

## LITERARY AND CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS

## 3.1 AUTHORSHIP

## 3.1.1 ONE AUTHOR?

Prior to a discussion of authorship, we need to answer the question whether the twenty-four Poems, handed down to us as a cohesive collection (see section 2.1), were indeed all written by one author. Kail concluded that the Poems are ‘most probably by the same author,’ because all or nearly all of them are occasional poems, bear the same religious character and ‘democratic tendency’, and were written in a style and language which ‘show no such difference as would compel us to ascribe the several poems to more than one author’ (pp. vii–ix). A few notes to this analysis seem in order here. The occasional character of the Poems is arguable with respect to only ten of the twenty-four Poems, no fewer than fourteen bearing no relation whatsoever to any datable or occasional event (see section 2.3). As to the consistently religious, social and political character of the Poems, at least they do bear witness of ‘a consistent attitude; deeply moral, church-supporting, gentry-favoring, monarchy-loving,’ in Robbins’ characterization.<sup>1</sup> The style and language of the Poems indeed provide corroborative evidence for a single author. Kail’s brief and only comment quoted above is altogether too circumspect. The consistency and coherence of versification and imagery (see section 3.3) bear the unmistakable mark of one author. But perhaps the most compelling evidence for assuming single authorship is to be found in the unvaried repetition throughout the Poems of one or two specific themes. For instance, variations on ‘wise’ (*wys/wyse/wysdom/wis/wis/wise/wisdom*) appear more than seventy times in twenty-one of the poems, from I to XXIV. Another phrase, expressing a favourite religious notion, is the author’s repeated emphasis on man’s free will:

3e haue fre wille, chese 3oure chaunce (III.167)

He hap fre wille: lese or wyne (VII.108)

I lent þe fre wil and þou3t (X.19)

In oure fre wille þe choys it lys (XI.61)

Pou hast fre wille, knowest euylle and good (XVII.151)

I lente þe knoweleche and fre wille (XIX.64)

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<sup>1</sup> Robbins (1959, p. xxviii).

The author's preoccupation with morality and religion reaches almost obsessive heights on the theme of the inevitable consequences, good or bad, of man's deeds. With the following list of the relevant verses I take the risk of tedium in order to explicate the almost unvaried language in which this theme over the years found expression in a range of poems extending from poems I to XXIV, as only one writer would produce:

- Whether he be worthi heuene or helle / To resceyue, after his seruyce (I.140)  
 After thy dede resceyue thy name (II.20)  
 Men wol the deme after thy dede (II.22)  
 Who is fals and who is trewe: / After þey lyue, alle folk wole say (IV.56)  
 After desert þe name haþ prys (IV.162)  
 After þy dede resceyue thy name (VI.58)  
 After þe dede þe doom is dy3t (VII.103)  
 After 3oure werkis ressayue þy mede (VIII.87)  
 After 3oure werkis wayte aftur 3oure mede (IX.151)  
 For to be demed after his dede (XIII.8)  
 To worschip or shame, after þe dede (XIII.80)  
 After þy dede ressayue þy name (XIV.7)  
 After þey lyue men deme so (XIV.22)  
 Alle þou3tes in Goddis doom are di3t, / And dedes, after þat þe be (XVIII.71–72)  
 As þou deserued fong þy fee (XIX.24)  
 After þy dede þe doom is dy3t (XIX.103)  
 Deme euel and good after here dede (XXII.60)  
 Dampne me no3t after my dede (XXIV.118)  
 Deme me no3t after my dede (XXIV.243)  
 After warke þat þey vsed, / I shal hem deme or saue (XXIV.407–408)  
 As thay deseruyd echon haue (XXIV.410)

It will be noted that the last four verses all find a place in the *Lessouns of the Dirige*, Job's Complaint to God because of his undeserved misery, the exact opposite of what the author of the Poems kept repeating in the preceding sixteen lines of the list. It may well have been the author's bafflement about God inexplicably allowing Satan to inflict the direst punishments on a wholly undeserving true believer, as the poet supposedly thought himself to be, that gave occasion to this particular poem.

The consistent style and the recurrence of favourite phrases and notions justify the conclusion that the Poems were the work of one author. The question is then: who was the author? He is anonymous and has left no positive evidence in his poems of his possible identity. There is only the text of the Poems themselves to provide us with clues about the identity of the person who wrote them. Kail ascribed the Poems to 'a priest, most probably an abbot or a prior', who 'as such ... occupied a seat in

parliament and voted with the Commons' (p. ix).<sup>2</sup> Apparently, Kail based his identification on three arguments: (1) in some of his poems the author speaks like a clergyman addressing the faithful, or as the master of a monastery admonishing his fellow monks; (2) he showed a 'lively interest in the cause of the Commons'; and (3) he demonstrated a 'rather detailed knowledge of the proceedings in parliament' (p. ix). The third argument in its turn is based on Kail's assumption that passages in six out of the twenty-four Poems allude to business transacted in parliament. As I concluded in section 2.3 this assumption seems almost certainly valid.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.1.2 IDENTITY OF THE AUTHOR

There can hardly be any doubt that the three arguments which Kail put forward to identify the poet point in the right direction, that is to say: to a member of the clergy very near to, and quite knowledgeable about, the Commons and its business. Yet, Kail's conclusion that he was an abbot or prior who sat with the Commons cannot be true, because the higher clergy at no time sat with the Commons, but with the lords.<sup>4</sup> Accepting the validity of Kail's profile of the author, what alternatives for Kail's conclusion present themselves? The nearest alternatives are either that the poet did indeed sit with the Commons, but as a member of the lower clergy, or that he was actually an abbot or a prior, but as such occupied a seat with the lords. Let us consider each possibility in turn.

Could the writer of the Poems have been a member of the lower clergy in the Commons? Pollard observed that:

as late as 1332 clerical proctors [i.e. deputies elected to represent the diocesan clergy, cathedral chapters and collegiate churches of the respective church provinces] put in an appearance in

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<sup>2</sup> Robbins' comment on this ascription (1959, p. xxviii) is that 'the proposal is ... at least tenable'. Scattergood (1971, pp. 17–18) cites Kail's argumentation and conclusion without comment.

<sup>3</sup> In that case it may be inferred that out of the ten parliaments held between October 1399 and November 1414 the writer of the Poems attended at least six parliaments in person, perhaps even all ten if he was returned to all of them but either was not present at four, or attended without making mention of their business in a poem. Of parliamentary business after 1414 there is no mention at all in the Poems. Again, either the poet was not returned to or did not attend any of the ten parliaments held between 1415 and 1427, the year of the last poem if we assume a frequency of one a year.

<sup>4</sup> See Brown (1989, pp. 156–76, esp. p. 174). With the exception of Dodd (2006, p. 318n.), Kail's assumption that the author was an abbot or prior with a seat in the Commons was accepted by all commentators and bibliographers (see Chapter 1), albeit in one or two instances with a note of caution. Incidentally, Dodd does not put forward any argument for his own suggestion that 'perhaps he [i.e. the author of the Poems] came from the localities (possibly a minor cleric).'

parliament; but they deliberated apart, and in time their appearance in parliament ceased altogether.<sup>5</sup>

This observation would seem to lead to the conclusion that half a century later a member of the lower clergy could not possibly occupy a seat in the Commons. Indeed, the lower clergy, as a body, met in separate, although as yet simultaneous, convocations [i.e. provincial church synods], and after 1340 technically under the jurisdiction of the archbishops of Canterbury and York.<sup>6</sup> Yet, as McHardy pointed out, proctors of the lower clergy after 1340 continued to be appointed for parliament. And even though ‘it is true that the number of appointments for any one parliament never reaches double figures ... there is no evidence of a tailing off of attendance at the end of the century’.<sup>7</sup> McHardy’s study makes it clear that, although ‘the lower clergy made no impression on the parliamentary scene’, there is ample evidence for the appointment of proctors.<sup>8</sup> McHardy adds that the lower clergy took their parliamentary duties more seriously than so far assumed,<sup>9</sup> but this assertion seems somewhat optimistic. Appointment to parliament and actual presence in parliament were by no means the same thing. Actual attendance of knights and burgesses and of the lords temporal and spiritual was recognised as a serious problem, as will be discussed below, and there is no reason to assume that the situation was any better where the lower clergy were concerned. On the contrary, practically the only parliamentary issue of interest to the clergy was the king’s demands for taxation, and by the fifteenth century such matters were considered and decided in clerical convocation.<sup>10</sup> If we add the requirement that a representative of the lower clergy, to qualify at all as our poet, must have attended in person at least six virtually consecutive parliaments, the conclusion seems justified that we have to look elsewhere.

Let us consider the other alternative: could the author of the Poems have been an abbot or prior, as Kail assumed, but sitting with the lords? A severely restricted and regularized number of abbots and priors, the residue of a longer list for earlier parliaments, was still summoned to parliament, as lords spiritual.<sup>11</sup> The first question that comes to mind is whether these secular and regular magnates could

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<sup>5</sup> Pollard (1926, p. 109). Lowry (1933, p. 454) confirms that the constitutional practice of clerical proctors attending parliament gradually died out in the thirty years after 1340.

<sup>6</sup> The king continued to summon the lower clergy under the *premunientes* clause in each bishop’s royal writ, but after 1340 obedience to the clause was no longer enforced by the crown (McHardy, 1973, p. 97).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 106. McHardy’s view is supported by Denton (1981, p. 100).

<sup>9</sup> McHardy (1973, p. 107).

<sup>10</sup> See Clarke (1936, pp. 125–53).

<sup>11</sup> By the 1370s the number of lords spiritual had been regularized to comprise ‘all the twenty-one ... archbishops and bishops, and an almost standard list of heads of religious houses, normally twenty-five abbots ... the prior of Coventry and the prior of the Hospitallers’ (Brown, 1981, p. 113).

have any knowledge at all of the business dealt with in the Commons, a prerequisite, as we have seen above, for one of the spiritual lords to qualify as the author of the Poems. This is a valid question, because the lords convened in separate locations, with the exception of the joint opening session; moreover, their business was different from that of the Commons.<sup>12</sup> The answer is: yes, they could. Petitions from the Commons came up for discussion and reply in the lords, and on occasion there were joint sessions of representatives from the Commons and from the lords.<sup>13</sup> Enough opportunities, in any case, for the prelates to become acquainted with the business dealt with in the Commons.

The next question to be asked is whether any of the abbots or priors summoned to parliament actually attended in person at least six out of ten sessions over a period of fifteen years. The historians are agreed that actual attendance of the lords spiritual left much to be desired, with only a few abbots and priors attending, and those quite often seeking to evade attendance.<sup>14</sup> The successive kings in the fourteenth and the early part of the fifteenth centuries had great difficulty in persuading the magnates and prelates not to excuse themselves from attending the parliamentary sessions to which they were summoned, except if acquitted because of pressing military or religious emergencies.<sup>15</sup> Roskell presents a wealth of detailed documentary evidence attesting to the lack of attendance of the lords in parliament, especially on the part of the lords spiritual.<sup>16</sup> The conclusion seems justified that the chances of finding the author of the Poems in this assembly are, again, very remote.

We are left, then, with the lay members of parliament: the lords temporal, and in the Commons: the knights of the shire and the burgesses. Kail does not consider any of these categories, because they do not conform to his profile of the writer of the Poems as discussed in the beginning of this chapter. Indeed, the author's preoccupation throughout the Poems with matters of church and faith does not immediately point to a lay magnate. Moreover, the same evidence that Roskell presents with respect to the frequent absence of the lords spiritual (see above) applies to the lay lords. The situation as regards

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 111–12, 123–24.

<sup>13</sup> Brown (*Ibid.* pp. 124–25) points out that 'petitions ... sent up from the Commons were read before the lords and advice was offered to the king on how they should be answered ... Over a period of weeks separate sessions, joint sessions and sessions with an intercommuning group of lords were held.'

<sup>14</sup> Brown (1981, p. 116), and Pollard (1926, p. 64).

<sup>15</sup> Roskell (1956, pp. 153–204).

<sup>16</sup> 'There have actually survived the letters of excusation of more than half of the abbots in the case of each of no fewer than forty parliaments in the course of the fourteenth century ... The surviving letters of excusation for the successive parliaments of 1391, 1393, 1394, 1395, and January 1397 (by which time twenty-seven abbots and priors were being regularly summoned) number respectively 16, 19, 19, 17, and 16. An examination of the record of the heads of individual monasteries ... suggests that in the vast majority of cases it was really exceptional for an abbot to attend parliament in person' (Roskell, 1956, p. 174).

election, re-election and personal attendance of the county gentry and the burgesses in the Commons is slightly more promising. As we have seen, for the writer of the Poems to have been a lay member of parliament, he should have been (re-)elected to at least six parliaments between 1399 and 1414. Statistics compiled for the years immediately preceding the period under review show that five or more re-elections did occur, but not frequently. Lewis (1933) analysed the twenty-six parliaments held between 1376 and 1397. Out of a total of seventy-four knights (two from each of the thirty-seven shires), the number of members returned six times typically varied between one and five, one year peaking with six. The number of county members returned ten times – the required frequency to fit the author's profile, as we have seen earlier on –, varied between nil (most often) and two. For the representatives from the boroughs the corresponding numbers are lower. The number of burgesses returned for the sixth time typically varied between nil and three, with an occasional peak of five or six, out of a total of about sixty borough representatives returned. The number of burgesses returned ten times typically varied between nil (most often) and two.<sup>17</sup>

The numbers dramatically go down even further when taking into account actual presence, rather than official (re-)election. In his *Evolution of Parliament*, Pollard demonstrated that actual attendance of the Commons in parliament remained at a lamentably low level until the middle of the fourteenth century, mainly because of the tendency of the boroughs to abstain themselves.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, if we were to seek our poet in the Commons, he could conceivably be found among the very few county representatives who were regularly present, but almost certainly not among the city and borough members. However, in terms of statistical chance, the option is only barely conceivable. What pleads even further against the notion of the author being a knight is the subject matter and tone of voice of a number of the Poems themselves. The traditional complaints and appeals of God to man in poems X, XVII and XIX, the criticisms of the secular clergy in poem XIV and of the regular clergy in poem XVIII, the versifications of biblical passages in poems XXI and XXIV, and the thoroughly theological poem XXIII, all point to a clerical rather than a secular background.<sup>19</sup>

The above analysis shows that the writer of the Poems was almost certainly not a member of parliament. Yet, the internal evidence keeps pointing in the direction of Westminster. The poet must have been familiar with the proceedings of at least six out of ten parliaments spread over a period of fifteen years. He demonstrates a lively interest in specific political issues, at home and abroad. Whilst

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<sup>17</sup> Lewis (1933). But occasionally a commoner was returned even more frequently. In the parliament of January 1395, one borough representative was returned (although not necessarily present!) for the eighteenth time, an absolute record in the statistics available to us.

<sup>18</sup> See Pollard (1926, pp. 319–21).

<sup>19</sup> The religious aspects of the Poems are discussed as part of their cultural background in section 3.4, in particular in sections 3.4.1.3 and 3.4.2.

his sympathies lay with the Commons rather than with the lords, he found himself near the centre of power, the place where he thought it expedient to address not only the king, but also a 'kyngis chaunceller', a 'kyngis counselere', 'lordis' and those 'that ouer puple han gouernaunce'.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the Poems give evidence of the writer's strong religious bent. He commented critically on the morals of both the secular and the regular clergy. The tenets of the Christian belief and the theological dogmas underlying the sacraments of the Church had no secrets for him.

With this profile in mind we are in fact looking at a man closely involved with the parliamentary business of the Commons without being a parliamentarian himself; a man near the centre of power without being part of it; a devout and strongly motivated member of the clergy. The figure best fitting this picture is that of a clerk in the royal Chancery, most of whom were clerics. One of the manifold duties of this vast administrative machinery of medieval royal government was to issue summons to parliament, and to receive on behalf of the king all private and common parliamentary petitions.<sup>21</sup> In Chancery our author was not only knowledgeable about parliamentary affairs, but as much about political affairs at home and abroad. The conclusion that the poet was a Chancery clerk finds concurrence with Giancarlo's remark in his study of the relationship between the English parliament and English literature in late medieval times, that 'to be a poet in this period was, by and large, to be a clerk and to have had clerkly-clerical training. All of these poets [i.e. those referring extensively to parliamentary matters] moved in the clerical and bureaucratic circles that were a distinctive feature of the London-Westminster environment'.<sup>22</sup> And Barr (1993, p. 17) suggests that the author of *Richard the Redeless* (and by implication also the author of its continuation *Mum and the Sothsegger*), because principally concerned with contemporary affairs, could have been a parliamentary clerk.

Chancery clerks were either laymen or clerics. I have argued above that the author was in all likelihood a cleric. There are indications that make it probable that he was a regular cleric, more precisely a Benedictine monk. First, he devoted a whole poem (XVIII) to an elaborate set of conventual rules, in which echoes can be heard of the Provincial Capitulary of 1422 concerning the behaviour of Benedictine monks, about which complaints had been made to King Henry V in 1421.<sup>23</sup> Second, the place where the author of poem XVIII was most likely to have become familiar with this particular Capitulary was evidently a Benedictine monastery, and the nearest, the Benedictine Westminster Abbey, was next door to the royal palace of Westminster and its Chancery offices. Third, in the early part of the fifteenth century the Chancery personnel, besides career clerks and secular clerics, still counted

<sup>20</sup> A social positioning which also Robbins makes explicit (1959, p. xxviii, and 1975, p. 1417).

<sup>21</sup> For a comprehensive description of the governance of late medieval England, see Brown (1989), especially p. 2 (clerks as clerics) and pp. 44–52 (the workings of Chancery).

<sup>22</sup> Giancarlo (2007, p. 10).

<sup>23</sup> See Kail (p. xxii).

clerics who had taken major or minor orders, albeit in rapidly diminishing numbers.<sup>24</sup> The Register of ‘the Brethren of the Convent’ of Westminster (Pearce, 1916) only shows the names of the monks who held conventual offices, so within the precincts of Westminster Abbey. But those of the monks who held no such office and, as a result, remain anonymous, account for more than half of the total number. It is therefore conceivable that among them were monks employed as clerks in the nearby Chancery offices. The brisk demand for scribes that the elaborate government machinery engendered could be readily satisfied from the nearby Abbey. In any case, our particular monk will not have encountered much difficulty in obtaining permission from his abbot, the powerful William Colchester. Colchester occupied a prominent seat in the Upper House, and was closely engaged in the national and international affairs of the king, who in his turn was patron of the Abbey church.<sup>25</sup> Engaging in secular business was not frowned upon among the Benedictines, in any case. They enjoyed a ‘remarkable degree of identification with the secular life of their times,’ in particular the monks of Westminster Abbey, whose ‘position was to some extent unique,’ and whose ‘royal associations affected the life of its monks’.<sup>26</sup> The intrusive influence of the worldly affairs of the Palace of Westminster upon the monastic life in Westminster Abbey is best illustrated by the fact that the sessions of the Commons in Parliament in those days took place regularly within the precincts of the Abbey, either in the chapter house or in the refectory.<sup>27</sup> That the vow of *stabilitas loci* was not strictly enforced, moreover, appears from a remark by the compilers of the Register of Monks, who also tried to ‘trace them (i.e. the obedientaries) in occupation of offices elsewhere’.<sup>28</sup> For instance, the Register makes mention of the monk John Stokes, who ‘was absent from the Convent from about 1421 to 1436’.<sup>29</sup> There was also the monk Roger Cretton, who from 1399 till 1413 held, among other offices, the office of ‘Warden of Q. Alianore’s and of Richard II’s manors’,<sup>30</sup> which must have made him an *outridere* like Chaucer’s ‘monk out of his cloystre’ in the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>31</sup> Cretton’s office, incidentally, is illustrative of the Abbey’s close links with the king and his court. To mention one other example, our poet’s confrere of greater renown, John Lydgate, a Benedictine of Bury St. Edmunds, in 1426 spent time in France, and during the six following years in and around London, on all occasions writing numerous commissioned poems for

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<sup>24</sup> See Brown (1989, p. 60).

<sup>25</sup> See Harvey (2008).

<sup>26</sup> See Harvey (1993, pp. 1 and 5 respectively).

<sup>27</sup> See Brown (1989), p. 212). When the Commons had their sessions in the Palace, they met in the Painted Chamber.

<sup>28</sup> See Pearce (1916, p. 21).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 34.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> See Benson (1988, l. 181).



aristocratic patrons, including the king.<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, the Benedictine priory of Great Malvern in Worcestershire was subservient to Westminster Abbey.<sup>33</sup> It is a tempting thought that the holograph(s) of the Poems found their way to the scriptorium of Malvern Priory, there to be transcribed by a local resident in the local dialect of the Malvern area (see section 2.4).

The profile of a Westminster monk working within the royal palace of Westminster, if correct, will have changed abruptly in the year 1421. In that year, Henry V, having received complaints about serious misbehaviour within the Benedictine Order, summoned a great assembly in the Chapter House of Westminster. Sixty Benedictine abbots and priors and more than three hundred monks were present, among them undoubtedly their host, the Westminster abbot Colchester, and quite probably his subordinate, our poet. The king peremptorily demanded that they reform themselves.<sup>34</sup> It is not inconceivable that this criticism should have resulted in the author quitting Chancery, either on his own initiative, or so instructed by his abbot, if only because the latter wished to demonstrate his loyalty to the king. A strong indication in support of this thought is the tenor of the last seven poems. In poem XVIII the writer forcefully admonishes his fellow monks on the same points of criticism as censured in the meeting of the previous year. In this poem he immediately puts a (self-)accusing finger on the sore spot of the Benedictines' worldly occupations:

The goode lyueres in spiritualte,  
 Þe worldly lyueres hem doþ hate;  
 Wiþ occupacioun of temperalte  
 Dryueþ relegeon out at þe 3ate,  
 For besynesse of vanyte,  
 Vaynglory and hy3e astate.  
 Ðat þus chaungen here degre,  
 Pey come to heuene neuere or late. (XVIII.9–16)

From poem XVIII forward, all remaining poems (XIX–XXIV) testify to a way of thinking that differs dramatically from the earlier poems: contemplative and deeply pious, as I will discuss within the context of the audience of the Poems in section 3.2.

The writer of the Poems: a Benedictine monk, resident in Westminster Abbey – a *royal peculiar* under the direct jurisdiction of the monarch –, with a powerful peer in the lords as his superior, and as a Chancery clerk, must have found his duties and allegiances many-sided: to the crown, to the

<sup>32</sup> See Pearsall (1997, pp. 18–32).

<sup>33</sup> See Willis-Bund & Page (1971, pp. 136–37).

<sup>34</sup> See Kail (p. xxii), who refers to Goodwin (1704, p. 303), who refers to the *Chronica Maiora*, covering the years 1377–1420, of Thomas Walsingham, chronicler at the royal Abbey of St. Albans (for an English translation, see Prest & Clerk, 2005, pp. 440–41).

Commons, to the lords and not least to himself as a devout clergyman.<sup>35</sup> The sometimes strikingly divergent themes and moods in the Poems testify to these divided loyalties.

Having refashioned the identity of the author of the Poems, we may conclude that Kail was off target with his profile of the poet, but only slightly so. He saw the poet as ‘a priest, most probably an abbot or prior’, who ‘as such occupied a seat in parliament, and voted with the Commons’. It is demonstrably more likely that the writer of the Poems was neither an abbot nor a prior but a Benedictine monk, not a member of parliament but a royal Chancery clerk.

### 3.2 AUDIENCE

A cursory glance through the twenty-four Poems will be sufficient to make it clear that their author was a thoroughly didactic writer who on almost every page had a message to convey: of advice, complaint, instruction, criticism or exhortation. Sometimes their recipients, the poet’s audience, are specifically addressed; more often, they are only generally designated, or merely implied.<sup>36</sup> The king, for instance, is personally addressed: *To kepe þe crowne God graunte 3ow grace* (XII.49). Or a specific critical question is addressed to a monk:

A questyon of 3ow y craue –  
 Resoun assoyleþ it by skille –  
 Who may here soules saue  
 To were an abyte, wole or nelle. (XVIII.49–52)

Self-willed fools are indirectly addressed with a home truth:

Pat freek may wel be holden a fool  
 Pat wayueþ wit, and worcheþ by wille. (XVI.99–100)

Self-willed hypocrites are similarly indirectly addressed:

Many callen conscience fleschly willis,  
 And nelen non opere conseil craue. (IV.105–106)

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<sup>35</sup> As Denton (1981, p. 89) observed: ‘The clerks working in parliament ... were ... themselves either prelates, ecclesiastical dignitaries or members of the lower clergy. This simple factor is an indication of the two-sided nature of the duties and responsibilities of the clergymen who served the crown.’

<sup>36</sup> See Wogan-Browne *et al.* (1999, pp. 109–16) on ‘Addressing and Positioning the Audience’.

If not directly or indirectly spoken to, the audience is at any rate implied. The readers are implicitly invited to agree with the author's opinions and beliefs: *To wete 3if parlement be wys, / Be comoun profit wel it preues* (III.97–98).

All the time, it should be noted, the author addressed his audience in the vernacular; the Poems contain not a word of Latin.<sup>37</sup> As a trained cleric, our author was well versed in Latin<sup>38</sup> and may have been tempted to intersperse his verses with Latin phrases like many a contemporary poet, to attach an aura of authority to his verse.<sup>39</sup> As a 'man with a message' he may have felt that the didactic nature of his verse needed the vernacular for 'the education of [his] audience in matters of current theological, political and ethical interest'.<sup>40</sup> Latin was a severely limiting choice of language, meant to reach only the clergy, lawyers and scholars. By opting for the vernacular, our poet apparently sought to achieve the much wider audience of clergy, nobility and commons.<sup>41</sup> These categories are at the same time the readers that will have appealed to the poet as a man not only with a moral mission, but also with a patriotic message. In many a poem, as I shall argue later on, he proved himself a man closely concerned with the *comoun profit* (III.99), who wanted nothing more than that the estates of the realm *in pes þey kepe alle þis contree* (XII.21). The writer may therefore have penned his verse in English also to promulgate his national sentiments, since in his day and age 'English could ... be claimed as the language of the nation, a powerful patriotic bond uniting commons, aristocracy, and crown against enemies from abroad'.<sup>42</sup>

About the readers themselves little is made explicitly known in the Poems, apart from the few instances of directly addressed persons. We can only be certain that the readership was not homogeneous. It would be difficult, for instance, to identify the audience of the deeply devout poem XVII (*God, how may y, man, bygynne / Wiþ myn herte to loue þe* [73–74]) with the audience of these hawkish lines:

On of two 3e mot chese,  
On lond or see, o[n] shippes bord,  
Wiþ fi3t 3e wynne, wiþ trete 3e lese.

<sup>37</sup> With the one exception of the original Latin incipits of the Office for the Dead in poem XXIV.

<sup>38</sup> Poem XXIII, for instance, is an English version of the Latin *Lauda Sion*, one of the four Sequences of the Mass on the Feast of Corpus Christi of St. Thomas Aquinas (McGarry, 1936, p. 258). Another example is poem XXIV, founded on an English prose version of the Lessons, but also heavily leaning on the text of a Latin primer (Day, 1921, p. xix).

<sup>39</sup> See Davidson (2003, p. 473) on mixed-language speech serving to convey spiritual or social authority.

<sup>40</sup> Coleman (1981, p. 15).

<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, Walther (2000, pp. 9–15), and Somerset (1998, p. 5).

<sup>42</sup> Wogan-Browne *et al.* (1999, p. 339).

3oure enemys han þat eure in hord,  
 Pat þey wynne wiþ word  
 3oure townes and castels in lengþe and brede.  
 And þat 3e wynne, 3e wynne wiþ sword,  
 Perfore wiþ swerd do 3oure dede. (XIII.153–60)

These two contrastive examples are in fact illustrative of a dividing-line which separates the thematic issues in poems I through XVII from those in the poems XVIII to XXIV. The themes in the first group are without exception of a political, social and moral character, whilst those in the second group are without exception of a deeply religious, devotional and pious nature. This dividing-line has so far escaped the attention of literary analysts. It will be clear that a thematic analysis of twenty-four unrelated pieces, written over a period of at least twenty years,<sup>43</sup> each a complete, rounded and independent poem, is certain to produce a variety of themes. For instance, Robbins discusses three Digby poems under the heading of ‘poems of protest’, venting political criticism in the prudent guise of religious criticism against the ‘sins of the age’.<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere Robbins prints three other Digby poems under the denominator of ‘historical poems’, heavily centred as they are upon the state of the realm, and the role therein of king and parliament.<sup>45</sup> Dodd quotes verses from two Digby poems in illustration of his essay on the changing role of parliament in ‘shaping and articulating public opinion’.<sup>46</sup> Peck ranges five, again different, Digby poems under the ‘political-cum-penitential’ theme, where he discusses the appeal made by late medieval poets on the individual conscience.<sup>47</sup> Coleman discusses five Digby poems as examples of ‘complaint verse’, partly overlapping the themes of Robbins and Peck.<sup>48</sup> Scattergood (1971) discusses ‘political and social’ verse in late medieval England using about thirty quotes from eight Digby poems. It so happens that all these issues are of a political, social or moral nature, and that they all appear left of the dividing-line, that is to say among the poems I to XVII. Not only the instances just listed, in fact all publications dealing with English historical literature in general, with parliament, with estates literature, with ‘advice-for-princes’ literature, with complaint verse, poems of protest, or moral poems – they all have recourse to only the first seventeen of the Poems for their examples and quotations. This is no coincidence, but the result of the fact that from poem XVIII onwards the poems have lost all

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<sup>43</sup> See section 2.3.

<sup>44</sup> Robbins (1960, p. 198).

<sup>45</sup> Robbins (1959, pp. xxviii–xxix, 39–53).

<sup>46</sup> Dodd (2006, p. 299, 317–18).

<sup>47</sup> Peck (1986, p. 138) ranges the Poems with *Richard the Redeless* and *Mum and the Sothsegger* as poems in the ‘Langlandian tradition’ of ‘advice to rulers, attacks on simony, discussions of conscience and the importance of Truth.’ Barr (1993, p. 6) holds that ‘the poems in the [Langlandian] tradition respond to *Piers* primarily as a social document.’

<sup>48</sup> Coleman (1981, p. 64).

allusion to matters of political or social import, but become – and with increasing intensity – wholly religious poems, thematically varying from the devotional and pious to the dogmatic and biblical. They are apparently not the themes that command attention from literary critics, with the sole exception of McGarry's treatment of poem XXIII.<sup>49</sup>

The verse lines quoted above from poems XIII and XVII illustrate the dividing-line between two distinct groups of poems, each with their own discrete issues. But they equally serve to illustrate a similar dividing-line running through the social environment of the author, where to all intents and purposes we may expect to find the author's intended audience, the people with whom he associated and among whom his themes were most likely to arouse interest, whom he will have tried to convince, persuade, or even reform. From the profile that we have been able to draw of the poet,<sup>50</sup> we may distinguish two wholly separate 'spheres of life', and hence two separate audiences. As a royal clerk in Chancery, of whatever rank, he was part of a vast mechanism which controlled the realm's governance, and included all Westminster personnel, from the lowest junior clerk to the most exalted department heads, lawyers and judges of the three great administrative offices, the king's Council, the royal law courts, the king's household, as well as every parliamentary official and the members of parliament themselves.<sup>51</sup> As a Benedictine monk, he moved in the circle of his fellow monks within the precincts of Westminster Abbey and, possibly, of its cells elsewhere in the country, of which with certainty the Great Malvern priory was one. Thus, left of the dividing-line is the author's secular life as a royal clerk, to the right is his religious life as a dedicated monk.

As I have argued in section 2.3, the events of 1421 will have caused our poet to give up his clerkship in the Westminster government offices, to live wholly by the vows of his order in Westminster Abbey. Through that watershed year of 1421 runs the line that splits the author's themes in a secular and a religious part, splits the twenty-four Poems into a secular and a religious group, and splits the poet's audience into a secular and a religious sphere. This observation leads to the tentative conclusion that until 1421 the audience of the first seventeen poems, with their political, social and moral themes, is to be found among the poet's politically, socially and morally aware associates around king and parliament. After 1421, the last seven poems, with their deeply religious, pious and devotional themes, are directed, first of all, at the brethren of the Benedictine monastery. As to the actual readers of the Poems among these two audiences, it seems reasonable to assume, if only as a matter of practical

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<sup>49</sup> McGarry (1936, pp. 258–63).

<sup>50</sup> See section 3.1.2.

<sup>51</sup> See Brown (1989) on the workings of government in late-medieval England, especially pp. 43–60 on the Westminster Offices.

convenience, that the poems will have circulated among a rather fixed group of individuals, rather than among an ever changing group according as the poetic themes varied.

### 3.3 THE STYLE

#### 3.3.1 VERSIFICATION

The very first thing that strikes us about the versification of the twenty-four Poems is the author's consistency, considering that the Poems were written not as one simultaneous and coherent creation, but as occasional poetry penned with a frequency of roughly one poem a year on a variety of themes, as discussed in section 2.3. The consistency is apparent in the author's management of the formal elements of the poetic skeleton: the stanzaic grouping, the rhyme and the rhythm of his verse. All but two of the twenty-four pieces are composed of eight-line stanzas, rhyming *abab bcbc* up to poem XIV, *abab abab* from poem XV onwards. The two exceptions, the poems X and XVI, are fourteen-liners rhyming *abab abab ccdddc*. These two exceptions I shall have occasion to discuss further on. Consistency is also apparent in the poet's use of the refrain. Each of the first fourteen poems has a stanzaic varied refrain. In poem I, for instance, the last line of each stanza has a variation on the phrase *knowe thy self, loue God and drede*. Or in poem IX where every stanza ends with a variation on the theme *wiþ God of pes 3e trete*. Consistency is, finally, also apparent in the rhythmic pulse. Pervasive in all poems but one (XVI) is the iambic tetrameter, or four-beat octosyllabic line, the most common type of metre since the beginning of the thirteenth century.

The iambic tetrameter line in the Poems, as in all syllable-counting verse in English, almost invariably plays upon the basic pattern of alternating linguistic stresses coinciding perfectly with alternating strong positions of the metre.<sup>52</sup> Following are some examples of the scarce verse lines wholly conforming to the metrical template:

Another, richer than he is (I.147)

A word þat God hym seluen ches (III.54)

Who secheþ wel, he may assay (IV.158)

In the vast majority of cases, however, the syllable composition is profoundly affected by phonological processes that are not necessarily reflected in the orthography of the Poems. The most common and notorious by far is the pronunciation of unstressed final or medial *-e*, which in verse could be dropped,

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<sup>52</sup> For a compact and tightly organized overview of the linguistic and metrical properties of Middle English, see Minkova (2007).

elided, syncopated or kept according to the requirements of the metre, as will be found in almost every line. A few examples will suffice:

His 3erde of loue on summe is lent (I.83)

But take and gedre al þat þou may (VI.4)

3oure Enemy ordynaunce þey di3t (XIII.138)

Apart from such accommodations in the phonological structure of the verse line, some metrical conventions serve to satisfy the four-beat rhythm. One is the *extra* unstressed syllable at the end of the line, which is in fact irrelevant for the metrical syllable count, merely signifying a feminine rhyme. The most casual glance through the Poems makes it clear that feminine rhyme is overwhelmingly predominant, and that it is nowhere metrically significant, as in the following fragment:

Wiþ soulis bri3t in God 3e glade  
As shynyng angels out of synne,  
In worschip of hym þat 3ow made,  
To knowe 3oure seluen now bygynne. (IX.9–12)

Counting out line-end *-e*, the octosyllabic line is still intact, with four unstressed syllables neatly coinciding with four weak metrical positions, four stressed syllables with four strong positions. The other metrical convention, and again a common feature in the Poems, is the so-called headless line, whereby an unstressed line-initial syllable is left out, resulting in a verse line of seven syllables instead of eight. For instance:

Burnysche bry3t 3oure soules blake (IX.2)  
Goddis loue fayleþ nou3t (XVII.126)  
Flesch, þy synnes mochil is (XX.193)

Note the optional feminine rhyme in IX.2, and the syllabic final *-e* of *loue* in XVII.126. The line-initial and line-end adjustments just described not only served their purpose in the process of matching the linguistic and metrical exigencies of the line, but at the same time contributed to the necessary rhythmic variation, avoiding the monotony of mechanical metrical regularity. Another such rhythmic device which the poet had at his disposal was trochaic substitution of the first iambic foot, as in VII.84: *How þou it wan, held, and spent.*

With this last line we are entering the realm of scholarly controversy. If the verse line follows the standard template of the iambic tetrameter, with the conventionally accepted adaptation of the line-initial trochaic inversion, it necessarily follows that the syntactic break between *wan* and *held*, in the editorial text marked with a comma, is prosodically needed as a so-called metrical pause, in order to fill out the number of syllables from seven to eight, thus to arrive at a total of four feet. The metrical pause is seen by some theorists, the ‘timers’, as a temporal pulse in the spoken performance of the verse line, as opposed to the ‘stressers’, who adhere to the strict tradition of metrical stress.<sup>53</sup> This is not the place to take sides in the controversy, but with the example from the Poems just quoted, the ‘timers’ do seem to have a convincing case. The metrical pause, to quote one other example, is also found in VII.88: *So quyte þat wel, lerne to di3e*. Here again the comma is editorial, but aptly represents the metrical pause and effectively builds ‘tension’ into the rhythm of the verse line. A combination of the variations to the iambic tetrameter line discussed above is found in X.57: *Man, hast þou au3t in mynde*, a headless line, with a metrical pause after *man*, and a line-end extrametrical unstressed syllable. In some places the poet broke the regular four-beat rhythm with a five-beat iambic pentameter:

I mad þe wys and fayre, angels pere,  
 Pou makest þe fool, and foul fendis fere. (X.107–108)

It should be noted that, whereas l.107 show complete regularity, the next line satisfies the prosodic and metrical fit of the iambic pentameter only if it is recognized that *in speech* medial unstressed *-e* in *makest* could be syncopated, and *foul* pronounced with final *-e*, although not represented in the orthography. Both phenomena are true prosodic features, the latter – pronunciation of an unstressed final *-e* not textually represented – is in fact the reverse of the one discussed earlier, of final unstressed *-e* being orthographically represented but not pronounced. Beside the iambic pentameter to break the overall tetrametric regularity, the occasional trimeter is found as well, as for instance in XIII.85: *Shamefully falsed to shende*, with syncopation of *e* in both *shamefully* and *falsed*, and loss of line-end *-e*. As always, we are here of course concerned with the phonology of the syllables.

Apart from metrical adaptations to build rhythmical tension into a verse line, other linguistic variations, to note enjambment and alliteration, served the author’s purpose as well. Enjambment – deferring the completion of a syntactic unit from one line to the following – effectively shifts the phrasal tension, as in IV.78–80:

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<sup>53</sup> For a discussion of the rift between ‘timers’ and ‘stressers’, see Cable (1991, pp. 115, 136).



Glosers shuld not go so gay,  
 Ne not so hardy for to meue  
 Suche wordes as they say.

and in V.9–10:

Who so wist what tresoure  
 He hap þat worcheþ by wit.

Enjambment is generally used as a deliberate way of infusing some dynamic tension into the metric regularity of a poem by occasionally varying end-stopped lines with run-on lines. As the above examples show – and they are illustrative for other instances – enjambment in the Poems appears to have been induced simply by the more prosaic need to complete a particular syntactic unit of thought beyond the bounds of one verse line. This may be one reason why enjambment is of rather infrequent occurrence in the Poems. Another reason may be that the interplay between syntax and verse structure required for successful enjambment slowed down its incidence in the Poems.

Alliteration, on the other hand, is abundantly in evidence everywhere in the Poems. The author often had recourse to commonplace set phrases that must have come readily to hand, for instance in poem V: *rebell and ryse* (l. 36), *robbe and reue* (l. 38), or in poem XII: *word of wynd* (l. 51), *to lette þe lawe* (l. 60), *lyf and leme to saue and spille* (l. 106).<sup>54</sup> As a stylistic device to reinforce the meaning, he used alliteration more deftly. For instance, in poem IV: *Falshed wolde trouþes tunge teyʒe* (l. 113), with its strongly suggestive initial stops. And the sweep of the sower's hand is heard in l. 129: *Summe men sowe here seed in skornes*. In XI.76, the combined alliteration and assonance in *As shynnyng sune in Goddis syʒt* lends the line its intended brightness. In XX.113-14: *For my soule, Ihesu suffred wo, / Bounden and beten wiþ scourges ynowe*, formal alliteration is cleverly mixed with stylistic alliteration: three *s*-sounds arranged in the formal *xx/x* scheme, reminiscent of traditional alliterative metre,<sup>55</sup> are interrupted by the evocative plosive *b*'s.

<sup>54</sup> See for the respective instances *MED* s.v. *risen* (v.) sub 9.(a); *robben* (v.) sub 2.(c); *wind* (n.) sub 4.(c); *letten* (v.) sub 2.(c), 3.(c), 4 and 11.(b); *lim* (n.(1)) sub 3; *spillen* (v.) sub 1.(b) and 2.(b).

<sup>55</sup> In the definition of Abrams (1993), Old English alliterative metre 'is the principal organizing device of the verse line; each line is divided into two half-lines of two strong stresses by a decisive pause or *caesura*, and at least one, and usually both, of the two stressed syllables in the first half-line alliterate with the first stressed syllable of the second half-line.' For a detailed discussion of the late-medieval alliterative revival, its characteristics and varieties of style, see for instance Turville-Petre (1977) and Kennedy (2000). For a lucid exposé of the constituent structure of Middle English alliterative verse, see Minkova (2007, pp. 176–81).

It may have become evident from the above examples that the author felt perfectly at ease with alliteration as a poetic device, so much so that in places he seems simply to let himself go in quite unexpected bursts of hyper-alliteration. In poem V, for instance, the first two lines of the first three stanzas are packed with alliteration, all on the one consonant *w*: *Man, be war of wikkid counsaile, / He wol the lede in wayes slidre* (1–2); *Whoso wist what tresoure / He hap þat worcheþ by wit* (9–10); *Whoso wyste what wille harmes, / Þat willefully fro wyt wendes* (17–18). After stanza 3 this form of stanzaic patterning abruptly stops. Indeed, no trace of alliteration is to be found in all of the next six stanzas of poem V, except two set phrases (*rebell and ryse, robbe and reue*) in stanza 5. Poem XIV is another example of a spasmodic use of alliteration. Wholly absent in the first thirteen stanzas, alliteration suddenly appears bunched in the last stanza: *frele frendis* (l. 105), *þe soule it schendis* (l. 107), *Richesse, rauenerere of worldis wele* (l. 108), *recheles as a roo* (l. 110), *Er 3oure synnes 3oure soules apele* (l. 111). It is difficult not to see an element of arbitrariness in such clusters of hyper-alliteration.

As noted earlier, the poems X and XVI are the two exceptions to the overall regularity of the format which the author adopted for the bulk of his poetic production. The two poems differ from the other twenty-two in both stanza form and rhyme scheme. The stanzas have fourteen lines, instead of eight, and the rhyme scheme of both is *abab abab cdddc*, in which the last six lines or sestet – the *cdddc* tag – serves as a ‘wheel’ to the eight lines of the octave.<sup>56</sup> Kennedy (2000, pp. 143–44) at one point suggests that the 14-line form, with its 8 + 6 structure, is somehow connected with the similarly structured Italian sonnet form, but then disowns her own suggestion on the ground that the English poets never adopted the Italian rhyme scheme in the octave. My suggestion is that both poems are hybrids. Their basic metrical template is that of the twenty-two other poems: the iambic tetrameter, whilst their line-count and rhyme scheme is that of 14-line alliterative verse, a rare variety of the much more common 13-line form.<sup>57</sup> The poems X and XVI differ from each other in one respect: where all fifteen 14-line stanzas of poem X are composed throughout in the iambic tetrameter mode, in poem XVI this format applies in only six out of the total of nine stanzas, whilst in the other three – stanzas 1, 5 and 9 – the octave is composed in alliterative strong-stress long lines. This fact turns these three stanzas from hybrids into perfect examples of the alliterative revival of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, which produced such outstanding alliterative poems as *Piers Plowman*, *Winnere and Wastoure*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Alliterative verse in general comes in various styles: unrhymed, rhymed or a combination of both, and as solid text or in a stanzaic grouping of some kind. The three alliterative

<sup>56</sup> The ‘bob and wheel’ is a metrical device functioning as a refrain and consisting of a very short line (the ‘bob’) followed by four or five short lines (the ‘wheel’), the last line of which usually rhyming with the ‘bob’. It is famously used in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

<sup>57</sup> See Kennedy (2000, pp. 127–28).

stanzas in poem XVI are examples of rhymed, stanzaic alliterative verse.<sup>58</sup> It should be noted that the characteristic alliterative pattern in the long lines of the octave is not consistently kept up, several lines in each of the three stanzas containing no alliteration whatsoever.<sup>59</sup> This inconsistency in the basic matrix is one reason why I doubt Kennedy's opinion that the symmetrical grouping of the three alliterative (A) and six non-alliterative (N) stanzas (A-N-N-N-A-N-N-N-A) in poem XVI is the result of deliberate, 'well-wrought prosody'. What adds to my doubt is the arbitrariness of the fortuitous bursts of hyper-alliteration elsewhere in the Poems, as noted above.

The instances of alliterative verse in poem XVI suggest that the author may have been of provincial extraction, either from the South-west Midlands or the North. The earliest examples of the alliterative revival, among them the most famous of them all, *Piers Plowman*, are from the South-west Midlands, whilst in later years alliterative verse became popular in the North-west Midlands and the Northern provinces.<sup>60</sup> A Northern origin is also suggested by the Northern forms *ham* and *knawen* in poem XXIV, signalled and discussed in section 2.3. I have, however, dismissed these factors as valid for the idea that the author of the Poems had his roots in these provinces. For one thing, the poet's use of formal alliterative verse is only incidental, and may have been inspired by contemporary authors who moved in the same circles as our poet,<sup>61</sup> and who have left evidence of sustained use of alliterative verse.<sup>62</sup> The other reason is that the two Northern forms are relicts which may just as well be evidence of the dialect of a copyist as of the author himself.

### 3.3.2 IMAGERY

The figurative language in the Poems is largely confined to the use of similes, of the well-known kind, and nowhere elaborated. In poem III we find a fair number of them; in l. 62, for instance, the poet warns that malice, once it gets out of hand, '*brenneþ ... as fyre in gres*'. In l. 121 the world is '*like a fals lemman*', in l. 145 '*like a chery fayre*'. In poem V.4–6 '*goode men ... / Ri3t as hay þey mon widre, / As blades of gres his seed doþ spille*', if bad counsel is not recognized as such. In poem VIII the writer urges those who exercise authority '*As li3t of lanterne to lede þe way*' (l. 62).

<sup>58</sup> For a detailed discussion of alliterative fourteen-line stanza forms see Kennedy (2000). Among the poems she analyses is poem XVI.

<sup>59</sup> Viz. XVI.15, 16, 59, 61, 64, 116, 118.

<sup>60</sup> See Turville-Petre (1977, pp. 29–36).

<sup>61</sup> See section 3.1.2.

<sup>62</sup> Instances are the four contemporary, alliterative poems in Barr (1993). Minkova (2007, p. 177) mentions 'London associations' as one source of inspiration for the composition of alliterative verse.

The metaphors similarly are most of them stock phrases, like ‘*Pe whete fro þe chaf 3e try3e*’ (III.47),<sup>63</sup> or ‘*To fli3e to (too) hy3e treste not þy wyng*’ (XIV.47).<sup>64</sup> In IX.178 the author assures the reader that he has told him ‘*What is salue to 3oure sore*’. There is the occasional somewhat higher flight of fancy, as for instance in IX.22–23, where ‘*Synne, to bay (bark at) many a folde (sheepfold), / On soules helle houndes slete (attack)*’. The play on ‘folde’ as a sheepfold as well as God’s congregation is one of the rare instances of punning. Usually, as in the following instance, the *pointe* is obvious, or is pointedly made obvious.

3if a clerk haue þurgh hap  
 Cure of soules or bischopriche,  
 He hat not bischop, he hat a by shap:  
 Make oþere after his werkis like.  
 To kepe his shep fro helle tike,  
 In folde go, amonge hem blete;  
 Saf and sounde brynge hem y lyk,  
 Bytwen God and hem to trete. (IX.153–60)

The *by shap* in l. 155 is both a ‘shepherd’ and a ‘near-in-shape’, as the two following lines carefully explain. As a shepherd it is the *byshap*’s task *to kepe his shep fro helle tike* (l. 157), but he also moulds his fellow creatures after his own *shap* (l. 156). In the following passage *clymbyng* is both literal climbing and social climbing:

Pe wyseman his sone forbed  
 Masoun craft and alle clymbyng,  
 And shipman craft, for perile of dede,  
 And preuey in counseil be ney3 no kyng.  
 For his mysrulyng þou my3t hyng,  
 Pat shep my3te grese under þy to. (XIV.41–46)

Again the pun is carefully explained. The literal climbing is made explicit in *masoun craft* (l. 42) and *shipman craft* (l. 43), the social climbing by referring to the dizzying heights near the king himself (l. 44), where – with a rare touch of perhaps unconscious humour – ‘*þou my3t hyng*’ (l. 45).

There is nothing complicated either about the poet’s use of personification, confined as it is to the familiar virtues and vices. In most instances the author makes use of personification without much elaboration, as in poem XIII.30: *And cloþe falsed in troupe wede*, but in a few places there is expansion

<sup>63</sup> See *MED* s.v. *whete* (n.) sub 1.(c) for more instances.

<sup>64</sup> The implied reference is to the mythical tale of Icarus, who went too high on home-made wings. He fell to the earth because the sun melted the wax of his wings.

of a kind. For instance, the first two stanzas of poem III explain the tasks of *troupe* in terms of his relationship to *ry3t* and *iustice*. In poem XII, stanzas 9 and 10 picture *troupe*, assisted by *wreche*, in his conflict with *falsed* and *treson*. And in poem XIII the whole of stanza 13 is devoted to a description of *troupe* being gagged and locked away by *falsed*.

Proverbial phrases occur in almost all of the Poems. Obviously, the author found them useful as a poetic tool, but he must also have considered them contextually effective. The proverbial phrases are most frequent in the earlier poems, which carry a politically and morally engaged message which is absent in the later ones, with their clearly religious overtones.<sup>65</sup>

The overall impression of the author's poetical gifts is that at best they were modest. He was first and foremost a 'man with a message', who put the vehicle of verse to the all-important end of getting across his views on the major political, religious and social issues of the day, and conveying to the reader (or his audience) his personal moral convictions and Christian beliefs. Yet we would do him an injustice by denying him all poetical skills. Apart from being a quite capable versifier, as demonstrated above, the writer had his flashes of poetic inspiration. For instance in the following passage, the metaphor of a boat becalmed as a description of the end of man's life is wholly convincing:

What may thy richesse þe auayle,  
Whan þou art to deþe dryue.  
Thy wynd is layd, þou mayst no sayle,  
Pou3 þou lete out bonet and ryue. (VII.25–28)

The opening lines of poem IX have the effect of a clarion call:

This holy tyme make 3ow clene,  
Burnysche bry3t 3oure soules blake.

In the second verse line, note the clever use of the formal caesural alliterative xx/x scheme to maximize the contrast between the first and the second half of the verse. The first stanza of poem XI is an emotional outburst of joy, almost like a hymn. In a wholly effective metaphor God is presented as a triumphant warrior who has liberated man from sin, slaking the shackles of evil:

Glade in God, þis solempne fest  
Now, Alleluya, is vnloken.  
Penkeþ how God, lest and mest,  
On oure enemys haþ vs wroken,  
Pat hadde vs in cheynes stoken,

<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of this dichotomy in the Poems, see sections 2.3, 3.1.2 and 3.4.2.4.

Wrappid in synnes many on.  
 Þe fendis are flowen, þe cheynes are broken,  
 And God and man are wel at on. (XI.1–8)

It is a pity that inspired passages like the above are the exception, whilst indifferent verse is the rule. For instance, hard on the heels of the poetic lines of VII.25–28, quoted above, follows a resounding platitude:

Loke to vertues þou þe 3yue,  
 Er tombe be held to þe li3e;  
 For he þat gostly wel doþ lyue,  
 He lerneþ wysely for to di3e. (VII.29–32)

In section 2.3 I argued that the Poems cover roughly three phases in the life of the writer: his parliamentary years, the post-parliamentary years of active political engagement, and the years of withdrawal and contemplation. The poems XVII and onwards may be assumed to have been written in this last period. It is interesting to note that in these last eight poems all traces of poetic imagery have disappeared, perhaps in the wake of the waning of the writer's worldly interests.

### 3.4 CULTURAL BACKGROUND

This section explores the social, moral and religious thinking of the author, as it emerges from his Poems, against the background of contemporary English society in the early part of the fifteenth century. The object of our exploration consists of twenty-four thematically highly diverse poems which have only their author in common, and which were written over a period of more than twenty years. Not only are the themes diverse from one poem to another, but quite often they also differ within the scope of one poem. The Poems thus form a kaleidoscope of subjects, presenting without any detectable premeditated order fragmented glimpses of the poet's views on the political, social and ecclesiastical organization of his country, on the one hand, and, on the other, his reflections on the moral and religious attitudes of his fellow man, both as a social being and in his relation to God. These fragmented glimpses have served in thematic literary studies to illustrate discussions of one specific genre: political poetry; complaint verse; poems of protest and lament; devotional, penitential, homiletic and didactic poetry – each label naturally covering only the relevant fragments from the Poems.<sup>66</sup> For an overall picture of the Poems' cultural background, the above thematic labels therefore need to be placed in a wider perspective. As will have been noticed, the themes listed fall naturally into two broad categories:

<sup>66</sup> See also chapter 1 and section 3.2.

those which refer to the social community, and those which deal with the individual as part of that community. Following up this natural grouping, I propose, first, to consider the working of the social classes or estates which together constituted England's medieval society, the ideal as well as their flawed reality,<sup>67</sup> and, second, the mental and spiritual make-up of the individuals participating in that society. I hope thus to provide useful guiding lines along which the larger patterns in the Poems may be traced.

### 3.4.1 THE BODY POLITIC

#### 3.4.1.1 *The Concept*

'In an ideal community every member of every class or "estate" fulfilled his duties and respected other's rights. Individually they obeyed God and their king, together they achieved unity and harmony'.<sup>68</sup> This is the picture, in the words of Baldwin, that every medieval writer would recognize as the prerequisite for a smoothly running social machinery. The well-being of the realm depended on the triptych of good government, adherence to the divinely ordained laws, and social harmony as its indispensable ingredients, as our poet himself repeatedly urged: *That ouer puple hast gouernaunce ... Make vnyte ther was distaunce* (I.10,13), *Gouerne the puple in vnyte, / In the comaundements that God bede* (I.21–22),<sup>69</sup> and again:

What bryngeþ a kyngdom al aboute:  
Wys counseil, and good gouernaunce.  
Eche lord wil other loue,  
And rule wel labourers sustynaunce. (III.153–56)

In modern parlance, the ideal medieval state was a hierarchical, top-down command structure, governed by divine law and demanding responsibility and performance from its composite parts, on the one hand, and a bottom-up consensus structure among the parts, based on deference, loyalty and faith. The interdependence of, and necessary cooperation between, the parts that together constitute the body politic readily evoke comparison with the parts of the human body and their function. Indeed, by medieval times it was a figure much used in prose and verse,<sup>70</sup> as also by the author of the Poems in *The*

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<sup>67</sup> Where I draw parallels between the realm's constituent elements and as they are reflected in the Poems, there will inevitably be a degree of overlap with Kail's direct parallels between concrete historical events and the relevant passages in the Poems (pp. x–xxii).

<sup>68</sup> Baldwin (1981, p. 5).

<sup>69</sup> See also III.130 and VIII.63.

<sup>70</sup> The history of the body as metaphor finds its origin in the Christian concept of the Church as the body of Christ, as Yeager points out (1999, p. 146). The biblical metaphor (see I Cor. 12:12–28) subsequently assumed the secular dimension of the human body as a metaphor of the body politic (see Yeager, 1999, pp. 148–49, where he refers to the *locus classicus* in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* [c.

*descryuyng of mannes membres* (poem XV). This piece compares in great detail the composite elements of the commonwealth with the limbs of the human body. Ideally, the parts of the body as well as the composite elements of a community work in perfect harmony for the common good. Thus, the head is compared with the king; the breast represents the clergy; shoulders, backbone, arms and hands stand for the lords of the land, the knights and the squires; etcetera, down to the feet, which are the *trewe tyhyers of landes*.<sup>71</sup> The classes of society listed in this analogy as the composite parts of the larger whole of the realm, form in the literature of the age the characteristic pattern known as estates literature. The detailed list of social classes that we find in poem XV is rather exceptional. The standard pattern is the familiar tripartite division of *bellatores*, *oratores* and *laboratores*, generally known as ‘the three estates’ of the nobility, the clergy and the commons, led by the king as their unifying force. The original concept of this ideal type of social organization fades back into remote history, but it was only in medieval times that it acquired the Christian connotation that the three-estates order of things was divinely ordained.<sup>72</sup> In the words of Wyclif: *And so pes pree statis ben, or schulde be, sufficient in goddis chirche; or ellis men mosten say þat god is and was fawty in ordenance of bope his lawis*.<sup>73</sup> In fact, there is no explicit biblical grounding of the divine origin of the estates, other than St. Paul’s prescription to ‘let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called’ (I Cor. 7:20), actually taken more as a call to *bere(n) þe ordre as it wes* (III.142) than anything else. The view that it was the duty of the peasants to labour for the common weal, of the clergy to praise God and pray for His blessing, and of the nobility to protect both, was not only not divinely ordained, but at no time conformed to reality either. Admittedly, for a very long time this straight three-estates view approximated contemporary conditions, but by the early fifteenth century it was fast losing all semblance to actuality.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, the author of the Poems, true to his conservative mind-set, stuck to what had virtually become fiction as the guiding principle for his day and age, although he did recognize newly emerging intermediate classes, as in the following fragment.<sup>75</sup>

Old speche is spoken 3ore:  
What is a kyngdom tresory:

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1159], which describes in minute detail the body of the commonwealth in terms of the limbs and internal organs of the human body).

<sup>71</sup> For other instances of this familiar analogy, see Mohl (1933, p. 119).

<sup>72</sup> See Keen (1990, p. 2), and Mohl (1933, pp. 277–83), on the supposedly divine origin of the estates.

<sup>73</sup> Robbins (1979, p. 30) quoting Wyclif from *The English Works of Wyclif, Hitherto Unprinted* (F. D. Matthew ed., 1880).

<sup>74</sup> See Keen (1990, pp. 4–5).

<sup>75</sup> See Thomson (1983, pp. 7–137) on the economic and social framework of England in the later Middle Ages, in particular pp. 125–37 on social mobility.



Bestayle, corn stuffed in store,  
 Riche comouns, and wyse clergy;  
 Marchaundes, squyers, chiualry  
 That wol be redy at a res,  
 And cheualrous kyng in wittes hy3e,  
 To lede in were, and gouerne in pes. (III.65–72)

*Bestayle* and *corn* metonymically represent the peasantry. Together with the *clergy* and the nobility, represented by the *squiers* and *chiualry*, they form the classic tripartite division. Relatively new on the social scene were the increasingly prosperous urban middle class of the *riche comouns*, and the merchant class, the *marchaundes*, a growing political and financial force in late medieval society. The unifying and protective force above the estates is the *chevalrous kyng*. In a later poem, the estates, harmoniously unified under their sovereign, are compared with the jewels in the king's crown:

What doþ a kynges crowne signifye,  
 Whan stones and floures on sercle is bent?  
 Lordis, comons and clergye  
 To ben alle at on assent.  
 To kepe þat crowne take good tent,  
 In wode, in feld, in dale and downe.  
 Þe leste lyge man, wiþ body and rent,  
 He is a parcel of þe crowne. (XII.9–16)

In the above metaphor, the merchant class as the comparative newcomer has lost its place again. As in the previous fragment, the *comons*, that is to say the middle-class citizens, are ranged with the *lordis* and the *clergy*, whilst the rural populace, the *leste lyge man*, is mentioned as an afterthought. It is useful to keep this ranking of the social classes in mind when reading the poet's eulogy on the glories of the estates of the realm. It shows him to be not only 'estates-conscious', but also thoroughly 'class-conscious' in the modern sense of the word. The 'commons' in estates parlance comprise the lower as well as the middle classes of society. The poet sharply distinguishes the two categories in his pieces. For all his praise of the *trewe tyhyers of landes* with the accolade that *alle þe world on hem standes* (XV.61–64) in the poet's idealized allegoric comparison between the realm's estates and the parts of the body, he still compares them with the very lowest parts: the feet. The lower classes, in the Poems often referred to as *puple*, *folk*, *labourrers* or just *the plough*, must be kept in their ordained place: *God made lordis gouernoures / To gouerne puple in vnite* (III.129–30). Robbins argues that what he calls 'the establishment', the ruling classes of nobility and clergy, used the God-given social structure, this recipe for stability, as a whip to keep the working class in order.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 still fresh in mind, what

<sup>76</sup> See Robbins (1979, pp. 28–30).

the ruling classes dreaded most was social instability, especially in view of Henry IV's shaky hereditary claims to the throne, after the indictment and deposition of Richard II, who, although despotically minded, at least had impeccable antecedents. A rise of the common mass of landless tenants against the 'powers that be' was to be avoided at all costs, because

... 3if comouns rise,  
Pan is a kyngdom most in drede.  
For whanne vengeaunce a comouns lede,  
Pei do gret harm er þey asses. (III.27–30)

In this fragment the *comouns* are associated with the peasant rebels of the 1381 rising. The poet's middle class *como(u)ns*, on the other hand, are given full honours. They are alluded to as the backbone of society, in good fortune or ill: *A kyngdom in comouns lys, / Alle profytes, and alle myscheues* (III.99–100). Their interests must at all times be safeguarded: *To stonde wiþ comons in here ry3t, / Is hy3est poynt of charite* (XIII.33–34), because *Comouns is the fayrest flour / Pat euere God sette on erþely crown* (XII.143–44). Down-to-earth economic interest, too, demanded that the middle classes should be treated with respect, an advice that applied to the lord of the manor: *3oure tenauntes playntes 3e mot here, / For þey kepen (maintain) alle 3oure tresour (fortune)* (XIII.43–44), but equally to the king himself:

... a kyng wiþoute rent  
My3t li3tly trussen his tresour.  
For comons mayntene lordis honour,  
Holy chirche, and religyone. (XII.139–42)

Incidentally, the author nowhere used *como(u)ns* with the meaning 'Commons in parliament'. Although he alludes to parliamentary business in seven of his poems,<sup>77</sup> only in two places, in III.97–98 and in the first two stanzas of poem XIII, he actually mentions *parlement*, and there in the broad sense of the gathering of commons and lords in parliament (the terms House of Commons and House of Lords were not yet in use<sup>78</sup>).

The supreme unifying force, according to the poet, to hold the estates together and mold them into a harmonious whole, was of course the king: *De heued y likne to a kyng, / For he is lord souereyn of al* (XV.9–10). Like his estates, the king was ordained by God himself, 'for practical purposes as the vicegerent of God':<sup>79</sup> *God 3eueþ his doom to alle kynges þat be; / As a God, in erþe a kyng haþ my3t*

<sup>77</sup> See section 2.4.

<sup>78</sup> See Brown (1981, p. 112).

<sup>79</sup> See Ullmann (1961, pp. 117–37) on 'Theocratic Kingship'; Brown (1989, pp. 5–6) on the divine element in kingship; and Goldsworthy (1999, pp. 22–38) on the development of the relative legal

(XII.89–90), holding full power of life and death: *Eche a kyng haþ Goddis power / Of lyf and leme to saue and spille* (XII.105–106). By his coronation oath the king was held to preserve the law ‘with equal and right justice and discretion’,<sup>80</sup> according to his power, as aptly worded by our author:

Eche kyng is sworn to gouernaunce,  
 To gouerne Goddis puple in ri3t.  
 Eche kyng bereþ swerde of Goddis vengeaunce,  
 To felle Goddis foon in fi3t. (III.137–40)

The writer used three whole poems (III, XII and XIII) to expound his views, directly and indirectly, on what he saw as the God-given duties of the one person who *in Goddis stede* is appointed to *do euene lawe ... in euene assise* (III.11–13), namely the king, the personification of justice. ‘Lawe’ should be taken both as secular law and divine law. The crucial question was: ‘Who is that *gubernator* that can shape and issue the law as an enforceable rule of action?’<sup>81</sup> Here we touch upon the age-old antithesis between the descending or theocratic philosophy, according to which the king rules by divine grace, holding delegated power handed down by God, on the one hand, and the ascending, populist or feudal thesis, which holds that governmental, law-creating power is concentrated in the people, whom the king merely represents.<sup>82</sup> In England, since King John had acceded to the demands of his barons at Runnymede early in the thirteenth century, the feudal function of the king at the expense of the theocratic function had gradually gained preponderance. In 1399, Richard II’s attempts to turn back the clock and reinstitute absolute, theocratic kingship had ended in total failure, and Henry IV on the rebound had promised to go strictly by the book, that is to say, to assure himself at all times of the consent and cooperation of parliament and his royal Council.<sup>83</sup> Yet, the old doctrine of the king as God’s vice-regent, as ‘the vicar of God, because the king’s power *solius Dei est*,’<sup>84</sup> was still firmly ingrained in the minds of his subjects, not least in the minds of the conservatively inclined middle-class writers of socially and politically engaged poetry.<sup>85</sup> With the Digby poet it was not different. Directly addressing Henry V, he straightforwardly told his king that *God made 3ow governour, / In Goddys ry3t*

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positions of king and parliament.

<sup>80</sup> See Brown (1989, pp. 12–13), citing the text of the coronation oath as it was used since Edward II’s coronation in 1308 until 1689.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>82</sup> For an instructive exposé of the descending and ascending principles of government, see *ibid.* pp. 150 *et passim*, or Ullmann (1968, pp. 149 *et passim*).

<sup>83</sup> Powell (1989, p. 35). On the development during the middle ages of the relationship between the king and the law, see *ibid.* pp. 29–38.

<sup>84</sup> Ullmann (1961, p. 176).

<sup>85</sup> See Embree (1985, p. 125).

to *deme þe dede* (XIII.47–48), in other words: to pass judgment on the people's conduct according to God's law. Consequently, the king does not make the law, he maintains it. Henry is told in so many words: ... *in 3ow þe helpe* (means) *it lys / Þe puple in Goddis lawe to hede* (rule) (XIII.165–66). The poet even goes one step further, proclaiming God as the people's real sovereign also in earthly matters: *God for his frendis math ordynaunce, / And governeth hem in werre and pes* (III.159–60). And consequently *eche kyngdom hongeth in Goddis balaunce* (III.165). Still, the writer was not blind to the realities of contemporary political life. His outlook may have been conservative, to the extent that an *honest knyght* in his view was one *that bereth the ordre as it wes* (III.142–43), he knew full well that *a kyngdom in comouns lys* (III.99), because *comouns is þe fayrest flour / Þat euere God sette on erþely crown* (XII.143–44). The crown, here as elsewhere in the Poems, is not used as a metonymy for the person of the king, nor for royalty as a political institution, but metaphorically for the realm and its constituent parts. The unbroken circle, studded with precious stones and flowers, symbolizes the unity of the realm:

What doþ a kynge's crowne signyfye,  
 Whan stones and floures on sercle is bent?  
 Lordis, comons and clergye  
 To ben alle at on assent.  
 To kepe þat crowne take good tent,  
 In wode, in feld, in dale and downe.  
 Þe leste lyge man, wiþ body and rent,  
 He is a parcel of þe crowne. (XII.9–16)

Kantorowicz, quoting this stanza, remarks: 'There can be no doubt that in the later Middle Ages the idea was current that in the Crown the whole body politic was present – from king to lords and commons and down to the least liege-man'.<sup>86</sup> Anyone who *pykep þe stones out of þe crowne* is guilty of criminal misconduct (XII.63–64), because

3if sercle, and floures, and riche stones  
 Were eche a pece fro oþer flet,  
 Were þe crowne broken ones,  
 Hit were ful hard a3en to knet. (XII.41–44)

The king was, of course, unable to prevent such a calamity on his own. He needed advice and assistance. Advice he obtained from his parliaments and Great Councils, and in discussions in his Household and

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<sup>86</sup> Kantorowicz (1957, p. 363) on 'The Crown as Fiction' (*ibid.* pp. 336–83), a thorough discussion of the 'tangle of intersecting, overlapping, and contradictory strands of political thought, all of which somehow converge in the notion of the Crown (p. 381).

his Council. Assistance came primarily from the Council.<sup>87</sup> In poem XIV the king's Chancellor and his Council are urged to *kepe þe crowne hool in stat* so that *no stones þerof abate* (decline [in quality]) (ll. 9–12). Prudent counsel is highly praised, anyway, throughout the Poems as indispensable to the common weal. The king *wol be lad by wys counsaile* (III.82), because it is *wys counseil* that *bryngeþ a kyngdom al aboue* (III.153–54), whereas the Duke of Burgundy, according to the poet, completely ignored his advisers. Addressing his Flemish liegemen on behalf of the Duke, the poet sneered: *To wynne wrongly wele* (wealth), *wod þey gan wede* (went wildly mad), / *But werkis of wys men were cast vnder stoles* (XVI.3–4). The results were predictable: *Whan wyse men fro hym fle, / Þen God his grace wole fro hem drawe* (XVI.91–92). The king's other mainstay, apart from *wys counseil*, was parliament, at least in theory. After Richard II's autocratic reign (1377–1399), Henry IV in an amazing turnaround promised upon his succession not only to be advised, but indeed to be governed by the people of his realm. Wilkinson observes that 'Henry came as near, perhaps, as it was possible for that generation to come, towards the expression of the sovereignty of the king in parliament'.<sup>88</sup>

### 3.4.1.2 *The Flawed Reality*

The ideal state of affairs pictured in what we have defined as the estates philosophy has always been just that: an ideal, which original sin for ever prevents man from achieving. This is the underlying theme to which the literary genre labels of 'lament', 'complaint', and 'protest' have been attached. They give in effect expression to the poet's feelings about, in Mohl's terminology, 'the defections of the estates',<sup>89</sup> in other words: the inevitable failure of the constituent estates of the realm to attain, let alone maintain, the desired perfect harmony of the community. The warnings against potential and real threats to the social order and the consequent functioning of the realm are frequently heard in the Poems. There is no lack of lament, complaint and protest with regard to the shortcomings of each of the estates. The lords are not *wyse men*, but – bad judges of a crisis – *medle in foly degree* (III.37,39). Out of touch with their tenants, *Lordis wet neuere what comouns greues / Til here rentis bigynne to ses* (dry up) (III.101–102). Far worse, the greedy lord, satiated as he is, still robs the peasant of house and land:

<sup>87</sup> See Brown (1989, p. 30).

<sup>88</sup> Wilkinson (1949, p. 505). Wilkinson's essay provides an instructive overview of the evolutionary stages from autocratic kingship to constitutional monarchy.

<sup>89</sup> See Mohl (1933, p. 9), where she defines the formal characteristics of estates literature: 'the three-fold division, the insistence on the shortcomings of each group, the obligation of maintaining the structure, and the need of amendment according to specific proposals.' See also pp. 341–66 on the defections of the estates of the world.

Than cursed is he þat ful is fylde,  
 Wiþ wrong take pore mennys thrift,  
 Pat makeþ pore men be [spilde],  
 For synguler profyt is sotylle theft; (XXI.57–60)<sup>90</sup>

The lords control the country's wealth, but at the same time they are its slaves: *Þe grettere lordschipe of worldis wele, / Þe more in þraldom hit dop hem bynde* (IX.27–28). They are hated for wastefully running up debts far beyond their income, causing *Stryf wiþ comons, threp* (contention) *and thro* (wrangling) (XIV.75–78). The commons are wild and violent. Once they are out for vengeance *Þei do gret harm er þey asses* (stop) (III.29–30), robbing and killing and burning down (III.116–17), bringing God's wrath upon their heads, because they *Rebelle and ryse a3en his lawe and robbe and reue, coffres to fylle* (V.36,38).

The abuses amongst the clergy are the subject of an entire poem (VIII), the poet inveighing against the worldly and dissolute life of bishops and priests alike. They take tithes but refuse to teach the people (l.20), *take pore mennys wele, / And helpe not þe soule to hele* (ll. 68–69). They are chasing worldly goods, riches and high positions, rather than do their ordained work in *folkis cherche* (ll. 25–27), living a life of ease and comfort, presumptuously relying on God's mercy (ll. 41–48). In XIII, the clergy are being reproached for gluttony and sloth, instead of taking care of body and soul, vigorously championing God's case:

Ofte wiþ ful wombe relegous slepe,  
 Whan kny3tes han hunger, and moche in drede.  
 Þe beter in clene lyf þey au3t hem kepe,  
 As Goddis kny3t to don here dede. (XIII.149–52)

In poem XIV, the Church as institution comes under attack. It tolerates simony, indeed is *wiþ him* (i.e. simony) *enchanted* (ll. 81–82), and thus *rebelle to Goddis sawe* (commandments), whilst *To kepe his comaundement þey say no* (ll. 93–94).

The merchant class is criticized only in passing. The merchants debase the currency by clipping money, and they tamper with weights and measures, serious offences for which *þey haue þe curs* (excommunication) (IX.49–52). In the same poem, the author also issues a stern warning to another social class: the judiciary. Judges and magistrates are admonished not to bully the poor:

Auyse 3ow þat leden lawe:  
 For drede of lordschipe or for mede  
 Holde no pore men in awe,

<sup>90</sup> Quoted by Robbins as an example of 'the complaints and protests against the wicked age,' (1960, p. 195), and of the poet's 'outspoken ... defence of the poor' (Robbins, 1959, p. xxviii).

To storble here ry3t or lette here nede.  
 Hit bryngeþ þe soule in gret drede  
 A3ens Goddis lawe to plete. (IX.57–62)

Those who *haldeþ questes or assise* must *lette* (hinder) *not lawe fro ri3t gyse* (custom) (ll. 65,67).  
 Corruption is again shown to be the root of evil within the judiciary:

For to amende þat was mys,  
 Perfore is ordeyned eche Iustice.  
 Lat eche man haue þat shulde ben his,  
 And turne not lawe for couetyse. (XIV.57–60)<sup>91</sup>

If the judiciary continues to fail in their duty to apply the law *in ri3t assise* the consequences will be calamitous, because *Pan is a kyngdom most in drede* (III.25,28). That these warnings, chastisements and admonitions were not mere theory is made clear in poem XIII: *In Engeland, as all men wyten, / Lawe as best (cattle) is solde and bou3t* (ll. 27–28).

Not only does the law meet with criticism, but this other stabilizing force in the realm, parliament, does not meet with unreserved praise either. The poet concedes that *For to amende þat was mysse, / Perfore is ordayned a parlement* (XIII.3–4). But in poem III he primly remarks that *To wete 3if parlement be wys, / Pe comon profit wel it preues* (ll. 97–98). And in poem XIII he critically observes that *In doom (administration of justice) of parlement ofte is fauour (partiality), / Pat afterward it harmeþ grete* (ll. 9–10). Dodd takes the opposite view, and sees the last two quotations as a quite positive assessment of the role of parliament.<sup>92</sup> The contrast is partly due to a difference of textual interpretation. Contrary to what in III.97–98 Dodd takes to express the poet's high regard of parliament as 'the sole and absolute guarantor of the public interest', scepticism about this very assurance is what the passage in question in my interpretation expresses: to know whether parliament is acting wisely, let it [first] provide solid proof that it is serving the common weal. And contrary to what Dodd in XIII.9–10 assumes to constitute a positive 'challenge facing the M.P.s', the lines evidently carry a downright negative meaning, irrespective of whether *fauour* is taken to mean 'the pursuit of profit and personal gain' or, as in my reading, 'partiality'. And thirdly, Dodd's interpretation that the *comouns* of the Poems – highly praised indeed – stand for the Commons in Parliament, contradicts his own statement – with which I heartily concur<sup>93</sup> – that 'the poet almost certainly means the common people when he uses the term "comouns" in his verse.'

<sup>91</sup> See also I.156, III.25–26 and XIII.27–28.

<sup>92</sup> See Dodd (2006, pp. 317–18).

<sup>93</sup> See also Robbins (1960, p. 198).

The flawed reality of the body politic did not only show in the imperfections and abuses *within* each of the established estates, the ideal picture was also flawed, and much more so, because of the disharmonies *among* the estates. In the first place, there were the frequent conspiracies and open rebellions against the king and his realm, involving secular magnates and church prelates alike. Henry IV had to repel raids out of Wales and Scotland, and, what is more, quell rebellions in England itself. Henry V had to deal with a conspiracy of some of the highest nobles in the land, as well as with the Lollard uprising by his erstwhile favourite, Sir John Oldcastle.<sup>94</sup> Kail heard distant echoes of some of these plots and rebellions in the Poems.<sup>95</sup> Stanza 10 in poem I, for instance, according to Kail, seems to allude to a failed plot early in Henry IV's reign by some of Richard II's former friends:

Gif a kyngdom falle a chaunce  
 That al the rewme myght greue,  
 A3en that make an ordinaunce  
 To kepe 3ow euere fro suche myscheue.  
 And chastise hem that matere meue;  
 Make othere take ensauple treuth to hede. (I.73–78)

The plotters were duly 'chastened'; they were executed by the king's order.<sup>96</sup> Stanza 15 in poem III is seen by Keen to refer to an armed Welsh revolt in mid-1400, the insurgents profiting from civil commotions in England itself:<sup>97</sup>

What kyngdom werreþ hym self wiþ ynne,  
 Distroyeþ hym self, and no mo.  
 Wiþoute here enemys bygynne  
 On eche a syde assayle hem so. (III.113–16)

Stanza 5 of poem XII, to mention one more example, according to Kail (p. xvii), refers to the Scots threatening to stir up rebellion within England, which might invite the French to begin hostilities overseas:

3if we among oure self debate,  
 Pan endeþ floure of chyualrie.

<sup>94</sup> See Keen (1973, pp. 302–25) for the political aspects of the troubles of the two Henry's; and Heath (1988, pp. 223–51, 274–79), who highlights the role of the clergy during these disturbances. Strohm offers a critical reassessment of the troubles, in particular of the Oldcastle rebellion (1998, pp. 63–100), mentioning in passing XII.93–96.

<sup>95</sup> Kail (pp. xi–xiii, xvi, xx).

<sup>96</sup> Keen (1973, pp. 304–305).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* p. 306.



Alle oþere londis þat doþ vs hate,  
 Oure feblenes wole aspye.  
 On euery syde þey wole in hye. (XII.33–37)

Besides the conspiracies and rebellions against the king and his realm, there were the widespread and protracted troubles which accompanied the Lollard movement, that extraordinary phenomenon equally involving the clergy, the commons, the lords and the king himself. The troubles evolved from John Wyclif's provocative views of the official teachings of the Church. Wyclif's doctrines rested basically on two tenets. The one denied that the Church was the sole and indispensable intermediary between the laity and God. The other denied the Church the right to possess any worldly possessions. From these two fundamental principles developed his other doctrines: on the Eucharist, on oral confession and absolution, on images and pilgrimages, on the Church as the congregation of the faithful, on 'private religions' (monks, friars, canons and the papal curia). Wyclif vigorously condemned the chronic abuses within the Church: its temporal wealth and power, simony, clerical endowments, the priests failing in their primary duties: preaching the Gospel and the cure of souls.<sup>98</sup> Over a period of forty years this counter-movement grew to become quite popular, and as a result constituted a serious threat to the authority of the Church. Lollardism not only challenged the Church's hold over the people in spiritual matters, it also came to present a disturbing factor in the country's social order as a whole. In the absence of effective sanctions, except excommunication, which the Lollards did not recognize anyway, the Church needed, and obtained, legal secular support from king and parliament, who in combination sanctioned a great many repressive measures. Also, the Lollards were allegedly involved in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, and although this was actually not the case, the rumour far into the next century clung to the image of Lollardism as a disruptive force in society. The parliamentary Statute *De Heretico Comburendo* (On the Burning of Heretics) of 1401 was the result of a concerted action by the ecclesiastical leadership and King Henry IV, the latter driven by the fear of the Lollards upsetting the stability of his kingship, a fear that was actually vindicated by the Lollard uprising of 1413 led by Sir John Oldcastle.<sup>99</sup>

Wyclif's doctrines, and the waves of enthusiasm they caused among his followers and throughout the institutions of the Church, can hardly have failed to make themselves felt, directly or indirectly, in the poems of a socially and morally engaged man. The poet criticizes in no uncertain terms a litany of abuses committed by the clergy, aiming his arrows in particular at the clergy's insistence on collecting

<sup>98</sup> See Hudson (1988, pp. 278–389), for a comprehensive discussion of the Wycliffite ideology and its theological, ecclesiastical and political ramifications.

<sup>99</sup> See Strohm's illuminating analysis of the causes leading up to the passing of the 1401 Statute (1998, pp. 32–62).

tithes and other offerings, whilst neglecting their basic duties, and without regard of the deserving poor: *Wipouten desert take pore mennys wele, / And helpe not þe soule to hele* (VIII.68–69).<sup>100</sup> Again, in the same poem the author attacks negligent parish priests, *Who takeþ cure ... take tye and nyl not teche* (ll. 17, 20), accept worldly possessions: *Worldis good nes not holichirche* (l. 25), give themselves up to a luxurious life: *Richesse and worschep y 3ow forbede* (l. 26), and seek lucrative livings whilst neglecting their parish:

Who ressayueþ benefys for richesse and ese,  
To haue his lyuyng in sykernes,  
Raþere þan serue God to plese,  
He ressayueþ hit o mys. (VIII.33–36)

The higher clergy are busily acquiring temporal wealth rather than debating serious theological issues: *Mayntene no debate / for synguler profyt of temperalte* (ll. 59–60). In another poem the author inveighs against the absentee parish priests, who desert their flock for a liberally endowed church office elsewhere:

A symple prest wole synge his masse  
While his lyuyng is but smal.  
As summe encrese, serue God þe lasse,  
Wiþ benefices ten my3te lyue wiþal,  
And fynde þere noþer household ne halle,  
Ne serue þe parische, but take hem fro. (XIV.25–30)<sup>101</sup>

God's vengeance is called on the Church for practising simony, the selling of lucrative church offices, and on secular lawlessness, which leaves usury, moral depravity and nepotism with impunity:

Whanne holichirche suffreþ symonye,  
And is wiþ hym enchaunted,  
And lawe of land suffreþ vsurye,  
Vnkyndely synne, and shameles haunted,  
And vicious folk auaunsed and dawnted,  
(...)  
In þat kyngdom God haþ vengeaunce graunted. (XIV.81–87)

All these expressions of disgust with the malpractices of the times within the Church were also voiced by Wyclif and his followers. There was nothing heretical about such protests. They were the poet's

<sup>100</sup> See Hudson (1988, pp. 334–46), in particular pp. 342–43 on the admissibility of tithe levying by the clergy.

<sup>101</sup> Kail (p. xvi) traced the criticisms in poem IV to a parliamentary debate in 1406, and those in poem XIV to a petition of Oxford dons presented to Henry V in 1418 (*ibid.* pp. xx–xxi).

attempts to help remedy church abuses, just adding his voice to the chorus of similarly minded contemporary prose and verse authors, whose writings ‘often engage respectfully and seriously with the institutional critique initiated by Wyclif, while seeking to reinforce the centrality of the priesthood’.<sup>102</sup> This latter aim was certainly in the mind of the author when he wrote, and nowhere more pithily: *Fro 3ow to God let þe prest be mene* (mediator) (IX.3). Further in poem IX he formulates in no uncertain words the Church’s insistence on oral confession and absolution: *3e mot hit* (i.e. your sins) *shewe, wiþ herte sorwe, / To a prest, and weel 3ow shryue* (ll. 33–34), with the additional requirements in ll. 42, 83 and 95 that the confession should be made in person and in full. To all these notions Wyclif was diametrically opposed: not the Church, but God alone can forgive the truly contrite offender.<sup>103</sup> The poet, in thus subscribing to one of the Church’s principal theological tenets, designed to cement its indispensable role as intermediary between man and God and as dispenser of God’s grace, makes himself known as a faithful, orthodox follower of the mother Church, without any disruptive heterodox notions whatsoever. The poet’s orthodoxy, if there was any doubt left, is triumphantly, *wiþ song and ympnes*, confirmed in his poem on the nature of the Eucharist (XXIII).<sup>104</sup> Where Wyclif was utterly opposed to the dogma of transubstantiation – Christ’s true presence in the bread and wine of the Eucharist – the poet faithfully reiterated in great detail the significance, nature and implications of the Church’s central dogma:

Lore is 3ouen to cristen men,  
 Into flesch passeþ þe bred,  
 As holychirche doþ vs kenne,  
 Pe wyn to blod, þat is so red. (XXIII.41–44)<sup>105</sup>

The poet’s doctrinal stance with respect to the Church’s temporal wealth and power, the sacrament of confession, and especially the Eucharist, stamp him as ‘one of those many authors who toe the orthodox line’.<sup>106</sup> Our poet nowhere explicitly labels any of these ‘Lollard’ notions as such, but I can only subscribe to Cole’s view, that in ‘the defensive posture of [the author’s] “Of the Sacrament of the

<sup>102</sup> Gillespie (2007, p. 417).

<sup>103</sup> See Hudson (1978, pp. 19, 144).

<sup>104</sup> The same approach is taken in *The Fyve Wyttes*, where after criticism the author hastens to profess his orthodox views of the Eucharist (Bremmer, 1987, pp. xxix–xxxiii).

<sup>105</sup> See Hudson (1978, pp. 17–18, 141–44; 1988, pp. 281–90) on Wyclif’s interpretation of the Eucharist. Also McGarry (1936, pp. 258–63), who discusses poem XXIII against the background of her dissertation on the Eucharist in Middle English homiletic and devotional verse.

<sup>106</sup> Cole (2008, p. 134). Hudson (1978) provides an illuminating overview of all Wycliffite doctrinal issues in a selection of Wycliffite writings.

Altar” we see one of the ‘vernacular religious writers [who] sought to affirm their own orthodoxy by defending the unity of Christ’s body against Wycliffian and Wycliffite accusations’.<sup>107</sup>

Summing up, the picture painted of the social ideal and its flawed reality is one by an author whose main concern was with *gouvernance ... that bereþ þe ordre as it wes*, using his poems to shore up the established position of the estates of the realm, emphasizing their blessings, warning against possible destabilizing tendencies, and criticising actual shortcomings, secular as well as clerical.

### 3.4.2 MAN

#### 3.4.2.1 *Man’s Flawed Nature*

The one broad theme of the Poems discussed so far was its concern with, and about, the social order within contemporary English society. The second theme demanding our attention is the poet’s perhaps even greater concern: the inadequacy of human conduct. Greater, because it is the moral conduct of the individual both in his relation with other participants in society, and in his relation with God. As a morally responsible social being, man is ultimately the prime mover of the functioning, and malfunctioning, of the social order.<sup>108</sup> At the same time he is morally responsible towards God, on whom he is wholly dependent for his spiritual well-being.

To medieval man, moral conduct was by definition Christian conduct. His was a life that from the cradle to the grave was immersed in and governed by God’s laws as they were taught by the Church, as well as by the king’s laws, which were supposed to be divinely ordained. The two sets of laws echo the Bible’s precept for human conduct in the Great Command: ‘love the Lord above all and your neighbour as yourself’.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, the religious messages and moral injunctions as they find expression throughout the Poems may be distinguished as relating to man’s attitude towards God, on the one hand, and his attitude in relation with his fellow man, on the other. Preliminary to his addresses on the individual’s specific moral attitudes, the author wished to make clear that at the root of the Great Command, as the reason why they were necessary in the first place, was original sin and its necessary

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<sup>107</sup> Cole (2008, pp. 140, 246 n. 37). Cole remarks on p. 246 that poem XXIII does not distinguish between the sacramental and the spiritual body of Christ, the former being received by any individual, pure or wicked, the latter only by pure and good individuals (p. 138). The implication is that the writer of poem XXIII was a ‘sacramentalist’, a matter-of-fact stickler for form, rather than a ‘spiritualist’. However, in the poem the latter, spiritual view, if not made explicit, receives due emphasis, which, as Cole remarks ‘always prevails in sacramental theology’ (p. 138). Only those, the poet says, who believe with their heart, commune with the true body of Christ and thereby reach salvation: *Pou seest not fleschly þou takest þenne; / Þy byleue of herte makeþ þe fast fro ded* (ll. 45–46), and in stanza 10 the wicked communicant *resceueþ a dedly knyf*, whilst *Þe good resceyueþ endeles lyf* (ll. 77–78).

<sup>108</sup> See Kane (1986, p. 91).

<sup>109</sup> Matt. 21:37–39.

corollaries.<sup>110</sup> Original sin was the cause of the contrariness of the soul, with the perspective of everlasting life, and the body, fleshly man, oriented wholly on this earthly life:

Mannys soule is sotyl and queynt,  
 Shal neuere ende þou3 he dede gynne.  
 The flesch is fals[e], frele and feynt;  
 Þe world alone wolde wynne, (VII.1–4)

In the untitled poem XX the body (sinful nature) tries by fair means or foul to entice the soul away from Christ.<sup>111</sup> Man's fleshly frailty, another corollary of original sin, is formulated in the following simile:

The worldē is like a chery fayre,  
 Ofte chaungeþ all his þynges. (III.145–46)

The corruptibility of the flesh, a necessary consequence of human frailty and signifying his moral corruption, finds its following rather graphic expression in a disgusted description of the conception:

Of fylthy seed þou were wrou3t,  
 And wan in at þe wyket of synne.  
 Foulere fylþe knowe y nou3t  
 Þan þou were fed þy moder wiþ ynne;  
 In a sake ful of filþe þou was out brou3t,  
 In wrecchednes horyble, and stynkyng skynne. (XXII.3–8)

At the other end of man's span of life loomed his inevitable death, fearsome and repulsive, not seen 'as a gateway into a new life,' but as a source of deep apprehension:

I sayde to stynke and rotenesse:  
 My fader and moder arn 3e;  
 And to wormes y sayde þysse:  
 My systren and my brethern both be 3e.  
 And erthe claymeþ me for hysse, (XXIV.267–71)

The Complaint of Job, the theme of poem XXIV, proved a rich source of similar passages, expressing medieval man's ambivalent disgust of, and fascination with, death and decay:

<sup>110</sup> For my discussion of the poet's treatment of moral sin I have relied heavily on John Peter's study of (the moral themes of) complaint in medieval England (Peter, 1956, pp. 40–80).

<sup>111</sup> Following the Poems, Digby 102 contains another Debate of the Body and the Soul by a different, equally anonymous, author (see the description of the manuscript in section 2.1).

Roten y schal be, wasted to no3t;  
 As clothes þat moþþes on hem fede,  
 So shal my flesch with wormes so3t. (XXIV.158–60)

Particularly upsetting was the fear of being left with a burden of unabsolved sins, when death struck without warning:

Man, þou wost wel þou shalt dy3e;  
 What dep, ne where, þou nost whenne.  
 And synnes wolde þy soule ny3e (VIII.97–99)

Such were the fundamental deficiencies and fears which formed the permanent backcloth against which man was acting out his role in society.

### 3.4.2.2 *Jeopardizing Social Harmony*

I have mentioned in the previous section that, generally speaking, for medieval man the Bible's Great Command basically served as his reference mark in his search for God's love, and in performing his Christian duties as a participant in society. In respect of this latter command, the author, being the polemicist that he was, uncompromisingly attacked any specific moral abuses that carried a socially disruptive risk: corruption (*mede*), disloyalty (*glosers, flaterers, wikkid counseil*), and greed (*synguler[e] profyt*). First on his list was *mede*: corrupt, and corrupting, reward, whether in money or in the shape of power and influence. *Mede* corrupted the soul of the individual, as well as posing an ever-present threat to the proper functioning of society. The poet recognized corruption for what it was: honey-sweet at the first taste, but deadly poisonous all the same: ... *mede wiþ poyson sotly* (treacherously) *is maynt* (mixed) (XIII.63). The courtier in Poem II gathers riches and esteem in return for systematically and indiscriminately flattering his master. Although vigorously defending his behaviour in a satiric dialogue with a simple and honest warrior knight, the courtier is really corrupting his soul (and his master's into the bargain).<sup>112</sup> There are, in fact, only few people who *don here deure* (duties) *dewely, and take no mede* (XVI.113). On the contrary, *fleschly man* is even prepared hypocritically to perform for money the 'seven works of mercy' (XVII.38). The corrupting rot of *mede* does not only eat into the individual soul, but

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<sup>112</sup> Coleman (1981, pp. 95–98) discusses poem II as an example of the literature of complaint against royal advisers. It should be noted that Coleman assigns ll. 67–72 of the dialogue to the warrior knight as a critical comment on his own unromantic calling. A more straightforward and logical interpretation assigns this stanza to the courtier, accusing the knight of hypocritically glorifying war, whilst actually seeking *profyt* and *pilage*, in other words: *mede*, nothing different from the courtier's own ambitions. This interpretation also makes for a naturally alternating dialogue, rather than putting three consecutive stanzas into the mouth of the warrior.

into the very structure of society.<sup>113</sup> Corrupt judges are prepared to bend the law for money (IX.57–58). The law itself, *as all men wyten, ... as best (cattle) is solde and bou3t* (XIII.27–28). Officials of the Church, the institute *par excellence* to warn against corruption, are being paid to make light of certain abuses (IV.137–38). Elsewhere, I have discussed the thematic caesura in the Poems after poem XVI.<sup>114</sup> In this connection it is noticeable that up to poem XVI *mede* retains its unfavourable meaning of ‘corrupt reward’, whereas in the subsequent contemplative and religiously inspired poems, *mede* acquires a neutral, even meritorious connotation.

Another ruinous force tending to disrupt the cohesion between the realm’s estates were the *glosers*, the *flaterers*, and the *false counselors*, in short, all those who cajoled and flattered their masters with self-interested advice into taking the wrong decisions. As indeed they did in XIII.134–35: *When gloser and flaterer on tapetis trede / For wynnyng þey counseled to cowardys*. A similar performance by their counterparts in Flanders is noted in XVI.5–6: *Glosers counseled lordis for to take mede, / To maken hem (themselves) riche, and here lordis pore foles* (fools). Typically, *þe glosers skulked away* afterwards (l. 8)! Even more than against merely irresponsible *glosers*, the poet warns against advisers with downright malicious intent: *be war of wikkid caunsaille* (V.1), and of *counsail of double entendement* (I.2). Conversely, he repeatedly urges to *take counseil that is wys* (I.60).<sup>115</sup> The mortal sin of greed – in terms of the Poems: *synguler profyt*, the selfish seeking of personal gain – is another of the morally corrupting factors: *Syngulerte is sotyl (vile) þefte; / Þey calle hit custom troupe to blende* (XIII.81–82). Poem XXI, the verse paraphrase of the ‘Beatitudes’, contrasts the *blessed ... / Pat hungren and thursten ry3twisnes* with the cursed, who:

Wiþ wrong take pore mennys thrift  
 Pat makeþ pore men be [spilde],  
 For synguler profyt is sotylle theft. (XXI.58–60)

The craving for temporal possessions not only damaged man’s own soul, but also the social order, harming the proper functioning of the estates: *Make opere folk þe worse to lyue, / For synguler profyt þou wolde haue* (XIV.52–53), and *for ... singulere to wynne, / Þey were rebelle, to ryse craft a3en craft* (XVI.59–60). The three social and moral vices just discussed: corruption, flattering and greed, form a truly vicious circle of cause and effect, which one finds faithfully reflected in the poet’s verse:

My flater yng, glos yng, not me harmes.  
 I gete loue and moche richesse, (II.49–50)

<sup>113</sup> See Baldwin (1981, pp. 24–38) on the social implications of ‘meed’.

<sup>114</sup> See sections 2.4, 3.1.2 and 3.2.

<sup>115</sup> See also II.78, III.82, 154, IV.239, VII.21.

The flattering of the courtier in poem II makes him beloved and, in addition, quite rich. Similarly: *Glosers counseled lordis for to take mede, / To maken hem* (themselves) *riche* (XVI.5–6), and again: *Gloseres that wiþ lordis bene, / Þey thryue faste ...* (IV.145–46). Among his manifold weaknesses it is this unholy threesome of moral vices that caused the greatest harm to man’s social environment, that is to say: his fellow men, and hence the social structures, the estates.

### 3.4.2.3 *In Need of Spiritual Reform*

The poet’s moral concerns did not stop at signalling the social abuses. As a *conditio sine qua non* for restoration the author emphasized the need for spiritual reform of the individuals who together constituted the body politic of the realm. As mentioned in section 3.4.2.1, religion and social issues in medieval times were often quite inseparable; social harmony between the institutions of the realm depended on the spiritual harmony between man and God, to whom he was personally accountable:

God, lete þis kyngdom neuere be lorn  
 Among oure self in no distance.  
 (...)  
 God, 3eue vs space of repe[n]tance,  
 Good lyf, and deuocioun. (XII.145–50)

The stages of spiritual healing, ritualized in the Church’s sacraments of Penance and Eucharist, were clear: the sinner needed to be repentant, with a true purpose of amendment, confess his sins, receive absolution and perform the prescribed penance. Thus shriven, the penitent could, with a clear conscience and rejoicing in his salvation, meet his God in the Eucharist. The poet in his verse gave due expression to these stages, but his call for repentance sounded loudest and most frequent. A few illustrative examples will suffice: *Serue god for helle drede, / fle fro synne and al vis* (I.41–42); *Repentaunce mot mercy by3e / While þy dede is in þy powere* (VII.118–19); *Holde wel þy penaunce; / Repentaunce, for3ete þat nou3t* (IX.187–88). At the same time the poet holds out the prospect of salvation: *... repentaunce may grace gete* (IX.6); *On mannys syde repentaunce doþ rise, / And on goddis syde mercy is* (XI.43–44). This momentous occasion of reconciliation between God and man in the author’s mind calls for poetic diction: *repentaunce and mercy kys/kesse* (XI.47, XXIV.63). However, repentance, to be valid, must be demonstrated in acts of amendment, and the poet is not lacking in hortatory verse to imprint on the mind that that there can be no salvation without works: *After warke þat þey used, / I* (i.e. God) *shal hem deme or saue* (XXIV.407–408).<sup>116</sup> *Warke*, in the poet’s theology, means good stewardship of everything

<sup>116</sup> See the numerous other examples in the Poems on the theme ‘you get what you deserve’ in the beginning of section 3.1.1, where the question of one or more authors is discussed. See also James 2: 14–18 on man’s salvation through his works or his faith.



God on his earth has made available, but on loan. Ultimately, man must render an account of his stewardship to God, and repay the loan with interest. It is one of the author's stock of favourite subjects,<sup>117</sup> recurring time and again, starting with his very first poem:

Eche man wot that hath wyt,  
 These worldes goodes bethe not his.  
 Alle is Godes, he oweth hit,  
 And land and see, and pyne and blis.  
 God wole haue rekenyng y wys, (I.25–29)

As in the parable of the talents, man will be rewarded for his stewardship, according to his deserts: his soul will go to heaven, or be cast into outer darkness. God requires a detailed reckoning of all man's deeds, whether good or bad:

Man of his owen nou3ten haue;  
 Al is Goddis, and he it lent.  
 Perof God wole rekenyng craue,  
 How þou it wan, held, and spent;  
 Py leste þou3t, and what it ment;  
 Troupe, and lesyng þou dede li3e;  
 And 3et þy soule is Goddis rent:  
 So quyte þat wel, lerne to di3e. (VII.81–88)

The parable, and the poet's interpretation of it, makes it quite clear that it is man's own free will to do good or bad: *Pou hast fre wille, knowest euylle and good* (XVII.151), and consequently: whether he is saved or damned in the eyes of God.<sup>118</sup> Personal responsibility of the individual for his salvation also finds expression in the poet's appeals to man's individual conscience, which will tell him whether he is worthy of heaven or of hell: *Mannes conscience wil hym telle, / ... / Whether he be worthi heuene or helle* (I.137, 139). Hence the writer's urgent call in the same poem: *Man, knowe thy self, loue god and drede* as a refrain to every stanza, repeated in VII.8 and in the title of poem XXII: *Knowe thy self and thy god*.<sup>119</sup> The poet's insistence that man should be guided by his own conscience in making his moral choices seems to echo Wyclif's tenet that man does not need the sacramental intermediary of the priest for his

<sup>117</sup> The theme is the familiar parable of the talents in Matt. 25:14–30. See further III.129–32, IX.129–33, XII.109–10.

<sup>118</sup> See in section 3.1.1 the list of quotations in the Poems on the concept of free will.

<sup>119</sup> Peck (1986, pp. 124–25) refers to poem I in his discussion of man's individual conscience as a feature of contemporary penitential poetry.

salvation,<sup>120</sup> and that he is personally responsible for making his peace with God.<sup>121</sup> However, as pointed out by Peck (1986, p. 118), Wyclif's emphasis on the individual conscience and personal choice was in this respect hardly discernable from the other, much broader, and thoroughly orthodox penitential movement. This movement, which had its origin early in the fourteenth century, was equally being directed toward man's personal conscience. It had other traits in common with Wyclif, for that matter, such as its critical awareness of the abuses within the Church, and its reputed encouragement of vernacular meditational literature.<sup>122</sup> Thus, the preoccupation of our author with free will, individual conscience, and personal moral choice, had nothing to do with Wycliffite or Lollard tendencies, faithfully orthodox follower of the mother Church that he was, as I have demonstrated above, but had everything to do with his own penitential urge to remedy what was wrong in state and church by reforming its subjects. In order to achieve this ultimate aim, the poet, with unflagging perseverance, went to great lengths: cajoling, warning, even threatening his audience with hell and damnation to make them change their ways. Instances throughout the Poems abound, but it would merely invite tedium to garner what would indeed be a rich harvest of evidence of the poet's powers of persuasion. I confine myself to poem I. In stanza 21 feuding parties are persuasively advised to be sensible and settle their old grievances amicably amongst themselves, because nursing animosities will only lead to the shedding of innocent blood:

3if a man do another mys,  
 Neighbores shuld hem auyse,  
 The trespasour amende and kys,  
 Do bothe parties euene assise.  
 Old horded hate maketh wratthe to rise,  
 And ofte gilteles blod to blede.  
 Fle fro fooles and folwe wise.  
 Man, knowe thy self, loue God and drede. (I.161–68)

In stanza 4 the poet uses sterner language when issuing a warning that a man will not enjoy heavenly bliss without charity and fair dealing. God demands a reckoning for even the smallest misdoing:

The man withoute charitee  
 May neuere wynne heuen blisse.

<sup>120</sup> See Hudson (1988, pp. 294–301).

<sup>121</sup> This parallel of the poet's insistence on free will and personal choice with Wyclif's views is possibly what Kail (p. ix) had in mind when he wrote, without corroborative reference, that 'the poems are not quite free from the ideas of the Reformation'.

<sup>122</sup> See Peck (1986, pp. 113–29), on the moral and political implications of Wyclif's insistence on individual conscience and personal choice for the established Church and the monarch's authority.

As thou wolde men dede for the,  
 Do thou so liche eche man haue hisse.  
 For all that euere is goten mysse  
 Mot be rekened, a drope 3e shede. (I.113–18)

And if nothing works, dire threats become necessary: *The bowe of Goddis wrath is bent / On hem that deth not that God bede* (I.69–70). Therefore: *Haue heuene or helle, chese* (choose) *of two* (I.111), or take the consequences. A misgotten heaven on earth must be paid for with the horrors of hell:

False men bye helle ful dere.  
 That taken with wrong are Goddis theues;  
 They han here heuene in this world here.  
 After in helle, huge myscheues. (I.121–24)

Yet, there is also, throughout the Poems, a positive note of unquestioning reliance on God's providence:

Make God 3oure ful frend;  
 Do þe comaundement þat he bede.  
 Pou3 alle þe world a3en 3ow wend,  
 Be God 3oure frend, 3e thar not drede.  
 For þere as God his frendis lede,  
 He saueþ hem boþe on lond and sees. (III.105–10)

In brief: *God dop batayle, and not 3e* (IX.143, XIII.111), and as the Omnipotent he *can skatre þe grete pres* (large[st] army) (III.157). The powers that be may plot and scheme, but ultimately *þe Fader of heuene is gouernoure* (V.11). So – and here we are back with the stern preacher – we are wise to bow to his will: *To stryue wiþ God we may not wynne, / Boþe body and soule he can bete* (IX.13–14). We had better *Holde couenant to God, and be kynde* (obedient) (IX.31), because *Hit bryngeþ þe soule in gret drede, / A3ens Goddis lawe to plete* (argue) (IX.61–62). For God is also an avenging God. The sinners who do not repent and yet expect to be forgiven had better think again, because *Pat synnen in ouerhope, in helle mon ly3e* (VIII.47). It is, incidentally, interesting to note that the question whether the sinner is justified *sola fide* (Rom. 3:27) or through works (James 2:14) was as much a moot point to the poet as it was in the days of Martin Luther. In one and the same poem (IX) the reader is urged *For synne þat wolde þy soule þrete*, to *Aske mercy, and seche gras* ([God's] grace) (ll. 46–47), whilst he has also sternly warned that *After* (according to) *3oure werkis wayte* (expect) *aftur* (afterwards) *3oure mede* (l. 151).

### 3.4.2.4 *In Search of God*

As discussed above, the Church's sacrament of Penance channelled the process of spiritual reform along the path of repentance, confession and penance. We have seen that the poet, in his own way, furthered this process with vigour, time and again calling the sinner to order and submission. From the very first poem these calls were invariably intermingled with the writer's protests against the abuses in church and state, as described in the first part of this chapter. Spiritual reform was the necessary basis for social harmony. This interplay between secular and moral passages comes virtually to an end in poem XVII. The author's calls for repentance remain as loud and frequent as ever,<sup>123</sup> but the secular element is barely present any longer. What begins to be heard in poem XVII, and continues to be heard in the later poems, is a devotional element: *God, how may y, man, bygynne / Wiþ myn herte to loue þe* (ll. 73–74)? *Loue* is mentioned in this poem no fewer than seventy times (thirty-six times as a noun, twenty-four times as a verb), ending with a eulogy on *trewe loue*:

Pere is an herbe þat hatteþ 'trewe loue',  
 And by name it haþ no pere,  
 Is lykned to Ihesus, y may proue:  
 His handes and feet þe leues were,  
 His herte was wiþ a spere þurgh shoue,  
 Mannys loue was hym so dere.  
 What soule is syk, lay þat herbe aboue,  
 Hit makeþ hool al yfere. (XVII.185–92)

'Love thy neighbour', as heard in the poet's moral injunctions in the first sixteen poems, is replaced by 'love God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.' The poet's concerns no longer focus on re-establishing social harmony, but on reconciling the soul with God:

3if þou wilt þy soule saue.  
 Lete soule be lord, and go byfore,  
 And make þy body þy soule knaue. (XIX.78–80)

It will be remembered that, according to the reconstructed time-frame for the Poems,<sup>124</sup> poem XVII was written in 1421, the year of the crisis within the Benedictine order in England, an event which, as I have argued, heralded the poet's withdrawal from secular affairs, to turn to the affairs of the soul and its eternal salvation as his sole preoccupation in the later poems. The struggle for the soul is between God

<sup>123</sup> See ll. 75–76, 84, 51–52, 59–60, 161–62.

<sup>124</sup> See sections 2.4, 3.1.2 and 3.2.

and carnal man. In Poem XIX, wholly within the ‘Complaint of God to Man’ tradition,<sup>125</sup> God asks man:

... why turmentest þou me so.  
 Euere þy synnes don encresce,  
 And þy vices waxen moo,  
 And þy vertues wanen lesse. (XIX.41–44)

God assures us that *For loue I hadde to mankynde* (l. 7), he was even prepared to pay for man’s soul with the death of his son Jesus: *Nas neuere bargayn derrere bou3t* (l. 12). In poem XX, the counterpart of poem XIX, God’s antagonists in the struggle for the soul, man’s *fleschly lustes*, try to keep the soul from uniting with Christ, her true lover.<sup>126</sup> It is, therefore, essential that carnal man should *Repente ... synne, and mercy craue* (XIX.74). God is ready to absolve and save man from purgatory: *For my grace is euere redy*; in return he must *In good werkis wysely wake* (XX.204, 209). The two sides of the medal are exemplified in poem XXI, the versification of the Beatitudes,<sup>127</sup> where the promise of salvation is held out to those who practise the eight virtues listed. However, the poet regularly interrupts the joyful procession of promised blessings with threats of damnation for those who do not practise the virtues asked in consideration: *Goddis curs he dop wynne* (l. 107). Here, as in the other six closing poems, he demonstrates the same irrepressible homiletic nature as in his earlier poems. One cannot experience the joy of the blessed without prior repentance, confession and due penance. Poem XVIII echoes the reprimands meted out to the Benedictines in the episcopal capitulary of 1422, issued as a result of the heavy charges laid against the Benedictine chapter by Henry V in 1421.<sup>128</sup> Poem XIX is full of warnings: to *amende þy mysse* (l. 28), to *Leue and forbere þy synne* (l. 52), to *Mayntene not wrong* (l. 97). Poem XX has more of the same: *Flesch, þy synnes mochil is / ... / Knowleche* (confess), *repente, and mende þy mys* (ll. 193,195). Following the curses in between the Beatitudes of poem XXI, poem XXII follows up with more threats. Those *Who breke þo hestes* (commandments) */ ... / in helle for to brenne, / in endeles pyne, dep shal hem fede* (ll. 37, 63–64). So *do penaunce* by keeping the *ten comaundementis*, practising the *seuen werkis of mercy*, bewailing the *seuene synnes*, and directing your *fjue wittes* (ll. 65–69).

In poems XVIII through XXII we have traced the poet’s unceasing calls to man to repent his sins, and to do penance by mending his ways, with the prospect of the salvation of his eternal soul. The last two poems are in a way the culmination of the injunctions and promises of the preceding five. In poem XXIV penance is no longer urged, but at last actually done. In poem XXIII salvation is no longer a

<sup>125</sup> See Furnivall (1866, pp. 190–232), and Brown (1939, pp. 151–77).

<sup>126</sup> See the summary preceding the text of poem XX.

<sup>127</sup> Matt. 5:3–12. See also the summary preceding the text of poem XXI.

<sup>128</sup> See section 2.4.

distant prospect, but can at last be enjoyed when shriven man, cleansed of his sins, meets his God in bread and wine in the Eucharist. Poem XXIV is formally a versification of nine lessons from the book Job as contained in the Church's Office for the Dead.<sup>129</sup> The author has in fact turned the poem into one sustained confession of sin, and prayer to be cleansed. It is shot through with numerous passages expressing a deeply contrite sentiment, as in the following lines:

Deme me no3t after my dede,  
 Lorde, I byseche þe,  
 I haue don in þy si3t, and tok non hede;  
 Perfore I praye þy mageste,  
 God, my wikkednesse away þou lede,  
 Myn vnry3t away wasche 3e.  
 Non more. Lord, at my nede,  
 Of alle my synnes cense 3e me. (XXIV.243–50)

Absolved, the poet gives emotional thanks, which constitutes at the same time his personal Creed:

I byleue þat soth y say,  
 Myn a3eynbyere lyuynges isse.  
 I shal rysen of þe erthe my laste day,  
 Bylapped in my flesch and skyn ywisse;  
 Byholde with myn ey3en twey,  
 Se God, my sauour, in blisse;  
 Non other ey3en bote þes, withouten nay;  
 Þe hope in my bosom yput vp isse. (XXIV.299–306)

The emotional style of the poet's religious expression in this stanza is reminiscent of the style of the mystical writers of the period. The urge to become one with God, to *Byholde with myn ey3en twey, / Se God, my sauour, in blisse* (ll. 303–304), evokes thoughts of the mystical experience of the *unio mystica* with God. However, the poet's vision is of heavenly bliss forthcoming, not experienced. Also, the almost palpable devotional ardour reaches these heights only in poem XXIII, that is to say in the context of the Eucharist, where the penitent and shriven sinner, through God's unmerited grace, is allowed to meet God in bread and wine. Nowhere else in the Poems, and in no other context, is there any trace of mysticism, but rather the style and tone of voice of a morally conscious, but practically minded Christian. Poem XXIII can be read as an antidote against the Eucharistic theology of Wyclif and his followers, who denied the doctrine of the transubstantiation of bread and wine to become really, 'in

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<sup>129</sup> See the summary preceding the text of poem XXIV.

substance', the body and blood of Christ.<sup>130</sup> Orthodox in his beliefs as the poet may be, there are certainly Lollard overtones where he says that *Pere as gadryng of goode men ys, / Is holychyrche of flesch and bones*<sup>131</sup> (rather than the institutional Church), as also where he says that *prestes are lanterne*.<sup>132</sup> The main point here, as argued above, is that in poem XXIII the sacrament of the Eucharist is actually being performed, rather than held out as a conditional promise. Deeply theological as large parts of the author's exposition in poem XXIII may sound, he finds moving words to grasp the essential significance of the Eucharist, the repentant sinner meeting his God over bread and wine, ultimately to gain eternal life and see his God face to face:

Lete þy mercy passe ryȝt,  
 And forȝeue vs oure mysdede.  
 Py face wiȝ loue to seen in syȝt,  
 In lond of lyf þou vs lede.  
 Among þy seyntes in heuene on hyȝt,  
 At þat feste of lif, God, vs fede.  
 Sopfast bred, God of myȝt,  
 Ihesus, herde, þou vs hede. (XXIII.105–12)

Where in this section we started out 'in search of God', the poet in this stanza points the way. In groping our way towards God, the Eucharist is the place *Py face wiȝ loue to seen in syȝt*.

<sup>130</sup> On Wyclif's stance with respect to the orthodox dogma of the Eucharist, see section 3.4.2.1.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. *The folkis cherche* in VIII.27. See also Gillespie (2007, p. 418), and Hudson (1988, pp. 314–27).

<sup>132</sup> Cf. *To lanterne ȝe ben likned riȝt* (XXI.153). See the Lollard treatise 'The Lanterne of Light' in Dean (1996, pp. 40, 75–90).

