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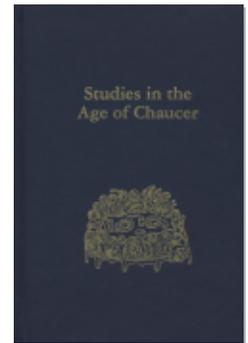
Jacob's Well and Penitential Pedagogy

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Jacob's Well and Penitential Pedagogy

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Freres and fele oþere maistres þat to þe lewed folk prechen,
Ye moeuen materes vnmesurable to tellen of þe Trinite
That lome þe lewed peple of hir bileue doute.
Bette it were by manye doctours to bileuen swich techyng
And tellen men of þe ten comaundementȝ, and touchen þe seuene synnes,
And of þe braunches þat burione of hem and bryngen men to helle,
And how þat folk in folies hir fyue wittes mysspenden . . .

—*Piers Plowman* XV:73–76¹

JACOB'S *WELL*, a sermon cycle composed in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, in many ways fulfills Anima's vision of a positive educational plan for the laity. Using the metaphor of the human soul as a foul, stinking well badly in need of cleansing and repair, the unnamed *Well* writer—who was almost certainly a parish cleric writing for an audience primarily composed of lay men and women—places basic Christian precepts like the Seven Deadly Sins and the Ten Commandments at the center of his text.²

¹ *Piers Plowman, The B-Version*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London: Athlone Press, 1975), p. 538.

² *Jacob's Well* survives in one manuscript, MS Salisbury Cathedral 103. In print, the work is available in two parts. The first fifty sermons are edited within *Jacob's Well: An English Treatise on the Cleansing of Man's Conscience*, ed. Arthur Brandeis, EETS 115 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1900). The last forty-five sermons have been edited by Clinton Atchley in "The 'Wose' of *Jacob's Well*: Text and Context" Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1998). I have silently regularized Brandeis's and Atchley's use of italics and brackets, respectively, to indicate omitted or abbreviated letters in the manuscript. My citations use "i" and "ii" to distinguish between these two editions. Citations are by page number.

For the dating and authorship of *Jacob's Well*, see Brandeis, *Jacob's Well*, pp. x–xiii; Robert Raymo, "Jacob's Well," in *A Manual of Writings in Middle English, 1050–1500*, ed. Albert E. Hartung (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967), p. 2262; and Leo Carruthers, "Where Did *Jacob's Well* Come From? The Provenance and Dialect of MS Salisbury Cathedral 103," *ES* 71 (1990): 335–40. These studies date the original composition of *Jacob's Well* to the first two decades of the fifteenth century.

The uncertainty surrounding the text's exact dating makes it impossible to state conclusively whether the *Well* writer is writing before or after Archbishop Thomas Arundel's Constitutions of 1407–9, which set strict limits on the content and scope of vernac-

While this decision allows the *Well* writer to avoid the abstruse speculative theology criticized by Anima in the epigraph above, it does not provide him with a straightforward answer to vexing questions concerning the kinds of knowledge that should be taught to lay Christians. As this essay will demonstrate, teaching the fundamentals of the faith is anything but simple for the *Well* writer. The “fals techyng” of the Lollards represents one danger to his flock, but other challenges loom just as large: he wrestles with the recalcitrance of his own congregation, the guidelines imposed upon preachers by ecclesiastical authorities, and the self-interested activities of the fraternal orders, whose authority he both mocks and cites.

In many portions of his text, the *Well* writer addresses these problems by adopting a rigidly hierarchical pedagogical stance toward his listeners. Particularly in the early parts of *Jacob's Well*, he urges his listeners to focus exclusively on repairing their own sinful souls and to value childlike compliance above all other virtues. As the work progresses, however, this mode of instruction begins to break down. New metaphors involving childhood and learning emerge, and the separation between individual examinations of conscience and wider forms of intellectual inquiry proves impossible for the *Well* writer to maintain. In the text's final exemplum, he not only urges his audience to embark on a search for truth but also makes clear that their efforts must include questioning ecclesiastical institutions as well as themselves.

For the *Well* writer, then, working closely with traditional elements

ular writing and preaching. (For the text of Arundel's Constitutions, see *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, ed. David Wilkins, 4 vols. [London, 1737], 3:314–19.) In his seminal essay, “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409” (*Speculum* 70 [1995]: 822–64), Nicholas Watson implicitly associates *Jacob's Well* with the post-Arundel era when he briefly asserts that the work adheres to the guidelines set by Archbishop Pecham in *Ignorantia Sacerdotum*, the thirteenth-century legislation praised by Arundel in his Constitutions. (For the text of Pecham's decrees, see Wilkins, 2:51–61). The work's presence in a single manuscript, as well as its ambivalence regarding lay learning, supports the idea that it was produced in a more constrained climate than texts of the late fourteenth century. As the following argument should make clear, however, its content cannot be said to function as a straightforward extension of Arundel's assumptions and goals.

Detailed analyses of Arundel's legislation and its effects can be found in Anne Hudson's *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 390–445, and in H. Leith Spencer's *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 163–88.

of the pastoral syllabus raises more questions than it answers. Even as he acknowledges that his parish should be a locus for learning (not just for obedience or blind faith), he seems uncertain about the exact contours this community should have. Ultimately, he resists conventional teacher-student relationships in favor of a more collaborative model. Having instructed his audience in the fundamentals of the faith, he tells them that there are some truths they will need to figure out for themselves.

In its very willingness to revise and reflect upon pastoral instruction, *Jacob's Well* enriches our understanding of late medieval vernacular theology.³ Specifically, it demonstrates the ongoing interest in pedagogical innovation within pastoral literature of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, even within texts that might initially seem to take a reactionary stance toward questions of lay learning. Moreover, the *Well* writer was not alone in his responsiveness to increasingly intense controversies and pressures: *Dives and Pauper*, for example, uses its dialogic structure to propose new definitions of “lerner” and “lewed.”⁴ These texts suggest that relatively late-stage examples of vernacular theology might offer particularly rich reflections on the process of religious instruction. Organized around a particular body of knowledge—the “curriculum” set forth in the pastoral syllabus promulgated in Lateran IV

³My use of the phrase “vernacular theology” derives, of course, from Watson’s definition of the term in “Censorship”; in *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); and in “The Middle English Mystics,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 539–65.

Bernard McGinn sets forth an analogous application of the phrase in his introduction to the third volume of his history of Western mysticism, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200–1350* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 1–30.

⁴*Dives and Pauper*, ed. Priscilla Heath Barnum, EETS o.s. 275, 280, and 323 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, 1980, 2005). For considerations of *Dives and Pauper* in light of fifteenth-century religious debates, see Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 419; Watson, “Censorship,” pp. 850 and 855; and *Idea of the Vernacular*, pp. 249–52, which presents an excerpt from the text itself. Connections between *Jacob's Well* and *Dives and Pauper* are briefly explored in Marjorie Curry Woods and Rita Copeland, “Classroom and Confession,” in Wallace, pp. 399–400, and in Leo Carruthers, “‘Know Thyself’: Criticism, Reform, and the Audience of *Jacob's Well*,” *Medieval Sermons and Society: Cloisters, City, University*, ed. J. Hamesse, B. M. Kienzle, D. L. Stoudt, and A. T. Thayer (Louvain-la-Neuve, F.I.D.E.M., 1998), pp. 238–40. For a discussion of other work by the author of *Dives and Pauper*, see Hudson and H. L. Spencer, “Old Author, New Work: The Sermons of MS. Longleat 4,” *MÆ* 53 (1984): 220–38.

and beyond—their writers could not afford to overlook the link between teaching strategies and belief itself.⁵

As Rita Copeland's recent study of heterodox pedagogy has made clear, this connection was of paramount importance to Lollard writers.⁶ In Copeland's account, new modes of instruction—specifically, those resisting the infantilization of lay people, and upholding the value of literal interpretation—constituted an essential part of Lollard thought. *Jacob's Well* complicates this picture by reminding us that Lollard writers were not the only ones to resist, or revise, what Copeland has called “pastoral condescension” toward lay learners.⁷ To be sure, the *Well* writer's competing responsibilities do not allow him to develop a fully realized alternative pedagogy like the Lollards': he never, for example, tells his audience to seek God's truth in texts, scriptural or otherwise. He does, however, uphold the value of critical inquiry at the end of his text, and implies that this must go on outside the confines of the mind or the parish. These aspects of *Jacob's Well* indicate a crucial area of shading within the “grey area” between orthodoxy and heterodoxy described by Anne Hudson.⁸ Even—or, perhaps, especially—in the shadow of Arundel's restrictions on teaching and preaching, writers of various stripes shared a commitment to envisioning new communities of knowledge.

Moreover, this conversation was not confined to sermon literature. As the analysis below will indicate, writers like Langland and the poet of *Mum and the Sothsegger* approach questions of lay learning, useful knowledge, and discernible truth with much the same blend of vehemence and perplexity displayed by the *Well* writer.

Structure and Sources

The questions posed by *Jacob's Well* are particularly striking given the disciplined metaphorical framework within which they emerge. Confronted with a potentially unwieldy list of precepts—including, among other things, the articles of excommunication, the gifts of the Holy

⁵For the promulgation of these decrees in England, see H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 196–227, and Thomas Heffernan, *The Popular Literature of Medieval England* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

⁶Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁸Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 411.

Spirit, and the virtues and vices—the *Well* writer carefully associates Christian precepts to the structure of each person's individual "well." Gravel and ooze within the pit correspond to deadly sins; shovels represent confessional practices; the rungs of the ladder to heaven stand in for the Ten Commandments. Every Christian tenet connects to a particular material object, and the writer regularly reminds his audience of the parts of the project that have been completed or remain unfinished. The work's structure has a temporal dimension as well: it is divided into ninety-five distinct sermons. Noting that this is the precise length of time between Ash Wednesday and Pentecost on the Christian liturgical calendar, and that the sermon corresponding to Easter on this time frame is particularly extended and affirmative, Leo Carruthers has persuasively argued that the *Well* writer designed his work to cover the Easter Cycle as a whole.⁹

Drawing from a wide variety of sources gave the *Well* writer plenty of material for this plan. A great deal of the text's theological material derives from *Speculum Vitae*, the fourteenth-century verse treatise by William of Nassyngton, which places an encyclopedic amount of doctrinal information into an intricate schema linking the petitions of the Lord's Prayer to the vices, virtues, and other elements of the faith.¹⁰ (The *Vitae* derives from the *Somme le Roi*, Friar Lorens of Orleans' thirteenth-century treatise, which was the progenitor for the fourteenth-century *Aȝenbite of Inwit* and *Book of Vices and Virtues*.) Another crucial source for the *Well* writer was the Latin *Alphabetum Narrationum*, compiled in the fourteenth century by the Dominican Arnold of Liège: this provided the *Well* writer with the majority of the illustrative narratives with which he concludes each day's sermon.¹¹ Close correspondences

⁹See Carruthers, "Allegory and Bible Interpretation: The Narrative Structure of a Middle English Sermon Cycle," *L&T* 4 (1990): 1–14, and "The Liturgical Setting of *Jacob's Well*," *ELN* 24 (1987): 12–24. Atchley (pp. 40–66) suggests some plausible revisions to Carruthers's schema for the work's sermons.

¹⁰For the connections between *Jacob's Well* and *Speculum Vitae*, see Edna Stover, "A Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen, edited from MS Harley 45" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1951), and Venetia Nelson, *A Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen: A Prose Version of the Speculum Vitae, ed. from B.L. MS Harley 45* (Heidelberg, MET, 1981). *Speculum Vitae* is not in print, but it has been edited within John W. Smeltz's "Speculum Vitae: An Edition of British Museum MS Royal 17C.viii" (Ph.D. diss., Duquesne University, 1977). Carruthers succinctly summarizes the relationship of *Jacob's Well* to several of its sources in "Liturgical Setting," pp. 12–13.

¹¹Joan Young Gregg persuasively establishes this connection in "The Exempla of *Jacob's Well*: A Study in the Transmission of Medieval Sermon Stories," *Traditio* 33 (1977): 359–80. See also Gregg's dissertation, "The Narrative Exempla of *Jacob's Well*:"

between portions of *Jacob's Well* and two other texts—Richard Lavynham's *A Lityl Tretyys on the Dedly Synnes*, and the late fourteenth-/early fifteenth-century compilation *Pore Caitif*—suggest that the *Well* writer drew upon these works as well.¹²

The *Well* writer's use of such sources supports Clinton Atchley's assessment of him as "an educated man with a respectable knowledge of Latin"; beyond this, however, little is known about the work's authorship or date of origin.¹³ The sole manuscript of the work, MS Salisbury Cathedral 103, appears to date from the 1440s, but it is not from the author's hand.¹⁴ Nothing in the source material or work itself contradicts the suggestion of Arthur Brandeis, who edited the work's first fifty sermons in 1900, that the text dates from approximately the first quarter of the fifteenth century.¹⁵ Evidence regarding the location of the work's original composition is also tentative: Carruthers's dialect study leads him to locate the manuscript's scribe in Suffolk, but he cannot confirm anything about the *Well* writer himself.¹⁶ Building upon this suggestion as well as internal evidence, Atchley suggests Bury St. Edmunds as a likely location or the *Well* writer's community of listeners.¹⁷ Again, however, scholars at this point must still confine themselves to speculation: as Carruthers concedes, current evidence does not even confirm whether the text ever "saw the light of day outside the scriptorium."¹⁸

The *Well* writer's references to his audience do, however, make clear that he intended his work to function within a congregation made up

A Source Study with an Index for *Jacob's Well* to *Index Exemplorum*" (Ph.d. diss., New York University, 1973). The *Alphabetum Narrationum* is not in print; quotations below are drawn from B.M. MS Harley 268. Readers could also consult "An Alphabet of Tales: An English 15th Century Translation of the 'Alphabetum Narrationum,'" ed. Mary MacLeod Banks, EETS o.s. 126–27 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1904–5).

¹² For the connections between *Jacob's Well* and Lavynham's treatise, see Carruthers, "Jacob's Well: Études d'un sermonnaire pénitentiel anglais du Xve siècle" (Thèse d'Etat, University of Paris–Sorbonne, 1987), esp. pp. 348–50. Having discovered that the treatment of the Ten Commandments in *Jacob's Well* (as well as other passages) corresponds closely with passages in *Pore Caitif*, I hope to say more about this relationship in future work. *Pore Caitif* is edited within Sister Mary Teresa Brady's dissertation, "The *Pore Caitif*, Edited from MS Harley 2336 with Notes and Introduction" (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1954).

¹³ Atchley, "The 'Wose' of *Jacob's Well*," p. 21.

¹⁴ Carruthers, "Provenance," p. 336.

¹⁵ Brandeis, *Jacob's Well*, pp. x–xiii.

¹⁶ Carruthers, "Provenance," p. 338–40.

¹⁷ Atchley, "The 'Wose' of *Jacob's Well*," p. 30.

¹⁸ Carruthers, "Liturgical Setting," p. 24.

of lay men, lay women, and even other clerics. Writing with Marjorie Woods, Copeland has pointed out that *Jacob's Well* "achieve[s] such rhetorical complexity as to challenge the generic distinction between instructions to priests and guides to lay persons."¹⁹ After carefully exploring various modes of address within the text, Carruthers suggests that the audience for the work was probably lay people of fairly substantial wealth and education.²⁰ But the text's working-man metaphors and concern for farming regulations lead Atchley to speculate that at least some of the work's listeners might have been lower-class and rural.²¹

Whatever his audience's social class, the *Well* writer directly addresses lay people throughout the text, and often characterizes them as deficient in their knowledge of penance and other aspects of the faith. What is more, they risk being led astray by the ideas of wrongheaded instructors. In his few direct references to the Lollards, for example, the *Well* writer highlights the movement's educational and intellectual dimensions. The sin of "euyll tunge," he writes, involves people "þat wyln noȝt lerne for techyng, but fallyn in erreure, in heresy, in lollardrye" (i.156). Elsewhere, he castigates Lollards for pretending to be holy so that they "myȝt þerby dysseyue þe peple be [their] fals techyng" (i.164).²² The *Well* writer's choice of words here merits our attention, since fifteenth-century writers used many different terms when condemning the Lollards. Reginald Pecock often hones in on their tendency to "vndirnyme" (rebuke) and "blame," for example, while Nicholas Love frequently highlights their connection to the Antichrist.²³ As Alexander Patschovsky has written, allegations of heresy often reveal less about the ideas of the "heretics" themselves than about anxieties and contradictions operating within the accusing culture or institution.²⁴ On a small scale, the *Well* writer's emphasis on the Lollards as resistant learners and deceptive teachers demonstrates his preoccupation with the pedagogical dimension of Christian penitential practices.

¹⁹ Woods and Copeland, "Classroom and Confession," p. 399.

²⁰ Carruthers, "Know Thyself," pp. 227–33.

²¹ Atchley, "The 'Wose' of *Jacob's Well*," p. 28.

²² The *Well* writer also takes care to point out that "alle wycches, & heretykes, & lollardys, & alle þat beleuyn on here heresy" will be excommunicated (i.59).

²³ See, for example, Reginald Pecock, *The Repressor of Over Much Blaming of the Clergy*, ed. Churchill Babington (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), p. 2, and Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Reading Text*, ed. Michael Sargent (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004), pp. 236–37.

²⁴ Alexander Patschovsky, "Heresy and Society: On the Political Function of Heresy in the Medieval World," in *Texts and the Repression of Medieval Heresy*, ed. Caterina Bruschi and Peter Biller (York: York Medieval Press, 2003), esp. pp. 32–33.

Moreover, Lollards are not the only bad teachers and learners at issue for the *Well* writer; as we shall see, poor instruction *within* the Church becomes his primary target by the end of the text. In response, the *Well* writer ultimately offers his listeners a conception of parish life defined by shared intellectual engagement. While he does not want his listeners to become scholars per se, he does afford them the opportunity to regard themselves as thinkers.

Juveniles and Delinquents: The *Well* Writer's Audience

Exploring the *Well* writer's initial characterizations of his audience reveals parallels between his own descriptions of lay people and those employed by other writers in the wake of Archbishop Thomas Arundel's Constitutions of 1407–9. Of particular interest are passages where he likens lay believers to children. As Copeland has argued, analogies in which “the association of laity with unlearned simplicity could be conflated with the intellectual limitations of childhood” were politically useful for those interested in maintaining lay people's subordinate position within the Church, and were strongly resisted by the Lollards.²⁵ A noteworthy example of this trope emerges in Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, which argues that lay men and women “hauen nede to be fedde with mylke of lyȝte doctryne & not with sadde mete of grete clargye & of hye contemplacion.”²⁶ As we shall see below, the *Well* writer sets forth similar ideas in some portions of his text. As the work progresses, however, he implies that lay listeners' duties involve much more than consuming “pious pabulum.”²⁷

Initially the *Well* writer characterizes his audience as dangerously ignorant and his own mission as clear-cut and urgent. After an introduction sketching out the plan for the work, the second sermon begins to explain the articles of excommunication. Presenting this material is crucial, the writer declares to his audience, because “þou art blynde in ignoraunce, & seest noȝt, ne knowyst noȝt þe watyr of þis pytt, þat is for to saye, þou art a layman, & knowyst noȝt þe artycles of þe sentencys, & art falle þere-in, & seest noȝt þe peryles, but schuldest perysche in soule

²⁵ Copeland, *Pedagogy*, p. 7.

²⁶ Love, *Mirror*, p. 10. See Watson's quotation and discussion of this passage in *Idea of the Vernacular*, p. 345; for analysis of a similar metaphor in Alan of Lille's *Art of Preaching*, see Copeland, *Pedagogy*, p. 99.

²⁷ The phrase is Spencer's (*English Preaching*, p. 188).

endlessly in deth of helle" (i.7–8). In an almost offhand manner ("þat is for to saye"), the writer associates lay status with ignorance, blindness, and possible damnation. He goes on to promise his listeners that they may overcome their spiritual degradation through repentance and shrift. But even this transformation has its limits. The writer promises that penitents will move "fro curs to blysse, fro synne to grace, fro peyne to ioye" (i.13), but he refrains from saying whether believers will progress from ignorance to knowledge, or even from blindness to sight. Similarly, his claim that after confession his listeners "schalt . . . be goddys chyld, þere before þou were þe deuelys chyld" (i.11) relegates even virtuous lay people to the position of dependents within the Christian "family." Through such statements, the *Well* writer seems to divorce intellectual development from the process of religious instruction. His listeners' potential for salvation goes hand in hand with their willingness to see themselves as reliant upon God's mercy and clerics' guidance.

Within this very sermon, however, the writer acknowledges his listeners' ability to make their own decisions. Immediately after pointing out the ignorance of lay people, the priest addresses their potential response to him: "þou awȝtyst noȝt to hatyn þi curate, but þou awȝtyst for to louyn hym al þi lyif"(i.8). He subsequently reiterates this in more personal terms: "whanne I schewe to ȝou an-oper day þe artycles of þe sentencys, beeth noȝt euyll payed wyth me, but beth glad to here hem" (i.8). The writer recognizes that he is not speaking into a vacuum: his listeners will actively react to his words, either with love or with hate. His agency influences not just the relationship between priest and parishioners but also the sermon-giving situation itself. As both Carruthers and Atchley have noted, the writer feels compelled to remind his listeners that they should "go noȝt out of þe cherche" while his discussion of the articles takes place (i.11).²⁸ The *Well* writer's dilemma is unenviable: he needs his listeners to stay in church so that he can explain to them the grounds on which ecclesiastical officials might exclude them. Such paradoxes emerge repeatedly within *Jacob's Well*. Even as the *Well* writer tells his audience that they need the mediation of the Church, he recognizes that his parish's viability—and his own authority as a speaker—are contingent upon his listeners' goodwill.

²⁸ Atchley, "The 'Wose' of *Jacob's Well*," p. 27; Carruthers, "Liturgical Setting," p. 14.

Conflicts specifically related to knowledge emerge when the writer turns to the virtue of humility. The meek must love God, he writes, and they should do so unquestioningly: “loue þi god, & worschipp in þi feyth. ȝif þou be symple of kunnyng, trowe & beleue þe woord of god, wyth-oute sekynge of resouns how it myȝt be so, as a ȝung chyld trowyth it sooth þat men sayn. loue & honoure þi god wyth symple mood” (i.245). Although the writer leaves open the possibility that some lay listeners could approach belief in a sophisticated manner (i.e., the more educated, who are presumably not “symple of kunnyng”), he urges other adults to embrace childish credulousness, and implies that their “symple” state is a permanent one. The *Well* writer is not alone in this idea of course: in many ways, his recommendations here parallel those in Passus X of *Piers Plowman*, in which Will extols the “pure bileue” evinced by “lewed [laborers]” and others “of litel knowing” (B.X.470, 478).

But the *Well* writer is no more satisfied with this solution than is Langland. As the *Well* writer elaborates upon the value of humble prayer, he offers a simile focusing on a different aspect of childhood. He exhorts his listeners to “thynk þi-self vnworthy & pray to god wyth terys, felyng þi-self badde & bare of goodnes, as a chyld þat kan noȝt his lessoun, stant nakyd a-forn hys mayster, dredyng, knelyth doun ful hertyly praying” (i.245). The writer again likens his audience to children—this time without any qualification—and encourages them to adopt an attitude of fearful submission. But the analogy works differently this time. Whereas the first passage advocates belief over learning, the second one encourages listeners to envision themselves as delinquent students. The connection between sin and ignorance overlooked by the first passage emerges forcefully here, and the vulnerability attendant to a lack of knowledge is graphically depicted (or even erotically charged). Once again, lay people occupy a position of puerile inferiority. By evoking the schoolroom scenario, however, the *Well* writer complicates his previous advocacy of simple piety and implies that his listeners should see themselves as students, not just as believers. Knowledge remains a requirement, even if it is one that goes unfulfilled: good Christians know that they do not know everything they should.

The *Well* writer’s analogy between a penitent’s interaction with God and a student’s relationship to a master raises particularly interesting questions for the people in his audience excluded from formal schooling by virtue of their gender, social status, or geographic location. As Jo

Ann Moran has demonstrated, elementary schooling was increasing, but by no means was it widely available, in the first half of the fifteenth century: rural areas often had trouble procuring or retaining the services of qualified teachers, and girls' education was still largely a private and isolated phenomenon.²⁹ Given that the curriculum for elementary education in many cases seems to have closely followed the syllabi for lay instruction set forth by later medieval bishops—one fourteenth-century primer described by Moran contains the Creed, the deadly sins, the bodily and spiritual works of mercy, and so on—the *Well* writer may perceive that his own preaching provides listeners with a form of cultural literacy that would otherwise be unavailable to them.³⁰ However negative, his image of the unprepared child makes the schoolroom setting available to listeners without distinction, and implies that all Christians possess the potential to better themselves through diligent study.

Academic learning emerges as an even more crucial issue later in the text, when the writer describes the gift of knowledge provided by the Holy Spirit to those of goodwill. In this case, the writer cannot simply characterize his audience as ignorant and fearful. Recognizing the ways in which this grace might increase lay people's sense of spiritual authority, the writer takes great care to inform his listeners about the narrow realm in which they should apply their knowledge. As part of this argument, he extols the laity's ability to achieve *sapientia*, or the wisdom attainable through emotional meditation upon God. At the same time, he struggles with the proper way to present *scientia*, and offers an extended narrative that both resists and upholds the relationship between intellectual inquiry and faith.³¹

Knowledge: A Dangerous Blessing

The seven graces of the Holy Spirit—deriving ultimately from Isaiah 11:2–3, and expounded upon by scholastic theologians during the High

²⁹See Jo Ann Moran, *The Growth of English Schooling, 1340–1548* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 75–82. Further explorations of schooling for medieval children can be found in William J. Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 15–20, and Nicholas Orme, *English Schools in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. 59–79.

³⁰Moran, *The Growth of English Schooling*, p. 43.

³¹For discussions of this distinction, see James Simpson, "From Reason to Affective Knowledge: Modes of Thought and Poetic Form in *Piers Plowman*," *MÆ* 55 (1986): 1–23; Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 60–66; Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 43–44; and Watson, "Politics," p. 339.

Middle Ages—form a crucial part of the *Well* writer's scheme.³² The well-digging he describes will, ideally, allow the "watyrz of grace" to spring up within each human soul. As with so much of the doctrinal material found in *Jacob's Well*, the writer's analysis of knowledge draws heavily from *Speculum Vitae*. A brief excursion into the treatment of knowledge within *Speculum Vitae* allows us to see the *Well* writer's specific preoccupations: the earlier text primarily focuses on emphasizing the benefits of knowledge, rather than on striving to define its proper scope.

As mentioned previously, *Speculum Vitae* possesses a complicated structure of its own, in which each petition of the Pater Noster corresponds to a particular gift of the Holy Spirit, to one of the deadly sins, to a virtue, and to a component of the Beatitudes.³³ Its author, William of Nassyngton, links the gift of knowledge to the "first askyng" of the prayer—"Forgive us our debts"—and defines it as the ability to perceive one's own spiritual status:

De gyft of knawyng shewys vs right
 What we er and what ys our myght
 And in what perille we er alle,
 And wyns we come and weþer we shalle,
 And what folys þat we haue done,
 And makys vs for sak our syn son.
 (256)

According to *Speculum Vitae*, this gift proves especially helpful in eradicating the sin of ire. After explaining this vice at length, Nassyngton declares that "þis syne of ire with outyn doute / De gyft of knawyng puttes out" (259). He asserts that knowledge replaces anger with the virtue of equity (the capacity to place one's reason in accord with one's will), lists the seven branches of this virtue, and links knowledge to the mourning described in the Beatitudes. Nassyngton concludes the section by repeating that equity "commes of þe gyft of knawyng" (269).

In several places, the discussion of knowledge found in *Jacob's Well* follows *Speculum Vitae* almost word for word. The *Well* writer incorpo-

³²For example, Thomas Aquinas deals with the gifts extensively in I.II, Question 68 of the *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), pp. 877–85.

³³See Smeltz, *Speculum Vitae*, pp. 37–66, for a summary of the text's structure. Citations from his edition of the text are by page number.

rates the Beatitudes into his chosen metaphorical framework, for example, describing mourning as the “watyr of terys” within the well (i.275). In other places, however, he tailors his source to his own ends. Most conspicuous are the *Well* writer’s efforts to attach limitations and caveats to the topic of knowledge. He introduces the subject by describing this gift as the ability to “seest þi-self wel wrecchyd & synfull” (i.275). While this definition closely parallels that found in *Speculum Vitae*, the latter text simply alludes to “knewyng” in subsequent references, while the *Well* priest goes out of his way to stipulate that he speaks of self-knowledge. He makes this point at both the beginning and the end of his analysis of weeping: “þis ȝyfte of grace, þat is, knowyng þe-self, makyth þe to wepyn in vj. maners . . . þise vj. maners wepyng of terys spryngeth in þi welle þe ȝyfte of knowyng, ȝif þou, thruȝ grace, kanst knowe þi-self” (i.275). A similar specificity prevails when he contrasts sinners’ spiritual blindness with “þe grace of knowyng to knowe þe-self” (i.275).

The *Well* priest does not, however, manage to confine knowledge exclusively to the realm of the individual soul. After yet another reference to “a knowyng of þe-self,” he delineates the parameters of this gift:

vnderstondyth þanne weel what þis knowyng is! it techyth þe to lyven ryȝtfully a-monge euyll lyuerys, & to teche ryȝtly, & to defende þi feyth wyth resouns fro inpuynyng of heretykes; It techyth how þou schalt absteyne fro synne & wyckydnesse, and how þou schalt medefully mynystryn, expendyn, dyposyn, þi temperall godys; It techyth þe be resoun to redresse þi werkys lykly to be conformyd to þi feyth; It techyth þe þat wyckydnesse may noȝt ben hyd to þe vndyr coloure of goodnesse. be þis ȝyfte of kunnyng þou knowyst þi-self what þou art, wher-of þou art, what þou schalt be. It techytz þi conscyens what þou schalt do, & what þou schalt bydden opere do in resoun and equyte. (i.276)

Within this passage, which has no analogue in *Speculum Vitae*, the *Well* writer engages explicitly with the social import of *scientia* for his audience. While the passage disparages heretics, it also reveals the impossibility of knowledge’s remaining an internal phenomenon. Instead of functioning exclusively as self-examiners, the *Well* writer’s listeners should teach and correct others. Even as he primarily presents this instruction as a defensive activity against sinners and heretics, his repeated references to reason lend credence to lay people’s interpretive abilities. The *Well* writer here describes his pedagogical project in a new way: his listeners’ primary teacher is not a cleric, but their own store of “kno-

wyng.” Moreover, there are other places in the text where the *Well* writer refers to teaching in a surprisingly open-ended manner: “þou þat hast connyng teche it to þe peple,” he commands in his discussion of pity (i.250), without qualifying the recommendation by considering questions of clerical learning or status. While there are numerous passages in *Jacob's Well* where the writer reminds his listeners to accept the tenets set forth by priests and the Holy Church,³⁴ he also remains open to intellectual and pedagogical activity on the part of lay people themselves.

With this openness, however, comes a large measure of anxiety. The *Well* writer's subsequent treatment of the gift of knowledge suggests that he is troubled by the possibility that lay people will interpret the blessing too broadly. Immediately following his definition of the gift and its uses, the *Well* priest departs from his source once again, in order to distinguish between certain kinds of knowledge and the Holy Spirit's gift: “þis ðyfte of kunnyng techyth þe noȝt of þe sterrys, ne of oþer sotyltes of þe vij. sciencys; but it techyth þe to kun knowe þe-self, whanne þou art synfull, & whanne þou art ryȝtfull, and how þou schalt gouerne þe to saue þi soule” (i.276). *Speculum Vitae* and many other instructional texts remain silent on the distinction between the gift of knowledge and academic education. The prologue to the popular fourteenth-century work *The Prick of Conscience*, for example, comments extensively on the need for man to “knew himself with-inne,” without setting that self-knowledge against scholarly pursuits.³⁵

Nevertheless, texts outside *Jacob's Well's* immediate circle of sources and analogues ponder this problem extensively. *Piers Plowman* is probably the most prominent example. Most readers tend to share Andrew Galloway's sense that “Will's temptations, anxieties, and uncertainties about learning” are central to the poem, but critical opinions vary widely on Langland's actual argument regarding the relationship of intellectual knowledge and Christian salvation.³⁶ Texts within the mystical

³⁴When explaining the fourth commandment, for example, the *Well* writer tells his listeners to “worshepe” and “obeye” their curates (ii.439); they should also “beleuyst alle thyng as holy cherche beleuyth,” even in difficult circumstances (ii.376).

³⁵See *The Pricke of Conscience*, ed. Richard Morris (Berlin: A. Asher & Co., 1863; reissued 1973), p. 5.

³⁶See Andrew Galloway, “*Piers Plowman* and the Schools,” *YLS* 6 (1992): 89–107. Daniel Murtaugh (“*Piers Plowman*” and the *Image of God* [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1978]) argues that Langland insists upon the connection between intellect and salvation, while Nicolette Zeeman contends that Langland feels knowledge must be combined with grace (“‘Studying’ in the Middle Ages—and in *Piers Plowman*,” *New Medieval Literatures* 3 [1999]: 185–212). Simpson perceives a movement from *scientia* to

tradition addressed this question as well: Dame Studie's condemnation of learned men who "haue [God] muche in [hire] mouþ" but not in their heart (B.X. 71) is echoed within *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which castigates those displaying a "proude, corious witte" instead of genuine belief.³⁷ From a political perspective, *Mum and the Sothsegger* turns this insight into an allegorized journey: the poem's speaker's search for truth leads him to seek "alle the vij sciences," but they neither they nor the fraternal orders can give him useful information.³⁸

Questions of excessive and inappropriate knowledge also emerge in the polemic surrounding Lollardy. Pecoock sarcastically notes that knowledge of "narraciouns and parabolis and lijknessis" may enable a cleric to "preche ful gloriosely," but it does not allow for the best kind of reasonable discourse.³⁹ Surprising parallels can emerge in opposing texts' treatment of this question: when Nicholas Love argues that Christians need to "leue hir owne witte & kyndely reson" at the door, so to speak, he recalls Lollard sermonizers' own deprecations of "worldly wyt."⁴⁰ While the former writer emphasizes the primacy of the Church's teachings and the latter the practice of "knowyng of God"⁴¹ through textual analysis, both texts evince a common distrust for intellectual activity unguided by spiritual priorities.

The *Well* writer shares these concerns, and has an even more difficult time resolving them. In the remainder of his treatment of the gift of knowledge, the *Well* writer offers two exempla that reveal herculean efforts on his part to define clearly the relationship between scholarly learning and spiritual well-being.

The first narrative concerns a devil worshiped as a god within a town. When a man asks him the best route to heaven, the fiend gives him an unequivocal answer—"knowe þi-self"—and repeats the *Well* priest's negative definition of proper knowledge: "To knowe sterrys, & oþer scyens, þat kunnyng comyth of stodye; but to knowe þe-self comyth of

sapientia in the work; by contrast, Somerset feels the text's ideas regarding knowledge remain unresolved.

³⁷ *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, EETS o.s. no. 218 (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 22.

³⁸ See *Richard the Redeless and Mum and the Sothsegger*, ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), p. 93.

³⁹ Pecoock, *Repressor*, p. 89.

⁴⁰ See Love, *Mirror*, p. 235, and *English Wycliffite Sermons*, vol. 1, ed. Anne Hudson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 511.

⁴¹ Hudson, *English Wycliffite Sermons*, p. 511.

no skole, ne of no clergye, ne of no letterure" (i.276). The fiend takes the *Well* priest's argument a step further, by ridiculing the learning possessed by the well educated. According to the fiend, some of these "doutourys of lawe & of dyuynyte, & maystrys of oþere scyence . . . knowe noȝt hem-self, ne wyll noȝt knowyn hem-self, to gouerne hem fro synne to ryȝtwysnesse" (i.276). In fact, he argues, "summe lay-men kun bettyr knowyn hem-self in gouernaunce fro synne þan summe grete clerkys . . . þys ȝyfte of knowynge comyth of þe holy gost, & noȝt of skole" (i.276). Not satisfied with this declaration, the *Well* priest elucidates the distinction between spiritual and scholarly knowledge one more time, in his own voice. The trappings of learning—"furryd tabbardys, hodys, chymerys, & pylyouns"—mean nothing to the Holy Spirit; instead, the spirit bestows knowledge "to leryd & lewyd þat arn in þe grounde of obedyence in ful equyte. to hem springeth þe holy gost þis watyr of grace to knowe hem-self, & to gouerne hem-self in goodnesse" (i.277). As a coda to the narrative, the writer describes how Christ at the Ascension gave all people "his ȝyfte of kunnyng for to knowe þe-self to gouerne þe in vertuys," and exhorts his listeners to behave "as chyldrin in obedyens," so that they themselves may someday reach heaven (i.277).

Carruthers, who includes this exemplum within his analysis of *Jacob's Well's* audience and social message, cites it as evidence of the writer's tendency to criticize people from all walks of life, including university "maystrys."⁴² I think we might say even more about the social implications of the narrative, particularly since the writer apparently went out of his way to incorporate the story: as Gregg has shown, this narrative constitutes one of only three occasions in the first fifty sermons where the *Well* priest recounts an exemplum not found in the Latin *Alphabetum Narrationum*. Although he does cite a source for the story ("Alysander in cronicis libro viij"), a close analogue has never been found, and Gregg perceives "a uniquely purposeful manner which suggests some invention" on the part of the *Well* priest.⁴³ In several ways, the story recalls the writer's earlier statements regarding lay people's role within Christianity. Arguing against differences in social status even as he vividly depicts them (indeed, his references to "furryd tabbardys" and the like may suggest that he shares his listeners' resentment of such trappings),

⁴² Carruthers, "Know Thyself," p. 239.

⁴³ Gregg, "The Narrative Exemplum of *Jacob's Well*," pp. 374–76.

the writer upholds lay people's spiritual equality to clerics. But this parity applies to an individual's obedience, at the expense of his or her intellectual abilities. As in his discussion of humility, the writer encourages his listeners to see themselves as children: his references to obedience in this passage evoke both the simple acceptance he attributes to young children and the delinquent student's fear before the schoolmaster. According to the exemplum, other kinds of knowledge—including schooling and “letterure”—only clutter the soul, detracting from its ability to receive the Holy Spirit's gift.

Of course, the *Well* writer's own methods belie this assertion. His disparagement of academic learning conveniently overlooks, for example, the fact that his own sermons expose the laity to the learning and rhetoric of the friars.⁴⁴ But this is not mere hypocrisy on the *Well* writer's part. His text will alter fraternal scholarship by anchoring it to the context of parish life. Instead of functioning as an accoutrement of prestige, the Christian knowledge set forth by the *Well* writer ideally will facilitate conversation, remonstrance, and genuine contrition within his community.

This possibility emerges even more forcefully in the section's other illustrative narrative, which both evokes and resists the connection between book learning and devout religious belief. Although the *Well* priest draws this narrative from the *Alphabetum Narrationum*, his initial description of the exemplum's protagonist reveals his willingness to alter his source to reflect his own preoccupations. The story concerns John of Damascus, the monk and saint, and his betrayal at the hands (literally) of his student.⁴⁵ The *Alphabetum* describes John as a person who combines piety with learning. Chaste and devoted to the Blessed Virgin, he is also well versed in Greek letters and the liberal arts, and skilled “in scribendo in dictando and cantando” (in writing, composing, and singing).⁴⁶ The *Well* writer begins the story with a different emphasis, asserting that John was so “full of pes” and “obedyent” that he receives the ability to “knowyn hym-self, & kowde gouerne hym-self in thouȝt, in

⁴⁴I am grateful to Larry Scanlon for bringing this contradiction to my attention.

⁴⁵This narrative is listed under the rubric “Hand restored to virgin” in Frederic C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1969), p. 191. For the relationship between this tale and a closely related one involving Pope Leo, see Brian S. Lee, “‘This is no fable’: Historical Residues in Two Medieval *Exempla*,” *Speculum* 56 (1981): 728–60, esp. 730–43.

⁴⁶The “John of Damascus” narrative occurs on folios 129v and 130r of B.M. Harley 268.

woord, in dede, in pes, in obedyens, [and] in grace" (i.277). Only after setting these terms does the *Well* writer follow his source in stressing John's great learning. Even then, the writer chooses his words carefully: his protagonist has mastered "scyens of clergie" (277) rather than all of the liberal arts.

The *Well* priest stays close to his source when he describes the events befalling the monk. Having been taken prisoner by the Saracens, John is put to work instructing a lord's son "in wrytyng, & in endyȝtyng, in lulture, & oþer kunnyng of clergie" (i.278). Eventually, the lord's son gains the ability to write and speak exactly like his master. Becoming envious of John's position at court, he writes a treasonous letter in his master's handwriting. When the emperor finds "þis cursed letter," he summons John, who admits that it "is lych myn hand & lyche myn endyȝtynge," but swears that he did not write it (i.278). The disbelieving emperor orders John's right hand to be cut off; as an additional punishment, the hand is suspended near an image of the Blessed Mother in John's priory. John returns home, exposes his wounded arm to the image, and mournfully asks her what he has done to deserve this suffering. That night, Mary appears to him and restores the hand. When the emperor and the court see his "arme & hand hool" the next morning, they realize their mistake and beg for John's forgiveness (i.279).

The *Well* writer departs from the *Alphabetum* in order to highlight John's obedience. When Mary appears to John in the *Alphabetum*, she calls him "puer meus fidelissime" (my most faithful boy); in *Jacob's Well*, she refers to him as "my chyld, trewe, meke, & obedyent in equitye to my sone & to me" (i.279). Even more striking is the writer's decision at the end of the narrative. The *Alphabetum's* exemplum concludes with the revelation of the truth—"rei veritas diligentius inquisita innotuit" (the truth of the matter, inquired into more carefully, became known)—and with a celebration of "mariam virginem et fidelitatem et patientiam et credulitatem" (the Virgin Mary and faith and patience and trust). By contrast, the narrative in *Jacob's Well* ends with an execution: "Þanne þe emperour putte þat lordys sone to a schamefull deth" (i.279).

These alterations, combined with the material in the preceding exemplum, give John's story a much different meaning in *Jacob's Well* than it has in the *Alphabetum Narrationum*. The latter text offers the narrative as an example of "infamia": John loses his reputation through treachery and regains it with the help of the Virgin Mary. Within the context of *Jacob's Well*, the story provides another opportunity for the *Well* writer

to interrogate the problems raised by Christian knowledge. By depicting the punishment of the traitorous pupil, the *Well* writer presents education as a risky undertaking, for students as well as teachers: the lord's son's learning stirs him to envy, facilitates his forgery, and leads him to an ignoble and violent end.⁴⁷ The *Well* writer's added emphasis on John's obedience further suggests that he wants his audience to value submissiveness over academic training.

But these interpellations cannot cancel out the fact of John's embodiment of a complementary relationship between learning and virtue: he continues to think and act throughout the story, rather than simply retreating into silent compliance. When he stands before the image of Mary, he demands that she explain (if not justify) his situation; when he receives the gift of a restored hand, he regains the ability to write songs and letters, not just to pray. While the picture of Mary and the restored hand are nonverbal signs that avoid the complications inherent in letter-writing, they represent conversation and literary creation, not simply pious meditation. Despite its negative portrayal of an educational scenario, then, the exemplum does not attempt to replace thought with blind faith. As we shall see, other parts of *Jacob's Well*—particularly its analysis of truth—also leave room for active lay inquiry and critique, even as they stop short of advocating book learning for all people.

The Pursuit of Truth

In his analysis of changing conceptualizations of truth in late fourteenth-century England, R. F. Green writes that in their works “Chaucer, Langland, and the *Gawain*-poet appear to have been wrestling with the meaning of a word [that is, truth] that also preoccupied many of their less prominent contemporaries.”⁴⁸ Certainly, truth is a problematic concept in *Jacob's Well*. Another gift of the Holy Spirit, understanding, brings this uncertainty to the forefront. Once again confronted with a grace affording a large measure of credit to all believers' intellectual abilities, the *Well* writer first defines understanding broadly as a “lyȝt of grace [that enables people] gostly to knowyn god. & to vnderstonde

⁴⁷The nature of the pupil's crime also parallels Arundel's characterizations of the Lollards as liars and forgers in his introduction to the Constitutions (Wilkins, *Concilia*, p. 315).

⁴⁸R. F. Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 5.

scripture and to haue vnderstondyng in creaturys of god . . . þus vnderstondyng of þe holy gost makyth vs to se god gostly in scripture and in his creaturis. & to sen oure self & oure defawtys" (ii.105). These references to Scripture are particularly provocative. Though the *Well* writer does not specify that this comprehension would come through *reading* God's word, he nevertheless upholds the importance of holy writ and implies that its ideas can be comprehensible to all believers. But he follows up this passage by linking the gift of understanding to a heavy burden of self-restraint and obedience: "holde þou mesure in vnderstondyng. þat is in alle artycles of þe feyth wythoute musyng aboute mannys wytt & resoun. ffor seynt Poule seyth Be no man wysere þan ryȝt wyle. but lede he his wytt in sobyrnesse. after þe mesure of truthe and desyre he noȝt to se resoun þere non may be. but holde he þe truthe þat holy cherche techyth. & seke he no ferthere" (ii.107). Having conceded that lay people possess the ability to know God and to understand Scripture, the *Well* priest explicitly rejects active inquiry into theological matters. Christians should forgo rational inquiry in favor of accepting "þe truthe þat holy cherche techyth."

While this might seem to resolve the question, the *Well* writer later depicts the church's own teachings as fraught with deception. Preaching is a particular problem, both in its delivery and its reception. People are happy to listen to criticisms of "prelatys & . . . opere grete men," the *Well* writer complains, but react angrily against remarks that hit too close to home: "whan þe preest comyth ny hem. & towchyth hem trewly & plentyously of here defawȝtes. þei turnyn away wrothly fro þe preest herte & defendyn here dyffawȝtys wyth false colourys & excusyn & turnyn to tellyn talys. & iapys & to depraue þe preest & þe woord of trowthe" (ii.226–7). In addition to reflecting badly on the congregation's morals, these responses taint the actions of priests themselves: "prechourys hye and lowe arn a feryd to sey þe trouthe. bothe seculere & relygious and stodyin how in here sermons þey mown wyth flateryng colourys symylacyouns & fals excusacyouns faouryn & plesyn þe peple grete & smale. leryd and lewyd in here synne. & to excusyn here vices. wrongys & here falsnesse" (ii.227). As he did when he asked his listeners not to hate or walk out on him, the writer demonstrates an awareness of the preacher-audience relationship as a two-way encounter, risky for both speaker and listeners. The institutional edifice indicated by the writer's earlier reference to "holy church's" truth reveals itself to be composed of individuals who are fallible and dishonest themselves.

The *Well* writer does not stop there. He develops his critique of priests and other members of the higher social orders (“Iustyses. iuges. prelatys doctourys and clerkys preestys & alle men of holy cherche”) by calling them the unfaithful husbands of truth (ii.228). When their wives give birth to ugly “children”—that is, to “rowe woordys and foule bacbytynges. foule lesynges. in hate of þe peple for þou seyst trouthe”—they conceive a hate for truth itself, and take on the “lemman” of flattery (ii.229).

The writer does not say which role he himself occupies within the troubled family he describes. Switching metaphors, he describes truth as the language of heaven. At this point, however, he evokes a school-room scene that offers yet another formulation of the relationship between learning and spiritual well-being: “ȝyf a gramaryan speke his owyn langwage in scole. englysche. he schal be smit with a pawmere on þe hand or scouryd or taken be þe cheke or be þe ere. and he schal be tawȝt to speke latyn or frensche. Ryȝt so in þis world. who so speke his owyn langwage þat is trithe he schal be chastysed & betyn in his body or in his good þat wo is hym & he schal be tawȝt to lye” (ii.230). For modern readers, the most striking aspect of this passage might well be its vivid portrayal of student vulnerability. As Nicholas Orme, Copeland, and others have noted, corporal punishment was so common in the later Middle Ages that whips and canes almost invariably constitute part of visual representations of schooling.⁴⁹ This passage is perhaps made even more evocative by its reference to actual physical contact (not just “smiting,” but actual grabbing of the face or ear).

The analogy certainly explains the terror felt by the delinquent student “who kan noȝt his lessoun” described elsewhere in *Jacob's Well*. Within that passage, the *Well* writer implied that Christians should debase themselves before God, in recognition of their sinfulness: his reference to the child did not question the need to learn lessons in the first place. In this discussion, however, the writer places education itself on

⁴⁹For discussions of corporal punishment in medieval grammar and elementary schools, see Orme, *English Schools in the Middle Ages*, pp. 123–28; Copeland, “Introduction: Dissenting Critical Practices,” *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages*, ed. Rita Copeland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 6–14; Jody Enders, “Rhetoric, Coercion, and the Memory of Violence,” in *Criticism and Dissent*, esp. pp. 36–42; and Ralph Hanna, “School and Scorn: Gender and *Piers Plowman*,” *New Medieval Literatures* 3 (1999): 220–23. For its use in medieval song-schools, see Bruce Hollinger, “Pedagogy, Violence, and the Subject of Music: Chaucer's *Prioress' Tale* and the Ideologies of ‘Song,’” *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997): 157–92.

the side of flattery and deception: people are “tawȝt” to tell lies, just as they are instructed in Latin and French. Far from functioning neutrally, then, the physical violence in this passage mirrors the brutality of those who deny or obscure the truth.

Even more important, the *Well* writer makes clear that the student already possesses knowledge—the pupil speaks English, his “owyn langage.” This idea represents a crucial revision of characterizations of scholarly learning within the “gift of knowledge” section of *Jacob’s Well*. In the tale depicting the devil and his recommendations, education emerges as a useless distraction from the necessary business of achieving self-knowledge. The John of Damascus story, for its part, presents knowledge both negatively (in the hands of the forger) and positively (when coupled with John’s virtue). But the logic of this grammarian simile adds a crucial new dimension to the *Well* writer’s analysis of schooling, and to his depiction of lay people in general. Although it disparages education, it posits a positive alternative that goes beyond penitential self-examination. People should seek to speak their “owyn langage”—the truths they possess before being influenced by worldly considerations. In a work whose major metaphor depicts individual Christians as foul-smelling wells, the recognition of an essential goodness represents a substantial development.

Moreover, because he has stated so emphatically that people of all stations are “tawȝt to lye”—indeed, he has stressed that preachers are particularly susceptible to this instruction—the *Well* writer departs from the hierarchies at work in some of his earlier statements. When the writer concludes his discussion by telling his listeners to “putte falsnesse & lesynges owt ȝour mowth. & seye truthe” (ii.230), he implies that all people should return to a childlike state—not one of blindness, submissiveness, or ignorance, but of honesty and authenticity.⁵⁰ In addition, the *Well* writer argues that his audience should not merely ponder the truth but should take on the authority of speaking it aloud. Despite his disenchantment with the preaching of his peers, he remains committed to outward conversation, as opposed to inner meditation or scholarly dispute.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *Mum and the Sothsegger* makes a similar point when it likens truth-tellers to a “barn un-ylerid” who “babliþ fourth bustusely” (50), though it does not specifically link the uneducated child’s words to a community of English-speakers.

⁵¹ Pecock, for example, privileged academic teaching and disputation over preaching; for analysis of this argument, and his contemporaries’ reactions to it, see R. M. Ball, “The Opponents of Bishop Pecock,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 48 (1997): 230–62, esp. 230–34.

By suggesting that people should speak out their “owyn language,” the writer seems to be feeling his way toward a collaborative model for community interaction: not one in which the “lered” instruct the “leude,” but in which people come together in a shared effort to remove themselves from rampant societal dishonesty. This passage’s anticlerical statements and association of the vernacular with truth suggest links between his ideas and Wycliffite views. The *Well* writer implies that his own preaching allows the truth to be spoken and heard, and his text involves an effort to communicate with people in their own language. In effect, his text functions as an alternative form of education—one well removed from the violence of actual schools. While he does not include textual study in the model he proposes, he does raise the possibility of lay people’s assuming new forms of authority, based on his recognition of their existing interpretive skills and of the need to repair crucial problems within conventional Christian communities.

At the very end of his text, the *Well* writer affirms these ideas even more resoundingly. Having recapitulated the schema of the text as a whole, the writer asserts that those who adhere to Christian principles will enjoy the benefits of truth, charity, and mercy. To illustrate these virtues, he tells of a “peddere in a markett” who has six baskets full of fish to sell (ii.545).⁵² He sets three of them, named God’s curse, sin, and falseness, out for immediate sale; they are quickly bought up by the rich. Meanwhile, he hides the other three—truth, charity, and mercy—in his stall in an effort to save these more precious baskets for later. Unfortunately, the latter three baskets are stolen while peddler is busy selling the first three. Desperate to sell them to the poor customers at his stall, “þe peddere ran abowtyn to enqueryn after his 3. panyerys of fyshe” (ii.546). Recalling the narrator’s pursuit of the truth-teller in *Mum and the Sothsegger*, the fishmonger’s journey takes him to every segment of society. He travels to “þe Popys paleys. and . . . þe Paleysis of cardynals, Erschebysschopys & bysschopys,” to the households of vicars and secular priests, and on to the abbeys of the monastic orders (ii.546). Everywhere the result is the same: when he asks if they have heard or seen truth, charity, or mercy, the reply comes back that the inhabitants “knewe non swyche” (ii.546). When he reaches the friars, the response is slightly different: “þe frerys seyden þat þei haddyn þe saveere of hem.

⁵²Carruthers edits and briefly discusses this narrative in “‘And What Schall Be þe Ende’: An Edition of the Final Chapter of *Jacob’s Well*,” *MÆ* 61 (1992): 289–97.

but it smellyd so strong on hem. þat þey leetyn all 3 panyers truth charyte and mercy pacyn forth by here gate. but non of hem thre abode þere ne koom in amongis hem” (ii.547). Turning to the nonclerical world, he asks everyone from emperors to squires and beyond—“ryche & pore and . . . alle þe comouns”—but all deny that these baskets are among them (ii.547).

The exemplum remains open-ended: no divine force of aid or retribution intervenes to aid the peddler. Instead, the *Well* writer addresses his audience directly:

þerwhyle is stolyn away out of oure welle þe fysche þat is. delyȝt & desyir of truthe charyte & mercy. þat I drede me sore þowȝ we sekyn þere aftyr in ony astate of holy cherche or of temporalte. eythir in heyȝ or lowe. poore or ryche grete or smale. it is wol hard to fyndyn hem. ffor þe fysche of truthe of charyte and of mercy smellyn so stronge vp on vs. þat we mowe noȝt sufferyn þe sauour þer of. but puttyn hem away fro vs. But ȝif I wyste where þat I myȝte fynde þis fysch of truthe charyte & mercy. I wolde gladlyche byggen þerof. And be my counseyl enquiryeth and aspyeth þerafter. ȝyf ȝe mowe wyte where it is. byeth þerof. (ii.548)

If truth, charity, and mercy are found, the writer advises in the last lines of his text, they need to be incorporated into the well (as stonework, parts of the ladder to God, and so on) so that the well-builder may partake of the “watyr of grace” (ii.549).

To Carruthers, the narrative is lively and humorous, but it also reflects the writer’s “deep-seated pessimism about human nature,” attributable to “long years of hearing confessions.”⁵³ I would argue, however, that the exemplum directly links examinations of conscience to a larger societal context. The narrative suggests that people cannot, after all, simply generate tools and building materials from within the self: they need to search the world for them. The *Well* writer tells his listeners to look outward rather than inward, and states very specifically that their questions will not be resolved by clerical authorities. His invitation to his listeners—“enquiryeth and aspyeth þerafter”—manifests a trust in his audience: instead of just scrutinizing their own sins, they should interpret the world for themselves. Although elsewhere he downplays the connection between belief and book learning, here he suggests that his listeners should take the world as a kind of text, and should read

⁵³ Carruthers, “Ende,” p. 291.

it critically. The fact that such analysis would also involve a sensory activity—one could “follow one’s nose” to the fish, as well as knocking on doors—recalls the image and the hand within the John of Damascus exemplum, in that they all involve interpretation and investigation, while remaining outside the textual practices rendered suspect by the Lollards, or the academic sophistries of the friars.

As in his discussion of the English-speaking grammarian, the *Well* writer stops short of advocating a program for change specifically focused on widespread literacy and preaching. Even so, the *Well* writer’s willingness to end his concluding narrative with a series of “ȝyfs” suggests that he seeks to teach his audience modes of questioning and analysis, not just pieces of information to be swallowed and internalized. Indeed, the story implies that confident self-assertion is essential to an honest Christian life. The *Well* writer never suggests that the baskets will become fragrant when found, and the friars’ refusal to admit them into their community bodes ill for anyone carrying them. In this concluding narrative, as well as in the image of the abuses suffered by the grammarian, the *Well* writer characterizes resilience in response to society’s hostility, disdain, and physical violence as an essential component of piety.⁵⁴

Simultaneously hopeless and determined, the *Well* writer’s attitude recalls that of Conscience at the end of *Piers Plowman*, who sets out on a truth-seeking quest of his own. *Jacob’s Well* of course is no dream vision: the imperatives the *Well* writer sets for himself involve a specific body of knowledge, not the “determined indeterminacy”⁵⁵ that so many readers find operating in Langland’s text. The list of precepts is finite, as is the time period of his preaching. At the same time, however, he implies that the information he conveys will provide a stimulus for thought and discussion, rather than a conclusion to it. Like *Dives and Pauper*, which builds a vigorous debate between a mendicant and a layman of sophisticated understanding around an exposition of the Ten Commandments, *Jacob’s Well* demonstrates that a syllabus can organize instruction without confining it. The *Well* writer acknowledges that his listeners’ process of education will extend far beyond the parameters of his own text, or indeed of his own pastoral authority.

⁵⁴The *Well* writer’s interest in the social dimension of individual belief leads him to conclusions quite similar to those set forth within the explicitly political *Mum and the Sothsegger*. Even as *Mum* emphasizes the “scorn oþer scathe” suffered by truth-tellers (ranging from sorrow to imprisonment or even death), it also affirms that “trouthe is so tough” that it will never be completely eliminated from the earth (165–92).

⁵⁵Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience*, p. 23.

