

1-1-2009

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Emily Russell

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Here tunggë made here slayn:

Dangerous Speech Acts in Four Exempla From

Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne*

by

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Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature

Eastern Michigan University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English with a concentration in Literature

Thesis Committee:

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October 28, 2009

Ypsilanti, MI

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the friends and family members who took the time to proofread and listen to ideas as I worked through this project. I especially owe a huge dept of gratitude to Dr. Christine Neufeld and Dr. Natasa Kovacevic. You pushed me intellectually and encouraged me when I felt overwhelmed. I appreciate you both very much.

## Abstract

In this project, I consider four exempla from Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne*: "The Tale of the Bloody Child," "The Tale of the Sacrilegious Carolers of Colbek," "The Tale of the Midwife Who Christened the Child Wrongly," and "St. Gregory's Tale of the Nun Who Spoke Naughty Words." I read these exempla through the theoretical texts of Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Mary Douglas, as well as others, and conclude that speech acts, whether deviant or sanctioned, make identity at any level (de)constructable. I hope to show that while this is particularly noticeable against the historical and ideological backdrop of Mannyng's day, linguistic difference always opens identity constructs. Language always poses a threat to individual, deific, and institutional identity, and so society attempts to control it through ritual. Complete symbolic quarantine, however, proves to be impossible, and so the unstable self must be written onto the physical space of the monstrous and grotesque body.

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## Introduction

In Robert Mannyng of Brunne's early fourteenth century penitential text, *Handlyng Synne*, dismembered bodies, burning tongues, and possessed children leave readers with powerful images and unforgettable lessons. Baby Jesus is torn limb from limb, his entrails stringing out of him as he cries. Noisy carolers are put into a trance and forced to dance and sing unceasingly for the rest of their lives. A dying infant is forbidden Christian burial, and a dead nun is dragged from her grave and cut in half by demons with swords of fire as her screams go unheeded. These and similar scenes were used to teach Mannyng's audience about the dangers of an unguarded tongue. Deviant speech can literally kill.

Mannyng's preoccupation with linguistic power makes his text an optimal space within which to consider the relationship between language and identity and how both of these function within and, at times, challenge an ideological structure like the medieval church.

Perhaps unintentionally, Mannyng explores within his text the impossibility of creating a clearly defined identity. Identity is always unstable and penetrable. Language makes evident the mutability of even the most basic borders. For example, as we look at the exempla contained within *Handlyng Synne*, the borders between life and death, community

member and non-member, and cleric and lay wo/men are all complicated by the very words used to construct them.

*Handlyng Synne* is a translation of a French text entitled *Manuel des Pechees*, which is usually attributed to William of Wadington, though some scholars challenge this, positing that a close study of the manuscript reveals that at best Wadington only wrote certain sections (Sullivan, “A Brief Textual History,” 339). Like *Handlyng Synne*, the *Manuel* is a penitential handbook meant to teach its audience about how to confess sin as well as how to facilitate confession. Though Mannyng’s translation is the most popular, it was one of many made even up until the sixteenth century (343). In organization and subject matter Mannyng stays fairly true to Wadington’s text, but he does often extend his narratives to include dialogue and setting to an extent that is not paralleled in the original text. Most likely Mannyng did this because of his audience and, in fact, he says as much in his prologue:

Þat may be weyl on englyssh tolde,  
 To telle 3ow þat, y may be bolde;  
 For lewdē men y vndyr-toke  
 On englyssh tunge to make þys boke.  
 For many ben of swyche manere,  
 Pat talys and rymys wyl bleþly here;  
 Yn gamys, & festys, & at þe ale,  
 Loue men to lestene trotēuale:  
 Þat may falle ofte to vylanye,  
 To dedly synne, or oþer folye;  
 For swyche men haue y made þis ryme

So that it might be told in English,  
 I have boldly done this;  
 For lewd men I undertook  
 To write in English tongue this book,  
 For many of them are of such manner,  
 That they happily listen to tales and rhymes;  
 In games, & festivities, & at the ale,  
 Men love to listen to gossip;  
 And they may often engage in villany,  
 And deadly sins and other folly;  
 For such men have I made this rhyme

<p>Þat þey may weyl dyspende here tyme,          And þere-yn sumwhat for to here,          To leue al swyche foul manere,          And for to kunnë knowe þerynne          Þat þey wene no synne be ynne.</p>	<p>That they may make good use of their time,          And because of what they hear,          They may leave such foul habits,          And so to know          That they know no sin be in [it]. (ll. 41-56)</p>
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His stories are meant as a way to keep the attention of the lay wo/men in his congregation so that he might better instruct them on how to recognize and confess their sins. He chooses not only to write in the vernacular but also engages his audience through his use of exempla, hoping that stories will be appealing to them because those will be reminiscent of the type of talk they engage in at festivals and while in the tavern.

Mannyng knew his audience might be a reluctant one, but he lived in an era where timely and proper confession practices were paramount to the faith. It was important both to his career and to his congregants that he educate them about how to “handle” their sins. He explains what exactly he means by “handlyng synne” and emphasizes the importance of both properly identifying sin and then confessing it.

<p>We handel synnë euery day;          In wurde and dedë, al we may,          Lytyl or mochel, synne we do,          Þe fend and oure flesh tysyn vs þerto;          Ffor þys skyle hyt may be seyde          ‘Handlyng synne’ for oure mysbreyde;          Ffor euery day &amp; euery oure          We synne þat shal we bye ful soure.</p> <p>Anoþer handling þer shuld be,</p>	<p>We handle sin every day;          In words and in deeds, all we may,          Whether little or much, we sin,          The fiend and our flesh work toward this;          For this reason it may be said          “Handling sin” for our wrong-doing;          For every day and every hour          We sin bitterly.</p> <p>Another handling there should be,</p>
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Wyþ shryfte of mouþe to clensë þe. Handyl þy synnë yn þy þou3t, Lytyl & mochel, what þou hast wrought; Handyl þy synne to hauë drede; Noþyng buy peyn ys þefore mede. (ll. 89-102)	With shrift of mouth to cleanse thee, Handling sin in thy thought, Whether thou have done little or much; Handle thy sin in full awe; So that nothing by punishment is therefore won.
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While Mannyng's agenda is in part the result of a larger movement towards lay education within the medieval church, it is important to note, as Ronald Finucane points out in his introduction to *Miracles and Pilgrims: popular beliefs in medieval England*, that the medieval church is not one enclosed unity but rather encompasses many different and often conflicting voices (10). There were official doctrines meant to help distinguish between "true" members of the church and those who would be labeled as heretics, but even these can't create a unified church. People believe different things and interpret mandates in different ways. Finucane also cautions us against reading official doctrines or canons as representative of what may have concurrently been said in the pulpit. As he puts it, the peasant priest is in a very different place from the pope (11). With this in mind, I try to distinguish between pastoral and ecclesiastical stances, though even these terms cannot pretend to represent unified identities. Ultimately, how to refer to the church is a question that haunts my text, and I'm not sure that it can be resolved. I intentionally try to

acknowledge that like any identity construct, the medieval church is a multitude of things in a multitude of places at a multitude of times.

That said, we must briefly consider the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and several of its canons, not because they represent the church as a whole, but because by Mannyng's day, the Fourth Lateran was known to almost all clergy and had significantly changed the background against which Mannyng and his contemporaries worked.

Altogether, seven church councils were held between the years of 1123 and 1312. Seven councils may not sound like a great many spread over nearly two hundred years, but the fact that a good many of these councils served almost exclusively to reiterate and reinforce decrees of previous councils points to the fact that during this period the church had some difficulty enforcing their declarations. The Fourth Lateran Council, however, was one of the few that met to establish new rules for the operation of the church. It also clarified some of the more disputed aspects of the Christian faith at that time.

The church concerned itself with four key topics during this meeting: confession, education, identifying "true" Christians and separating them from everyone else, and attempting to obtain control over secular powers. Each of these concerns proves that in

truth the importance of the Fourth Lateran council lays in its concern with constructing a distinct identity for the church and her members. It is this focus that has earned the Fourth Lateran Council its place as the most important council for the medieval church; and for this reason it is crucial to understanding a text like Mannyng's even though it appears nearly one hundred years after the council took place. As we will see, the verdicts declared by the council members shape in a very distinct way the issues addressed, both intentionally and unintentionally, in *Handlyng Synne*.

Most important to my project is the Fourth Lateran Council's preoccupation with the sacrament of confession. For the first time in church history, confession to a priest became compulsory for all Christians. According to canon 21, every Christian who is of the age of reason must confess to a priest at least once a year. Bellitto, among others, has written about the practical significance of this mandate. Priests were taught to ask specific questions of confessants in order to educate the laypeople about what the church considered sin and to weed out heretics within the congregation (53-55). Mannyng's penitential manual, and others like it, were born out of a society deeply concerned with identifying sinful behavior, or behavior that was incongruent with the practices of the church, and correcting it.

The effects of aural confession are far reaching. It is a religious institution that arguably helped shape the way the Western world conceptualizes individual identity. In “*Space to Speke*”: *The Confessional Subject in Medieval Literature*, Jerry Root considers how confession as it was set up by the Fourth Lateran Council is in many ways the genesis of modern day self-hood. Essentially, confession creates a discourse through which the confessant can narrate the self. Through confessional manuals like *Handlyng Synne*, congregants learned a language that could codify inner life and distinguish between what is private and what is public (57, 77). It is this private life that begins to foster a sense of individuality (58).

Katherine Little points out that the confessional discourse and the concurrent need to label sin and sinners provided people with signifiers through which to understand themselves in relation to others. One could be a “backbiter,” a “gossiper,” a “glutton” – all signifiers that carry with them particular identity constructs (7). But self-narration does not stop there; through confession one is afforded the discursive space to tease out what it means to be a sinner and a Christian. Root argues that “The technique of confession is also a language of persuasion made available to the penitent, one which the penitent him - or herself must envisage as a powerful and persuasive tool with regard to personal salvation” (60). Penitents had more control over salvific discourse and thus over their religious life.

What begins to happen is that the church realizes that confession, as a powerful narrating tool, must be somehow controllable. As Eamon Duffy points out in “Religious belief,” confession often worked as a tool for church officials to monitor the success of their educational campaign, as well as a way for superiors to make sure that the pastors practicing under them did not stray into heretical teachings (301, 319). There was more than spiritual salvation on the line; if a pastor could not sufficiently handle the task of educating and confessing his parishioners, he could find himself out of a job and out of the church.

With his emphasis on detailed and accurate verbalization of sin in confession, it is no surprise that Mannyng dedicates much of his manual to the power of language – both to save and to condemn. To him, words have the ability to open the speaker up to spiritual powers, both good and bad. Confession allows one to interact with God and thus gain forgiveness for past sins. Conversely, transgressive speech – in the form of lying, swearing *per membra*, and idle talking – opens one up to the more diabolical side of the spiritual world. Several exempla, such as “St. Gregory’s Tale of the Nun who Spoke Naughty Words” and “The Sacrilegious Carollers of Colbek,” showcase the dangers of using transgressive speech. Even unintentional misuse of language, as the midwife in “The Tale of the Midwife Who Christened a Child Wrongly” discovers, can lead to damnation and rejection by the community.

Edwin Craun, in his book *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature*, succinctly sums up the church's stake in the discourse of deviant speech:

Emerging from the Fourth Lateran Council's program to define the Christian community more sharply and to catechize and discipline individuals more effectively, it [the discourse of sin] set forth what it claimed to be universally valid norms for conduct, it demarcated what was deviant, and it labored to awaken revulsion against the deviant... This discourse on sin, along with other types of pastoral discourse, was used to create a large and loose 'textual community,' a social group in which a small literate core instructs the whole in authoritative texts in order to establish systematic, text-based ways of constructing a moral self, of regulating human conduct. (3)

The church attempted to regain the control it let loose through confession by tightening the reins in other linguistic arenas. Cursing, swearing, and idle talk are all types of speech with narrative powers that posed a potential threat to "Christian" identity as it was defined by the medieval church and were thus designated "deviant" and sinful. Transgressive speech is seen as destructive and harmful for what it can enact. According to medieval

thought, words can actually act in the physical arena – an interesting idea when considered in conjunction with identity construction. Deviant speech doesn't just threaten ideological integrity but can actually affect physical harm.

Thinking about language in this very material way is an adjustment for the modern reader, though the idea that language can perform, or effect change, has enjoyed something of a revival in twentieth-century linguistics thanks to John Langshaw Austin and his book *How to do Things with Words*. He distinguishes between constative and performative speech acts and systematically considers speech acts, usually ceremonial in context, that carry out an action, or perform through their utterance. Linguists before Austin considered language to be mainly descriptive. We report through speech but we do not act through speech.

Austin proposes that we do in fact act, but only in particular contexts. Examples he gives are utterances like “I do” in the marriage ceremony or “I bet twenty dollars” in an oral contract. According to Austin, at the point that the speaker says a performative phrase, he or she is accomplishing something with his or her words that would not be accomplished without the utterance.

J. L. Austin was one of the first modern linguists to distinguish between performative and constative speech acts but since his seminal work, many have added to the discussion. Of

particular note is the work of John R. Searle. Searle argues that Austin's definition of performatives is too broad. Instead, only what Austin refers to as "explicit" performatives – or speech acts that actually name the type of speech within the utterance – are actually capable of performing and not just reporting. The example Searle gives is the statement "I order you to leave the room" where the speaker identifies that what s/he is doing through speech is "ordering" (536). Most of what Austin calls performatives are actually declarative statements. They declare something about a situation, but they do not actually affect the situation. According to Searle, phrases like "I do" and "I promise" only report what is already happening but they hold no power in and of themselves (541).

He does concede that there is potential for language to take on performative powers if used by someone or something that by nature has the ability to enact change through words. He gives the example of the Judeo-Christian tradition that holds that God created light through speaking "Let there be light." The problem does not lie in the semiotic structure but rather in natural law. Humans simply cannot create physical change through speech – except in very specific circumstances (549).

It is this last concession, the possibility of a speaker with the natural ability to use words performatively, which makes Searle's work interesting within the discourse of deviant



speech since, as I mentioned above, in the medieval world humans are believed to have the natural ability to effect physical change through speech. Almost all utterances are assumed to be performative in nature, though, as is the case in “The Tale of the Sacrilegious Carolers of Colbek,” what the speech act performs once it is uttered is often beyond the control of the speaker.

Considered in the light of speech act theory, Mannyng’s decision to use exempla is not an altogether uncomplicated one. The exemplum is fascinating partly because it is difficult to lay down any strict guidelines for the stories contained within the genre. Fritz Kemmler points out that there are many different types of exempla that can also serve many different purposes. Because of this, it is problematic to try to pinpoint steadfast conventions shared between the many different stories classified as exempla. Some exempla are based on stories from Christian scripture, some are taken from the tales of saints’ lives, and still others are told as though they had been witnessed first-hand (60-89). Mannyng makes ample use of all of these types of exempla in *Handlyng Synne*.

With his emphasis on the power of speech and his warnings about the hazards of an unguarded tongue, using what he refers to as tales not much different from what one may have heard in a tavern makes his text walk a fine line. He includes stories in order to

engage his audience. But is he engaging in the same type of gossip he warns them about?

Perhaps in an attempt to justify his inclusion of the tales he uses, Mannyng insists on their historical base. He mentions at the beginning of his poem that:

Talys shalt þou fynde þerynne, And chauncys þat haþ happed for synne; Meruelys, some as y fonde wrytyn, And oþer þat haue be seyn & wetyn; None ben þere-yn, more no lesse, But þat y founde wryte, or had wytnesse.	Thou will find tales here, And things that have happened because of sin; Marvels, some that I found written, And others that have been seen or known; But nothing else, no more or less, But what I found written or had witnessed.
(ln. 131-136)	

These tales, Mannyng claims, have either been taken from another source or have been witnessed. According to him, there is no reason to believe that any of the stories he tells are pure fancy. Elaine Lawless has written about this preoccupation on the part of many clergy who represented exempla as fact. Originally, exempla began as folk stories that traveling friars worked into their sermons as a way to keep their audience's interest. Often they would even take these tales from local folklore. As they traveled they built up a repertoire of tales, and eventually friars began to record these exempla and to share their collections with other friars (53-5).

Like the urban legends of today, part of the appeal of these sermon stories was that they were presented as though the teller had some knowledge of the event or had at least learned of the event from a trustworthy and reputable source. As exempla became more of

a staple in sermons, people became more fascinated with the tales about demons, saints, horrible sins and fantastic events – so much so that eventually the church discouraged the use of them altogether because they feared that the tales were no longer being used for a moral purpose, but rather functioned only as a source of entertainment (57-8). While *Handlyng Synne* was clearly written during a time when the church seemed to have no problem with the use of exempla, Mannyng's insistence that his sources are reliable, coupled with his use of dramatic techniques like dialogue, setting, fantastical events, and graphic imagery, certainly foreshadow the eventual concerns of the church.

It is against this backdrop that I begin my consideration of four of the exempla included in *Handlyng Synne*. I hope to acknowledge the historical, geographical, and socio-political space within which Mannyng wrote, but my main concern is with what his writing reveals to us about the process of constructing identity through language. Moreover, this analysis is meant to extend far beyond the pages of Mannyng's text.

I begin my text with a look at the instability of the linguistic sign and, consequently, of any ideological institution constructed through language. I will do this primarily by reading Mannyng's exemplum, "The Tale of the Bloody Child," through Georges Bataille's *Theory of Religion* and Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. I contend that semiotic instability serves

to open and complicate the doctrinal identity of Christ within this exemplum, and by so doing, complicates any human/deity relationship. In particular, I'll explore theories of consciousness put forth by Augustine of Hippo and Bataille; I'll use this discussion to move into a close reading of the text and finally end with a look at Derrida's concept of the trace. Derridian trace embodies the infinite potentiality of language, identity, and event. When read through the concept of the trace, Christ's messianic power exists because his identity is always a trace. He is infinite potentiality, but his always becoming negates his ability to be fully present.

In the next section, my focus shifts from linguistic and identity instability to contamination; more specifically, the always already there plurality inherent in language and identity. In this chapter I will rely heavily of the work of Julia Kristeva to explore the abjection of the contaminated priest and his dead daughter in "The Sacrilegious Carolers of Colbek." Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* is also important to my reading here.

Through Douglas's text, the exemplum can be read as a story about the importance and ultimate impossibility of purity.

After considering the instability and impurity of language and identity, I will switch focus in Chapter Three to address the typical response to contamination fears. Chapter Three

focuses on the exemplum “The Midwife who Christened a Child Wrongly” and will explore the ways in which the medieval Catholic Church attempted to control language, and thus identity, through ritual and naming. Interestingly, this tale is about a “failed” speech act and thus affords me the textual space to consider how and why a speech act can be unsuccessful. Ultimately, ritual speech and naming are ways of attempting to divide out what is abject, though they are doomed to fail because, as I discuss in Chapter Two, the search for complete purity can only lead to death.

The final exemplum I will look at is titled “St. Gregory’s Tale of the Nun Who Spoke Naughty Words.” In this tale, the linguistic sign spills over into the realm of the visual and takes us full circle back to the bloody infantile deity in “The Tale of the Bloody Child,” where division and anxiety are carved into human flesh. Like the bloody child, the nun in this exemplum suffers as a result of speech, though this time it is her own speech that enacts her torture and not the speech of another. I have chosen to close with this exemplum because it seems to me to encapsulate most of the overarching themes addressed in Chapters One through Three, as well as creating for us an explicit image of the anxieties entwined within medieval doctrinal identity construction.

“Al to-drawe were the þarmys”: a vision of linguistic dismemberment

Among Mannyng’s many graphically striking stories, few are as dramatically violent in their imagery as “The Tale of the Bloody Child.” While the title certainly hints at the tale’s content, it is altogether too unassuming and mild. “Bloody” doesn’t begin to describe the picture our narrator paints for us. He presents us with a baby that is actually torn, with its limbs hanging from its body; it is barely intact and yet still living. The torn body of an infant certainly does hold the reader’s attention, but what is happening just beneath the surface of this gory scene is perhaps even more striking. The violently active oaths exemplify precisely what the exempla purports to debunk – the instability of identity and the (de)constructive power of language.

In “The Tale of the Bloody Child,” a man has a habit of cursing. The narrator tells us that, “þys ryche man wlde nat lete/But þat he swore euer oþys grete” [This rich man did not speak but that he swore great oaths] (ln. 693-94). Because of his “oþys,” Mary appears to him while he is sick in bed. She brings with her a baby Jesus who is bloody: his limbs and entrails are hanging from him. Mannyng uses graphic imagery here to highlight the grotesque consequences of the man’s verbal transgression:

Al to-drawe were the þarmys;	The entrails were torn from him;
Of handys, of fete, the flesh of drawyn,	The flesh on his hands and feet was ripped away,
Mouthe, y3en, & nose, were alle to-knawyn,	His mouth, eyes, and nose were all disfigured,
Bakke & sides were al bloody	His back and sides were all bloody (ll 702-705) <sup>1</sup>

Mary tells the man that his words have caused the baby Christ's physical suffering. Not only that, but every time he curses, he does something akin to re-crucifying Christ. Mary tells him that,

þyn oþys done hym more greuesnesse	Thine oaths have done worse to him
þan alle the Iweys wykkednesse.	Than all of the Jews' wickedness.
Þey pyned hym onys, & passed a-way,	They pinned him once and passed away
But þou, pynest hym euery day.	But thou pin him every day. (ll 719-722)

Housed in the tale's vivid imagery is a paradox that haunted the medieval church. The church was an ideological construct established and perpetuated through discourse, but its power rested on its ability to maintain the appearance of transcendent authority (Kristeva, "The Bounded Text" 40). Pastoral and doctrinal attempts to reconcile the overtly performative nature of speech acts like confession and prayer with the need for the discourse to seem closed end up displaying rather than debunking the vulnerability of the discourse. A reading of this exemplum through the works of Georges Bataille and Jacques

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<sup>1</sup> Miriam Gill posits that a possible reason for this seemingly disproportionate punishment may be because swearing oaths seems like a trivial sin so, in an attempt to rid it of its perceived triviality, clerics created a genre in which its consequences are hyperbolically dramatized (152).

Derrida reveals that the man's oaths do more than dismember Christ; they point to the inherent instability of all systems of signification and the ideological constructs that rely on them.

The medieval church attempted to maintain linguistic and ideological integrity by displacing instability unto speech acts that are labeled deviant. It is not that a particular type of speech is actually more destructive than another, but that there must be a category within which the disruptive can be placed, and for the medieval church this category is sin and, in particular, transgressive speech (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 17). "The Tale of the Bloody Child" deals specifically with the medieval perception of swearing as a performative speech act. Mannyng attempts to scare his audience into forsaking this common practice. However, his attempt to prevent discursive deviance actually ends up exposing the precarious integrity of discursive identity.

Anxieties about discursive, spiritual, and even physical integrity are never far from the surface of "The Tale of the Bloody Child." One way we see these anxieties play out is through the genre choice Mannyng made when writing the tale.<sup>2</sup> This exemplum seems to belong to the Warning to Swearers tradition, a popular motif in Mannyng's day. In "From

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<sup>2</sup> This is one of the few tales that has no counterpart in the *Manuel des Pechiez*.



Urban Myth to Didactic Image: The Warning to Swearers,” Miriam Gill documents the development of the largely visual didactic motif of the Warning to Swearers. According to this tradition, principally relegated to medieval English murals, the link between verbal transgressions - particularly “swearing per membra” or swearing by parts of the body - and the supposed literal repercussions to those implicated in the utterances are represented in vivid and gruesome imagery (137-8).<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with other Warning stories of his time, Mannyng makes explicit the link between what an oath swearer says and the literal meaning of his words. For example, if a man or woman were to say, “I swear by the hand of Christ that this is the best bread pudding I’ve ever tasted,” s/he is, according to the Warning tradition, literally invoking the hand of Christ with his or her oath. In much the same way, the baby Christ’s bodily injuries are explained as resulting directly from oaths that the man has spoken. We can assume that he has sworn by Christ’s eyes, nose, arms, legs, even guts, because we see them torn from the baby.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the Warning to Swearers tradition draws upon a popular folk belief often espoused by English priests but not officially ordained by the Catholic Church.



c. 1470, Broughton, Milton Keynes, Bucks. Photo by T. Marshall,  
The Churches Conservation Trust, [www.paintedchurch.org](http://www.paintedchurch.org)

In *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings*, Sarah Beckwith explores the late medieval fascination with the corporeal body of Christ.<sup>4</sup> She states that “...Christ’s body was the arena where social identity was negotiated, where the relationship of self and society, subjectivity and social progress found a point of contact and conflict” (23). It was the space where one could begin to identify and understand the self in relation

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<sup>4</sup> The above church mural is one of the few surviving Warning to Swearers paintings. It may be based on an earlier painting or wood carving ([www.paintedchurch.org](http://www.paintedchurch.org))

to others, the church, and the Other. The medieval interest in the often-contested doctrine of transubstantiation and in the Passion also invited ecclesiastical and pastoral writers to read Christ's body as a space in which concerns about divine integrity could be placed (Beckwith 3; Bishop 39). Beckwith goes on to point out that the very idea of an incarnate deity implies integral violation (4). Giving physical form to a supreme being is to make a deity vulnerable. It should not be surprising then that we find deviant speech transposed onto the broken limbs of the deific infant. A Christ mutilated by deviant speech is a particularly appropriate symbol for fears about doctrinal and personal stability – especially when considered within a medieval philosophical context.

Medieval sign theory, based largely on Augustinian sign theory, embraced the performative nature of language. This is in part due to the contemporary belief that language had the potential to be an “external imitation of a transcendental reality” (Bedos-Rezak 1498). In the case of Judeo-Christianity, transcendental reality takes the shape of the Holy Trinity; thus language is the way that humanity can access the godhead because it has the potential to imitate the godhead. Important too is the doctrine of the divine Word, or the Word made flesh. The Judeo-Christian tradition has always conceptualized its deity as very intimately connected to language, or rather to reason, which is reflected in language (Craun 29). Christ is the incarnate Word; he is perfect reason. That is not to say that all language

represents or communicates God but rather that it has the potential to do this. Only “pure” language, which reflects pure reason, can fully connect humanity with God and this is why Christ is needed. He is “pure” so he can act as a conduit. Typical human language is never pure and so it may partially represent divinity, but the representation will always be flawed (Bedos-Rezak 1499).

Not only does language connect humanity to God, it connects us one to another. It is the means by which we give and receive our thoughts back and forth between each other.

Medieval sign theory presupposes an understanding of post-lapsarian humanity that posits consciousness as an isolated event<sup>5</sup> that can only be bridged through communication.

Augustine uses the imagery of water, saying that language allows us to pour our thoughts and minds into others and have thoughts and minds of others poured into us (Craun 30).

Georges Bataille reads the Judeo-Christian tradition differently, positing that humanity actually began in an intimate state and moved towards an individualist existence.

Nevertheless, close examination shows that both Augustine and Bataille agree that language is the primary mode of connectivity.

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<sup>5</sup> The post-lapsarian human naturally moves towards sin. To move towards sin is to move away from God, and thus from purity and ultimate connectivity.

In *Theory of Religion*, Bataille espouses a view of the development of human consciousness that centers on wo/man's ability to occupy two planes, or modes, of existence. Initially, all animals were not self-conscious; they did not distinguish between self/other. Bataille calls this the intimate order and, like Augustine, uses the concept of "water in water" to talk about a type of continual and collective existence. But according to his post-Darwinian position, this is our initial state and it is not dependent on a Supreme Being - though he does recognize that humanity's longing for a return to this "water in water" state is why wo/man has created Supreme Beings (19-25). Bataille posits that we began to move away from this indistinguishable existence to human self-consciousness at the moment when wo/men began to use tools - to use objects in order to accomplish goals that depend on duration or that exist within a framework of time (27). This revelation created for wo/men a world of distinct things and times - objects and subjects, self and other, now and later - but this new human world of separation did not entirely eclipse the former world of oblivion. Wo/men began to occupy both worlds. S/he is both separate from, and a part of, everything (27-28).

For Bataille, this dual existence necessitated a world-view that could explain and contain both the experience of a self isolated and divided and of a self that exists within a type of material and temporal ebb and flow (52). He posits that language is the tool that can at

least partially bridge the gap between these two modes of existence and thus we populate our world of division with symbolic bridges that, while imperfect, do to some extent contract the gap manifested at the birth of individuality (31-33).

Part and parcel with wo/man's ability to signify thoughts and emotions is the human tendency to reflect personal subjectivity onto others, even objects. This tendency, coupled with the memory of the intimate order, is the occasion for the birth of Supreme Being(s). Wo/man's need to signify experience has led to a personification of oblivion. According to Bataille, all religions are rooted in this basic human experience (33). Oblivion, or the intimate state, is the only true type of purity because it is unmixed with any forms or any conscious subjectivities. As we will see in later chapters, the medieval church was obsessed with purity; Bataille would read this as a quest to return to the oblivion of the intimate order.

Whether human consciousness tends towards the universal, as Bataille suggests, or towards isolation, like medieval thinkers contend it does, language clearly plays an important role in its development, and this is why medieval thought gives to speech the power to physically

manifest its consequences.<sup>6</sup> Louise Bishop explores the material nature of speech in *Words, Stones, Herbs: The Healing Word in Medieval and Early Modern England*. As the title suggests, her principal concern is language's ability to enact positive physical change, but she also acknowledges that linguistic materiality is a two-way street. Bishop refers to Jacques Derrida's essay on Plato's *Pharmakon* to discuss language as both medicine and poison (12). In Augustinian sign theory, this dual nature of the sign is named *vox* (Craun 39). In other words, speech can heal but it also can harm – as is the case in our tale. The swearing man, whether intentionally or not, accesses language's poisonous potential.

According to our narrator, Christ's body is mutilated by false oaths sworn in his name. His integrity is both literally and figuratively attacked because of the man's verbal indiscretions. Two things begin to emerge when one considers the power of the man's speech. First, the literal dismembering his words enact reflects his speech's concurrent attack on Christ's spiritual integrity. Second, the fact that the man's oaths have the ability to deconstruct Christ physically and figuratively highlights the constructedness of Christ's deific identity.

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<sup>6</sup> Representations of speech's ability to enact physical consequences are not simply relegated to the Warning tradition. While I do not have the space to do so here, an interesting study could be made of speech scrolls in Gothic art as a representation of linguistic materiality.

The narrator tells us that the man's speech enacts violence upon Christ's body because it is potentially deceptive. He has sworn false oaths. In essence, the man has aligned salvific identity with something that he knows to be untrue – he has even used Christ's supposed purity and truthfulness to validate what is invalid. In so doing, the man threatens deific integrity. He corrupts the tool meant to reflect God. Edwin Craun puts it thus: "To lie is to violate the communion of minds which speech makes possible" (43). A lie intentionally manipulates reason and is thus an affront to pure reason, which is God. The man equates Christ's physical integrity with a lie and thus makes Christ's physical integrity a lie. This is the real threat inherent in swearing false oaths – they insinuate the artificiality of the character by which they are sworn.

"The Tale of the Bloody Child" follows closely behind a section of Mannyng's text dedicated to supplying his audience with a very precise identity for Christ. Mannyng begins this section, which is dedicated to the second commandment, with an explication of the nature of Christ that is very like that given in the first canon of the Fourth Lateran Council. Mannyng first explains to his audience that a lie is anything they say when they know it is untrue. He then goes on to use the doctrine of the nature of the Trinity and its members as an example. He dedicates lines 647-662 to constructing this doctrinal identity for the Trinity, with particular interest in the identity of Christ - specifically that he is



eternal, that he is an equal member of the Trinity, and that he came down to earth as “þe manhede þat toke flesshe & bone” (ll 661). As is clear through the narrator’s insistence on the particulars of Christ’s identity, integrity is important here, so much so that within the tale, Mannyng has Mary reiterate the doctrinal characteristic of Christ.

In essence, what is happening here is that the man has just as much verbal power as Mary and the narrator do to construct or deconstruct the narrative existence of Christ. The man’s oaths deconstruct the church’s monopoly over religious performative speech. In order to explain what I mean by this, I turn to Mary’s verbal formation of Christ’s poly-subjectivity.<sup>7</sup> Her monologue is in response to the man’s question/accusation about why the child is crying. At this point, the man has not yet realized his situation or “identified” his visitors. Mary begins:

Þou,..hast hym so shent, And with þy oþys al to-rent. Þus hast þou drawn my dere chylde, With þy oþys wykked and wylde; And þou makest me sore to grete, Þat þou þyn oþys wylt nat lete. Hys manhede, þat he toke for þe, Þou pynyst hyt, as þou mayst se; Þyn oþys done hym more greuesnesse	Thou has torn him so With thy oaths. Thus have thou dismembered my dear child, with thy wicked and wild oaths; thou make me very sad, Because thou will not stop swearing oaths. His humanity, that he took on for thee, but thou assault it, as thou may see; Thy oaths have done him more harm
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<sup>7</sup> While discussing verbal – or textual – identity construction, I am intentionally sidestepping the question of whether thought can exist outside of language. For my purposes, thought – as it relates to identity construction or any other experience – exists inasmuch as it is present through language. This is not because I am convinced that thought can never occur outside of language, but rather because it does not serve my interests here to deal with anything outside of a linguistic existence.

Þan alle þe Iewys wykkednesse.  
 Þey pyned hym onys, & passed a-way,  
 But, þou, pynest hym euery day.  
 Þe pyne, he suffred for þy gode,  
 And þou vpbreydst hym of þe rode;  
 Alle hys flessch, þan þou teryst,  
 Whan þou falsly by hym swerest;  
 And y am euer so [in] mynde  
 For to pray for al mankynde.  
 How shulde y lengyr prey for þe,  
 So rulyche makyst þou hym to be,  
 And ouþer many mo þan þou;  
 How shulde y þan be meke to 3ow?

(ll 711-732)

Than all of the Jews' wickedness,  
 They pinned<sup>8</sup> him once and passed away  
 But thou pin him every day.  
 The pain, he suffers for thy good,  
 and thou nail him to the cross;  
 then thou tear all of his flesh  
 when thou swear falsely by him;  
 and I am always thinking  
 To pray for all of mankind,  
 but how should I pray for thee,  
 when thou cause him to suffer,  
 and many more besides thou do this as well;  
 How should I be compassionate to all of you?

Notice that Mary does not endorse one coherent identity here but rather insists on characteristics that often seem to be at odds with each other. For instance, in lines 720-721, Mary refers to a sacrificial Christ, one that has already undergone the crucifixion. Starting in line 722, however, Mary accuses the man of continually crucifying Christ and, by implication, identifies Christ as in the midst of the sacrificial act. Both of these identities complicate the description at the beginning of the exemplum of Christ as an infant – an identity that is also endorsed by Mary. Finally, in line 717, Mary implies Christ's deific identity when she tells the man that he took on flesh in order to die for his salvation.

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<sup>8</sup> Can mean “to nail” or “to cause pain” and likely means both. It is worth mentioning that Mannyng uses this fortuitously ambiguous term several times in the space of only a few lines. Pain, especially the grotesque pain associated with crucifixion, is very important in this passage.

As is reflected in the mutilated state of his body, Christ's identity within "The Tale of the Bloody Child" becomes something like a subjective collage as the identities Mary and the narrator iterate for him come together and, at points, contradict each other. What we are left with is far from a coherent individual subjectivity. Rather, we see constructed before us a crying and bloody child who is all powerful, has been crucified and killed as a sacrifice, is living, has the ability to forgive sin and hear prayer, is unable to communicate except through sobs, does not react to the prayer of the man, is held by his mother, and is quite literally not able to hold his body together.

The Christ child's identity is pulled in so many directions that he becomes something larger than can be contained within the narrative, and yet at the same time, he exists as what Jacques Derrida calls a messianic hope. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida talks extensively about messianic hope – the event or idea that is always to come (81). For him, everything begins by waiting (4). Everything exists because some day it can exist; and it can exist because it was preceded by its own potential. Messianic hope is the hope that exists only because it always anticipates what is to come. It cannot exist except as anticipation. If the hope is ever fulfilled, it would cease to exist. Hope is because what is hoped for is absent.

In the exemplum, Christ's messianic potential relies on the multiplicity of his narrated identity. He is the infant who will be the sacrifice. He is the sacrifice that will make salvation possible. For the man in the tale, he is the visual representation of his sins that will make confession possible. In all of these ways, Christ's power relies not on what he is in the present but what he will be or will facilitate. In other words, his power lies in the inherent lack of ontological closure that allows him to be becoming eternally.

But this is only part of what is happening here. Christ's narrated subjectivity may anticipate, but it also reiterates. It relies on an idea that precedes it. If the blasphemous man in our exemplum had no knowledge of Christ, the visitation would have had quite a different effect on him. Likewise, if Mannyng's audience had no context within which to understand the figure of Christ in the tale, his narration would have been lost on them.

Christ's narrated identity relies on identities that must precede him. In other words, he is always already but never in the here-now. This is what Derrida would refer to as the spectral dimension of Christ's identity because it can only be by coming back (11).

Central to both messianic hope and to the specter is the idea of presence, or rather the impossibility of a present. Derrida explains it thus:

The present is what passes, the present comes to pass...it lingers in this transitory passage...in the coming-and-going, between what goes and what comes, in the middle of what leaves and what arrives, at the articulation between what absents itself and what presents itself. This in-between articulates conjointly the double articulation...according to what the two movements are adjoined...Presence...is enjoined... ordered, distributed in the two directions of absence, at the articulation of what is no longer and what is not yet. (*Specters* 29-30)

Presence operates as something like an ideal that can never really be attained. It is itself spectral in nature. This is exactly why, to Derrida, there can never be a true beginning, or an original but instead there are only traces – only whispers of have-beens and to-comes. Everything already was and is already about to be. He says that there is, “No difference without alterity, no alterity without singularity, no singularity without here-now” (*Specters* 31). In other words, an original (a singular) can only exist in the present, and since the present is never really present – or never present long enough to be – then there is no present-space for an original.

Conceptualizing the present in this way leads to “a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic...” (*Specters* 78). There is nothing that is not already

spread out between the coming and the going, even if it is only because there is the potential for it to be. There is nothing that is not already a trace of a former and future existence. This idea of the trace is very important in Derridian philosophy because it allows us to conceptualize outside of an ideological framework that posits a beginning – and in turn it lets us explore the infinite possibilities embodied in any signification that means (can mean) only as much as it has the potential always already to mean.

In essence, it is the messianic hope that the character of Christ embodies that negates his ability to be present fully. He is always a “to-come” and a “has-been”, but the stability of a here-now is denied. Without the here-now – the certainty and immediacy of it – there is no stability, no original, no ontological closure. Christ cannot be the only Christ.

In this tale it is not only Christ’s integrity that is brought into question, but the integrity of the entire ideological system – which relies on linguistic construction – and even signification itself. But, as I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the medieval church depended on an ideology that posited it as an entity eternal, existing beyond temporality or any system of signification. In essence, when the Judeo-Christian tradition became (and therefore always already was) signify-able, its integrity – its ability to exist

beyond Bataille's intimate order – opened up to potential contamination. This is what I will look at in the next chapter.

And noþer body, ne arme,/ Bledde neuer blodë, colde ne warme”: speaking death

The “Sacriligious Carollers of Colbek” is a complex tale that attempts to deal with issues of purity and integrity on a number of levels. But, as we will discover, purity is a state that is attainable only in death, and so we are left to face the always already contaminated spaces of identity and language. In other words, we are left with our own abjection.

The exemplum opens as twelve unruly carolers stumble into a churchyard on Christmas night, disrupting mass. The narrator makes a point of describing them as crazy and riotous. They are most likely drunk and they have come to town in search of the priest’s daughter. Priest Robert, the presiding cleric of the church, comes outside to ask the group to cease their songs and come inside to listen to mass. Not surprisingly, the carolers ignore his requests and instead two of them, Merswynde and Wybessyne, go in search of Ave, Robert’s daughter. Interestingly, the narrator never mentions why the group comes for



Ave or if Ave willingly joins the festivities.<sup>9</sup> We do know that Merswynde and Wybessyne are successful in their mission and shortly Ave becomes the thirteenth member of the group.<sup>10</sup> Soon the carolers are gathered around the church and begin to sing a ballad. Curiously, they apparently sing it in Latin, though it is certainly not a religious song.

Priest Robert, unable to ignore the ever-increasing mayhem outside his church, delivers a short speech to the carolers:

On Goddes behalue, y 3ow forbade	On God's behalf, I now forbid
þat 3e no lenger do swych dede;	That you do this deed any longer
But comeþ yn, on feyre manere,	But come in, in a fair manner
Goddës seruysë for to here,	In order to hear God's service,
And doþ at Crystyn mennys lawe;	And abide by Christian law
Karolleþ no more for Crystys awe,	Carol no more for Christ's sake
Wurschyppeþ hym with alle 3oure myzt,	Worship him with all your might
þat of þe vyrgyne was bore þys nyzt	That of the virgin was born this night (ll 9065-9072)

Again, his words go unheeded and in exasperation he prays to God and to St. Magne, the patron saint of the church at Colbek, to punish the disruptive group. The narrator tells us that:

þe prest þarefore was sore a-greued,	The priest was very upset
He preyd God þat he on beleued,	He prayed to God in whom he believed
And for seynt Magne, þat he wuld so werche,	And to St. Magnus, that he would help,

<sup>9</sup> We are told that it was the men of the group who wanted her, and since permeability is one of the underlying themes within the story, their designs were most likely sexual.

<sup>10</sup> A potential subtext here draws on the idea of the coven, or convent, a religious group made of thirteen members - twelve followers and one leader. The coven is closely tied to Christ's twelve apostles and initially would have been a term likely to be applied to a group of nuns or clerics, though its later connection with witchcraft may not be altogether irrelevant here either (MED, OED).

Yn whos wurschyp, sette was þe cherche,	After whose name the church was established,
þat swych a veniaunce were on hem sent	That such a vengeance was sent of them
Are þey oute of þat stedé were went,	Before they went out of that place
þat þey myzt euer, ryzt so wende	They might always do just this [what they are doing]
Vnto þat tymë tweluemonth ende.	Until the year was up. (ll 9075-9082)

As soon as the priest prays this, “euery hande yn ouþer so fast was loke,/ þat no man myzt with no wundyr/ þat tweluemonþe parte hem asundyr” [every hand in another was locked so that no one could pull them apart no matter what they tried until the year was up] (ll 9088-9090). They will sing and dance for twelve months, never resting, eating, or drinking.

When the priest sees that his hasty prayer has doomed his daughter along with the rest of the carolers, he sends his son to break her free from the circle of dancers upon which the priest’s “veniaunce leyde” (l 9096). The boy pulls and pulls at his sister, but she will not stop singing and dancing. Finally, he pulls so hard that he actually manages to rip her arm from her, but even as he has “þe arme in hande,/ þe body zede furþ karoland;/ And noþer body, ne þe arme,/ Bledde neuer blodë, colde ne warme” [the arm in his hand/ her body continued to sing and dance;/ and neither her body, nor her arm/ Ever bled blood cold or warm] (ll 9103-9106). Robert attempts three times to bury his beloved daughter’s arm, but to no avail and so he decides to have it enshrined within the church for all to see. Ave continues to dance and sing without her arm though the fact that she does not bleed leaves

one wondering if she is still alive or if she is somehow able to sing and dance even beyond death.

Eventually the year is up and the carolers fall into a deep sleep for three days. After the three days, the group revives and parts ways only to sing, dance, and wander separately for the rest of their lives. Ave, however, never awakens. The narrator tells us that she is dead.

The life and death of Ave are juxtaposed to that of her father, Robert. As we will see, his sexuality opens up his body and his identity and ultimately destroys his integrity as a priest. Conversely, Ave comes to signify purity as she occupies the only state in which purity is possible – death. Robert through his speech acts, and Ave through her death, introduce abjection into the tale and into our discussion of language.

Julia Kristeva applies the term *abjection* to anything that “disturbs identity, system, order...” (*Powers* 4). Abjection is an apt descriptor for the mixing of possibilities embodied in both language and identity. This mixing makes purity and integrity, two semiotic ideals linked closely in the medieval mind with Godliness, impossible to achieve in any other state but

complete oblivion – or death.<sup>11</sup> But first I would like to start by looking at how abjection works within several speech acts in the text.

Much of what happens in this story centers on the disruptive voices of the carolers. Their singing disrupts mass and occasions the curse, but it also disrupts linear and communal time in that it holds a particular festive moment for an entire year. Through their repetitious refrain, the carolers (re)create or (re)call the moment they locked hands and began to sing. The narrator tells us that they continually sing one phrase:

“Why stondë we? Why go we noght?” (l 9156)

This is a powerful staging of the ritualistic side of language, something I will revisit in greater detail in Chapter Three. For now, it is enough to say that the carol’s iterability highlights its rituality by suspending it in both time and place. The verse is a trace, the echo of an echo of an echo, *ad infinitum*. Though the song does not actually go on *ad infinitum*,<sup>12</sup> it does repeat incessantly, and each repetition always holds the possibility of another repetition that will always hold the possibility of another repetition. True enough, each verse also holds the possibility of rupture. Each repetition could be the last repetition

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<sup>11</sup> This is similar to Bataille’s pre-differentiated world of pure (un)consciousness – or “water in water.”

<sup>12</sup> By virtue of the fact that each verse holds the possibility of another verse, one could actually argue that it is impossible to prove that the carol does not go on infinitely. Perhaps we are just experiencing a thousand year gap between verses!

– but even this possibility repeats and holds the possibility of its own rupture – or the rupture of a rupture. It is precisely this iterability and the possibilities inherent within it that makes of the speech act a contaminated space. It is contaminated because it contains within itself the potential for contamination, a potential that ruptures purity.

Kristeva discusses this mixing present in iteration when she considers the unspeakable name of the Judeo-Christian God. It cannot be uttered because the repetition inherent in language, or as she puts it, the “always already prior” would destroy its purity (*Powers* 104). Therefore, a signifier that can afford to be a mixture must take its place in communication. She states that:

Henceforth, confronting the “future perfect” of a discourse that is One and transmitted, impurity moves away from the material register and is formulated as profanation of the divine name. At this point in the trajectory, where the separating agency asserts its own pure abstract value (“holy of holies”), the impure will no longer be merely the admixture, the flow, the noncompliant, converging on that “improper and unclean” place, which is the maternal living being. Defilement will now be that which impinges on symbolic oneness, that is, sham, substitutions, doubles, idols. (*Powers* 104)

Purity cannot withstand the iterability of signification, but, to the medieval church, purity – in speech, in actions, in body, in space – is very important because purity is Godly. It is more than just pleasing or “right”; it is God-like. It is through purity that God can be reached. Take, for instance, Augustine’s contention that what makes lying sinful is not so much that it misleads or enacts harm, but rather that it interrupts (corrupts) truth, which is a sign of God (Craun 43). What is at issue in the case of lying is the integrity of the sign. Iterability, however, makes purity impossible – or, rather, only as possible as all of the other possibilities with which it must co-exist. And yet this need for purity haunts “The Sacrilegious Carolers,” and it is Priest Robert’s prayer/curse that brings this to the fore.

Priest Robert becomes a suspect character for several reasons, not the least of which are the tragic consequences of his prayer/curse. After his son has tried to retrieve Ave and accidentally pulls off her arm in the process, he brings the arm to their father and this short speech follows:

“loke, fadyr,” he seyde, “and haue hyt here,	“Look, father,” he said, “see that I have here
þe armë of þy doghtyr dere	the arm of thy dear daughter
þat was myn ownë syster Aue,	who was my sister Aue,
þat y wende y myȝt a saue.	That I thought I might save.
þy cursing, now sene hyt ys	Thy cursing, now is descended
With veniaunce on þyn ownë flesh;	with vengeance on thine own flesh
Fellyche þou cursedest, and ouer sone;	Angrily thou cursed, and too quickly
þou askedest veniaunce, þou hast þy bone.”	Thou asked vengeance, now thine prayer is answered.”
(ll. 9111-9118)	

Priest Robert's son is the first character to acknowledge the sinister side of his father's speech act when he declares in line 9115 that it was a curse. Interestingly, however, by line 9118, the son refers to the same speech act as a prayer, telling his father that he has the vengeance he prayed for.

Judging from Robert's reaction to his daughter's inclusion in the cursed circle – he immediately sent his son to pull her out of the circle – it is safe to say that he did not intend for her to fall victim to his curse. Whether he actually meant for the other carolers to sing and dance for an entire year or if he simply uttered the prayer/curse in a moment of unthinking frustration is less clear. Either way, it is obvious that he was not completely in control of what his speech enacts. Regardless of his intention, his performative utterances have consequences – and dire ones, so much so that by the end of the tale it is unclear whether Priest Robert is in fact our hero or whether the carolers emerge as the protagonists of the exemplum.

In a tale meant to exemplify the dangers of sacrilegious behavior, the carolers are positioned in a very sympathetic role by the close of the story, which leads one to the question – who exactly is being charged with sacrilege here? Certainly the carolers are guilty of inappropriate behavior – one need look no further than the title of the tale to deduce that.

But is there another type of sacrilege at work here? To answer that, it is important to consider the textual placement of the tale. It belongs to a section of *Handlyng Synne* dedicated to the topic of the sin of sacrilege. This is certainly no surprise, but what is intriguing is the way it works in relation to the short story that comes immediately before it.

The exemplum directly preceding “The Sacrilegious Carollers of Colbek” is titled “The Tale of the Sacrilegious Husband and Wife who stuck together.” As one might expect, this short tale is about a husband and wife who have sex in the church:

And God was nat payd, and wlde hyt noȝt,	And God was not served, and willed it not,
So ny þe cherche, swyche dede were wroȝt;	That this deed was done so near the church;
þey myghte no more e broughte a-sondre	They might no more be pulled apart
þan dog and bych þat men on wonder.	Than a male and female dog on which men wonder.

(ll 8949-8952)

The moral is clear: the actual physical space of the church is sacred and it is a sin to “defile” it with what are considered unclean acts. To the medieval church, sex is always an unclean, even contaminating act, as is evident not only from the punishment meted out to the husband and wife, but through the many laws dictating how and when sex is acceptable. Moreover, in medieval literature, concerns about purity and integrity often present themselves through anxieties about virginity; and this is certainly the case with both the above story and “The Sacrilegious Carolers.”



Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, notes that anxieties about pollution and contamination often center on sex, perhaps because it is a site of much social attention and pressure (194). To her, the early church's obsession with virginity makes a great deal of sense: "The idea that virginity had a special positive value was bound to fall on good soil in a small persecuted minority group... these social conditions lend themselves to beliefs which symbolize the body as an imperfect container which will only be perfect if it can be made impermeable..." (195).

Kathleen Hobbs posits that by postulating Mary as a perpetual virgin, the church was able to "exalt itself as a fixed and timeless institution, thereby allowing it to declare itself the well-spring of absolute truth" (184). In essence, through Mary's virginity, the church was able to distance itself from the ebb and flow of human history and establish itself as an entity entirely separate from historical and social context – at least rhetorically. Hobbs goes on to say that, "For Christianity to acknowledge its place within the continuum of history would imply the destruction of its status as an absolute" – and all of this depended on Mary's uncontaminated body (184).

Envisioning Mary as a closed physical space helps to explain the importance the medieval church placed on clerical celibacy. Celibacy among the clergy was among the issues addressed during the IV Lateran Council. In fact, celibacy of clergy was one of a number of mandates that were reiterated from past councils because the church was having trouble enforcing them. Thus, Mannyng's audience would immediately recognize that something was amiss with this priest if he had a daughter. Later, his son makes an appearance as well. By virtue of the fact that the priest had both a daughter and a son, his spiritual authority is called into question.

Priest Robert, a clergyman who was unable to abstain from sexual intercourse and as a result has fathered two children is a rather blatant example of a permeable personality both because of sex and because of the way he chooses to employ language. The carolers echo Robert's impurity when they are penetrated by his curse and made to dance and sing against their will. Ave, however, is the most apt example of permeability within this story. It is through her that I will contemplate the possibilities of a body that quite literally cannot hold itself together. She becomes so permeable and so mixed that her corporeal body is no longer a viable one.

While the earliest versions of “The Sacrilegious Carolers” seem to make no mention of the priest’s children, the connection between unchaste priests and the dancing sickness is well documented. Often, the dances were interpreted as being brought on by demon possession and just as often, the people in affected towns cited their priest’s inability to correctly baptize as the root of the possessions. Recorded hostilities concerning the issue of clerical celibacy point to the notion that it was a part of clerical life that many struggled with. When they failed to remain celibate and took a partner, the concern was that since they could no longer be seen as pure and holy, they may no longer be able to perform crucial sacraments like baptism (Hecker 8-9). In effect, priestly sexuality opened parishioners up to demonic forces. Now, this was not the official stance of the medieval church. But this folk belief illumines for us a potential subtext for our enigmatic exemplum that might explain why it is that the priest has no control over his speech act, as well as clarify who is in fact being punished for the sin of sacrilege.

In a narrative space so concerned with guarding purity, there is the deeply unsettling notion that complete purity is only possible in death.<sup>13</sup> Mary Douglas puts it this way: “It is part of our condition that the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be

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<sup>13</sup>I argue that here can be no purity without death, not that there can be no death without purity, a distinction that will be important in chapter four.

hard and dead as a stone when we get it...Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise" (199). Purity is only attainable in death because it requires stasis - lack of change, lack of mixture, lack of malleability. It is impossible to obtain purity in anything that is living or active, as is evidently the case with the priest in this tale. Priest Robert fails his clerical duties because he is not a static being, but rather fully engages in the processes of life. He has sex. He has children. He is not a closed vessel; his transient nature belies the impossible ontological closure upon which his authority is based.

In the same way that Christ's torn body made it impossible to ignore his (de)constructedness, Priest Robert's sexuality obviates his potential for symbolic integrity. To the medieval mind, sex is contaminating because it transgresses bodily boundaries. Eating and drinking also transgress these boundaries and, because of this, become sites of identity complication. Interestingly, our narrator tells us several times that during their year of continual singing and dancing, the carolers do not eat or drink; they do not even release excrement. They become whole bodies, unthreatened by the continual adding and subtracting that is symptomatic of the human condition.

To revisit the case of the Virgin Mary, her purity relies on an entirely closed body with uninterrupted integrity. This becomes problematic because Mary is not only a virgin but

also a mother. She gives birth, an act that Kristeva positions as one of the most elemental moments of abjection because it requires that one body literally be divided from another (*Powers* 47, 54-5). Part and parcel with this division is the excretion and mixing of blood and other bodily fluids, the tell-tale signs of inner splitting and threat to coherent identity (*Powers* 53, 71). In order for Mary to remain pure she must go through childbirth without experiencing a threat to her personal and, by extension, her physical integrity. Kathleen Hobbs asserts that this is the reason for the otherwise perplexing doctrinal assertion that Mary did not bleed or experience pain during child birth.<sup>14</sup> She states that, "...Mary is blessed with romanticized, less physical motherhood, exclusive of the post-Lapsarian process of actual birth" (184). This is how she is able to avoid contaminating abjection even in child birth. As such, Mary exists in a state of purity and thus is able to become a ritualistic space, separated from historical and cultural context, but at the price of her humanity. Kristeva thus posits, "The body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic" (102). Mary's perpetual virginity relies entirely on her impossibly closed body. Her body becomes so entirely symbolic that it ceases to operate as an individuated thing. She crosses over into the intimate order; as

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<sup>14</sup> This is part of the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, established at the Second Council of Constantinople in 381 (Hobbs 181).

Bataille warned, complete purity cannot exist except at the point where individuation is precluded (57).

Ave's death echoes Mary's miraculous childbirth in its exclusion of blood, though to argue that her physical integrity escapes intact may be problematic since her arm is severed. She does, however, challenge the physical and societal norms of death and by so doing is marked as an Other. Not only does she not bleed when her brother pulls her arm from her, but she continues to sing and dance for an entire year after this incident. She is animated even beyond death. In essence, her death disrupts the normative because it fails to disrupt her inclusion in the ritual space of the iterative caroling circle. She becomes the space where contamination fears are placed.

Ave's animated death allows her to be the communal receptacle for the Other that is always already here/now. In this way, she works much like sin or deviant speech. She is marked as different in order to maintain the appearance of a stable normative against which she is juxtaposed. She facilitates what Kristeva calls primal repression, which is "the ability of the speaking being, always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat" (*Powers* 12).

Ave, because she embodies the abject, must be continually divided out from the community

as its struggles towards the purity it will never attain. But the impossibility of this purity is exactly why the separating must be continual.

Kristeva points out that what is at stake here is much more than contamination fear. It is the fear of death itself that we must continually stave off. Language, the continual metaphor, seeks to contain death, to keep the self from sinking into oblivion (*Powers* 8-11, 64; “The Bounded Text” 53). Consequently, Ave is necessary. She provides for Mannyng and his audience a space in which to place not only the contamination and death within “The Sacrilegious Carolers of Colbek,” but the contamination and death that is, according to Kristeva, a part of every mortal life.<sup>15</sup> She holds for us “the impossible possibility of ...death” latent in every consciousness, in every signification (*Specters* 143). She is the Other that is not Other at all.

Kristeva suggests that the internalized other and continual othering is enacted through signification (*Powers* 113). In the story, this is accomplished by the continual presence of Ave’s arm. After her brother tears the arm from her in an attempt to save her from the cursed circle, he takes the arm to their father who attempts to bury the arm three times.

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<sup>15</sup> See for example, Kristeva’s discussion on fecal matter – *Powers of Horror*, p. 108. See also her section on continual self-division through language and especially through the classifications of sin and the concurrent act of confession, p. 112-131.

Each morning, the arm is found lying above its unsuccessful grave. Finally the congregation determines to make a shrine for the arm and this is where it stays, enshrined in the church for all to see (ll 9122-9136). It acts as a continual signifier for the Othering of Ave.

In the next exemplum, we will see that naming can work in much the same way as Ave's arm. We will also see that signification must always occupy the space that is in between – it is, as Derrida says, “the play of difference” (“Semiology and Grammatology” 246). This in-between-ing, this enacting of a necessary and continual mid, is the subject of the next chapter.



Mydwylfe ys a perylus þyng – ritualistic speech and naming

In Chapters One and Two, I focused on issues of fluidity and contamination. In this chapter, I intend to explore how social institutions like the medieval church attempt to control identity through ritualistic separations – both linguistic and spatial. “The Tale of the Midwife Who Christened the Child Wrongly” affords us the perfect textual space in which to explore this for two reasons. First, it deals with naming and social marking. The tale is involved in teaching its audience about the importance of performing rituals “correctly,” but it also deals with a “failed” performative utterance and thus affords us the opportunity to explore several different aspects of the ritual process. The second reason I’ve chosen this exemplum as the textual space within which to tease out ritualistic utterances is because it provides us with a helpful symbolic visual in the act of baptism. I am referring to the imagery of submersion and emergence associated with death and birth, but also with contamination and purification. I will argue that ritualistic speech acts, and naming as a subset of this group, work in a similar way to the submerging and emerging imagery utilized in baptism.

“The Tale of the Midwife Who Christened the Child Wrongly” is one of the shorter exempla in Mannyng’s collection; it is only about 30 lines long and has very little detail. A child is born and it is evident to the attending midwife that the child will soon die. She cries over the infant and then attempts to christen the newborn, praying, “God and seynt Ione/ Crysten þe chylde, boþe flesshe and bone” [God and St. John/ Christen this child, both flesh and bone] (ll. 9627-9628). When the child dies, the priest is called. He arrives and interrogates the midwife, asking to whom she prayed for the child’s salvation. The midwife recounts her prayer to God and St. John, much to the displeasure of the priest. He becomes enraged, telling her that she was born “yn euyl tyme” because she has caused a soul to be lost (ll. 9645-46). She should have prayed to the Holy Trinity and not to St. John, a mistake that cost the infant its membership in the community and, consequently, its salvation.

Because the baptismal ritual was unsuccessful, the child cannot be buried in the sacred space of the Church graveyard, marking it as unsaved, unclean, and as an outsider.

Furthermore, the midwife herself is prohibited from coming near the place where children are born, depriving her of her profession, a significant part of her identity, and her place in the community. Both of these characters are separated from their community via ritualistic speech in an attempt to stabilize communal identity.

Not surprisingly, this exemplum is found in the section of *Handlyng Synne* dedicated to the sacrament of baptism. Mannyng begins his discussion of baptism, or christening<sup>16</sup>, by explaining that Adam's original sin is so great that no man or woman can be cleansed of it but through baptism (ll. 9505-9510). After he sets up the reason for baptism, he begins his tale in which the sacrament of baptism is used as a way to distinguish between members of the community and outcasts. In essence, ritual behavior continually separates out those considered impure or contaminating from the community. As we will see, these separations have both positive and negative effects for individual and communal identity.

Mannyng concludes this exemplum with a section that echoes his introduction to the tale. Midwives need to know how to correctly baptize a child. He drives the point home with a discussion about the position of the midwife. He states that a "Mydwufe ys a perylus þyng" if she does not know how to correctly baptize (ll. 9653-4).

As may be evident to my reader, Mannyng's foreboding inference here is a loaded one.

Midwives, when they perform their job incorrectly, are indeed perceived as perilous, but

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<sup>16</sup> Traditionally, an older child or adult undergoes baptism, while christening is performed on an infant. Mannyng seems to conflate the two and so for the sake of this discussion I do as well.

what about outside of exceptional circumstances like the one we are presented with? Is it possible that the peril in our tale results from more than a midwife's bad memory for ritual phrases?

Mary Douglas discusses the place of ritual in society. To her, pollution behaviors and the ritual spaces within which they are often enacted are not about hygiene, superstition, or even remnants of functional practices of the past. Rather, ritualistic practices attempt to control what is abject in society. Ritual creates a safe place to separate out what has the potential to disrupt social order (45). Rituals create identity for society by marking off boundaries – spatial, relational, and temporal. The exacting nature of ritual practice testifies to its utilitarian social purpose. Take, for example, Mannyng's detailed instructions about how midwives should perform a baptism in the case of a dying infant:

3yf þou se a chylde yn swyche perel  
 Þat none may saue hyt with no wylle,  
 Sey þan þus, 3yf þou haue haste,  
 “y crysten þe yn þe name of þe fadyr &  
     sone & holy gust,”  
 and 3yue, what þou wylt, hyt a name,  
 and kast on water; þan ys hyt frame;  
 and 3yf þou 3yue hyt name none,  
 Noþer Robert, Wyllyam, no Ione,  
 Loke þat þese wurdës be weyl seyde,  
 And water þer-on algate leyde;  
 And þat þyr be none ouþer waste,  
 But yn þe fadyr and sone, and holy gaste;  
 Þese wurdës for3ete þou nught,  
 Ne watyr, what as euer elles be wro3t.

If thou see a child in danger  
 and no one is there who can save it, no matte what,  
 Then saw thus, if thou need to be fast,  
 “I christen you in the name of the father &  
     son & holy ghost,”  
 and name the child whatever thou will,  
 and cast water on the child for his/her benefit;  
 and if thou do not name the child,  
 not Robert, William, or John,  
 make sure that these words are said  
 and pour water on the child;  
 and do not add [say] anything  
 but in the father and son, and holy ghost;  
 do not forget these words  
 nor the water, whatever else be done. (ll 9599-9612)

It is of the utmost importance that the baptism ritual be performed correctly, not straying in any detail – neither adding nor subtracting any part of the formula. Interestingly, Mannyng does allow leeway at the part of the ceremony where the child should be named. It is okay to name the child or to leave the child unnamed. I propose that this flexibility reflects the fact that it is through the baptismal process that the child is marked as a member of the society and therefore, since the child is on the brink of death, there is no other identity marker needed.

The baptismal ritual, like most rituals, is an important purification mechanism. As a socially signifying process, it works as a bridge between one social stage and the next. It is the mode through which someone passes from outsider to insider. But, as we know from Bataille, Kristeva, and Douglas, social boundaries are tenuous at best and entirely imagined at worst. They are not stable and therefore crossing over such a boundary is almost always an occasion of pollution fear – or fear that these crucial boundaries will break down.

Douglas tells us that pollution fear “...arises from the interplay of form and surrounding formlessness” (130). The fear is that any identity transition – whether it be from non-member to member of a community, from single to married, or pregnant woman to mother – will deconstruct the system within which it operates. Thus rituals like baptism

work as semiotic quarantine. Douglas notes, “The person who must pass from one social stage to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others. The danger is controlled by ritual which precisely separates him from his old status, segregates him for a time and then publicly declares his entry to his new status” (119-120).

In the case of baptism, the “quarantine” period is very short and occupies only the space and time needed to utter the correct ritual phrases and anoint the child with water.

Mannyng even suggests this process be carried out with haste if the infant is about to die, thus shortening the time of separation even more. It is of the utmost importance that the child dies as a member of the community, a status identity that will be further marked by his/her inclusion in the church graveyard.

In “The Tale of the Midwife Who Christened the Child Wrongly,” because the ritual of baptism is performed incorrectly, the infant must be quarantined continually by being laid to rest outside of the communally inclusive space. S/he cannot be laid to rest in the churchyard because his/her otherness has the ability to infect communal space. The burial taboo highlights that the unbaptized infant is perceived as a figure of disorder and, as such, is a threat to communal identity (118-8).

The child challenges normative communal categories and even the assertion that there can be such a thing as “normative.” What is potentially being ruptured by this challenge to the notion of “normative” is semiotic iterability. In other words, the child, because, s/he complicates typical social classifications like living/dead, member/non-member, sinner/saved, disrupts the perceived communal continuity. If an infant can die a sinner, can be disowned by the church and the community, then what does it really mean to be a sinner and to be an outsider? What is the basis of these classifications and how stable are they when a “wrong” prayer can negate them?

The child embodies what Derrida calls “differance.” In “Plato’s Pharmacy” Derrida explains that differance is the play resulting from the duality of every signification (127). It is the space of signification. In other words, it is the infinite possibility of the sign that I briefly discussed in Chapter Two. For Derrida, differance works hand in hand with iterability. Any system of signification must be iterable – it must hold the potential for replication even if that potential is never met. But nothing will ever be replicated exactly; if it is, it becomes something new unto itself, completely independent of what came before (139). Instead, all systems of signification rely equally on iterability and differance – and because of this, there is always room for play. No meaning is ever stable. Everything is always a trace, a whisper of what it could potentially be, or has already been.

The child who is christened “wrongly” is the (de)constructive possibility. S/he is the reminder that death is always very near life and that the outsider is really not different from the accepted member. It is a matter of a few spoken words that marks the difference – that encapsulates the difference. The dangerous and necessary play of continual (de)constructive possibility is a little too readable on the body of the dead infant and so it must be removed from the communal space. The churchyard must be protected from difference if it is to operate as symbolic perpetually closed iterability.<sup>17</sup>

We rely on what is mimetic in ourselves for the construction of self; we need initial submersion in order to emerge - even if ever only partially and imperfectly. To draw on the image of baptism, the power of the ritual does not only lay in the emergence, but in the submersion; both are necessary for naming to be effective. The infant “christened wrongly” is unable to join the community because s/he is not successfully submerged and therefore cannot emerge.

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<sup>17</sup> To better understand the importance of a churchyard that is ontologically closed and continually iterable, it may be helpful to remember the importance of Mary’s perpetual virginity. The space of the churchyard works in a very similar way.



To better explain what I mean here, I want to visit the very short formulaic performative speech act that triggers the action in “The Midwife Who Christened the Child Wrongly”- the midwife’s utterance over the body of the dying infant:

God and seynt Ione	God and St. John
Crysten þe chylde, boþe flesshe and bone.	Christen the child, both flesh and bone.
(ll. 9627-9628)	

What is particularly interesting about this speech act is that it is identified as “wrong”; it does not accomplish what it sets out to do, which is to mark the child as a member of both the community and of the church. It is ineffectual; its ability to signify is taken away because it is not exactly the same as the phrase Mannyng gives us a few lines earlier:

Y crysten þe yn þe name of þe fadyr &	I christen thee in the name of the father &
Sone & holy gast,	Son & holy ghost (ll. 9602-9603)

In this particular instance, the ability to replicate exactly the Christening phrase marks one as a member of the church or, at least, marks someone as familiar with ecclesiastical discourse – but it also allows this ritual space to be continually iterative. To replicate exactly is to continue the cycle of signification and thus to remove the sacred utterance from linear temporality. This works on a linguistic level in the same way that Mary’s perpetual virginity works on a physical level.

Just as ritual can be used as a tool of generative separation and can even create a sacred space rhetorically outside of temporal reality, it can also designate something/someone as unclean or dangerous by marking it/him/her as a space within which to place fear, confusion, and ambiguity. I discussed this in Chapter Two in relation to contamination but did not fully flesh out how this works. In “The Tale of the Midwife Who Christened the Child Wrongly,” this darker side of ritual plays out in the ritualistically performative act of naming.

Naming is very important in this tale. Naming, as I am using it here, refers to any speech act that differentiates an individual or group from another. In this respect, naming can work in the classical sense of the word – to name someone John, Jill, Herbert – but it can also refer to a social marker like priest, nurse, or mother. Working from this definition of naming, one can see that to name is to perform a ritual act.

What happens to the infant is that the normative social naming process has failed. The infant is not a member of the church and thus is also not a member of the community that is defined by church membership.<sup>18</sup> Because of this, the infant is instead marked as a

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<sup>18</sup> Membership in the church community carried with it a certain amount of spiritual protection. For example, infants who died after baptism were protected from witches and demons – their remains could not

socially contaminating figure. S/he is named pollution. S/he is named sinner. S/he is named outsider. Of course, none of these names will appear on his/her grave marker. Instead, they are inscribed in the very ground within which s/he is laid to rest. The narrator tells us that after the midwife prays, they would have laid the infant in the churchyard “As a-nouþer chyld shuld ha be” (l 9631). A different child could have been buried in the churchyard, but never this child; s/he is the forever other.

The churchyard is a place where mortal social rank translates into eternal spiritual rank. For instance, it was the practice in the later medieval period for royalty to be buried inside the church. Their “special” placement at death functions as a constant reminder of their elevated social as well as spiritual status (Finucane, “Sacred Corpse, Profane Carrion” 43). Likewise, exclusion from the churchyard cemetery operated as a powerful social and spiritual representation of rejection (“Sacred Corpse” 54).

To the medieval Christian, the afterlife, like mortal communal life, is demarcated through spaces. There is Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, and Limbo – each of which carries with it its own socio-spiritual markings. Limbo, the space designated for those who are neither saved

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be used in potions or spells. The skin and bones of unbaptized infants, however, was often a key ingredient in purported witch’s spells (Roper 117).

nor damned, is where unbaptized infants live out eternity. The unbaptized infant is made to occupy a spiritual in-between space. Unlike their counterparts in Purgatory, the other spiritual in-between space, they will never progress. Their middled-marking never changes. Because the infant has not committed any specific sin and is therefore only punished because of original sin, s/he suffers no torments but will nonetheless never see the face of God, the ultimate enlightening experience towards which the medieval Christian was taught to strive (“Sacred Corpse” 54).

Essentially, the unbaptized infant is liminalized in every way – physically, socially, and spiritually. Because of this, the child is monstrous – an idea that I will develop further in the next chapter. For now, however, the idea of the monster can help us consider why this child can never be anything other than continually other. I mentioned earlier that the infant is the (de)constructive possibility. This makes the infant a potential source of contamination. It also challenges medieval concepts of being – not simply of self and other, but of being a being becoming. The monstrous infant is the problem of becoming. Caroline Walker Bynum deals extensively with the medieval fascination with the monster and the hybrid in her book *Metamorphosis and Identity*. She tells us that “...medieval discussions struggled to retain the identity of things, both their entity-ness, or unitas, and their spatiotemporal continuity, despite physical or spiritual transformation” (28). Just as

liminality challenges social stability, so does the potential for becoming. This is the reason for ritualistic quarantine, but it is also the reason behind the idea of the “essential self” – or the continual static self (23). No one – no thing – changes. Essence is stable. There can only be the appearance of change, but this “change” is really only the unfolding of the “essential self.” One only becomes more of what one always already was. Our “wrongly” christened infant was never going to become a member of the community. S/he was/is/will be only always liminal because essentially s/he is liminal.

The unbaptized infant is not the only one who is socially marked in this tale. The midwife occupies a very tenuous social position, something we might see reflected in the name given to her: (mid)wife. She is quite literally a figure that stands in the gap – between life and death and between sacred and profane.

In medieval literature, the midwife is often seen as a marginal figure (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 27). She quite literally stands in the breech helping to deliver life – which also means that sometimes her duties potentially put her in a place to influence life and death. She is there when a baby comes into the world.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes the baby is healthy and the midwife

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<sup>19</sup> Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, in *Not of Woman Born*, points out that the midwife’s social place became even more tenuous in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council’s mandates against clergy or religious officials

simply helps with the delivery. Other times, however, the child is born sick or is even near death, as is the case in our tale. When this happens, the midwife may find herself a character of suspicion. Lyndal Roper, in his study of the western witchcraft tradition, tells us that when something went wrong during childbirth, midwives were often targeted as the culprit. He cites as an example the *Malleus Maleficarum*'s tale of the midwife of Dann who was guilty of killing forty infants by sticking a pin in their skulls (124). The midwife becomes a figure endowed with great power, and because of this, a figure that is sometimes feared (Douglas 123-4).

Here too iterability has its function. Douglas states, "Just as the witch's bad name will get worse with every disaster that befalls her neighbors, so the saint's good name will improve with every stroke of good fortune" (137). What happens is that experience works as a constant re-iterative experience for those who are socially marked. Every time a birthing goes wrong or a child is "wrongly" baptized, the midwife experiences a reaffirmation of her middling social position.

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taking part in any medical matters that may require them to come into contact with blood. They were not allowed to help in the delivery process for fear that blood and bodily fluids might contaminate them. At the same time, the Forth Lateran placed strict rules on physicians regarding the spiritual wellbeing of those about to die. Physicians were not supposed to intervene too much before a priest was called to the sickbed. Only after the spirit had been administered to could the physician administer to the physical body (25-7).

The midwife in this exemplum, while chastised for incorrectly performing the ritualistic speech required for the sacrament of baptism, is equally vilified because she is a character made to occupy a social space she is both required to fill and forbidden to claim. While most sacraments are traditionally performed by priests - male bodies that are carefully marked - other members of the congregation could perform the sacrament of baptism, as we see in this tale. This anomaly necessitated by the social reality that often midwives and not priests are present at the death of an infant threatens sacramental iterability because it necessitates a break in the normative. The midwife, as the figure who at times must fill the space of cleric, finds herself in a dangerous discursive space. Her social position makes her utterances suspect.

Something similar happens in Ralph of Coggeshall's "The Witch of Rheims," and it might be beneficial to consider what Coggeshall's tale can tell us about the midwife's liminal social position. In "The Witch of Rheims" two women are charged with heresy when they are identified as Publicans. The first, a young maiden, is burned at the stake. The second, an old woman, goes toe to toe with her accusers in a verbal duel and ultimately escapes, not because the charge is dropped but because she uses magic to fly away - hence the title, "The Witch of Rheims."

Christine Neufeld, in “Hermeneutical Perversions,” explains that because of the old woman’s social position, her knowledge of Biblical texts must be treated as dissembling – even witchcraft. She cannot partake in the theological discourse even if she knows what words to say (14-15). She is guilty of occupying a discursive space that is closed to her. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White make the connection between discursive and physical space in their book, *The Politics & Poetics of Transgression*. They state that utterances cannot exist outside of social, even physical, context and thus the old woman must be condemned because while what she says is acceptable in some spaces and by certain speakers, it is not legitimate within her context (80). Likewise, the midwife in our tale occupies a social space that precludes her from any meaningful participation in a theological discourse.

Just as the infant is spatially marked as an outsider through his/her burial outside of the community churchyard, the midwife is told that she is no longer allowed near the place where children are born, thus topographically marking her separation from society and marking her position as even more in the gap. The precariousness of her position is evident when we consider that the priest’s ban obliterates her social identity: How can a midwife be a midwife if she is not allowed near a birthing place? She is separated from her “middling” space; however this does not mean she is free to adopt a different social



function – Mannyng still refers to her as “the midwife.” In effect, she becomes a figure that cannot even stand in the middle. She is in the social equivalent of Limbo.

Douglas tells us that, “The final paradox of the search for purity is that it is an attempt to force experience into logical categories of non-contradiction. But experience is not amenable and those who make the attempt find themselves led into contradiction” (200).

Limbo is a necessary socio-spiritual marker, but it is an inconclusive one. Both the midwife and the unbaptized infant are continually divided out because they continually pose a threat to “logical categories of non-contradiction.” Above, I briefly alluded to the monstrous nature of the unbaptized infant and the idea that constant separations, with their concomitant “middling,” can lead ultimately to a monstrous identity.

This is true for both the midwife and the infant who are both marked as dangerous others. Neither the midwife nor the child, however, physically resemble what we would think of as monstrous; their monstrosity lies in their social and topographical naming, not in their physical appearances. This is not always the case. As we will see in the next chapter, when liminality is seated in a character that is meant to represent ontological and social closure, monstrosity must be clearly inscribed upon the physical body. It is as if the potential to misread the nun in our next exemplum is so dangerous that her liminality has to be dramatically enacted in order to leave no room for alter-interpretation.

“þey cloue here mouþe euyñ two”: speaking the body

The final exemplum I want to look at, entitled “St. Gregory’s Tale of the Nun Who Spoke Naughty Words,”<sup>20</sup> provides us with a narrated representation of the continual splitting we saw “The Tale of the Midwife Who Christened the Child Wrongly” and highlights the violence this type of splitting necessitates. Mannyng presents us with the grotesque body of a burnt, bloody, and halved nun who reflects for us the abject state of human identity and our consequential need to continually parse out self from self – even as it makes integrity impossible. Finally, we project onto the other that which we know we are – the monstrous and multiple self.

In this exemplum, a nun dies and is condemned because she speaks villainy and wasteful words. Other than her linguistic transgressions, the tale insists, she is free from sin. One night shortly after the nun is buried near the altar in the church, fiends come to retrieve

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<sup>20</sup> “Saint Gregory’s Tale of a Nun who Spoke Naughty Words” is, as the title suggests, taken from Saint Gregory’s *Dialogues*, a popular source for medieval sermon stories. Interestingly, the version in Gregory’s *Dialogues* ends with a note about burial placement. We are told that even if a body is buried in the church, it is not safe from judgment (*Dialogues* book 4, ch 51).

the half of her body consigned to hell by her deviant speech. The churchwardens are awakened from their sleep by her postmortem screams and cries. They rush to the altar to witness demons with burning swords cutting her in half; they cut her vertically, severing her mouth in two. Half of her body is burnt away and half is left in the coffin.

The tale makes clear to us that the nun's transgression is not a mild one. As is discernable from the tale's placement under the fifth commandment, she is actually being condemned for murder. Her speech has caused death. Mannyng explains the spiritual significance of the nun's divided body to us:

Seynt Gregorye seyþ þat hyt was sygne  
 Þat half here lyfe was nat dygne;  
 For þogh here dedys were chaste,  
 Here wurdys were al vyle & waste.  
 So was hyt shewyd before here ygne,  
 Þat haluynde she was 3oue to pyne.

St. Gregory says that it was a sign  
 that half her life was not honorable;  
 for though her deeds were chaste,  
 Her words were all vile and wasteful  
 so was it showed to them,  
 that half of her was given to pain. (ll 1583-1588)

One reason for the physicality of the nun's punishment is the medieval idea of the human as a psychosomatic whole. In *Metamorphosis and Identity*, Caroline Walker Bynum discusses the importance to the medieval thinker of a holistic approach to envisaging the spiritual and physical life. She states, "Scholastic and monastic discussions of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries saw an embodied self as locus of identity..." (79). Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth century abbot, went as far as to say that, "If you tear your flesh, it is

your mind you damage; if you look to the stomach or below, you bring ulcers on your soul” (Bynum 130). In other words, nothing is ever simply a spiritual or a physical matter because the two are inseparable in humanity. Spiritual events will manifest on the body, as is the case with our nun, and physical events will manifest on the spirit, which is why a fellow nun could be killed by listening to “naughty words.” The narrator tells us that:

She made many of here felawys  
þenke on synnē for her sawys.  
For many tyme a vyleynys wurde  
Gadryþ foulē þouþ to hurde

She made many of her peers  
Think about sin because of her sayings  
because often an evil word  
gathers foul thoughts when it is heard (ll 1553-1556)

This holistic conceptualization of human existence means that a threat to physical integrity is always a threat to spiritual integrity, and vice versa, as we have already seen in Priest Robert and his sacrilegious carolers. The priest’s inability to maintain his physical integrity opened him, and by extension his congregation, to destructive forces. According to the tradition surrounding those affected by the dancing sickness, priestly infidelity left everyone open to physical and spiritual sickness (Hecker 8-9). What we see happening with the nun is very similar, only here it is not her physical infidelity but rather her linguistic unfaithfulness that threatens communal integrity.

While a holistic identity, one that incorporates both the physical and the spiritual, is important to medieval thought, identity discourse is always haunted by the duality of

existence. If one is not split between corporeal and incorporeal, one certainly is divided between pure and impure. The notions of hybridity and monstrosity capture the essence of this complicating mixture. Bynum takes a close look at medieval concepts of hybridity and monstrosity,<sup>21</sup> especially as they manifest in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard seems to have been obsessed with imaging the body as a representation of lived duality. To him, the monstrous is almost always a negative thing because it involves a mixture, a state that he juxtaposes to purity and completeness. Only God is pure and complete. Because wo/man contains both “good” and “bad” - both life and death - s/he is always a hybrid (121).

Julia Kristeva, reflecting on the Judeo-Christian tradition, reminds us that “The interiorization of abomination as sin, in the New Testament, would thus be not only a centering but even more so the condition, on the basis of that center of pluralizing the object as well as the subject” (*Powers* 118). At the moment that Judeo-Christian doctrine embraced the concept of sin, it precluded the possibility for identity totality. We are always beings at war with ourselves. She goes on to say that “...man is a spiritual, intelligent, knowing, in short, speaking being only to the extent that he is recognizant of his abjection – from repulsion to murder – and interiorizes it as such, that is, symbolizes it” (*Powers*

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<sup>21</sup> Bynum defines monsters as “mixed things without names” (118).

118). In other words, identity consciousness (or self-consciousness) only exists inasmuch as it is a mixture. Georges Bataille acknowledges as much when he claims that self-consciousness is the product of a continual division that aims at a purity that can only be realized at the moment when self-consciousness no longer exists (50-51).

This hybridity, or innate duality, is the occasion of our constant division. On a physical level, it is the dead that drops away – the dead skin, the excrement. On a spiritual level, it is the sinful self that must be continually confessed; and on a social level, it is the other that must always be divided out, like the midwife in the last exemplum. For the midwife, it is her name that continually enacts separation. She is constantly quarantined from the community and marked as a type of liminal figure – neither one of us nor completely other. Moreover, while the consequences of this verbal marker are evident – she enters a form of social limbo – Mannyng does not identify naming as the explicit culprit in the tale. Instead he places the blame on her inability to perform the ritual of baptism successfully. However, as I have shown, one of the main reasons why she cannot perform the ritual accurately has to do with her social function as (mid)wife.

Naming, while sometimes violent, is essential to communal life and therefore cannot be villainized. This is not the case, however, with all types of speech. The implicit violence of

naming must be displaced. Consequently, the nun in this exemplum suffers the full wrath of the Judeo-Christian god as the scapegoat bearing the brunt of this violent division through her role as a deviant speaker. Once she is labeled “deviant,” it is much easier to read her speech as “sinful” and thus harmful. This is particularly true of the type of deviant speech she is accused of using.

The nun is accused of idle speech, often called jangling or gossiping, and this type of communication is villainized because it is speech that is not carefully guarded (Craun 205).

Susan Phillips discusses the particular threat of idle speech to the ecclesiastical discourse, and especially to the genre of exempla. Gossip threatens to “undermine the institutional power of the exemplum” because it so closely mirrors the didactic genre (“Janglyng” 69).

Both gossip and exempla use narrative to communicate their point. Both claim authoritative sources and actual events as their base. The line between these two categories of speech is often blurred and many times comes down to a simple distinction between speakers. A priest relates an exemplum; a wife tells gossip.

In “Gossip and (Un)Official Writing” Phillips takes a close look at the intimate relationship between gossip and discourses of power. Of particular interest to her is Chaucer’s “Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale.” She considers the tension within the story that results from unclear

distinctions between gossip and narrative (479). Philips goes on to state that similar tensions are at work in Mannyng's exempla. The line between didactic narrative and gossip is often blurred (478).

The problem for Mannyng is that he must portray his stories as true while not giving away so much information that his text would too closely mirror idle conversation. He often attempts to contain his narratives by insisting that while they are true, he is unable to tell his audience the names of those involved or the exact locations of the events. As we have seen in "The Tale of the Sacrilegious Carolers," however, Mannyng does not always stay true to these guidelines. Even when he does, the tension is not entirely resolved.

One reason for this lingering apprehension about the nature of exempla has to do with the doctrine of confession. In the introduction to this project, I mentioned the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and its mandate concerning annual confession. This is the catalyst for Mannyng's work. He is attempting to teach his parishioners how to both identify and confess sin. The problem is that while he tells his audience about different types of sin, he runs the risk of introducing to someone a sin they had never thought to commit.

Confessors were warned against accidental suggestions, but it is not easy to distinguish



between those sins that would be common knowledge and those that may never occur to some.

In this exemplum, Mannyng's interest in portraying authenticity while guarding against gossip results in an unnamed and, in the text of the narrative, mute nun. She is given no voice within the narrative. In fact, we only meet her once she is dead. Likewise, we are provided no clues as to what exactly she has said. We do not know what form her gossip took; we only know that it was deadly. Here too Mannyng attempts to protect his audience from sinful suggestion. The nun has no voice within the story because her words were transgressive and dangerous.

Edwin Craun also observes that part of the problem with transgressive speech like gossip is that it has the potential to incite anger or strife within the community (200). Jangling can contaminate, especially when committed by someone who is traditionally connected with the salvific discourse (21). If all speech acts have the potential to deconstruct, then keeping a close rein on your tongue is important to your integrity and to the integrity of the ideological structure. We see this play out in a dramatic way in "The Tale of the Nun Who Spoke Naughty Words" in that the nun's unguarded speech marks her as a murderer.

As I mentioned earlier, this exemplum is found in the section about the fifth commandment: “þou shalt no man slo” (1308). What she is found guilty of is causing spiritual murder through the actual words she utters. Just as the swearing man’s oaths literally dismembered the child in “The Bloody Child,” the nun’s speech literally causes death and because her words have killed, fiends make of her body a grotesque reminder of the dastardliness of her speech.

In the introduction to the section of *Handlyng Synne* pertaining to the fifth commandment,

Mannyng states that:

þyf þou euer yn any tyme	If thou ever at any time
Reftē any man hys lyme,	tear any man’s limbs
Or hyt was reftē þurgh þy rede,	or if it was torn because of thine urging,
þou art enchesun of hys dede.	Thou are to blame for the deed.
þyf hyt be aʒens hys wylle	If it was against his will
Or hys assent, þou synnest ful ylle.	or if he gave his assent, thou sin. (ll. 1319-1324)

In other words, you are responsible for not only the actions you do, but also the ones you inspire. If, for example, you encourage someone to rob his/her neighbor, you are just as responsible for that robbery as you would be if you had done it yourself. This interpretation of the fifth commandment gives to language an awesome and often horrific power and explains why the nun’s “naughty words” can accomplish murder even when she has never actually killed someone.

Mannyng explains that even speech acts that do not lead to physical harm are still murderous. Several lines before “St. Gregory’s Tale of a Nun Who Spoke Naughty Words”

Mannyng informs his audience that causing spiritual harm is every bit as dastardly as causing physical harm:

þyf þou with-drowe any mannys wyl,	If thou take away a man’s will
þat he ne myzt þe gode fulfyl	so that he cannot do good
Whan he þoght to haue wel doun,	when he wanted to do good
Or entycedest any fro relygyoun,	or if thou entice any away from religion
Gostly þou mayst hum slo	thou has killed him in spirit
þyf he to ouþer wykkednes go...	if he turns to other wicked (ll 1501 – 1506)

This seems to reinforce the medieval understanding of the human as a psychosomatic whole, though Stallybrass and White posit that a psychosomatic imaging of humanity is not exclusive to medieval thought but rather a symptom of the desire for integrity. The physical body, through the classical image of the fully impenetrable body, becomes the space where identity is mapped out. They reflect that “It is no accident then, that transgressions and the attempts to control them obsessively return to somatic symbols, for these are ultimate elements of social classification itself” (26).

We have seen the idealized classical body in Mary’s perpetual virginity. Her closed body is the ideal against which all other body imagery can be compared. The catch is that her

perpetual purity results in death – the classical body cannot be maintained in life. As Stallybrass and White point out, physical and identity heterogeneity are impossible (113). The classic body is an unattainable ideal; thus the only completely impenetrable body will be one that is seen from a distance, projected onto the space of an other. This is to say that Mary's integrity can be intact because she is the messianic hope. Her body is always remembered and continually hoped for but only pure inasmuch as it is never present.

What happens to the nun in “The Tale of the Nun Who Spoke Naughty Words” is partially a repercussion of the importance of Mary's perpetual virginity. As a nun, a bride of Christ, she is supposed to reflect the impenetrable body of Mary. Socially, her task is to provide a space on which idealistic integrity can be projected. If you will recall from the last chapter, burial place is often a strong indicator of social and perceived spiritual rank. The nun who spoke naughty words was buried near the altar, which means that the congregation saw her as a spiritual superior. She was supposed to be “pure” and so she was seen as “pure,” which means that she had the potential to make deviant behavior appear to be normative and acceptable. When we consider this symbolic function of the nun, we can see why her impurity poses such a threat to doctrinal and individual identity. Through her deviant speech, she has eliminated the space upon which communal and individual purity is supposed to be (dis)placed.

The nun fails not because of her sexuality, as is the case with Priest Robert of Colbek, but because of her verbal impurity. While complete purity - whether physical or linguistic - is not attainable, it remains integral to the Judeo-Christian concept of god. Bataille would argue that this irrational purity is necessarily characteristic of all supreme beings. If you will recall, Bataille's supreme being is fully transcendent because he/she/it/they is/are the embodiment of humanity's lost continuity, or uninterrupted intimacy.

When the nun fails to reflect the classical body, when she compromises her spiritual integrity and the spiritual integrity of those around her, she embodies the continual social and personal realization that purity is impossible - she becomes a monster (Stallybrass 113). Just as complete purity must be sought out in another because the self must always be a divided being, so too with the grotesque. Extreme divisions cannot be placed upon the self; they must be reflected back onto someone else - onto the social outcast - who is, in our tale, the jangling nun (108).

The nun, while acting as an important social symbol for idealistic purity, is intensely scrutinized and her ability to maintain her perceived purity is strained (Makowski 1-8).<sup>22</sup>

As is the case with the midwife in our last exemplum, to be someone with an undefined, or redefined social role is already a very tenuous and dangerous position – but for the nun, her precariousness was only heightened as the added weight of communal symbolism was added to her social identity.

As a result, she must be imaged in a particularly deviant way. She must become a grotesque body – a drastically opened physical and rhetorical space. Jeffrey Cohen discusses the medieval fascination with the open body in his introduction to *Medieval Identity Machines*. He recounts several cases where bodies are depicted as covered in orifices and sexual organs, as oozing and bleeding. They are bodies that have so many openings and are so corrupted they represent in drastic terms the instability of both personal and national borders (XVIII-XXI). Stallybrass and White point out that the grotesque body must always be the body of the Other. Much like the pure and closed body of the Virgin Mary, the entirely open body is a space on which to project, not a reality to be lived.

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<sup>22</sup> In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII published what is commonly known as the *Periculoso*, which was a decree mandating that all nuns in all orders be continually cloistered. Elizabeth Makowski posits that one potential reason for the new harsher mandates may have been to enforce the differences between nuns and female members of other social and religious groups (1-8).

Interestingly, the nun's body is not visibly changed until after her death. As I mentioned earlier, by placing her body near the altar, the congregants of the church effectively, though apparently inaccurately, mark her as close to God. It is the fiends that come to claim her that mark her "true" identity when they split her in two. They portray her treachery when the church politic could not. It is significant that spiritual beings make of the nun a monster because by leaving this final social mark to powers outside of the church community, Mannyng gives to the act a particularly potent sanctity. In effect, the nun's monstrosity is proclaimed by beings that exist outside of time and space. Much like the perpetual virginity of Mary places her outside of temporal, and thus subjective, space, the violence done to the nun places her social mark outside of the church. Her accusers are not of this world. Their judgment is thus preeminent. The nun's monstrosity is not debatable and is certainly not retractable.

Sarah Beckwith suggests that as a symbol for the church, the nun's splitting takes on another level of significance. She is a failed symbol of purity, yes, but she is also a representation of the medieval church. Beckwith states that, "The emphatic insistence on unity and unification which is the ecclesiastic claim to hegemony actually paradoxically proliferates its own monstrous two-headed image of the body" (30). The church tries so hard to project unity that it reveals its multiplicity.

This condition, as Kristeva mentions, is the occasion for ecclesiastical institutions like confession (*Power* 94, 130). Confession affords a discursive space within which one can continually divide in an attempt to achieve purity – or one-ness. Social chastisement is another way that the church could continually divide out the “impure,” or the members that most represented anxiety-provoking multiplicity. That is exactly what happens to the jangling nun as her punishment is meted out by higher powers in order to reinforce the church’s divine ability to mark its members in similar, often gruesome ways.<sup>23</sup>

The nun’s duality is mapped out on her physical body. When her community cannot identify and mark her properly – spatially or linguistically – she must be marked physically by divine agents. Her violent duplicity threatens ecclesiastic identity and as such it must be represented violently. Unlike Ave in the “Sacriligious Carolers of Colbek,” the nun’s second death is neither silent nor clean as she is cut in half by a flaming sword. The nun’s screams and cries of agony awaken the churchwardens, bringing them to witness her gruesome punishment.

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<sup>23</sup> See for example Jodi Enders’ “Violence, Silence, and the Memory of Witches” for an excellent analysis of the use of the brank in medieval speech punishment.



What happens to the nun in this exemplum is not at all unlike what happens to the infant Christ in “The Tale of the Bloody Child.” His body is also grotesque. He bleeds and cries – as does the nun. Both characters are physically marked in very distinctive and violent ways, though it would seem that the occasions for their respective tortures may be different. Christ suffers as a result of a man’s false oaths. The nun suffers because she speaks idly. I propose that these grotesque bodies actually signify the similarities between the speech acts that perpetuate them.<sup>24</sup> The man’s oaths literally enact what he figuratively communicates; his intention, while he may not want to actually dismember Christ, is closely tied to the physical repercussions. The nun, on the other hand, is punished for no specific utterance but rather because she has spoken wastefully. Read together, the infant’s blood and the nun’s halved body imply that all speech acts are potentially devastating. The divisions they enact, through naming, through rejection, through ritual practice, always hold the potential for a violent separation. In the end, the sacrilegious nun and the dismembered infant stand together – they do not contradict but rather testify one to the other.

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<sup>24</sup> A fruitful comparison can also be made between the churchwardens and the man who swears oaths. Each is identified as the source for the tale. The man is told to tell others his story so that they will leave off swearing, and the churchwardens are the only witnesses to the nun’s punishment so they are, by implication, the “original” narrators. As narrators, these characters partake in a type of gossip and therefore are potentially subject to the same repercussions as the bloody child and the nun.

Throughout this project, the monstrous has cast its shadow and every discursive step has led us closer to spying its looming form. It resides in Kristeva's abjection, in Douglas's dirt. It hides in the hesitation, in the hope that can only be becoming because it never is. This is why oaths can flay a deific child. Through speech, the monstrous other spills out – and is always already in Derrida's eternally echoing trace - in differance. The monster exists not only because it is possible; it is possibility.

And here we are, face to face with what must be called other, so disruptive to our idealistic integral identity, and yet always only a mirror – only our own reflection.

## Conclusion:

## Unspeakable Possibilities and the Apophatic Tradition

From the outset, the idea of concluding this project has seemed problematic to me. I have spent four chapters following possibilities that rely on their own potential to be impossible and endings that seem always more like question marks than exclamation points. How then can I write “en finè”? I find that I can’t, but that is not to say that I will not attempt something more like a reflection – with the understanding that reflection implies a looking back from a present point that is always already gone and still to come. Nonetheless, I do feel I can express one more thing and leave off. I say “express” intentionally because in my conclusion I want to consider not linguistic utterances of the nature we have dealt with in the previous chapters, but rather the extra-linguistic events of cries and screams. These extra-linguist acts play an important role in all of the exempla I’ve considered.

Mary’s mournful moan alerts the rich man who swears oaths to her presence. The midwife lets out a loud sob as she realizes that the infant in her arms will not live. The revived nun screams as her demonic tormentors cut her in half. And then there is Ave who sings even beyond death – but never cries, never screams, never moans. She becomes a Philomel,

unable to tell anyone of her pain. She is completely silenced because she is only allowed to sing – her voice is swallowed by a dominant discourse. It is her fate that the other women in the tales attempt to circumvent through moans, tears, and shrieks.

Jeffrey Cohen reads Margery of Kempe's disruptive sobs in a similar way. As an outspoken female religious figure, she was aware of her position as an outsider. Her female speech was always suspect as she attempted to participate in an almost exclusively male discourse (158). Only her extra-linguist speech acts afforded her the chance to communicate without the potential for accusation. Similarly, the women in Mannyng's exempla have no discursive space within which to act without suspicion. The midwife in "The Midwife Who Christens the Child Wrongly" learns this when she is deprived of her social position because her attempt to partake in a ritualistic speech act goes awry. As I discussed in Chapter Three, her linguistic failure is partially due to her already liminal social place.

I would like to extend this reading a step further and posit that during the time Mannyng wrote, it was not just the female voice that was suspect. What I am proposing is that concerns about speech acts – deviant and salvific – belie distrust in linguistic signs. My question is: How much is the discourse of deviant speech engaged in the politics of the Apophatic tradition? This is not to suggest that Mannyng intentionally aligned himself

with negative theologians, but how much is the acknowledgement of deific unspeakability “present” anyway?

Negative theology revolves around the idea that it is not possible to communicate – or to capture in words – any part of divine essence; the divine is simply too big, too beyond, too transcendent. In his *Contra Eunomium*, Gregory of Nyssa explains the inadequacy of language, even of human intellect, to comprehend a God that is outside of time and space. We are simply incapable of fathoming such a thing, and we certainly cannot express anything about it (Laird 64-65). But the possibility of language’s impossibility to re-symbol the divine begs the question: is it possible to signify anything? I have already discussed in Chapter One Derrida’s claim that impossibility must be possible in any thing, event, sign. Iterability necessitates all possibilities – even at the risk of negating iterability itself. That is to say that prayers, curses, chants, screams, sermons, songs, blessings, oaths, and even sacramental speech hold in them a latent hush.

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