At the Font and in the Grave

The Fabric of Parochial Identity

When Langland’s dreamer meets Holy Church at the beginning of Piers Plowman, he has no idea who—or what—she is. “Thanne hadde I wonder in my wit what womman she weere,” he says, “That swiche wise wordes of Holy Writ shewed.” He greets her in a formal way—he “halsede hire on the heighe name”—as he would a total stranger.¹ As it turns out, however, he and Holy Church have a long history together. “Thow oughtest me to knowe,” she says,

I underfeng [received] thee first and the feith taughte.  
Thow broughtest me borwes [pledges] my biddyng to fullfille,  
And to loven me leelly [loyally] the while thi lif dureth.²

You ought to know who I am, she scolds, because I baptized you. And yet, even though Will has made a lifelong commitment to her, he does not know who she is.

². Ibid., 1.75–78.
Holy Church constitutes one of the poem’s most expansive concepts, a capacious “entity,” in Galloway’s formulation, that encompasses church doctrine, textual authority, the apostolic tradition, and sacramental theology.\(^3\) The encounter between Holy Church and Will has been explored from a wide variety of perspectives, particularly in relation to philosophical and homiletic traditions, gender discourse, and theories of allegory and language.\(^4\) As the personification of Ecclesia, she represents church authority,\(^5\) but she also figures the church more broadly, including its congregation, its practices, and the material spaces and objects through and in which the church constituted itself. The local parish is perhaps also one of Holy Church’s many facets. Indeed, as Galloway reminds us, Langland’s figure of Holy Church evokes John Thoresby’s mid-fourteenth-century definition of the “holy Catholic church” as an entity consisting of “the congregation and the communion of the faithful” and “the sacraments of the church and other things by which the Christian church communes.”\(^6\) I want to suggest that Will’s failure to recognize Holy Church draws attention to the ritual, material, and spatial aspects of parochial identity. His confusion may stem at least in part from the fact that Holy Church exhibits none of these features when he encounters her; in personified form, she lacks the very spaces, objects, and practices through which medieval laypeople experienced religion. We might compare Will’s early encounter with Holy Church with his later encounter with Thought, another personification whom Will is unable to recognize:

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4. Galloway provides a brief introduction to some of these approaches in Penn Commentary, 148–50. On the Latin poetic tradition that undergirds Langland’s figure of Holy Church, see Piehler, Visionary Landscape: A Study in Medieval Allegory, 31–68; Paxson, Poetics of Personification, 8–34; Raskolnikov, Body against Soul: Gender and Sowlhele in Medieval Allegory, 33–50. On the speech of Holy Church and its relationship with contemporary sermon-writing, see Wenzel, “Medieval Sermons,” 165–67. Simpson observes that Holy Church “uses the homiletic, didactic style we might expect of the authority figure in an oraculum,” but he warns that her sermon-like speech cannot be characterized as the kind of instruction offered in the manuals that proliferated in the centuries following the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. “Piers Plowman”: An Introduction to the B-Text, 25–28. For a discussion of Holy Church and the broader topic of gender personification, see Cooper, “Gender and Personification in Piers Plowman,” 32; Paxson, “Gender Personified,” 65–96.

5. Raskolnikiv, Body against Soul, 173. Hanna suggests that Holy Church “evokes the fraught correction of the grammar master.” “School and Scorn: Gender in Piers Plowman,” 223.

6. As Galloway observes in Penn Commentary, 149; Lay Folks’ Catechism, 25 (lines 416–20).

As Smith has recently observed, Will has trouble recognizing Thought because thought requires thinking: "It is not surprising that the narrator cannot recognize thought as a substance [. . .] because it is the very means by which he recognizes, or conjures, thought." Holy Church is not something entirely external to the dreamer, or to any Christian for that matter—instead, it is actively constituted by way of ritual participation in and through the material space and fabric of the church. Will fails to recognize Holy Church because church is, like thought or thinking, a practice—something one does. And in late medieval England, it was something one did in the parish church. Indeed, Holy Church’s appearance as a person may be what makes her the most unintelligible: she lacks the ritual and material features that were so central to the medieval church and to the layperson’s experience of it. In personified form, she looks nothing like the conglomeration of practices, spaces, and people that constituted the church.

When the dreamer thinks of Holy Church later on, however, he does so in the context of a heated conversation about burial location, and he associates Holy Church with parochial space and ritual. The moment of recollection occurs in passus 11, when Will dreams that he is an old man faced with making his last confession and choosing his place of burial. Although Lust of the Flesh and Covetise of Eyes encourage him to work out a deal with the friars, he decides not to be buried at the friary but rather in his own parish:

And tho fond I the frere afered [afraid] and flittynge [changeable] bothe Ayeins [against] oure firste forward [agreement], for I seide I nolde Be buried at hire hous but at my parisshe chirche (For I herde ones how Conscience it tolde That there a man cristned were, by kynde he sholde be buryed)."
Angered that the friars care more about burial than baptism, his mind is
drawn to Holy Church once more:

Al for tene of [distress at] hir text trembled myn herte,
And in a weer gan I wexe [I became perplexed], and with myself to dispute
Whether I were chose or noght chose; on Holy Chirche I thoughte,
That underfonged [received] me atte font for oon of Goddes chosene.  

The dreamer’s decision to commit his body to the parish rather than the friary
draws particular attention to the spatial specificity of both burial and baptism
and to the symbolic function of the font as an emblem of parochial identity.
In refusing burial at “hire hous,” he chooses his own parish—“my parisshe
chirche”—instead. And he does so, it seems, out of a sense of belonging; where-
ever a person was christened is where, “by kynde,” the dreamer determines, he
should be buried. His later memory of Holy Church centers not only on the
parish but on one of its most striking monuments.

Late medieval laypeople understood and experienced parochial devotion
in ritual and spatial terms: in the parish, at the font, even in a churchyard
grave. Baptism and burial were central to lay spirituality and to the construc-
tion and representation of the parish and parochial identity. They also framed
the nave of a parish church, from the font at the western end to the image of
souls rising from their graves in a Last Judgment painting over the chancel
arch. Throughout the fourteenth century, the rituals, objects, and spaces asso-
ciated with baptism and burial appear as emblems of parochial identity in a
wide variety of texts, from poetry and sermon exempla to handbooks written
for priests. Beyond its role in welcoming new Christians, the baptismal font
emerges as the source not only of parochial identity but of an extended sense
of spiritual kinship among parishioners, both living and dead. The church-
yard was just as central to lay spiritual identity and is often figured as a site
for negotiating the extended spiritual community that baptism established
between the living and the dead. The newly baptized parishioner entered a
community that included both the living and the dead, and churchyard burial,
in turn, represented a renewal of that vow, a homecoming or return to the
place of one’s baptism, and a lateral move into the fellowship of the dead. This
chapter explores the productivity of font and churchyard, both in the parish
and on the page. Given the important role they played in making and shap-
ing the parish, their prominence in late medieval poetry and sermons, for
example, should not come as a surprise. Even as the textual representation of

10. Ibid., 11.115–18.
font and churchyard reflects the productive role they played in late medieval culture, however, it also does productive work of its own by conjuring up the very matter of the parish.

At the Font

The life of the Christian began “atte font.” Will uses this phrase to describe the location of baptism—in passus 11, he thinks of Holy Church, who “underfonged [him] atte font.”11 But beyond its descriptive function, the phrase activates the material and liturgical contexts of baptism, calling up the parish nave and its most striking monument.12 In some parish churches, fonts were works of art, carved with images and topped with ornate wooden pinnacles that reached into the rafters. But even the most basic font was a monument to parochial membership because it was the focal point of the baptismal ceremony. Indeed, the phrase “atte font” gestures to the liturgy itself, which carefully choreographed the catechumen’s movement through church space, beginning at the church door and ending at the font. For example, in the Sarum Rite, the ceremony begins with the priest calling the child “to the font of baptism.” After a series of readings and prayers, the priest carries the child “into the church, having asked his (or her) name, saying: N., enter into the temple of God that thou mayest have eternal life, and live forever.” At the start of the baptism proper, the child is then “carried to the font by those who are to receive him at baptism.”13 Will’s prepositional phrase also calls attention to the spatial fixity of baptism, which was reinforced by the font itself. The Sarum Rite stipulates not only that baptism should occur only “in churches,” but that the font itself—ideally constructed of “stone whole”—should be immovable.14 And even on days when the font was not being used for baptism, it was very likely the first thing a person saw upon entering the church.15

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11. Ibid., 11.118.
12. For Vitz, when liturgical quotations are used in literature, they have the potential to evoke the visual, ritual, and emotional contexts of the liturgy. “Liturgical versus Biblical Citation in Medieval Vernacular Literature,” 443–49.
13. Quotations from the Sarum Rite for baptism are from Fisher’s translation, offered as an appendix to Christian Initiation, 158–79 (at 164–65, 172, emphasis mine).
14. “It is not lawful to baptize someone in a hall or apartment or some other private place, but only in churches in which there are fonts specially appointed for this purpose, unless it be the child of a king or prince, or such necessity have arisen that it is not possible to come to church without risk. Moreover if possible let a presbyter have always a font of stone whole and decent for baptizing: but if he cannot, let him have a vessel suitable for baptism which may on no account be put to other uses nor taken outside the church.” Ibid., 176–77.
15. Davies observes that the font would have been “immediately visible upon entering the
In referencing the font, Will also calls up the broader social context of baptism. Kellie Robertson’s recent study of medieval objects reminds us, via Heidegger, that material things function as “assemblies” that gather people together. The ceremony itself drew catechumens to the font, but it also amassed a broader spiritual network around the newly baptized Christian; this is often emphasized in visual representations of baptism, which are typically packed with people, all congregating around the font. Godparents played a central role in assembling this community; they named the child at the church door, carried him or her to the font, and promised to teach him or her a catalogue of prayers “after the lawe of all holy churche.” They also formed the roots of an extended spiritual family for the child: although the simple fact of baptism gave a child access to Christian salvation, the involvement of godparents had the added practical benefit of establishing a system of mutual spiritual support between godparent and godchild. But the commitment forged at the font extended far beyond a catechumen and his or her godparents. The author of Jacob’s Well (c. 1375–1400), for example, articulates a complex web of “gostly kynrede” that includes not only the child and its godparents but also the spouses and children of the godparents, the parents of the baptized child, and the person administering the baptism:

Be twixen [between] þe god chyld & godfadyr & godmodyr is gostly kynrede. Also a twixe þe godchylde & þe chyldryn of godfadyr & godmodyr. Also atwixe þe godchylde & þe husbone of þe godmodyr þif he knewe here fleschly beforne. Also atwixen þe godchyld & þe wyif of þe godfadyr of hym beforne fleschly knowyn. Also a twixe þe fadyr & modyr and godfadyr and godmodyr of þe godchylde. Also atwixe þe godchylde & hem þat baptysen þe chylde. Also atwixe þe godchylde & þe chyldryn of hem þat baptysen. Also a twixe þe godchyld & þe wyif of þe hym þat baptyseth þe chylde. 3yf sche be of hym beforne fleschly knowyn. Also a twixe þe godchylde & þe husbone of her þat baptysed þat chyld þif he knewe here fleschly beforne. Also a twixe hem þat baptysen þe chylde & fadyr and modyr of þat chylde."
The network of relationships established through a child’s baptism precludes marriage among its members: “All þis gostly kynrede,” the Well-author warns, “lettyth matrimonye to be solenyyed & departyd hem þat ben weddyd in þis kynrede.” But the repetition of the phrase “also a twixe” simultaneously reinforces the spiritual productivity of baptism and the robust, infinitely expanding network of relationships that it brought into being, inaugurating what John Bossy has called “a formal state of friendship between the spiritual kin and the natural kin,” a voluntary “kinship-group partly natural and partly artificial.” This special bond of kinship had the advantage of “securing mutual support in salvation” because “one’s chance of eternal life, as well as one’s welfare in the present, depend[ed] on the size, cohesiveness and wealth of one’s kindred.” Baptism enlarged the spiritual networks of both catechumens and godparents, bettering everyone’s access to salvation.

The font was a powerful symbol of the parish community and its collective efforts toward salvation. The location of the font played an important role in this: standing at the east end of the nave, it formed an axis with the high altar that linked the death of Christ with the eternal life of the Christian. The Rite itself ends, in fact, by looking ahead to death and urging the new Christian to “guard” his or her commitment to God by returning a clean chrismal robe to him at death. The author of the *Prick of Conscience* (c. 1325–50) sharpens the connection between font and future salvation by emphasizing that the robe should be “als clene as it first was, / When he was hoven [raised] at funstane.” In churches where the nave was flanked at one end by the font and at the other with a chancel arch painting of the Last Judgment, the connection between baptism, death, and salvation would have been even more powerful. At the font, the members of a parish made commitments to God and to one another in anticipation of rising from their graves together to face judgment. Indeed, when Will thinks of his baptism, he does so as part of an extended rumination.

*Jacob’s Well,* 315–16. I have slightly modified the passage by silently expanding the abbreviations and adding punctuation. Fitzgibbons reads *Jacob’s Well* with an eye to parochial devotion, focusing in particular on its concern with the “process” of lay religious instruction and on its “conception of parish life [as] defined by shared intellectual engagement.” *Jacob’s Well and Penitential Pedagogy,* 215, 220.


on both burial and salvation. The phrase “atte font” conjures up the material and liturgical contexts of baptism, but it also taps into the vast spiritual network that baptism established, a temporally complex network that included both the living and the dead. The font itself gathers this community, but it also looks ahead to another site of assembly: the grave. Will links font and grave when he ventriloquizes Conscience’s claim that a person “sholde be buryed” where he was “cristned.” If the font produced and assembled Christians, the churchyard offered opportunities, through the practices surrounding burial and the care of souls, for reaffirming and renewing these relationships.

In *Handlyng Synne*, Robert Mannyng explores the relationship between baptism and salvation in a story about the terrible fate of a godparent who betrays the commitment he made when he presented his goddaughter at the font. Mannyng’s book, written between 1303 and 1317, offers commentary on a wide range of pastoral subjects, including the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, and the Sacraments. Although the story about the godfather appears as part of Mannyng’s treatment of the sacrament of baptism, it focuses on the death of a sinner and his eventual rejection from the parish and its churchyard. The narrative begins with a godfather lifting up his goddaughter at the font on the day of her baptism but quickly zooms ahead several years. The “mayde chyld” whom the godfather “hefe [lifted]” is now on the cusp of “wommannes elde.” Nearing the end of his Lenten fast, the man requests the company of his goddaughter on Easter Sunday, not just at Mass but “all þat yche ester day / And lenger ȝyf hyt were here pay.” Thinking that “none euyl myght be done,” her parents grant the request. But the godfather, drunk and “vnryght,” rapes his goddaughter that very night. Seven days later, the man dies. Soon after his burial, the churchyard bursts into flames, incinerating the godfather’s body until no trace of it remains:

Sone after þat he byryed was,
Veniance com for þat trespas.
Out of hys graue a fyre vp smote,
Ful stynkyng and ful hote,

27. Ibid., lines 9727–30.
28. Ibid., lines 9735–36.
29. Ibid., line 9738.
30. Ibid., line 9739.
And brenned þat cursed body al,
And stone & erþe boþe gret & smal;
Al was so brenyd yn to þe grounde,
Þat of hys body myght noght be founde.
Here mowe ȝe here apertly why
God toke veniaunce greuusly,
Þat God shewed so moche hys yre,
For he synned þat tyme wyþ hyre,
Þat he lyfte of þe font stone.
Hyt ys a warnyng to vs echone
Þat we kepe þe sacrament,
Oure bapteme þat God haþ lent.31

Soon after he was buried, vengeance came for that trespass; a hot, stink-
ing fire rose up from his grave and burned that cursed body in its entirety,
even the earth and stones, both big and small. Everything burned into the
ground—no part of his body could be found. Here may you openly hear
why God took such grievous vengeance, and why he showed his anger so
forcefully: he sinned with the one he lifted at the font stone. It is a warning
to us all to keep the sacrament of baptism, given to us by God.

The punishment of the sinful godparent draws close attention to the space and
fabric of the church as Mannyng explores the relationship not only between
baptism and salvation but between godparents and the wider parish commu-
nity. Mannyng figures baptism as a vertical pathway to heaven; the lifting of
the girl at the font points to her potential for salvation as a new member of
Christendom and looks ahead to her future ascension to heaven. But Man-
nyng also explores the opposite end of this vertical spectrum by demonstrat-
ing the dire consequences of the godfather’s betrayal. While baptism produces
Christians, sin can destroy them. Indeed, the protagonist lifts up his god-
daughter at the font only to hurl himself down to hell by violating the terms
of the sacrament.

Although Mannyng frames the story with references to the font, he stages
most of the drama in and through the churchyard. In this tale of postmortem
justice, the churchyard is a site of rejection and exclusion, at least for those
who betray the commitments they make at the font. Mannyng’s baptism story
chronicles the disenfranchisement of a sinful godparent for whom the church-
yard, instead of providing a long-term place where the living might pray on

31. Ibid., lines 9773–88.
his behalf, becomes a kind of earthly hell that destroys his body and deletes him from the extended community of the parish. The fire is so destructive that nothing of the man’s corpse remains, not even a bone: his disappearance from the churchyard suggests his deletion from the book of life. In linking font and churchyard grave, Mannyng’s story ultimately explores the churchyard as a kind of material map of the parish, a roster of those who deserve access to its long-term spiritual benefits. When Mannyng exhorts readers to “kepe þe sacrament,” he asks them to think about what a sinner stands to lose by being rejected from a site that was powerfully associated with mutual help among the living and the dead. Baptism gave a person access to Christendom and, more particularly, to a spiritual network founded on reciprocity. These bonds were retained and even intensified through parochial churchyard burial. Clive Burgess rightly suggests that the characteristic “penitential mentality” of the later Middle Ages was “channelled through the parish,” and I want to argue that this channeling occurred most explicitly in the parish churchyard, where intersections of individual and community, living and dead, past and present, were made manifest.

**Churchyard Reciprocity**

Despite Mannyng’s emphasis on exclusion and rejection, the churchyard was also powerfully associated with reciprocity and solidarity among the extended generations of the parish. In a Middle English sermon for the Feast of All Souls, John Mirk offers an exemplum in which the churchyard brings together the living and the dead. He begins by describing the feast and by emphasizing the spiritual needs and demands of the dead: on the Feast of All Souls, he explains, “Holy Chyrch makyth mynde, and syngeth and reduth genera łych for alle þe soules þat ben in purgatory, hauyng full beleue to releson hem of hure peyne.” Even “þe lest preyere,” he maintains, “doth hem gode.” But this

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32. This is not the only example of churchyard corpse rejection in *Handlyng Synne*. Readers might be reminded of the well-known story of the Dancers of Colbek, who commit sacrilege by dancing in the churchyard during the celebration of the Christmas Mass. When one of the dancers loses an arm, the priest attempts to bury the severed limb, and the earth rejects it no fewer than three times. Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, lines 9015–260. See also Miller’s discussion of this story in “Displaced Souls,” 610–12.


reciprocity was mutual, and Mirk tells the story of a man who prays for the dead and receives their help in return:

There once was a man who had a house next to the churchyard, its door opening toward the church. Whenever he went through the churchyard, he had a habit of saying the *De profundis* for all Christian souls. Then one day, he rushed home, pursued by enemies. When he came into the churchyard, however, he thought, “now it is time to say the *De profundis,*” and he kneeled down and said it. Immediately the churchyard was full of risen bodies, each holding a tool of his trade, and each driving against his enemies. When they saw this, they all asked God for mercy, including the man who had been pursued, and he was ever after more devout in praying for the souls of the dead.

Mirk’s All Souls story explores the sense of spiritual reciprocity that increasingly defined the relationship between the living and the dead in the medieval parish. Prayers for the dead were beneficial to those languishing in Purgatory, but they also helped the living: when pursued by enemies, Mirk’s devout layman is rescued by the risen dead, each of whom carries an “ynstrument” of the “crafte” he practiced during life. The layman’s prayers also have a positive effect on the unnamed enemies who, in an important addition to Voragine’s barebones account in the *Golden Legend,* undergo a kind of spiritual conversion when they witness the rising of the grateful dead and beg God for Mercy.

Beyond teaching listeners about the efficacy of praying for the dead, Mirk draws special attention to the role of the churchyard. An earlier version of the

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37. Ibid., 242 (lines 22–32).
38. Ibid., 242 (line 32).
story appears in the *Golden Legend*, where it provides a more straightforward illustration of the benefits of prayer:

Another example, this one from the Cantor of Paris, shows how grateful the dead are for the prayers of the living. There was a man who, as he walked through the cemetery, always recited the *De profundis* for the dead. Once, when he was running away through the cemetery with his enemies after him, the buried, each one armed with the tool proper to his craft, quickly rose and defended the fleeing man with might and main. His pursuers, terrified, retreated in haste.39

In adapting the story, Mirk foregrounds the role of the “chyrch-ȝorde,” a term he repeats four times in the brief narrative. Although Mirk follows the *Golden Legend* in confirming that the prayers of the living are “pleasing” to the dead, his story focuses on the churchyard as the place where this reciprocal relationship is negotiated. In addition to its association with purgatorial obligation, Mirk’s churchyard is a place where Purgatory meets parish, where the living and the dead come together as an extended parochial community.

As many scholars have observed, the “bookkeeping logic” associated with Purgatory forged a temporal link between the living and the dead: suffrages made by the living on behalf of the dead were indirectly proportional to the duration of a soul’s residence in Purgatory.40 In other words, earthly time expended in the form of a commemorative prayer functioned as a time-saving voucher that could be directly applied to a dead person’s term of penance. But the churchyard also offered a spatial link between the living and the dead. In Mirk’s story, for example, the world of the dead is comfortingly close at hand. The nearness of Purgatory is often represented in the context of the church; in some books of hours, for example, the illuminated miniatures that accompany the Office of the Dead call even more attention to the proximity of Purgatory by depicting it directly beneath the church. In an image of a funeral Mass from a fifteenth-century book of hours (fig. 1), Purgatory and its smoldering inhabitants are portrayed in a subterranean crypt directly beneath the tiled floor of a church where a funeral mass is being celebrated.41 Purgatory is archi-


41. For a discussion of this manuscript, see Randall, *Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts*
Figure 1. Mass helps souls in Purgatory. Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, MS W.274 (c. 1460–70), fol.118r.
tecturally distinct from the church, separated by the tiled floor and by a thick wooden frame that cuts across the image, dividing it into upper and lower halves. The image does more than show the efficacy of the Mass: beyond its proximity to the altar, Purgatory also borders on the world outside the chancel, where a layman gives alms to the poor. As he dips his hand down into his purse, two naked souls rise up and out of the flames toward a pair of angels. Purgatory is thus part of a complex spiritual landscape that encompasses liturgical time, eschatological time, and everyday life in the present. But as Mirk's All Souls exemplum suggests, the proximity of the dead is also powerfully expressed in the churchyard, a place where past, present, and future collide, a place where the dead rise from their graves to walk among the living. The author of the Prick of Conscience explores the figurative nearness of Purgatory in more explicitly topographical terms, locating it just beneath the surface of the earth.42 The dead were, in fact, just outside, under the grass. In a number of Last Judgment paintings, the dead rise from outdoor graves that strongly evoke the churchyard. In the well-known doom paintings at Salisbury and Coventry, for example, artists have taken great pains to reinforce the outdoor setting by strewing the scene with rocks and tufts of grass, the visual equivalent, perhaps, of Mirk's repetition of “chyrch-ȝorde” in his All Souls tale.43

Sharing the Churchyard

The late medieval churchyard was associated not only with intergenerational reciprocity but also with sharing, and, for this reason, it was also subject to certain behavioral expectations. In Handlyng Synne, Robert Mannyng treats the subject in a section devoted to sacrilege in which he chastises those who abuse the space by acting out of self-interest:

Vnkynd man ys he hardyly
Pat yn cherche ȝerd dop vyleyny.

42. “Þe stede þat purgatory es calde, / Under þe erthe es, als I halde, / Aboven þe stede, als som clerkes telles, / Þar uncrysomd + childer duells” (Prick of Conscience, lines 2788–91) [The place called Purgatory is under the earth, as I understand, above the place, as some clerks say, where unbaptized children dwell].

43. Photographs of the mural at Coventry are available at http://paintedchurch.org/coveht.htm. For a more general discussion of Last Judgment murals, including a photograph of the Salisbury Doom, see Benson, Public “Piers Plowman,” 172–81 and fig. 2. See also Caiger-Smith, English Medieval Mural Paintings, 31–43; Rosewell, Medieval Wall Paintings, 72–81.
Oure long hous hyt ys to come
To rest yn tyl þe day of dome.
Þarfore we shuld, ȝyf we were kynde,
Kepe hyt clene with gode mynde.
And þese prestes me þynkþ do synne
Þat late here bestes fyle þer ynne.
Þe gres ys hys þat þere grenes,
Þe place ys þe parysshenes.\textsuperscript{44}

The man who acts villainously in the churchyard is audaciously unkind; it
is the longhouse that we rest in until doomsday. Therefore we should, if we
were kynde, have the good sense to keep it clean. I think these priests sin
when they allow their animals to defile it. The grass belongs to him who
greens it; the place is the parishioners'.

Mannyng reinforces the shared nature of the churchyard by studding
the passage with first-person pronouns and by describing it as “oure long hous,”
a place of collective rest until doom.\textsuperscript{45} In doing so, he makes an important
departure from his Anglo-Norman source text,\textsuperscript{46} which describes the “cem-
etery” (cymiter) more simply as “our house” (nostre mesun).\textsuperscript{47} Mannyng's
addition amplifies the temporal dimensions of the churchyard as a long-term
resting place that fills the expanse of time between death and the Last Judg-
ment. It also evokes a powerful sense of horizontality—the body laid from
west to east in the grave. In imagining the grave as a longhouse, Mannyng
perhaps borrows from parochial Last Judgment iconography. Like those res-
surrected bodies dragging themselves up and out of a landscape of opened
graves, the residents of Mannyng’s longhouse wait there “tyle þe day of dome.”
The horizontality of the longhouse stands in sharp contrast with the verticality
that is to come: upright, resurrected bodies abandon their churchyard graves
in order to ascend to heaven alongside their fellow parishioners. Indeed, Mirk
describes the laying out of a corpse as advanced preparation for bodily resur-

\textsuperscript{44} Mannyng, \textit{Handlyng Synne}, lines 8655–64.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., line 8657.
\textsuperscript{46} As Mannyng explains in his prologue, he “tournede” the “manuel de pecchees” into
“englyssh tonge out of frankys.” \textit{Handlyng Synne}, 77–82. Furnivall presents excerpts from Wil-
liam of Waddington’s Anglo-Norman Manuel de Péchés (c. 1260) in his parallel text edition of
\textit{Handlyng Synne}. Schemmann has warned that Furnivall’s edition, currently the only one avail-
able, is unreliable: \textit{Confessional Literature and Lay Education}, 4–5. For further discussion of the
\textit{Manuel des Péchés}, see especially Sullivan, “Brief Textual History of the \textit{Manuel des Péchés},”
337–46; idem, “Author of the \textit{Manuel des Péchés},” 155–57.
\textsuperscript{47} “Cymiter est nostre mesun / Ou nus tresuȝ reposerum / E le iugement atendrum; /
Furnivall), 273 (lines 6697–704).
rection. As he writes in his burial day sermon, the body of a dead person is oriented eastward “to ben þe more redy to sene Criste þat comyth oute o þe est to þe dome, and so ryson aȝeynus [facing] hym.”

48 “Longhouse” is, moreover, an agricultural term generally used to describe one-story buildings that provide general storage space and shelter for farm animals. 49 In Mannyng’s description of churchyard burial, the parochial longhouse ultimately retains its agricultural significance as the site of the Last Judgment harvest, where Christians will be reaped and collected by God.

50 Mannyng’s description of the churchyard as a shared longhouse points toward the sense of parochial solidarity that was deeply associated with churchyard burial practices. Burial rights were central to the identity and autonomy of the parish, and parishioners petitioned for them when necessary. 51 A church’s possession of a cemetery meant not only that its parishioners would have access to all of the sacraments in a single location but that the extended parish community would be kept intact, even in death. According to canon law, any church that had a churchyard was required to offer free burial to its parishioners, although there were often fees owed to gravediggers and other personnel. 52 Those looking to make more of an individual statement might seek burial inside the church; some commissioned carvings in brass and stone, while others paid for elaborate effigies along aisles, under arches, or nestled against altars or shrines. 53 The vast majority of laypeople, however, would have been buried outside in their parish churchyards.

49. According to Grenville, a medieval reference to a “longhouse” or domus longa generally refers to “a long building, usually separate from the main dwelling, with an agricultural purpose.” Medieval Housing, 137. Mercer tentatively defines the medieval longhouse as a type of farm building “which might house animals, which might be attached to a dwelling, but which was thought of as one whose functions were distinct from that of the dwelling.” “Domus Longa,” 9. Neither Mercer nor Grenville notes late medieval literary deployments of the term.
50. Handlyng Synne marks one of the term’s earliest uses as a way of describing burial. See the MED entry for “hom,” n., 2c: “long ~, a final resting place, the grave.”
51. In the case of semi-independent chapels, for example, securing burial rights was a stepping stone to achieving full parochial status. On the evidence from Bath and Wells, see French, People of the Parish, 24–25; on London, see Harding, Dead and the Living, 38.
53. Rogers explores “the positioning of monuments” as “a reflection of the devotional priorities and the social networks of the living” in “Location of Monuments in Late Medieval Parish Churches,” 276. Canon law stipulated that only benefactors and members of the clergy could be buried inside the church itself, but this restriction became increasingly relaxed in practice; by 1500, paying for indoor church burial was a “standard practice” among laypeople of means in London. Harding, “Burial Choice and Burial Location,” 30. Harding warns, however, that even though burial inside the church was “always a minority option,” the “social bias of willmaking makes it appear more important in statistical terms than it really was.” Dead and the Living, 132. And as Rogers reminds us, “testators did not always get what they asked for.” “Location of Monuments,” 262.
Churchyard burial practices reinforced the shared nature of the space. For example, many parishes provided a communal parish coffin or “common box” used and reused for transport to and from the churchyard. Long-term grave markers seem not to have been a standard feature of late medieval burial practice. If anything, a churchyard grave may have been marked with a wooden cross. In Middle English sermons, this kind of humble churchyard burial symbolizes membership in the greater community of the saved. In the Speculum Sacerdotal (c. 1425), for example, a cross is staked at the head of a person’s grave “in tokenynge that he is a Cristen man.” For Mirk, a person is buried with a “cros of tre sette at hys hed, schewing þat he hath ful beleue to ben sauid be Crystus passion þat dyud for hym on þe cros of tre.” Although testamentary evidence demonstrates parishioners’ concern with expressing individual loyalties through personal bequests and monetary donations, churchyard burial constituted a more generic and collective memorial; in the absence of more permanent markers, churchyard graves would not have been recognizable over long periods of time, their inhabitants a collection of unidentifiable skeletons.

This sense of anonymity was reinforced through the use of on-site storage for dry bones. To free up space in heavily used burial grounds, bones were exhumed and collected either in crypts underneath the church or in free-standing charnel houses outside in the churchyard. From communal parish coffin to charnel house bone pile, churchyard burial deindividualized the dead while also celebrating their ongoing membership in the parish. Churchyard charnels served an important space-saving function, but they were also impressive monuments in their own right. Even so, few outlasted the Reformation. The charnel nestled against the churchyard wall of St. Michael’s

54. Cox, Parish Registers of England, 21; Daniell, Death and Burial in Medieval England, 58; Gittings, Death, Burial, and the Individual, 61. Harding reports that “many burials in church up to the mid-sixteenth century were not coffined, and nor were most churchyard burials for another half-century at least.” In London churchyards, moreover, references to coffined burial are “unusual” before the late sixteenth century. Dead and the Living, 59; and see 141–45 for further discussion of coffin usage.


56. Speculum Sacerdotale, 230 (lines 7–8).

57. Mirk, Festial, 257 (lines 29–31). On shrouding more generally, see Daniell, Death and Burial, 43.

58. Harding speculates that, unlike Parisian charnels, which were “systematically managed,” “it seems probable that London parish charnels were the product of a more casual process in which the sexton collected bones disturbed by later burials and stored them appropriately.” Dead and the Living, 64. For further discussion of English charnel practices, see Bond, Introduction to English Church Architecture, 2:84–88; Cook, English Mediaeval Parish Church, 124–30.

in Mere (Wiltshire) is a rare exception. At St. Mary’s in Mildenhall (Suffolk), only the ivy-covered ruins remain. Because parish charnels have never been studied in any sustained or systematic way, their use and management remains unclear. At Exeter and Norwich, charnels were staffed by chaplains who spent their days singing Masses for the dead. And evidence from extant indoor crypts offers a window onto the care with which a charnel’s bones may have been stored and even artfully displayed. In the average parish churchyard, then, very plain and with few if any permanent grave markers, a charnel house gave the dead an impressive visual and ritual presence, insuring that the living members of the parish were in constant contact with generations of dead parishioners.

Keeping bones on-site enabled the churchyard to unite the extended family of the parish. With this in mind, we might think once again about Mannyng’s baptism exemplum. In a chilling reminder about the spiritual and social import of the churchyard, the man’s corpse disappears when a fire erupts from his grave and burns everything to the ground. Mannyng tells the story, he explains, as a “warnyng” about keeping commitments made at the font. But if the churchyard united the extended generations of the dead, the fact that no trace of the man’s body can be found, not even a bone for the charnel, also points to the absolute nature of his exclusion: with no physical presence in the churchyard, he has no purchase on the spiritual network that churchyard burial facilitated. The social and spiritual benefits that he loses

Cook discusses the rediscovery of several charnel crypts during post-WWII reconstruction in London in his English Mediaeval Parish Church, 129–30.

60. Friar has suggested that the Mere charnel, “erected against the churchyard wall,” is typical among “churchyard ossuaries.” Companion to the English Parish Church, 327.

61. In a brief entry for Mildenhall, Pevsner reports “the remains of a charnel house with a chapel of St. Michael over.” Suffolk, 365. Mortlock adds that the charnel was “founded in 1387 by Ralph de Walsham” and that it was “endowed with a priest to say masses for the dead.” Guide to Suffolk Churches, 343.

62. Churchyard charnels are typically only briefly mentioned in area guides and architectural surveys. Bond includes a list of nearly two dozen surviving “bone houses,” but he does not differentiate between church crypts and free-standing churchyard charnels. Introduction to English Church Architecture, 86–88.

63. On the evidence from Exeter and Norwich, see Orme, “Charnel Chapel of Exeter Cathedral, 162; Houlbrooke, Death, Religion, and the Family, 332–33; Gilchrist, Norwich Cathedral Close, 34.

64. Friar includes an image of skulls shelved at the ossuary of St. Leonard’s, Hythe (Kent). Companion to the English Parish Church, 327. See also Roberts, “Femora from a Medieval Charnel House,” 120 (plate 1). In some striking Continental examples, bones were displayed in underground catacombs or used for decorative purposes inside churches. Ragon, Space of Death, 51–52.

65. Mannyng, Handlyng Synne, line 9786.
are powerfully expressed in an image from an early fifteenth-century French book of hours (fig. 2).\textsuperscript{66} This churchyard scene appears at the beginning of the Office of the Dead and emphasizes the communal and ceremonial aspects of burial: clerics enter the churchyard with a cross, a bell, a bucket of holy water, and a liturgical book. In the foreground of the image, a priest leads a procession from the church into the churchyard as two men lower a shrouded body into a freshly dug grave. The man who stands at the center is probably a representative of the deceased person’s fraternity or parish guild.\textsuperscript{67} Further in the background, three wooden grave markers stick up out of the ground, and a cloistered walkway along the back wall doubles as a display case for bones, with rows of skulls peering out from a lofted arcade.\textsuperscript{68} The churchyard in this image is actively shared by the living, the newly dead, and the long dead; in a single patch of ground, the extended age-groups of the parish are brought together as a unified spiritual community.\textsuperscript{69}

But churchyards could also be caught up in conflict and disorder. Indeed, when English bishops made formal visitations to the parishes in their dioceses, they found churchyards marred by broken gates and crumbling walls, defiled by farm animals, and incurred upon by greedy, land-filching neighbors.\textsuperscript{70} In chronicling churchyard abuse, however, visitation records evince the ideal churchyard, revealing clear expectations about mindful conduct in a shared space. In 1408, a Salisbury chaplain was cited for, among other things, his selfish misuse of the churchyard:

\begin{quote}...
\end{quote}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Wieck, \textit{Painted Prayers}, 131.
\item See also Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery MS W.197, f.175v, reproduced in Wieck, “Death Desired,” 473 (fig. 25). Like the churchyard pictured here, the famous Cemetery of the Innocents in Paris was surrounded by cloistered arcades in which skulls and bones were stored. See Harding, \textit{Dead and the Living}, 101–13. Its walls were painted with a \textit{danse macabre} scene which inspired the fifteenth-century Dance of Death murals at St. Paul’s in London. Ibid., 102–3; see also Gertsman, \textit{Dance of Death}.
\item Natalie Zemon Davis (citing Varagnac) describes the dead as an “age group” in “Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion,” 327.
\item In Salisbury, for example, two members of the same parish were accused of encroachment in 1405. John Dauntesey “built a house taking in along it a foot of the graveyard,” and William Wyly “made a hedge round his house taking in along it 4 feet of the graveyard.” \textit{Register of John Chandler}, 27. Harding explores the many uses of London churchyards in \textit{Dead and the Living}, 52–55. Unlike jurisdiction over the chancel and nave, which was clearly divided among clergy and parishioners and reinforced in Episcopal statutes, churchyard regulation was a much more complicated matter, and visitation records from the period regularly record struggles between priests and parishioners over its maintenance. French, \textit{People of the Parish}, 154–62.
\end{enumerate}
Figure 2. Churchyard burial scene. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.453 (c. 1420–30), fol. 133v.
Richard Bromhulle commits adultery again with Edith Godesgrome; he habitually disturbs the peace between his parishioners; he beats a pathway over graves; he tethered his horse to the churchyard gate-post, and it broke the gate-post and fouls the churchyard disgracefully; he keeps wills and compels executors to pay before returning them. Denied charges on 26 Nov.71

I have singled out this particular citation not only because of its attention to churchyard jurisdiction but because it presents the churchyard itself as a victim of insidious abuse. In addition to exploiting his parishioners both sexually and financially, Richard Bromhulle tramples his own shortcut through the graves, behaving no better than his horse. The charge represents Bromhulle as a repeat offender who puts his own interests first, but it also sheds light on certain expectations about churchyard propriety; the problem is not just that Bromhulle uses the space for grazing, or that he tramples the grass, but that he behaves like an animal in a space that was shared by both the living and the dead.

We might remember that Robert Mannyng lodges a complaint against churchyard tramplers such as Bromhulle. But instead of comparing them to horses, he calls them unkynde. Kynde has an exceptionally broad range of meanings in the Middle English: nature and natural reason; kinship and humankind; even kindness, morality, and generosity.72 Mannyng exploits this valence of possibilities in his discussion of the shared “long hous,” calling on the term’s association with nature and kinship as well as graciousness and reciprocity when he claims that “we shuld, ȝyf we were kynde, / kepe [the churchyard] clene.”73 As a space shared by the living and the dead, the churchyard represents the extended generations of the parish; its users are spiritual kin, and their conduct should reflect that affinity. Indeed, Mannyng’s notion of kynde accounts for churchyard reciprocity and articulates a scale of decorum: while the “unkynde” person commits “vyleyny,” those who are “kynde” work more mindfully to maintain the churchyard out of a sense of mutual respect and propriety.74 Bromhulle would, of course, stand at the lowest, most selfish, and most “unkynde” end of the spectrum.

71. Register of John Chandler, 74.
72. See MED, “kinde,” both adjective and noun forms. Galloway explores the social and ethical systems that inform kynde in “Making of a Social Ethic,” 365–83. See also the entry for “kind” in Lewis, Studies in Words, 26–33.
73. Mannyng, Handlyng Synne, lines 8657, 8659–60.
74. Harding explores the relationship between medieval property ownership and its effect on an individual’s conception and experience of a space in “Space, Property and Propriety,” 569.
Burial “by kynde”

A similar understanding of *kynde* also informs Will’s decision about burial location in passus 11 of *Piers Plowman*. Although the important and wide-ranging concept of *kynde* has received considerable attention from scholars, its distinctly parochial resonances have gone unnoticed. As we have seen, when Will decides to have his body buried in a parish rather than a friary, he makes the decision according to *kynde*. The dreamer’s preference for his own parish rather than “hire hous” brings to mind Mannyng’s discussion of churchyard propriety. But for Will, baptism is what makes the parish *his* parish. Baptism welcomed new Christians into the church, giving them access to salvation while also positioning them in a reciprocal spiritual network that included both the living and the dead. In Will’s formulation, “my parische chirche” constitutes a spiritual family, formed at the baptismal font and renewed in the grave. His decision accords with *kynde* because it acknowledges this sense of parochial kinship and secures his long-term membership in the community of the parish. Will’s expression of parochial allegiance also demonstrates the relationship between parochial identity and space. I began this chapter by looking at Will’s failure to recognize Holy Church—a failure that raises important questions about parochial identity and about the predication of that identity on the very space and fabric of the parish church. One reason that Holy Church may be unintelligible to Will is because she lacks the features that made the church visible to a layperson—the features through which a layperson experienced religion. In passus 11, Will conceptualizes the church in distinctly material and spatial terms, both at the font and in the grave.

When Langland gestures to particular objects, he conjures up the spatial, liturgical, and social contexts of the parish. The phrase “atte font,” for example, calls up not only the liturgy of baptism but also the extended spiri-

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77. Ibid.
tual network that the ceremony established as well as the east-west axis that the font formed with the high altar. The poem’s earliest readers continued to grapple with Langland’s exploration of parochial identity in passus 11, particularly its association with space and practice. A spurious scribal addition to the B-text registers a certain ambivalence about the relationship between baptism and burial and about the suggestion that a person should, “by kynde,” be buried wherever he was baptized. The line, which appears in all copies of the B-text, comes immediately after Will’s memory of what Conscience told him about burial location. I include it here in italics along with the passage that it works to clarify:

For I herde onys how Conscience it tolde
Pat þere a man were crystened by kynde he shulde be buryed.
Or where he were parisshen þere he shulde be grauen.

Kane and Donaldson have called the line an instance of scribal participation in “criticism of the clergy.” As Wendy Scase points out, however, the practice of repaying one’s baptism with parochial burial is “favourable to the parish clergy.” Indeed, the added line confines baptism and burial to the jurisdiction of parish priests. It also reinforces the spatial fixedness of parochial identity; the “or” perhaps reads as “that is to say,” or “in other words,” and the line it introduces underscores the idea that burial is only “kynde” if it happens “riȝt þere” in one’s parish. In one copy of the poem, a fifteenth-century reader bolsters this interpretation with a marginal gloss in abbreviated Latin: “ubi” baptized, it reads, “ibi” buried, the Latin where and there reinforcing once again the link between the fixed spaces of devotion and the communal ritual practices that took place within them. A person’s parochial allegiance—“where he were parisshe” —is ultimately defined by his or her

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78. Ibid., 11.118.
81. Scase speculates that these lines were omitted from the C-text in order to advance “an anticlerical viewpoint.” “Piers Plowman” and the New Anticlericalism, 34.
82. "vbi baptiza’ / ibi sepelir’ d." London, British Library, MS Additional 35287, f. 48v. Benson and Blanchfield offer a description of the manuscript and an expanded transcription of the Latin gloss ("qua vbi baptizatur ibi sepeliri debet") in Manuscripts of "Piers Plowman," 64–67, 178. The manuscript has been dated to the early fifteenth century in Langland, Parallel-Text Edition, ed. Schmidt, 1:5. This copy of the poem is part of a small group of manuscripts that are “only two generations of copying removed from the archetype.” Warner, Lost History of "Piers Plowman," 5.
place of baptism, and this same place is where an individual “shulde” seek burial.\(^8^3\) These readings attend to the idea that, in choosing parochial burial, Will reaffirms his membership in the parish community and lays claim to the powerful network of spiritual reciprocity that parochial membership offered.

But if authors such as Langland were exploring the relationship between baptism, burial, and the community of the parish, they were also grappling with the relationship between the ideal and reality. Robert Mannyng, for example, idealizes the churchyard even as he acknowledges the acts of “vyleyny” that take place within it, and in *Piers Plowman*, parochial burial stands at the center of a conflict between the ideal of parochial reciprocity and the financial motivations of the friars. There is also, of course, the problem of mobility: medieval people were on the move, living and dying away from their hometowns and in parishes other than the ones in which they were baptized. Indeed, wandering itself is central to *Piers Plowman*, whose unfixed protagonist is walking “wide in this world” when we meet him in the prologue.\(^8^4\) The spurious line in passus 11 may illuminate some of these concerns, offering a different take on Will’s understanding of burial according to kynde. Instead of suggesting that a person should be buried where he was baptized—that is, where he has been a parishioner since childhood—the line may present an altogether different option: a person should be buried *either* where he was christened *or* where he is *currently* a parishioner.\(^8^5\) If a person cannot be buried where he was baptized—if that ideal cannot be achieved because, for example, a person has moved to the city to find work—then Langland may be suggesting a reasonable alternative: get buried at the very least where you now attend Mass and make your obligatory annual confession. At least one early reader of the poem registered disapproval at the prospect of burial in a parish that was not also one’s place of baptism. In Corpus Christi 201, a copy of the B-text from c. 1400, the scribe has added a phrase that discourages burial outside of one’s baptismal church:

\[
\text{Ffor y herde onys how co’science it tolde} \\
\text{þt þer a man wer’ c’stnyd þer sholde he beryed} \\
\text{Wher’ he p’shene or noon ȝit sholde he þer be g’yvd.}\quad 86
\]


\(^8^5\) As Schmidt puts it, the line “underscore[s] the axiom attributed to Conscience by extending it to cover a man’s whole life or the part of it spent in the parish he may have moved to.” Langland, *Parallel-Text Edition*, ed. Schmidt, 2:398.

\(^8^6\) Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 201, f.41.r. My transcription and emphasis. Schmidt has most recently given this manuscript a date of 1400. Langland, *Parallel-Text Edition*, ed. Schmidt, 1:5. Kane and Donaldson date the manuscript to the first half of the fifteenth century.
A person should be buried wherever he was christened, whether he is currently a parishioner there or not.

Any number of circumstances could take people away from their baptismal parish—a move or a marriage, for instance, or the lure of voluntary associations such as religious fraternities and guilds. Even those who chose an unmarked parish grave might also fund a more elaborate form of commemoration elsewhere. The ideal parish—one in which the living and the dead mutually benefit each other in perpetuity, in which children experience the same spiritual cycle from font to grave to charnel as their parents and grandparents—had serious staying power, but the ambivalence of Langland’s early readers about the relationship between baptism and burial also suggests that ideas about the parish and parochial identity were evolving. In exploring the space and fabric of the medieval parish, fourteenth-century authors demonstrate that parochial identity is something that is actively made over the course of a lifetime and in a number of different ways. Churchyard burial at one’s place of baptism is just one way to knit oneself into the fabric of the parish. Its members are also those who make sure the font is covered and those who serve as godparents, even at fonts where they themselves were not baptized. They are also those who say the De profundis when walking through a parish churchyard, even a churchyard that does not contain the bodies of their parents or grandparents. Langland’s reasonable alternative to the parochial ideal—that is, his suggestion that Christians should, at the very least, be buried where they are currently parishioners—acknowledges that church is something one does, that a parish is something that its members produce. Baptism marks one’s initiation into the Christian community, but parochial membership must be made, remade, and renewed on a regular basis through active involvement in a parish of some kind, alongside one’s even-Cristen—old and new, living and dead.

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in Langland, The B Version, 8. For further discussion, see Benson and Blanchfield, Manuscripts of “Piers Plowman,” 98–101.