and safety was through preferring the spiritual world to the secular one, but as an adult it was that same practice that in part brought about his end. Several decades after Lydgate wrote his poem, Henry VI was deposed twice by the future Edward IV and killed after his second fall from grace. He was so legendarily pious that miracles were reported by visitors to his tomb, and he was informally regarded as a saint until the Reformation, but in the end he could only achieve such spiritual capital through martyrdom.
And this brings us back to Lydgate. One could make the case that Lydgate gave the king the idea for this shift from secular to spiritual authority; when Henry visited Bury St. Edmunds later that year, Lydgate commemorated the occasion by presenting Henry with *St. Edmund and St. Fremund* later that year (a lavishly illustrated account of two early English kings who, through their piety, performed miracles and accomplished great things). One could also make a case that Lydgate foresaw the eventual outcome of such a strategy (both Edmund and Fremund were martyred, and their miracles were all posthumous). I will not go so far, though it certainly seems to be no coincidence that while Henry was certainly a devout child before, this period marks the beginning of his legendary piety. However, I will argue that Lydgate recognizes these two analogues that I have presented and that he does his best to navigate between them: in the end he is unable to entirely preclude one in favor of the other, recognizing the value and problems inherent in each, but in attempting to reconcile the two he lays the groundwork for an ultimate alignment with kingly power and St. Christopher as an identity for the giant—a decision that foreshadows Henry’s similar choice of spiritual over secular authority, and one that arguably, ultimately brings with it the devastating consequence of civil war.

“Cristis champioun”: Spiritual and Secular Authority in Henry VI’s Reign

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183 For more on Lydgate’s strategic use of piety to legitimize Henry VI through Lydgate’s *St. Edmund and St. Fremund*, see Fiona Somerset, “‘Hard is with seyntis for to make affray’: Lydgate the ‘Poet-Propagandist’ as Hagiographer,” in *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture and Lancastrian England*, ed. Larry Scanlon and James Simpson (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 258-277.
At this point I should clarify that, although I have presented these two characterizations of the giant as a simple duality (Christopher vs. Gogmagog, benevolent vs. malevolent, court vs. city, spiritual vs. secular, etc.), the role(s) of the giant are anything but. Opposition, far from precluding common ground, requires it: the figure of the pageant-giant embodies both of the extremes I have presented. While up to this point I have merely attempted to present the two extremes, the “true” identity of the giant—as truth so frequently does in cases of opposition—lies somewhere in the nebulous middle. That middle is also where Lydgate himself is uneasily located. His divided loyalties, which I have already detailed, make his position, and those of his poem, not immediately clear.

John Carpenter—the city clerk whose letter is a likely source for Lydgate’s poem—gives a brief description, in that same letter, of the giant on the bridge:

Et deinde equitando per medium de Southwek pervenit ad exteriorem fenem civitatis prope pontem ubi parabatur machina, satis pulcrae, in cujus medio stabat gigas mire magnitudinis, vibrans et extendens gladium in hostes regie magestatis, hac proinde scriptura circumcinctus: Innimicos ejus induam confusione.\textsuperscript{184}

(And next, having ridden through the midst of Southwark, he came to the outer boundary of the city, near the bridge, where a quite noble device was being prepared, in whose center a giant of uncommon size was standing, brandishing and extending a sword against the enemies of the king’s majesty, and consequently encircled by this scripture: “His enemies will I clothe in confusion.”)

Carpenter’s description of the giant focuses on three aspects of his appearance: his size, the specific motions he makes with his sword, and the fact that he is surrounded by a scripture just as the king’s enemies it describes are surrounded in confusion. None of these aspects are primarily

\textsuperscript{184} McCracken, “King Henry’s triumphal entry,” 81. The scripture is a quotation from Psalms 131:18.
vertical—size can describe width or girth as well, a sword-arm can be extended and brandished both outwards and upwards, and one can be encircled along any axis—but all at least hold the potential of verticality, and in doing so represent the threats posed by the giant. The size of the giant dwarfs lesser men (and by this metric, even the king is made lesser) and the sword represents the physical and martial power of the giant and the potential threat that such power always poses. Even the seemingly innocuous, or even beneficial, scripture, helps to position the giant as a threat. Just as the king’s enemies will be clothed in confusion, the giant himself is clothed in this non-vernacular scripture (perhaps literally, assuming the possibility that it appeared on some sort of banner or sash)—does this then position him as one of those enemies?

When he translates Carpenter’s Latin into English, how does Lydgate change the portrayal of the giant? Lydgate’s first reference to the giant describes him as “a sturdy champeoun, / Off looke and chere sterne as a lyoun”; the words “sturdy” and “champeoun” here are the most compelling. While the adjective “sturdy” certainly held its modern meaning of “vigorous, robust, strongly built” in Middle English, it also—and perhaps more commonly—held several now-lost meanings that shed more light on the giant’s role in the pageant: “disobedient, rebellious, refractory”; “willful, aggressive, obstinate”; and “fierce, violent, cruel, furious, menacing.” Lydgate himself in fact uses “sturdy” to describe another giant, that slaughtered by Guy of Warwick in his eponymous poem. In the Pilgrimage of

185 *Henry VI’s Triumphal Entry into London*, lines 74-75. All quotations are taken from Claire Sponsler, ed., *John Lydgate: Mummings and Entertainments* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010).

186 MED, *sturdi* (adj.).
Man, meanwhile, a sword “techeth...Not to be stordy nor rebel/A·geyn the Spyryt.”¹⁸⁷ In his account of the entry, Lydgate acknowledges the innate threat posed by the giant and attempts to neutralize it by use of the word “champeoun,” a word defining someone by their role in fighting for and serving somebody else. Champeoun also suggests a certain exemplarity: one who is at the apogee of their milieu, figuratively if not physically.

Even here, “champeoun” could be defined in two ways: one centering on defending another, and one meaning fighting at another’s command. The figure of the “kinges champioun”—centering around specifically acting as a champion for the king and at his command—was the latter, though it might also hold undertones of the former when the king was a minor.¹⁸⁸ Being identified as a general “champion” can certainly be argued to be a position of power—if one is in need of protection, one needs a champion, and need allows for negotiation and leverage. However, if placed in the context of St. Christopher, it’s unlikely that the giant could be anything but the latter variety, and specifically a “kinges champioun”; not only is he serving the king, of course, but there was a precedent in that Henry VI had explicitly had a “kinges champioun” at his English coronation two years before.¹⁸⁹ In a ceremony responding to a French coronation, and recalling in its pomp and circumstance Henry VI’s original English coronation, it’s hard not to see


¹⁸⁸ MED, champioun (n.).

¹⁸⁹ See “The Coronation of Henry VI,” quoted in Thomas Wright, ed., Political Poems and Songs, vol. 2 (London: Rolls Series, 1861), 146-148. At the 1429 coronation two years before, Henry had an official king’s champion, Phillip Dymmok, whose official role was to challenge anyone “that wille say the contrary/That kyng Harry the sixt is crownyd truly.” And McLaren quotes another account of this very triumphal entry in which the giant declares “And y: the Kynges Champyon, in full might and power” (quoted in London Chronicles, 54).
parts of this pageant as having the effect of evoking memories of the past ceremony.

It is in Lydgate’s presentation of the giant as “champioun,” and the specific manner in which that term works with the historical and biblical analogues already presented, that the giant’s role seems most clearly defined, and it is through use of this word that we can most clearly discern the way Lydgate presents its, and by extension London’s, role with regards to the king. Lydgate mentions it, as above, in his first mention of the giant. He also has the giant identify himself as such in his poem’s version of the giant’s words to the king:

“All tho that ben enemyes to the Kyng,  
I shall hem clothe with confusioun,  
Make him myhty with vertuous levyng  
His mortall foon to oppressen and bere adoun,  
And him to encresen as Cristis champioun,  
Alle myscheffes ff rom hym to abrigge  
With the grace off God at th’entryng off the Brigge.”

(85-91)

Lydgate, notably, does not mention the giant being encircled or clothed by the scripture. As previously mentioned, at least one contemporary account outside of Lydgate sees fit to characterize the giant as “London’s champion”; however, Carpenter uses the phrases “gigas mire magnitudinis” and “gigantis” in Latin, seemingly reinforcing the size differential and not using anything resembling the word “champion.” Lydgate refers to the pageant-giant as a “geaunt” only once, referring to him as a “champioun” twice (one use of which is of indeterminate antecedent, but which I will argue based on his previous use of the word does in fact refer to the giant rather than Henry). In his attempt to leaven the threat posed by the giant, it is important to Lydgate to reinforce his identity as a champion first and foremost.
The identification I have argued for above, in which the Christopher parallel reframes London and the king in a feudal relationship of vassalage, is reinforced by Lydgate’s invocation of “Cristis champioun”. It is syntactically unclear whether Christ’s champion is Henry or the giant, but from the context of this scene – with the giant explicitly identified as a champion, in other sources if not in this one, and Henry implicitly identified as Christ – it seems likely that the phrase is being used by the giant to refer to himself, relinquishing any temporal power inherent in the position of “champioun” to the young king as his lord. (After all, while it is theoretically possible to gain such power from serving as champion to an earthly king, the same is not necessarily true for spiritual monarchs.)

Christ was often represented as a giant, both literally and figuratively, in medieval art. Frequently he is portrayed far larger than those who surround him, presumably to illustrate his relative significance (not uncommon in medieval art)—nevertheless, the result is that in these pictures he appears to be a giant, often appearing two or three times the height of other people in the pictures. Christ is also obviously associated with elevation and upward motion, from his position at the Crucifixion, pendant

190 The antecedent of the second instance of the word is unclear. The giant claims that he will “him...encresen as Cristis champioun”; this can mean either that the giant is Christ’s champion and will encresen Henry (cause him to grow), or it can mean that the giant is fostering Henry’s growth in becoming a champion of Christ. While either interpretation is valid, I have chosen to assume the first for two reason: first, the giant is explicitly identified as a champeoun only two stanzas before, and second, the near-explicit identification of Henry with Christ throughout the poem would seem to reinforce a dual identity for the giant as champion to both king and Christ.

191 One example is the three-headed Christ in a thirteenth-century psalter (St. John’s College, Cambridge, MS K26, fol 9v.) Discussion of this image and its association with gigantic monstrosity can be found in Robert Mills, “Jesus as Monster,” in The Monstrous Middle Ages, ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 40. Mills discusses the parallels between the triune Christ and a being of the Plinian monstrous races, both of which are presented as giants with three faces.
on the cross, to the heavenward rise of the Ascension. (Medieval belief also included downward motion for Christ in the Harrowing of Hell, but only to then lead the freed souls upward.) In this case, height represents not the self-deluded importance of pride, but the genuine importance of the Son of God.

Later in the poem, a clever bit of wordplay on Lydgate’s part reinforces the parallel between Christopher serving as Christ’s bridge of sorts across the river and the giant’s role in aiding Henry’s journey across London Bridge. Above I have quoted the section of Lydgate’s poem featuring the giant’s speech; while the other accounts of the speech (though general consensus is that it was not a speech, but a written text) generally identify the selection from scripture and then summarize the giant’s words, Lydgate devotes an entire stanza to the giant’s words. Without other accounts which explicitly record the words, we have no idea whether Lydgate is recording them faithfully or embellishing on a skeletal summary and his own possible memories, but it seems more likely the latter, given the time between the event and composition of the poem. In his version of the giant’s words, he explicitly links the giant’s role as “Cristis champioun” with his role as a glorified porter or gatekeeper through his repetition of the word “brigge”: his “abridging” mischief from the king and his enabling of the king’s entry into London (a literal “a-bridging”) strengthen the association with Christopher, who serves as Christ’s champion and his bridge in the same action. In serving as the king’s bridge, the giant—for which read the city—must figuratively allow the king to tread on him, and is placed in an ultimately servile position.

“A pyler reysed lyk a tour”: London Bridge and its Gate-Towers
The Middle English “tour” of course implies verticality, just as our modern noun “tower” does. It also can be used to represent the apex of something, or one who is at the height of a representative virtue. It also is used for things vaguely resembling towers, such as projections on a crown; presumably, then, it could conceivably refer not just to the gate-tower itself but perhaps to the spikes on which heads were placed. (That could also explain why it is “a pyler reysed like a tour” rather than just a “tour”—it is a “tour” [tower] that is like a “tour” [spike].) Interestingly, “tour” can also be used to refer to either heaven or hell in general (presumably the former due to its association with height, and the latter due to its association with a prison or place of confinement). It refers to any kind of building or set of buildings, from as small as a single building to as large as a fortified city (or heaven itself). As for “pyler,” it obviously also refers to a general sense of support, as “pillar” does in modern English. Interestingly, it is the Middle English word used for the beam in the eye in Matthew 7:3. It is also used to describe the pier of a bridge, such as those supporting London Bridge itself.

The medieval London Bridge was certainly a place of crossing—the place of crossing, as the only way to cross the Thames on foot in London at the time—but that is not all it was. The bridge was a site for commerce, residence, and political theater. Not only did it serve as a location for pageantry such as that which greeted Henry’s return, but the towers on the Southwark end of the bridge—the specific gate-tower in question being among them—were also the locations where traitor’s heads were impaled, on spikes on or attached to the towers, to greet those entering the city. London

192 MED, tour (n.). Interestingly a “tour” can also mean an entourage, so in a sense Henry brings one tour to another.
Bridge had partially collapsed in the mid-fourteenth century, and was repaired in 1381—the same year as the Peasants’ Revolt—and the heads of Wat Tyler and his associates likely graced that same gate-tower.

The bridge most often known nowadays as London Bridge—infamously bought by a wealthy American and moved across the Atlantic piece by piece—was in fact built in the 1820s to replace the medieval bridge. John Schofield describes it was “the single most important secular structure [in London].”

The older bridge survives in illustrations and in descriptions by authors such as John Stow. The bridge itself was made of stone, and was held aloft over the river by twenty stone arches, sixty feet high and thirty feet wide, set twenty feet apart along the bridge. From bank to bank, wooden buildings stood along both sides of the bridge, “so that it seemeth rather a continual street than a bridge.” These buildings contained shops and houses. What John Stow describes as “a large chapel” dedicated to St. Thomas, established by King John and rebuilt in the 1380s, sat in the middle of the bridge. A tower was built on the London side was built beginning in 1426 from which the bridge could be drawn up for defensive purposes, and stood until 1577. In 1435, not long after the Bridge served as the stage for the giant’s pageant, it was condemned “as being in a ruinous condition”; the very gate-tower on the Southwark side collapsed in January 1437, along with two of the arches. (It was rebuilt later in the fifteenth century of timber and promptly burnt down in 1471 by Thomas Neville, the so-called Bastard of Fauconberg or Falconbridge, a Lancastrian leader during the Wars of the Roses.) Early

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modern portrayals of the bridge show much of the fifteenth-century work still extant, while by the seventeenth century the bridge had been built up with taller, more stylish buildings of the era.

It is intriguing that this very vertically-oriented pageant took place on a location so associated with horizontal movement, across the river and back. Nevertheless, the bridge went much higher along the sides than more modern London bridges do, because of the buildings: as such, walking down the bridge itself would not have been unlike walking down a city street, surrounded by buildings of multiple levels on both sides. Perhaps the staging of this pageant was meant to contrast the horizontal movement of the bridge crossing, and of the procession’s general movement, with the vertical barricade posed by the giant; only after the king has heard its message and seen its posturing is he allowed to pass. Here the use of vertically-oriented gate-towers to mark the marginal borders of horizontal spaces shows the intriguing ways these two dimensions sometimes work together, as described in the introduction with Levinas and Bachelard. The figure of the giant combines the looming threat of verticality with the presumably horizontal marginality of monstrosity.

Conclusion

Although Christopher seems to be the analogue Lydgate wants to prefer, he cannot entirely abandon Gogmagog. Almost at the end of the poem, right before the envoy, he records a speech by Welles to the king in which Welles mentions London’s status as the “New Troy”: a status that immediately also invokes London’s Trojan founder (512). Though much of the poem seems to attempt to efface the ghost of Gogmagog and replace him with
Christopher, Lydgate cannot reach the end of the poem itself without bringing up Brutus, and through him Gogmagog, if only by implication. He wants to cast his loyalties wholly with the king, but his equally strong associations of patronage with London—and first and foremost with the patron of this particular poem, Mayor Welles—leave him unable to do so. Through this revealing reference, Lydgate leaves audiences of his poem remembering the triumphal entry at its end the same way it began. In a way, the conflict foreshadowed in the entry and the poem—that of crown versus town—was a red herring, but in their responses to it both Henry and Lydgate unexpectedly foreshadowed a different one. Henry’s actions perhaps forestalled one potential internecine conflict, but in doing so they brought about another, and brought him a martyr’s tomb. Lydgate, meanwhile, in an act of perhaps unwitting precognition, shows that the English of 1432 faced the same problem on the horizon that their mythical British forebears faced: a nation in the looming shadow of a towering giant.
CODA

As I have argued, medieval English authors used verticality as a lens through which to view the society they inhabited, and as a literary device to comment on it—an environment in which verticality was a major way of relating to and imagining the world. From the *Cleanness* poet’s use of vertical movement to critique new social mobility to Chaucer’s use of a newly vertical conception of genealogy to discuss changing ideas of maternity and paternity, vertical metaphor served as a tool for these authors to discuss certain ways in which their society functioned and in which their culture was defined. As we have seen with the *Cleanness* poet and Lydgate, discourses of verticality also allowed authors to critique aspects of their society in subtle ways that helped avoid potential punishment. The plausible deniability for more trenchant critiques that metaphors of verticality provide likely played a part in the use of such concepts in these literary works. Through the use of verticality, these authors harnessed some of the popularity of vertical thought during the Middle Ages and bent it to their own individually very different ends.

With the waning of the Middle Ages, I would argue that the role verticality played in the popular imagination shrank correspondingly. The Protestant Reformation shifted the focus in much of Europe to a direct relationship between man and God, rather than the strict vertical hierarchy that the Catholic Church endorsed. The Age of Colonization went into full swing, an age of movement *across*—across seas and across cultures. With the end of many traditional feudal class structures, and the growing importance of the middling classes, class differences at least ostensibly began to shrink and barriers between classes became more permeable, a trend that perhaps
culminated in the early modern era. A century after Lydgate’s poem, the son of a cloth merchant (Thomas Wolsey) could become a Catholic cardinal and the wealthiest man in the kingdom, and less than a century after that a glover’s son turned playwright (William Shakespeare) could gain the attention and patronage of a reigning queen.196

Yet even as the Middle Ages came to an end and the major role verticality played in society dwindled, many of the patterns of thought that I have described remained. While still evolving, recognizably vertical family trees of major families appeared in the fifteenth century, and by the end of the early modern period this was essentially set as the major Western pattern for representing kinship relations. The research of genealogy has grown in popularity within the past half-century or so, largely due to the increased availability of resources thanks to venues like the Church of Latter-Day Saints’ archives and Internet digitization of old government records—and a majority of those connections discovered are diagrammed in a family tree. The vocabulary and hierarchy of class develops vertically in the Middle Ages, and said vocabulary, at least, often survives into the modern day. The threat Lydgate’s giant represents to Henry VI’s authority may have culminated in the Wars of the Roses—a series of events that are generally considered to bring the English Middle Ages to an end. Giants no longer hold as strong a place in the English imagination as they once did, but certain practices and objects from the era have survived even into the modern day. (The Lord Mayor of London’s parade, for example, still has a wicker Gogmagog in the procession.) Meanwhile, giants crossed from the Old World

196 Rumor at the time held that Wolsey’s father was a butcher, but records indicate this was likely untrue. Nevertheless, the impetus behind the rumor only serves to mildly exaggerate Wolsey’s meteoric rise in social status.
to the New, resulting in figures such as Paul Bunyan rising from the young nation of America. Giants still play a role in popular culture, from *Harry Potter’s* Hagrid, Grawp, and Madame Maxime to Marvel Comics’ Giant-Man.

Understanding the medieval treatment of vertical thought more fully not only helps explain its continued effects, but also enriches our understanding of medieval space, both physical and conceptual. Whether a dais in a great hall or a tree in an enclosed garden, keeping the vertical dimension in mind when thinking about these spaces, and examining the way in which vertical space is used when these spaces are reimagined in medieval literature, gives us a clearer idea of the way medieval people thought of their spaces and their world.

Ultimately, understanding the medieval conception of verticality helps us understand audiences of the Middle Ages more thoroughly. Though it will never be possible to entirely duplicate their worldview, it is important to make the effort to take the original audience’s point of view into account when approaching medieval texts. For example, Christians were instructed to live with one eye metaphorically cast to the heavens, anticipating the afterlife and the rewards it would bring by modifying their daily behavior and morality. Life with one eye cast to the heavens—whether due to sincere belief or a desire to appear like everyone else—cannot have failed to affect the ways in which medieval audiences saw the world and their place within it, and should also affect the way in which we read and discuss these texts of the time.

In spite of these grander suggestions, as I have mentioned in my introduction, the scale of my project has been of necessity limited to late medieval English literature. I have not attempted in this project to write an overarching theory of medieval verticality, and much work remains to be
done with, for example, Old English literature or Continental literature. Nevertheless, I hope this work has illuminated, at least in small part, the major role in which verticality played in medieval life and literature and the ways in which it served as a useful metaphor for English writers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.
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