York Merchants at Prayer
The Confessional Formula of the Bolton Hours

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York, Minster MS Add. 2, a mercantile book of hours compiled in or around York sometime between 1407 and 1420 and commonly known as the Bolton Hours, includes the standard fare of later medieval books of hours: Marian and Christocentric devotions and prayers, hours of the Cross, a calendar showing saints’ and feast days, penitential psalms and formulas, the litany of the saints, and the office of the dead.1 But although primers (as these books of hours are also called) include reasonably predictable prayers and devotions, they can reflect local interests, too: in terms of sheer numbers, books of hours are among the most popular forms of medieval devotional literature; in terms of their composition, they are also among the most idiosyncratic.2 The Bolton Hours is no exception:


2. On the central place of books of hours—over 1,400 of which survive in extant codices—in late medieval devotional reading, see Mary C. Erler, “Devotional Literature,” in The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, vol. 3, 1400–1557, ed. Lotte Hellinga and J. B. Trapp
fol. 100v includes a three-quarter-page illumination of St. Richard Scrope, erstwhile bishop, executed traitor under Henry IV, and popularly venerated (though not canonized) saint of fifteenth-century York. His inclusion in this primer, as many have noted, serves as a testimony to the manuscript’s urban York provenance. Along with two images of Scrope, illuminations of William of York and celebrations of other northern saints would have reminded the fifteenth-century reader of his or her relationship both to the community in York and to heaven (populated, as it happens, by saints associated with the reader’s hometown and with the North in general).

This essay will focus not on the Bolton Hours *per se* but on the confessional formula that is crammed into the opening and closing leaves of the manuscript. In many ways conventional in its recollection of the seven deadly sins and catalog of the Ten Commandments, this formula does not read like a general invitation to confession, as confessional formulas are supposed to do. Instead, the formula is, if not personal, particular to the social and economic milieu of a family like the Boltons. Some moments are charming in their presentation of sin: writes the author of this formula, “I haue synnyd in glotony ofte tymes & many, many tymes ettyyn & drownkyyn mor than my body may resonabily [be] sustenyd with” (fol. 1v; emphasis added).

It is easy to imagine the repetition of “many” as distinctive, the author recalling and even daydreaming about a particular dish. And indeed, this author—whom I will argue was likely a member of the Bolton family—shapes the confessional

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5. Depictions of northern saints include St. John of Bridlington (fol. 207r), St. Cuthbert (fol. 40r), and St. Sitha (fol. 40v).

6. This moment is less clearly idiosyncratic than other instances in the confessional formula; as Richard Newhauser pointed out to me in private correspondence, it is entirely possible that the author is representing a perfectly standard version of gluttony, the very definition of which is consuming far too much. In concert with other particularities of this formula, however, the temptation to understand it as reflecting the author’s own habits remains.
formula to reflect the concerns of a family like the York Boltons. Some omissions or alterations in the section on the Ten Commandments, for instance, might seem at first glance like mistakes born of ignorance; but as I will show in this essay, the author in fact provides a unique perspective on how a successful lay family might square the demands of religion with the ordinary concerns of successful businesspeople.

The Bolton Hours is named for a mid fifteenth-century mercantile family in York, Alice and John Bolton III, who seem to have owned it at least in 1445 when John died. Patricia Cullum and Jeremy Goldberg have convincingly shown that Alice Bolton’s mother, Margaret Blakburn, commissioned the manuscript for herself and her daughters. It is no surprise, then, that this book of hours foregrounds the popular devotional figures of the North and of York. Mid and late fifteenth-century additions to the manuscript, such as the confessional formula and the obituaries interpolated into the calendar, illustrate a still more specific connection to York’s governing class: the mercantile oligarchy, of which the Boltons and Blakburns were a part. Both Alice Bolton’s father and her brother, Nicholas Blakburn Sr. and Jr., served as mayor of York (in 1412 and 1429, respectively). Nicholas Sr. and Margaret belonged to the prestigious Trinity guild, long associated with mercers and merchants; they endowed a Trinity window at All Saints, North Street and were buried in York Minster. For their part, in 1430 the Boltons joined the elite Corpus

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7. There is an interpolated obit for John Bolton on fol. 30v. There are competing claims as to how and when Alice Bolton came to own the Bolton Hours, and the circumstances under which the book passed to her remain unclear. See Cullum and Goldberg, “How Margaret Blackburn Taught Her Daughters,” p. 225.
8. Ibid.
9. Jeremy Goldberg tracks the growing authority of the civic government in York, made up largely of successful merchants like John Bolton and Nicholas Blakburn, over craft guilds, suggesting that the government in the city was manipulated in order “to ensure that mercantile interests were upheld.” See Goldberg, “Craft Guilds, the Corpus Christi Play and Civic Government,” in The Government of Medieval York: Essays in Commemoration of the 1396 Royal Charter, ed. Sarah Rees Jones (York: Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 1997), 151–63, p. 159. As Jenny Kermode points out, the governing elite of York was overwhelmingly mercantile: between 1300 and 1509, 122 men served as mayor; 79 percent (96) were merchants. See her Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 39; and on the mercantile success of the Boltons and Blakburns in particular, see pp. 188–89, 298–301.
10. Cullum and Goldberg, “How Margaret Blackburn Taught Her Daughters,” p. 222. On the Guild of the Holy Trinity, see The York Mercers and Merchant Adventurers, Surtees Society 129 (Durham: Andrews & Co., Sadler Street, 1918), pp. v–xiii. Margaret Blakburn’s financial stability after her husband’s death in 1432 is similarly suggestive of the Blakburns’ overall prestige in the city: she retained sufficient wealth after Nicholas died to make bequests totaling over £520 when she died in 1435. Bequests of other mercantile widows who were financially independent at the time of their death were significantly lower, £137 being the next highest sum. See Kermode, Medieval Merchants, pp. 42, 94–96.
Christi guild;11 John Bolton served as mayor of York and as an MP,12 and his father was a prominent supporter and friend of John Gysburn, mayor of York three times in the 1370s. This relationship in particular connects the Boltons to one of York’s most controversial political figures: Gysburn was a wealthy merchant whose mayoralty was so plagued by scandal that he was removed from office in November 1380.13 Gysburn was also one of the affluent merchants who controlled the route of the Corpus Christi cycle.14 What is more, Margaret Bolton, Alice and John’s daughter, married into the landed gentry.15 Thomas Scauceby, whose interpolated obituary also appears in the Bolton Hours’ calendar, was yet another successful merchant in fifteenth-century York: a member of the Corpus Christi guild as of 1439 and closely connected to the Blakburn family,16 he was city chamberlain in 1442–43, master of the Mercers’ guild in 1443, and mayor in 1462–63;17 his name also appears in a 1454 list of stationholders on the route of the Corpus Christi plays.18

In confirming the Bolton Hours’ connection to two of the most influential families in fifteenth-century York, as well as their connections to other prominent figures like Scauceby, the interpolated, fifteenth-century obituaries shed light on what might otherwise seem to be infelicities in the primer’s confessional formula.19 This formula was very likely composed by a member

12. See Kermode, Medieval Merchants, p. 81; Cullum and Goldberg, “How Margaret Blackburn Taught Her Daughters,” p. 221.
13. Kermode, Medieval Merchants, p. 57. See also Beckwith, Signifying God, p. 38.
18. Crouch, “Paying to See the Play,” 75–76; and see Cullum and Goldberg, “How Margaret Blackburn Taught Her Daughters,” p. 221.
of the Bolton or Blakburn family: paleographical and codicological evidence confirm that the Bolton Hours was finished before the formula was inscribed, as the formula ends abruptly on fol. 4r in the middle of a section on the sacraments and then picks up again on fol. 209r, after a full-page illumination of the Day of Judgment. So, too, while the primer itself is inscribed in textura, probably by a York Dominican,20 the confessional formula and obits are recorded in a mixed hand of anglicana and secretary and in different ink from the rest of the primer. Based on the appearance of these hands, I believe the order of composition of these additions to be, first, the confessional formula; then the obit for John Bolton as well as two interpolations in the formula; and finally, the three remaining obituaries. Three and possibly four scribes are responsible for these additions: the confessional formula, to be found on fols. 1–4 and 209–10, is in a single and distinctive hand;21 another scribe recorded the obituary for John Bolton and may also have added two words to the confessional formula itself;22 and another still recorded the obituaries for Alice Bolton, Thomas Scauceby, and Agnes Lond, all of whom are listed as having died in 1472.23

Given that the book was in their possession at the time of these additions, it is highly probable that members of the Blakburn or Bolton household are responsible for all of them. Perhaps Alice Bolton, who lived almost thirty years longer than her husband, documented (or had a family clerk inscribe) the date of her husband’s death in 1445; perhaps she or some other woman


21. The formations of the “s,” “h,” and “b” in particular distinguish the scribe of the formula from the two obituary scribes (fols. 30v–32r).

22. It is difficult to distinguish between the scribe who noted John Bolton’s death in 1445 and whoever added gender-inclusive language to the confessional formula. On the one hand, the different formation of the “h” in the interpolated “husband” (fol. 3v), the “h” of the confessional formula’s original scribe (fol. 3v), and the “h” of “Johannis” in the obit (fol. 30v) suggests three separate scribes. On the other hand, the “h” of “husband” looks especially bizarre, including a hook that the scribe of the confessional formula executes neatly; and the “b” of “husband” matches that of “obitus” (fol. 30v); it is possible that whoever wrote “husband” also inscribed the obit for John Bolton and was attempting to mimic the hand of the formula’s scribe on fol. 3v.

23. These obits, to be found on fols. 31r–32r, are recorded in brown ink; the formation of the “c” and the “b” in particular distinguishes this hand from the other additions to the book of hours, including the obituary for John Bolton. Based on the ink color, this scribe is likely also responsible for another addendum to the calendar on fol. 28v to include the feast day of Saint Sitha. Whoever is responsible for this interpolation slavishly tried to imitate the textura of the book’s original scribe.
who used (or composed) the confessional formula added one instance of gender-inclusive language to be found there: “Also þat I haue desyryd þe wife ['husbond'] of my neythbur” (fol. 3v–4r). Perhaps Margaret Blakburn, Alice Bolton’s mother, commissioned or composed the formula itself upon receiving the finished book of hours. Moreover, as I will argue in this essay, while the author of this formula was clearly aware of the basic components of confessional forms, he or she wrote from the perspective of a wealthy merchant, highlighting issues that would likely have been of concern to the mercantile oligarchy, excising those that would not, and making allowances for worldly behavior that clerics routinely condemn. The formula clearly expresses lay and mercantile interests in even more intimate and specific ways than the book of hours proper. This document, in other words, reflects the local preoccupations of the manuscript and illustrates the effect of oral, public, and local culture on mainstream religious practices.

The Confessional Formula of the Bolton Hours: Mercantile Piety at Work

Forms of confession such as we find in the Bolton Hours are quite distinct from the *summae confessorum* and other didactic confessional works. In his analysis of over 440 Latin, French, and English forms of confession from circa 1200 to circa 1500, Michael Cornett explains that the form of confession frequently includes staples such as the Seven Deadly Sins, the Ten Commandments, the Articles of Faith, the Sacraments, and the Seven Works of

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24. There is one other example in the formula, also on fol. 3v: “Also þat I haue synnyd flesly with any ['man'] woman outher weddyd or unweddyd.” In this instance, however, the word “man” is patently the hand of the formula’s original scribe.

25. King has also suggested that this confessional formula shows evidence of “lay mercantile use,” though she does not examine the formula in detail. See “Corpus Christi Plays,” p. 56.

Mercy. Catechetical material is similar, of course; what makes the confessional form unique, as Cornett points out, is its focus on preparing for confession “through a first-person speaker”: “Not the confession of any particular sinner, the form of confession presents a full range of possibilities of sin for anyone, or at least has this comprehensive purpose.” I think we might both expand and complicate Cornett’s definition by considering how formulas were also modified to suit the needs of particular communities, and not just the singular (and universal) penitent. In making this suggestion, I also part ways with Alexandra Barratt, whose observation that the formula may be “a broad-spectrum, all-purpose formula,” “striking one with its inclusiveness,” has much in common with Cornett’s interpretation of these documents. While it is true that the Bolton Hours’ formula sometimes behaves in the generalized way we might expect of this genre, offering gender-inclusive moments and incorporating the sacrament of ordination as well as marriage, moments of revision and omission reveal concerns in keeping with such a high-status family. This confessional formula may not have been composed for a particular individual, then, but its author nevertheless wrote it with a particular community of elite merchants in mind: two of the most successful families in York at the turn of the fifteenth century.

And indeed, the formula reflects the status of these families; it does not necessarily, as Cornett suggests, “present a full range of possibilities of sin for anyone.” In fact, this formula makes allowances that, in the context of medieval penance, seem rather odd: the author of the formula implies, for instance, that it is possible to have just the right amount of pride:

I haue synd [in] þe seuen dedely syns, þat is to say [in pryde?] of herte, of vnbowsumnes to god and haly kyrke & agayn the hele of my saule, in prowde spekyng, in continaunce of beryng, and in araiment of clethynge, in werldys gude hafeyng, owthyr of grace or of kyndredyn. Als so [. . .] in

30. Cornett, “Form of Confession,” p. 5; emphasis added.
any [conceuyng] of gude name, & in spycy of ypocrysie, to haue commendacioun be any [symulacion] of þe pepill better þan I ‘was’ worthy [to] haue. (fol. 1r)31

This section in some ways corresponds to traditional subdivisions of pride: disobedience (vnbowsumannes), vanity (perhaps including boasting, here—prowde spekyng), and hypocrisy. So, too, in expressing regret for having sought “commendacioun [. . .] of þe pepill better þan I was worthy [to] haue” (more praise of the people, by any pretense, than I was worthy of), the author draws on another branch of pride: ambition. At the same time, the author limits the circumstances of his or her repentance: of disobedience to God and the church, rather than, more broadly speaking, “hem þat þu schuldest obieȝschen”32 of conceiving of his or her “gude name” specifically beyond its worth, rather than simply repenting of pride in status.33 Put another way, the author, while rejecting dissembling behavior (by any symulaciou n), implies that he or she is in fact “worthy” of at least some commendation and, even as the author repents of this behavior, obliquely condemns others who pretend to be of a higher class. Read in light of the Boltons’ and Blakburns’ status in York, these moments signal both an awareness of their local importance and that others (the gentry, the titled nobility) were higher still.34

While the inclusion of improper dress or proud speech is perfectly conventional, then, the expression of these sins has a distinctly local and lay

31. In citations from the Bolton Hours, single quotes go around words that a scribe added in the margins or between lines; in this case, ‘was’ is to be found sandwiched above the line ending “worthy [to]”; square brackets signal words that have faded and are thus difficult to read. I follow the scribe’s orthography except to expand abbreviations, which are italicized. I am indebted to Barratt’s edition of this formula.
33. Chaucer’s Parson has the following to say about pride in one’s station: “Eek for to pride hym of his gentrie is ful greet folie; for ofte tyme the gentrie of the body binymeth the gentrie of the soule; and eek we ben alle of o fader and of o mooder; and alle we been of o nature, roten and corrupt, both riche and povre. / For sothe, o manere gentrie is for to preise, that apparaileth mannes corage with vertues and moralitees, and maketh hym Cristes child” (The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987], X.460–61). Robert Mannyng of Brunne similarly exhorts, “Of alle folyys hyt ys þe flour / For þy godennesse to haue wrldes honour. / Þat þou art outrage / Þat þou art come of hegh lynage, / Beþenke þe weyl fro whenne þou cam: / Alle we were of adam” (Handlyng Synne, ed. Idelle Sullens [Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1983], lines 3031–36).
34. See Kermode, Medieval Merchants, pp. 81–83, for a Bolton/Blakburn family tree, illustrating their connections to other influential mercantile and gentry families in York (the Aldestonemores, Boweses, Gascoignes, Holbecks, Kirkebys, Louths, and Ormesheads) as well as their intermarriages with members of the gentry.
mercantile tinge. In a devotional context, “commendacioun” signals the virtue of obedience, a sign of humility (and hence an antidote to pride) that extends to include embracing the role of your own group. But “commendacioun”—and seeking too much of it—is a social problem, too: in the mercantile group to which the Boltons belonged, sons rarely survived long enough to inherit the family business. As a result, among the mercantile families in York, financial affluence frequently depended upon intermarriage and not, as we might expect, on patrilineal inheritance. Hence, while inveighing against improper dress or proud speech is to be expected in a late-medieval discussion of pride, for the Boltons and Blakburns in particular, acting out against one’s peers in these ways could have serious financial and social ramifications, especially in securing a future match between two families. Feuds or speaking proudly—let alone having too much pride in one’s clothing or “werldys gude hafeyng”—might chip away at a community that relied on the circulation of goods from one family to another. A stable community would surely have been essential to a class of individuals whose family businesses survived, as Jenny Kermode explains, an average of only two generations and for whom individual wealth “was continually redistributed amongst other members of the merchant group in bequests and through marriage.”

In such a context, relationships with neighbors would matter as much—if not more—than relationships with immediate family members.

This was, then, a culture in which it could literally pay to know your neighbors well and in which understanding what you were (and were not) entitled to must have been crucial. Not surprisingly, then, the form for confessing avarice highlights not merely the desire to withhold worldly goods from others in need, but also one’s right to goods:

‘Auericia.’ Also þat I haue synnyd in couyttyse. þat I haue noght hawdyn me paid of þe state & þe degre that god has sent me, bott couett wyrshepe of þe warld, mar þan me hyght to do. & Also þat I haue sett my herte, of

35. Ibid., pp. 78–81, 111–15. For a similar claim, see Rees Jones and Riddy, “Bolton Hours of York,” p. 245.
36. Kermode, Medieval Merchants, p. 80. Sylvia L. Thrupp, writing about London, remarks that “marriage was recognized as one of the best means of obtaining capital for a merchant’s business, and the need of capital was very great” (The Merchant Class of Medieval London [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1948], p. 29). Moreover, as Thrupp notes, Caxton observed that in London, “merchant families retained a high status” for a short span of time—no more than three generations—“sons somehow failing to inherit the business capacity of their fathers and consequently tending to sink in the social scale” (p. 191). Many merchants left no male heir at all, whether because of disease or because sons took other occupations (pp. 200–206); it hence seems at least possible that in London, as in York, merchant wealth circulated among families, horizontally, rather than vertically down a family line.
fals couutyse, for to desyre any thynge þat I haue no ryght to, & þat I haue takyn or withhaldyn þat att I had no ryght to. Whar for I cry god almyghty mercy. (fol. 2r)

Here, the author emphasizes desiring what is beyond one’s station in particular, including phrases such as “state” and “degre” and repenting specifically of having coveted “wyrshepe of þe warld, mar þan me hyght to do.” Yet again, the author of the confessional formula suggests that, commensurate with social standing, there is in fact an appropriate degree to which one might covet worldly worship. Neither is it sinful to desire what one is legally entitled to: the problem is in desiring what “I haue no ryght to,” or taking or withholding what “I had no ryght to.” As Roger Ladd points out, in antimercantile satire, merchants were often depicted as avaricious; it is not difficult to see how this confessional formula pushes against such caricatures by redefining what constitutes avarice in the first place. Pride and avarice both have their corresponding virtues (humility and largesse), but here, the formula redefines those virtues in mercantile terms. In this context, pride itself can be virtuous, provided it corresponds to one’s social station and does not offend other members of the mercantile community; and seeking profit via trade can similarly be virtuous, provided one does not overstep one’s bounds. Given the conflict between some of the craft guilds and the ruling elite of York, particularly in the early and mid-fifteenth centuries, connecting virtue to legal profit is a canny move: understood in the context of the labor statues of 1363–64, which artificially divided labor in order to restrict the practices of craft guilds and benefit members of the mercantile oligarchy, the formula might remind its reader that merchants were not subjected to the same legal restrictions as members of craft guilds. Put another way, a York merchant who had the status of a Bolton or a Blakburn had the “ryght to” just about anything.

Preoccupations that are consonant with a mercantile community are nowhere more apparent than in the confessional formula’s rendition of the

38. One is here reminded of the special status accorded to merchants in the section on greed in MS Laud 463, a poem about the seven deadly sins: “Or marchaund wip hise marchan-dise / To loken in alle kynne wise, / Hou myche he may wip treuth e winne, / Pat no treche-rie is inne” (“Septem peccata mortalia,” in Die Kildare-Gedichte: die ältesten mittelenglischen Denkmäler in anglo-irischer Überlieferung, ed. W. Heuser [Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1904], p. 191; emphasis added).
39. Sarah Beckwith characterizes these statutes as a “mercantile-enforced fantasy of a division of labor”; the net result was that each craftsperson must choose one craft and use no other (Signifying God, p. 48); see also Heather Swanson, Medieval Artisans: An Urban Class in Late Medieval England (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 112–21.
Ten Commandments. The section on the commandments in the Bolton Hours fails to include, as Barratt has noted, the fourth and fifth commandments to honor one’s parents and not to kill, substituting instead Christ’s dictum to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Barratt associates this absence with a deficiency in formal religious education among the lay bourgeoisie; but I find it unlikely that someone would confuse such a central tenet of the faith. Medieval commentaries on the Decalogue were widespread and popular, to say nothing of longer works such as *Dives and Pauper,* mnemonic vernacular poems such as appeared in the widespread *Speculum Christiani,* or the Decalogue’s regular appearance in confessional and didactic works. One such work not only is from Yorkshire but also survives in over forty copies: the *Speculum vitae,* the only verse translation of the *Somme le roi.* There, the author works the Decalogue into his intricate presentation of the components of the *Pater Noster*—and he includes the fourth and fifth commandments in precisely the right spots (in fact reserving a long section advocating for the proper treatment of one’s parents).

If we think of these missing commandments in the Bolton Hours as moments of revision rather than accidental omissions, then, framing the precepts in terms of loving your neighbor and omitting the commandments addressing familial honor and homicide make sense: because intermarriage was as important as inheritance, it should not be surprising that a merchant family member would have been perhaps more concerned about falling out of step with his or her neighbors than with his or her parents. What is more, commandments four through ten map onto the second commandment of the New Law—to love your neighbor as yourself. Indeed, the author of *Dives and Pauper* presents the fifth commandment as largely allegorical, identify-

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40. Barratt, “‘Envoluped In Synne,’” p. 6.
44. Ibid., lines 1045–64.
45. I owe this point to Nicholas Watson. As the author of the *Speculum vitae* puts it, “Pe other seuen [commandments] may a man kenne / How he sal haue hym onence alle men / Pat here his euencrysten bene” (lines 1041–43).
ing as “manslaute” such (seemingly) minor sins as backbiting, flattery, and duplicity. The author of the confessional formula in the Bolton Hours, in other words, both modifies the commandments to suit his or her immediate circumstances and, in doing so, draws on popular renditions of the sins of the mouth as tantamount to spiritual homicide.

This section reads as follows: “Also þat I haue noght lufyd my neuyn crystyn als me aght to do na noght done to þham47 als I walde þai dyd to me in worde and dede. Also þat I haue bene glade of þaire euylle fayre and sorowefull of þer wele fare, I cry God mercy” (fol. 3r). In raising the issue of backbiting and schadenfreude, the author obliquely echoes descriptions of “al maner manslauthe vnleful, bobin bodily & gostlyche” such as are found in Dives and Pauper.48 The author of Dives and Pauper affirms that “þe Iewys slowyn Crist with her tungis nout with her hondis”; “& þerfor seit h þe lawe þat he þat sleth his broþir with his hond & he þat hatyth his broþir & he þat bacbytith his broþir, alle thre been mansleeris.”49 Put another way, while the confessional formula does not explicitly include the fourth and fifth commandments, Christ’s dictum provides a handy substitute: it reframes the fifth commandment in terms that would have been relevant to York’s mercantile oligarchy. In this social group, doing what you say you will is crucial for the community to function well. So, too, to be “glade of euylle fayre” could be destructive. To wit, the uprising against John Gysburn in 1380 pitted merchants against each other in a conflict that would surely not have been good for the community or for business.50 In substituting the sin of

46. Dives and Pauper, I.13; I.2.1–31. This approach is common in other catechetical works, too, including the treatment of homicide in Pore Caitif and in the fifteenth-century Jacob’s Well. On this issue see Moira Fitzgibbons, “Poverty, Dignity, and Lay Spirituality in Pore Caitif and Jacob’s Well,” Medium Ævum 77 (2008): 222–40, pp. 231–32; and see Speculum vitae, lines 1065–1104, especially 1099–1104.

47. The scribe employs a problematic form of the third-person-plural object pronoun (them). His or her usual form is þhm, with an abbreviation mark above the m. The alternate form is þame (fol. 1v line 8, 209v penultimate line, and 210v lines 15–16). The predominant form is not attested in Middle English: see A. McIntosh et al., eds., A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English [LALME], 4 vols. (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986), 4:14. The scribe’s orthography is occasionally, as in this case, difficult to parse: he could be intending yham here, a form that is attested in LALME. For a discussion of the similar formation of y and þ in northern script, see LALME 4:xi. Cf. Barratt, who does not record the odd þ-h or y-h combination, supplying “þam” when the scribe records þhm with the abbreviation mark.


49. Ibid., I.2.2. Chaucer’s Parson defines spiritual manslaughter in similar terms, including hate, backbiting, and wicked counsel (X.563–66).

50. Gysburn’s opponents installed another merchant, Simon de Quixlay, as mayor; his opponents included merchants, aldermen, and other influential denizens of York (Kermode, Medieval Merchants, 57).
spiritual homicide for two of the Old Testament commandments, this formula expresses a keen awareness of the importance of the community, both economically and socially.

In the section guiding the penitent reader through the ninth and tenth commandments, the confessional formula returns yet again to the mercantile necessity of “consolidat[ing] political and commercial associations” through intermarriage and bequest, rather than through patrilineal inheritance. In so doing, it draws on distinctions between moveable and immovable property:

Also þat I haue desyryd myn neghtbure house, land, rent, tenement or any thyng þat may noght be lyftyd or rasyd fra þe gronde, als thyng þat es stedfaste.

Also þat I haue desyryd þe wyfe ‘husbond’ of my neghtbur or of my neuyn crystyn, his madyn or his seruant or gold or syluer or any oþer warldis ryches þe whylke I haue no ryght to [. . .] (fols. 3v–4r)

The emphasis here on the legal right to profit and to own goods is reminiscent of the formula’s presentation of avarice, and in this mash-up of commandments 7, 9, and 10, the author clearly associates one’s spouse with one’s material goods. Barratt calls associating one’s husband or wife with one’s money “unfortunate,” and this is certainly true. But we should also consider why the confessional formula of a successful mercantile family might have associated marriage and money in this way. This passage does not necessarily present husbands and wives as analogous to money so much as regard marriage as facilitating financial and communal stability. In this context, desiring someone else’s husband or wife might be threatening not because of sins of concupiscence but rather because of the redistribution of mercantile money through marriage: you are not lecherous, but rather wish for the station and financial stability of that husband or wife—you wish, in the words of the Bolton Hours, for that person’s “gold or syluer or any oþer warldis ryches þe whylke I haue no ryght to.” This confessional formula suggests that for York’s urban elite, the most alarming sins included wishing for too much financial success, when it was in fact crucial that each family of the elite cadre play its part.

51. Ibid., p. 81.
52. The formula includes the sixth commandment, but it does so in a single clause: “Also þat I haue synnyd flesly wif any [‘man’] woman outher weddyd or unweddyd, syb or fremyd, I cry god mercy” (fol. 3v).
53. Barratt, “‘Envoluped In Synne,’” pp. 11–12.
Lay-Produced Penitential Literature?

Confessional formulas and documents like them have been almost entirely overlooked, perhaps because, as Barratt surmises, they are regarded as boring;\(^{54}\) or perhaps because, although there are so many of them, so few appear in critical editions. It may be, too, that we have assumed that they replicate the concerns of manuals for confessors and didactic manuals for the laity and are thus not really worth examining in detail.\(^{55}\) But as Barratt points out, confessional formulas “are not nearly as formulaic as a cursory acquaintance might suggest [. . .] and in their own way they present in microcosm much information on lay knowledge of the basics of the faith.”\(^{56}\) This subgenre of confessional literature is distinct from *summae confessorum* and manuals for parish priests (such as Mirk’s *Instructions for Parish Priests*), in that it is not necessarily written by clerics. Rather, as in the case of the Bolton Hours, confessional forms were sometimes composed by the very laypeople who were to use them. Both the formula of the Bolton Hours and another fifteenth-century lay adaptation of a clerical work on penance, Peter Idley’s *Instructions to His Son* (c. 1440–55), a reworking of Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s *Handlyng Synne*, do not present a “matrix of sins,” in Cornett’s turn-of-phrase, but rather highlight details both pertinent to the community and frequently legal in nature.\(^{57}\) Like the Bolton Hours, Idley’s adaptation, while not a formula *per se*, reveals how laypeople thought about, thought with, and used confession.

In this way, the form of confession may have something unique to tell us about confessional discourse in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Both the Bolton Hours form of confession and Idley’s *Instructions* suggest that con-

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54. Ibid., p. 5.

55. Such didactic manuals might include Dan Michel’s *Ayenbute of Inwit* (c. 1340) and other translations of *Somme le roi* such as *The Book of Vices and Virtues* (c. 1400); Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s *Handlyng Synne* (c. 1317) and *Of Shrifte and Penance* (late fourteenth / early fifteenth century), both translations of the *Manuel de pecieix; The Boke of Penance* (found in one manuscript of *Cursor mundi*, c. 1300); *Clensyng of Mannes Sowle* (late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, a redaction of Raymond of Peñafort’s *Summa casuum poenitentiae*). For information about the vernacular works in particular, see Raymo, “Works of Religious and Philosophical Instruction,” pp. 2255–378, 2467–582. H. G. Pfander includes all of the above in his category of “manuals of religious instruction”; see “Some Medieval Manuals of Religious Instruction in England and Observations on Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 35 (1936): 243–58, pp. 250–51.

56. Barratt, “‘Envoluped In Synne,’” p. 5.

fession was malleable, not a static sacrament whose meaning was assigned only by clerics. On the one hand, there is no reason to suppose that anybody interpreted confession in different terms than it was taught to them: a popular text like *The Pricke of Conscience*—apocalyptic, but drawing heavily from confessional metaphors—as well as that of *Speculum vitae* or *Speculum Christiani* would seem to suggest that popular reception of confessional discourse did not deviate very much from clerical didacticism. On the other hand, attending to differences where they occur may have much to tell us. In the *Series*, for instance, Hoccleve engages with taxonomies of sin partly to suggest that he is sane, sinless, and deserves reintegration into the community. For his part, in adapting Mannyng’s text, Idley “reflects his social, religious, and political environment,” as Matthew Giancarlo explains. Idley’s adaptation emphasizes, for example, the legal aspects of many of the commandments and Seven Deadly Sins: in this, both Idley’s desire that his son pursue a career in law and his experience as a bailiff and property manager are abundantly clear. Idley’s text, like that of the Bolton Hours, shapes the materials of confession to its own ends, attempting to reconcile the demands of the secular world with the requirements of the faith.

We have tended to assume that confessional literature always has something to tell us about lay responses to penitence, especially if this literature

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58. *The Pricke of Conscience* survives in over 100 manuscript copies; *Speculum vitae*, a late fourteenth-century translation of the *Somme le roi*, is extant in over forty manuscripts, as is the *Speculum Christiani*.


60. “Dressing up a ‘Galaunt,’” p. 430. Giancarlo argues that Idley excises material that emphasizes the distinction between lay and clerical roles, involved as he is in an “estates-crossing task [. . .] as a layman adapting a clerical text” (p. 442).

61. Idley frequently explains the occasional legal necessity of various acts that might seem to violate a commandment or constitute a deadly sin; throughout the text, he also emphasizes the law and his experience in managing tenants. Giancarlo outlines many of the differences between Idley and Mannyng (pp. 432–41). To those Giancarlo notes, I would add or underscore the following sections, which diverge significantly from *Handlyng Synne*: in the commentary on the fourth commandment to honor your parents, Idley includes a lengthy exhortation that parents not select “thyn heire to be thyn executoure” (IIa, lines 1230, 1237, 1244, 1251, 1258); Idley returns to the possible treachery of executors in his commentary on covetousness, including a tale of three dishonest executors (Iib, lines 1624–1813). Idley’s rendition of the ninth commandment reads as an advice to princes, abhorring kings who take what is not lawfully theirs (IIa, lines 2921–73).

62. I, lines 127–28. Idley’s text has been dated to circa 1440–55. During this period and until 1447, Idley, an esquire, held the position of bailiff for the Honour of Wallingford and of St. Valery. As bailiff, Idley’s primary duties included collecting rents, dues, and administrating local justice; in 1443, he also acquired the lease of two mills and was responsible for maintaining these properties.
has been translated into English. Katherine C. Little has suggested that all such texts are “lay-oriented,” and this is surely the case. Recent work on Carthusian houses in particular in fifteenth-century England has taught us that at least some laypeople were very interested in contemplative, even monastic, devotional works, like Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection* or the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost*; Nicole Rice has shown how spiritually ambitious laypeople sought out works of religious instruction that helped them to live a contemplative life in the world. At the same time, as Rice illustrates, such works may well have circumscribed lay piety, limiting it to a certain, and interior, state of being rather than an exterior state of acting. Rice’s point implies that while laypeople were clearly interested in reading works of spiritual instruction, we should consider to what degree these works express clerical beliefs about what the laity should know. This cautionary note is borne out by the relatively limited circulation of the fourteenth-century *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which seems largely to have been kept away from lay readers, as was Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls*. The corollary, I would argue, is that we must revisit our catch-all use of the term “lay-oriented”: what precisely does it mean? I can’t help but wonder to what extent “lay-oriented” assumes an inherent passivity in the consumption of books by laypeople; or to what extent the term depends upon an unstated binary: that laypeople were either heterodox or compliant, mainstream Christians whose practices were in perfect step with the church teaching—about confession, for instance—outlined in clerical *summae*. But as the confessional formula of the Bolton Hours indicates, the manuscript contexts of individual works of catechesis and devotion have a more complex story to tell. Attending to these contexts may, in some cases at least, reveal whether we might consider an individual copy of a text lay-copied, lay-produced, or both; Robert Thornton’s copy of the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost* would be one such instance. What might other such works tell us? In the case of lay-produced works like the Bolton Hours or Idley’s

63. As Katherine C. Little puts it, “the translation of penitential manuals for a non-Latinate audience, an audience that presumably includes some laity, entails a shift in attention from the clerical to the lay role in the penitential process.” *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 50.
64. Ibid., p. 55.
66. Ibid., especially pp. 17–46.
68. There is a growing body of work on the continuities of practice and belief between so-called mainstream and heterodox Christians. See *Wycliffite Controversies*, ed. Mishtooni Bose and J. Patrick Hornbeck III (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011); and Gillespie and Ghosh, *After Arundel*. 
Instructions, laypeople adapted the texts they enscribed to better suit their environments. There is no reason to suppose they did so out of ignorance. It seems obvious to say, but English penitential literature does not inevitably tell us something about lay attitudes just because it is in English. We need to develop a more radical way of thinking about devotional literature that acknowledges the possibility that lay readers did not always mirror clerical interests and concerns—an approach that might encompass the worldview of the Bolton Hours’ confessional formula, which explores how virtuous, money-making participants in the active life might achieve salvation too.

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